

2566 A.D.!

A TALE OF ADVENTURE IN THE SECOND DARK AGE OF MAN

By Jerome B. Bigge

Part Two

Author's Note

In "2565 A.D.!" Doctor Lorraine Duval and her stepdaughter Sharon traveled from our own era here in the 20th Century to the fantastic world of 2565 A.D. A world where Mankind now lived under the domination of hideous alien beings from the planet Mars! Here on two worlds the former LA "shrink" found herself involved in a deadly conflict, in almost constant battles against enemies both human and alien, her sword often red with the blood of foes!

Now, once again, Lorraine must take sword in hand to deal with new enemies, while a recent "revolution" on Mars has now completely altered the political situation on that world, leaving our heroine somewhat "unsure" herself as to just what the future will now hold for her and those she holds dear. A "new world" of both barbaric savagery and an awesome high technology that allows travel between worlds as swiftly as we may step from one room of our homes to another! This then is the "world" of 2566 A.D. And here we may once read of the adventures of the greatest fighting woman of all time as once again she battles against her enemies! While at the same time "powers" almost beyond our understanding now face each other, each wishing to have "mastery" of the Earth!

Jerome Bigge

Chapter One

"You must be feeling pretty 'confident' of yourself today," I, Queen Lorraine of Trelandar grinned as Darlanis, the Empress of California tossed me a foil from those on the rack and then took another for herself. Both of us had stripped down to golden nipple clips and silken crotch straps, the universal "underwear" of upper class women of North American societies of the 26th Century. Our throats closely encircled by lovely silver chains that marked us both as being married women of less than three years.

Darlanis was like some erotic vision of mythical golden beauty, too beautiful to be "real", while I looked more the "part" of what I actually am, the awesome "Warlady" of Imperial California. A woman from the now mythical 20th Century who had once flown with her stepdaughter through a mysterious "Gateway" from her own era into this one. A one time member of the French Olympic Fencing Team who found her skills extremely useful in this new world! My body now scarred from the numerous battles I had fought in. A newly healed third degree laser burn there on my left thigh yet a reminder of what had transpired on Mars only the month before. The "Revolution" of the "Women" in which I had myself played a "minor role" as Raspa's "defender" during that climactic battle a mile beneath the arid airless surface of that cold desert world. A "revolution" that had "altered" little now that the Priestesses of Lys had suddenly "asserted" their own terrifying powers, power so great that they were almost as "gods" from some old mythology! Both the Lorr and the Women having learned that there were THOSE who possessed "powers" so beyond their own that they were just as "helpless" now against them as we'd been against those of Mars...

The other three persons there in the Imperial Palace's walnut paneled exercise room with us were Yvette, my French slave girl and Lynn, Darlanis' personal confidant. Both were in their own ways "studied" in feminine sexuality. As was beautiful golden haired Serena Novak of Muskegon, a barbarian "Princess" from a ruined city in what had once been the State of Michigan back in my own time. Yvette a lovely slim bodied wench, while Lynn is "riper", and more sensual in her appearance. Her unswerving loyalty to Darlanis earlier is a good part of the reason that she occupies the position here in the Empire that she now does. Serena in silk and leather that much became her young trim body. She had gotten into a bit of "action" recently when Queen Darlanis mounted an expedition against a group of runaway slave girls that had become a general nuisance to the south and west of Sarn. The wenches now safely back in their slave collars as was proper!

"I've been 'practicing' a bit," Darlanis laughed, going to the "guard position". Her bare feet securely gripping the wooden floor as she took position, her knees slightly bent to give her a better agility in such a contest of physical skills. Doubtlessly with someone else than her Nevada husband, who had learned pretty quick that his wife was "better". Jon Richards, my own husband was very willing to "pass" on such "opportunities" with me too for much the same reason. The little Princess of Talon, Sela Dai, being my latest "sparring partner". She was "quick" on her feet, and reminded me much of my late friend the lovely Nevada maiden Sa-she-rawho died while taking the bullet meant for me! * * The "Nevadas" are a racially mixed group much like the American Indians of the American Southwest in the Nineteenth Century. (JB)

It was well into spring now, the birds singing sweetly in the trees, the Peasants out in their fields tending their shoots. There had been a few minor clashes between the forces of the Empire and those of Dularn. Darlanis' pursuit of the war had been rather "half-hearted" to date, which had irritated a considerable number of people. I also suspected that Darlanis didn't yet see the reason to expand the war, to carry "war" back to Dularn! To teach Queen Maris the "folly" of attacking the Empire of California. Her swift raiders having been quite "successful" in showing the people of California how "helpless" they were against Dularn. Our long almost undefended coastline being extremely "vulnerable" to such craft, especially in an era without "modern weapons". * * The "EDICT" prohibited the development of any weapon much past that of perhaps the Twelfth Century. Firearms were "known", but were forbidden by the Edict, which had been enforced by the Lorr, the gigantic ant-like aliens who lived beneath the surface of Mars. At the present time such "enforcement" was the responsibility of the Priestesses of Lys, whose "mind technology" was truly awesome, effectively exceeding the "technology" of the Lorr which was based of course upon more "ordinary" physical sciences. It may be noted here for those curious that the Priestesses of Lys also possessed the "secret" of time travel and had made at least one "visit" back to our own era for "reasons" perhaps they best understood. The next book of this series introducing a married couple from our own 20th Century that I am sure you'll like. They will also be fighting on the "Dularnian

side" and we'll get to see just what the Dularnians thought of Lorraine and all! (JB)

"Your 'talents' lie in other 'fields'," I teased the beauty, feinting, trying to see if I could "draw her out". My own reputation with a sword is awesome. Legendary as a matter of fact. I am not "invincible", but I do rank as the "best" in California! I usually "win" these "matches", but Darlanis is getting "good"!

"I've fenced too much with you for 'that' to work," Darlanis laughed, not responding to my "challenge". She was getting "wise" to my style now, which made our matches more interesting! I had once been offered by a wealthy man the promise of a donation of a thousand gold crowns if I would fence with Darlanis in a public match. I had refused, feeling such would be "improper".

"But on the other hand you make the mistake of thinking that what I've done in the past I will do in the future," I pointed out, suddenly whirling, my point flashing out. She parried it, but just barely! I tend to "hold back" a bit in these matches, perhaps because I fear that I might hurt her with a thrust. She is more than a friend to me. We are more like "mother and daughter" in some respects despite the fact she is actually "older" than I am. There is an "innocence" about Darlanis that has been exploited by persons of evil intent before. She is easily hurt. Her teen years were unhappy. She suffered the "rejection" of her own "mother" when she charged her "brother" with rape. It was only a couple months ago that Darlanis learned she is actually the daughter of Aurora, Leaderess of the Women of Mars! That she was born there on Mars, not here on Earth as everyone believed! * * Her father Prince Paul, fell in love with Aurora, who was the Lorr's ambassador to Dularn in 2520 AD. Apparently Aurora, knowing little about "s-e-x" at the time (Mars is a "lesbian" society with reproduction based upon "cloning"), allowed herself to become impregnated. Bearing the child while on Mars and then returning with the baby to Earth where she presented the Prince Consort of Dularn with this doubtlessly rather quite "embarrassing evidence" of their relationship. His wife, Queen Tulis, at the time this was all going on giving birth to a stillborn baby girl, thus allowing the "substitution" of Aurora's baby for Tulis' without anyone being the "wiser" but for those actually involved.

"You've been doing more than just sitting on your throne," Darlanis smiled back, suddenly thrusting straight at me with a blinding swiftness. I parried the thrust, jumped to one side. I had sensed the muscle tension there in her body before she made her move. It is like a sixth sense. Part of what makes one Queen Lorraine of Trelandar the "living legend" that she is. Our foils for a moment clashing as we "tested" each other, looking for a "weakness" that we might "exploit" against the other one. I am a tall brunette, 5'9", slim and muscular, the Queen of a country that back in my own era was known as southern California. Trelandar having the name that it does due to the great redwoods.

"I've been 'working out' with Sela Dai," I smiled back. She was "small", but "quick". No match for a woman like Darlanis, or myself for that matter, but she was willing to "learn", and that was the most important thing. My husband Jon, like Darlanis' own Serak has a bit of a "problem" that way. I suppose it is "hard" for a man to be married to a woman who is "better" with a sword than they are. Although Jon takes considerable pride in the fact that I am, as he says, "The toughest bitch that there ever was!"

"And how is Gayle getting along with Sela's brother?" Darlanis asked with a smile, trying to "distract" me, and then suddenly spinning about and thrusting at me. I parried her thrust and swiftly answered it with one of my own. Darlanis is a strong woman. There is a lot of muscle in that 5'10" frame of hers. She is a big blonde "Amazon" who draws a 75# compound bow! Gayle is my lovely golden haired foster daughter, my own "Princess"!

"He's pretty 'infatuated' with her," I answered, watching her eyes, taking a chance, feinting, Darlanis leaving an "opening". I took it, but wisely "held back", the Empress having been as she had said "practicing a bit". I didn't fall for her trick! Our foils ringing together as I parried that sudden quick thrust!

That blonde was getting pretty damm good! And fast too, I noted! I wouldn't care to have to face her in a "real fight" either now!

"You're `good'," Darlanis breathed, giving me a smile, stepping back, her azure eyes glowing into mine. I nodded, watched. Kept my "guard up". I suspected that the sixteen year old Prince was a bit too much "in love" with Gayle for his own good. Girls, even a "nice" girl like Gayle, will "exploit" a boy like that given time. I suspected if things continued as they were she would be tempted to sexually exploit him for her own "pleasures"! Gayle was "sexually experienced", a former slave I had "freed" last year. The story is quite "involved", I might mention here.

"I don't have a beautiful face, blonde hair, blue eyes, or a `figure' like yours," I smiled back, "But I do have one thing," I told her, Darlanis being very much aware of what that thing was! She drove me back with a series of thrusts and slashes that I was barely able to fend from myself. Darlanis was getting damm good! Obviously she had been getting some "instructions" somewhere too! She is a "proud" woman, and I suspected she was "serious" about trying to regain her "title" as California's finest swordswoman!

"Your legendary skill with a sword," the Empress smiled. I saw Lynn whisper something to Yvette as the two stood side by side watching us. Yvette in her golden slave collar, wearing a brief green shift slit on both sides up all the way, and tied at the waist. The "Lady Lynn" in a clinging bright red silken dress that showed off that ripe sensual figure of hers to perfection. Both were dark haired, Yvette's straight, while Lynn's was set in one of the attractive modern styles of 26th Century California. Serena in more barbaric garb, such being fitting for her. She is quite good in a fight, especially at close quarters with a dagger or hand to hand. A true blonde, blue eyed, and "beautiful".

"I am pretty good," I answered, meeting her sudden thrust. I answered it with one of my own, meeting her feint, parrying her thrust. The two of us leaping apart, the tips of our foils now just touching each other's as we circled. I learned a long time ago to "pace" myself when I fenced with Darlanis. That her own strength exceeds mine, and that I must "husband" my strength if I am to win these little "matches" that we now so much both enjoy!

"And me?" Darlanis asked, leaping back. She had not been foolish enough to take her attention off me. She was a true mistress of the blade. California's "best" before I came around!!!

"A unique combination of beauty, brains, and skill," I smiled back. Darlanis nodded, but didn't let herself get careless. She is "wiser" now than she used to be when we first did this together. No longer will she "rise" to "bait" like a trout!

"If you were a man Serak would still be `playing' with his Pussycat," Darlanis smiled back. I suspected the comment had been made to distract me just a bit. I didn't allow it to do it! I don't like to think about things like that. What could happen! I've been fighting those sort of "urges" all my life, it seems!* * I came very "close" to "giving in" with the Lady Lana however.

"I'm glad I was born a woman," I answered, driving Darlanis back with a sudden flurry of thrusts and slashes that she had a hard time meeting. I was aware of the dampness there on my skin. Of the fact that Darlanis' own lovely tanned figure now gleamed there in the light from the candles and the lamps set above us.

"There are a lot of women who would argue that point," Darlanis pointed out. I suppose that there were. I parried her thrust. Met it with one of my own. Leaped back from the next. I thrust, but she was too "quick", leaping to one side just then!

"I don't," I answered, driving her back a bit. I was quite happy to be the sex that I was. I met her return attack, danced to one side. Good swordsmanship is often a matter of "footwork". You let the "enemy" expend themselves making "attacks", which you in turn dodge and parry until an "opening" is presented for your own "attack". It is a lot like a battle between two armies. One must be able to think and act at the same time to be successful.

"I wonder if being 'turned over' to the Priestesses is such a good idea," Darlanis suddenly ventured, changing the subject. The Priestesses of Lys had suddenly to everyone's surprise but mine shown their true "power" only a few weeks before. A "power" I had suspected for some time considering my own earlier experiments with hypnosis back in the 20th Century. The Priestesses apparently possessing the "power" of electronic hypnosis, which I had "suggested" to Janet Rogers back before Sharon and I flew through that strange mysterious "Gateway" into this era over five hundred years into the future! It now appeared from what Aurorahad told me that the Priestesses had been in "communication" with beings on other worlds with similar powers, such "beings" having become "The Guardians" who now controlled the activities of technologically advanced worlds throughout the entire Universe. The result of all this had been that the Priestesses now "controlled" things, not the Lorr or their now former "servants", the Women.* * I am in a way "responsible" for the Priestesses as I suggested to Janet Rogers back in the 20th Century such might a good idea as a means of insuring "social stability" in a changing society. Unlike the religions of the past, the Priestesses are not "bound" by "dogma", and they are quite able to adjust to changing conditions. Unlike "Christianity" of the past, they are not anti-sex although the Priestesses are themselves I now believe "de-sexed". I suspect this is done to avoid "embarrassing incidents" of the sort that the Catholic Church used to experience back in my era. The only thing the Priestesses seem to "oppose" is other religions, which they will not "tolerate". Nor do they "tolerate" what commonly now is called "witchcraft". I know from my personal experience what can "happen" if you "meddle" in things considered "improper". I got into "trouble" last year for attempting to "hypnotize" Gayle, and was "warned" not to ever try it again! There was no "doubt" either that the Priestesses did have the "power" to carry through with their "threat" if they so wished!!!

"Saves the Lorr the 'trouble' of watching over us," I answered, jumping back from her feint. Darlanis following through, but just a fraction of a second too slow. While the popular reaction had been one of "joy", I didn't think that the people knew how little actual "difference" it would make in their lives now.

"At least certain 'mysteries' have finally been 'solved'," Darlanis observed, carefully watching for any chance to exploit a weakness in my skill. She was fighting on the "defensive" right now, playing a "waiting game". I've seen her do that with others. I would not care to face her in an actual duel to the death. I am not all that "sure" either that I would survive the fight! I did not let myself "dwell" upon what she had said. Such would be too "distracting" from the "task" here "at hand". I parried her sudden thrust, feinted, and slipped my "point" beneath her guard! Touching her there on the upper right shoulder!

"Touche!" Darlanis laughed, stepping back, her azure eyes glowing into mine. The honest sweat of exercise gleaming there on her tanned skin as Lynncame forward to slip a robe about her. The golden haired beauty handing me her foil to put away as Yvette came forward with a robe to slip over my own sweaty body.

"You are still the 'best'," Yvette said to me in French. Serena nodding, giving me a smile as she took the foils from me.

Chapter Two

I watched Darlanis slowly pour a dipper another full of water on the hot rocks fished from the brazier, watched the steam rise up into the heated moist air of the room. The two of us now both completely nude there in the little steam room as she seated herself beside me, her beautiful body like mine beaded with water both from the steam and from our own profuse sweat caused by the heat. I found it a bit difficult to breathe in such heated air.

"Conditions have gone from bad to worse in our conflict with Dularn," she said to me. That was my own understanding too. She had refused to commit the forces necessary to go on the offensive against Dularn. You do not "win" a war by fighting on the defensive all the time. We were still losing a ship now and then to one of their "North" class raiders that harassed our vulnerable coastlines. The third ship of my own fleet was now getting ready for sea. I also had two smaller schooners, neither a match for a "North" class in battle, but still good for observation and such. There was also my own flagship, the Squala, and the Seahawk, which was under the command of the Prince of Baja, Jers Bisan. I had "urged" Darlanis to construct a fleet of such ships, but she had seen little "reason" as yet to "commit" the monies for them. She did however have a pair of "second rates" that would have been effective against Dularn's raiders, but they spent most of their time in port, and not near enough in my opinion out at sea!

"It is of little value having a 'Warlady' if you won't allow her to fight," I answered honestly. This war was growing more and more unpopular with my own people. Even such "pacifists" as my Prime Minister, Sanda Talen, wanted to see an "end" to it now!

"I fear that your use of 20th Century technology will have to come to an end," Darlanis smiled in reply. "Tais informed me just yesterday that she will not allow any more 'use' of such things." Tais being the First Priestess, their "Pope". Raspa, the First Princess of the Lorr having formally handed the Earth and its inhabitants over to the Priestesses for "safe-keeping". For the majority of Mankind it made very little practical difference, although there had been a great deal of celebrating about it all. Now Mars too lived under the "rule" of the Priestesses, something I suspected neither Raspa or Aurora really "liked" all that well. Especially Aurora, who had her "pride" to consider as Leaderess of the Women, the Revolution having "cost" many lives.

"It'll be a long 'walk' for Serena," I teased Darlanis, the "Princess" having been "rescued" by Darlanis and her husband from being killed by a bunch of black cannibals who roamed around the area. The blacks being infected by the disease called "AIDS". A disease almost "unknown" now in this era, but yet just as deadly as it had been back in the 20th Century before a cure was found in the 21st Century. One that hopefully had now been "stamped out" by the combined forces of both the Priestesses and the Lorr. The blacks, who Serena had called by the term "niggers", having killed and eaten the Priestesses who had attempted to help them. Tais and Raspa and Aurora having "agreed" that it was best if the group now living there in the areabe "exterminated" as "vermin"! Such had now been carried out by a patrolling Lorr battle-disc.

"No more airplane flights?" I ventured. I had suspected that Tais would not "approve" very much of my nitroglycerine, napalm, or the black powder explosives that I had developed. I had even built a small cannon, which did work rather effectively! And I even had made up plans for building a 54 gun frigate too!

"She doesn't object to those, but she certainly didn't like hearing about all those other little "gadgets" you came up with." Darlanis smiled, running a hand through her dripping wet hair. I supposed the idea of a second "Constitution" hadn't set too well.

"No more 'boom' or 'bang'," I smiled, glad now in a way. I had feared too what would happen when such weapons came into the "hands" of others. Princess Tara had built muzzle loading guns. She had attempted to kill me with such a weapon, but had failed. She was now in "protective custody" there in Vegas, hopefully in a position where she would make no more "trouble" for anyone now. On the other hand her criminal organization was still in place.

"We'll have to go back to swords and bows," Darlanis smiled. My factory making the new compound bows was in full production. Most were being shipped across the mountains to the Nevadas, who were fighting their own war against the Montanas from the north. The Montanas were being supplied by Dularn with their most modern arms. The conflict was growing now, Dularn having allied itself with a number of little "states" to the north of it, mostly dens of pirates from what I had heard of them. More "trouble" for my own people. More raiding vessels launching surprise attacks on innocent fishing villages for women and anything else of value! * * The enslavement of women seems to date from some time after The War of 2047 when all social order broke down and "barbarianism" ruled the land. I once told a well known "feminist" in the 20th Century that without "civilization", women would be but "slaves". She didn't believe me, but history has shown that I was "right"! It is also due to this fact that nearly all women now carry some sort of a "weapon" (usually a dagger) here in the 26th Century.

"And there's 'trouble' now in Trelandar too," I then said.

"What sort of 'trouble'," she asked, her voice concerned.

"There's a 'move' underfoot in Trelandar now to declare its 'independence' of the Empire if you don't act pretty damn soon to put a stop to this simply 'turning the other cheek' when Dularn attacks us." I warned the beautiful golden haired Empress as we sat together. I have always spoken freely to Darlanis. Told her when she was "right" and when she was being a "dumb blonde". I considered this one of those times she was being a "dumb blonde".

"And no doubt you are 'one' who feels that way," she challenged me, her azure eyes gleaming hot as they burned into mine. Hotter yet than the steamy almost choking air there around us! In a way I preferred old Darlanis the "War Queen" to Darlanis the "Queen of Peace" as she was now called by the more "charitable". Some in Trelandar now spoke of the "need" for another "Empress". My name was usually the one mentioned as Darlanis' "replacement".

"I keep the Caste Codes," I answered, "Even if I think you really don't know what you're doing right now." I know that she knew that, but it still "hurt" to sense her immediate "distrust".

"I'm sorry, Lorraine," Darlanis said, putting her hand on mine. "You've always been the one friend I knew I could trust." That was "shading the truth" just a bit, but it is true in a way. I admire Darlanis more than any woman I've ever met, even more than Janet Rogers, who did so very much for humanity despite the fact that she had to do some awful things to retain control!! Such as her destruction of Meccain 2017 by ICBM and her use of poison gas in the battles in the Middle East against the Moslems. The Middle East having been a "sore spot" ever since the war against Iraq in 1991 according to what I learned there at Leith. Those of Leith having kept a good record of the past, more perhaps for the Lorr, their "masters", than for any "benefit" to us.

"You don't have a 'choice' anymore," I told her. We would have to strike at Dularn. Strike hard, and from the sea. I had no burning desire to put myself again "in harms way" for Darlanis, but I saw no other alternative. What it would do to my marriage was something else that I feared even more than the enemy's arms! Dularn was his country, and I would be bringing death and destruction to his own people. Even if I tried to avoid harming the ordinary citizens of Dularn, there would still be deaths, injuries, all the

"hurt" that goes along with war regardless of the level of technology used! Jon had said that he would "love" me regardless, but I wondered what he would think later on of me???

"I promised Queen Tulis before she died in my arms that I wouldn't attack Dularn again," Darlanis answered softly in reply. "That I would live in peace with those of the land of my birth."** * I know Darlanis was born on Mars, but she didn't know that then nor would have it made any "difference" to her as she considers herself to be "Dularnian", at least "culturally", if not in the "biological" sense. Her father was Prince Paul of Dularn. Tulis suspected the "truth" almost from the first, but kept the "secret" to herself until her death, perhaps to avoid embarrassment. Unlike the 20th Century, there is a strong "bias" against those born out of wedlock here in the 26th Century, especially so considering that Darlanis is the actual daughter of Aurora of Mars!

"Oh," I breathed, "understanding" now what I had not before. Darlanis saw such as a "matter of honor" sworn to a dying woman. She is of the Caste of Warriresses. To such "honor" is something "unquestioned". I am reminded here of the "Code" of West Point back in my own era. We of the Caste do not "question" such things. There was no way now that Darlanis could "act". If we were to "defend" ourselves against Dularn, it would have to be without her as our leader. Such is a part of our "Caste Codes".

"Does Maris know?" I asked, wondering. Darlanis nodded in the negative. Queen Tulis of Dularn had died of poison in Darlanis' arms. She had done so rather than face the month or so of raving insanity she faced before her death from a tumor buried deep inside her brain. Her death had made Maris Queen of Dularn.

"It was almost the last thing we spoke of before her death," Darlanis said in a soft voice, her eyes glistening with tears. I understood now what I had not before. Why she had not committed our forces to anything more than just "defense" against attack!

"You can 'trust' me," I said to her. "Follow my advice." I was getting awfully "tired" too of defending her to my friends. Especially after the North Star had attacked Lady Tirana's lands. True, the "damage" had not been that great, but the simple fact that a Dularnian raider could attack our vulnerable coastline almost anywhere it wished "bothered" a lot of people, including me!

"I will consider it," Darlanis answered, "But understand that I can do nothing myself." I nodded, kissed her, knowing as I did that she was truly "worthy" of being Empress of California. That she kept the "Codes" as a true caste sister should always. I would have to "act" on my own. Perhaps as Queen of Trelandar?

My slave girl Yvette Senchal stood at my side, her perfumed body brushing mine as I sat before the mirror, and carefully painted the eyeliner around my eyes. The briefly attired delight just a bit nervous now knowing the importance of the occasion. I had impressed upon the girl the necessity for my looking my best. I am not a beautiful woman. Hardly even "attractive", I often feel "inferior" to women like Darlanis who are so "beautiful"!!!

"I am proud to belong to a great and wonderful mistress like you," Yvette breathed in a low whisper as she completed her task. I had no fears of her "loyalty" to me. I was her only "contact" with her own country half a world away. The only one who could speak French. We often spoke it together. It was, I supposed, a way of speaking privately that I greatly enjoyed especially now.

"And I assume that you already have a handsome young sailor from the Squala to keep you 'warm' in your blankets tonight," I said to the sensual delight. Yvette trains my other slave girls in the arts and crafts

of love-making. A slim gold band around her neck marked the girl well as being the sort of slave she was. Yvette often "needed" sex like a drunkard "needs" the "bottle".

"Yes, mistress," Yvette answered softly as she did my lips. She has few secrets from me. She reminds me in a way of another woman I once knew long, long ago although she was more like Lara, the Princess of Baja than Yvette in her appearance. The home she once lived in still exists as ruins on the forested lands I own. Once again I regretted the "wrong" that I had done Carol Simmons by letting myself become "emotionally involved" with her husband. There never was any question of "infidelity" here, but it was an act that I am not very proud of even now long after their deaths.

"I'm just glad I don't have a long coastline to worry about," Queen Dala Dai of Talon said to me with a smile as she strolled the rooftop arboretum that overlooks the harbor beyond. She was wearing a lovely silken silver gown, a wrap over her bare shoulders against the chill. She is small, about five feet, no more than a hundred pounds, like a perfect little "doll" of a woman. Talon's Tarls, a gigantic eagle like bird, can carry a small woman on their backs, such "birdwomen" being a mainstay of Talon's defense against attack. They were the major reason why Talon did not succumb to Darlanis' attack on it ten years ago. I had seen scenes of those battles recorded on laser disks by those of Leith. It had been a "war" that had "cost" little Talon much. Now she was here at my urging to sign a treaty with Darlanis. I hoped such a treaty might be the "start" to something "greater". It was "time" that Mankind once again considered "civilization".

"Darlanis needs all the 'friends' she can get right now," I told the little brunette there at my side. Dala nodded, her dark eyes glowing up into mine. I knew how she "felt" about Darlanis. It had taken all the diplomatic skills I possessed to get Talon into an alliance with California. There were still those in Talon who claimed that their beloved Queen had now "sold them out"! That what Darlanis had not been able to obtain "by the sword" she had now "obtained" by other means. Few yet "trusted" Darlanis!!!

"I am 'your' friend, not hers," Dala answered softly back, the breeze off the ocean in the distance gently ruffling her coal black hair. Swinging the ships in the harbor at their anchors as they waited for the escorting warships to protect them on the open sea from the swift Dularnian raiders now somewhere out there beyond the horizon. Darlanis' name was now a "curseword" on the lips of many. I much feared what might "happen" here if action was not taken against those now harassing our shores like wolves.

I pulled my own wrap more about my shoulders, the black silk of my long formal gown doing nothing to protect me from the chill of the air. I am not a beautiful woman, but Yvette does well with what she has to work with. My bust is small and firm, and I do have rather high set muscular buttocks. I don't look all that bad in a long gown, as it conceals my legs, which are not really one of my best assets so far as my own personal appearance goes.

"I want to thank you for what you've done for my Sela," Dala said to me. Sela Dai was now in command of my little fleet of two "Squala class" schooners and two smaller schooners used mostly for patrol work and observation. She had done well in a ship to ship battle with the infamous "North Star" off the coast of Trelandar. The "North Star" being under the command, I understood now, of none other than the Queen of Dularn herself! Maris had eventually broken off the battle, using her superior skill and her ship's better "handling" to flee the heavier ship. There had been considerable "outcry" in Trella at the news, and poor Sela had come in for her share of blame in letting the North Star get away from her, but Sela had been fighting an experienced and battle hardened crew commanded by Dularn's best naval commander! Maris Jord now being the "Jon Richards" of Dularn, I understood.

"She did well considering the lack of training," I smiled. Sela had got off a couple good broadsides into the North Star. I had not authorized the use of flame weapons unless the Dularnians started using them.

The heavy three master she commanded had been manned by inexperienced men who had never seen combat before. They had not responded to her orders like those of the North Star had to their commander. I had reviewed the issue, and found that Sela had done the best that she could with what she had to fight with. Still, it had been the first time that a Dularnian raider had actually engaged one of my famous "Squala's"! There had been too much of an expectation of "automatic victory"! The "belief" by some that Sela Dai had not tried to "win" either!

"It would have better had she killed Queen Maris," the Queen of Talon answered, looking out over the greatharbor of Sarn. I sometimes see in my mind's eye yet another city now only a memory. There is little left anymore of the remains of what once had been San Francisco. Only a few massive structures like parts of the Golden Gate Bridge too heavy for even the people of the 26th Century to use for building materials. There is little "love" for the past. The people of "today" blaming those of the "past" for much of their "troubles". For The War of 2047 A.D. that nearly ended life here on the Earth. The "past" is now mostly "legend". Leith probably possesses the most "accurate" records of that era, although I yet "wonder" about the Priestesses of Lys. There is no doubt in my mind that they do possess a "technology" far in advance of the rest of Mankind, or even now that of Mars! The "demonstration" Tais put on this spring was proof!

"Perhaps," I answered. What puzzled me was why Maris was now actually putting herself "in harms way" like she was. I suspected that there were also "reasons" not so readily obvious. I did not think that Maris was doing what she did just to win the admiration of her people, although that no doubt played its part! Her present popularity among her people was almost unbelievable! Men had actually "fought" to sail on the North Star with her too! Such had come to my ears through "means" best left unspoken here.

"She is far more 'popular' with her people than Tulis was," Dala observed, her dark eyes looking up into mine. Dularn has universal military training. All adult Dularnians bear arms. It is not a country that would be easy to conquer even with the full forces of the Empire and its allies. And Dularn's alliance with the Montanashad already insured that the Nevadas would be of no value to California. And Baja even with Princess Tara deposed and her son on the throne offered little help, the Bajans having little "love" for either the Empire of California or Darlanis. I knew too of the political opposition Dala now faced, and I did not expect that she could be of much help either against Dularn!

Chapter Three

"Darlanis!" Gayle breathed in sudden shocked embarrassment, the tall golden haired ruler having without any warning suddenly pushed the door open and stepped into the room. The young Prince of Talon kneeling there before her, his head now buried between her spread open thighs licking away at her shaved love slit, her light blue silken gown drawn up over her hips. The surprised and somewhat "shocked" Empress of California quickly closing the door behind herself, then pressing her body up against it to insure privacy as she stood there trying to think of what to do next!!!

"You should lock the door when you do things like that," the Empress breathed. The young Prince Carl Dai blushing as red as a beet as he quickly yanked his head out from between the Princess' provocatively open thighs! Gayle in turn quickly yanking her gown back down over herself as Darlanis stood there smiling to herself at the sight. She had suspected such "activities" might be going on, but she had thought that the Trelandarian Princess knew better than to "do" such things without first locking the door! The glow of sweat on Gayle's features leaving no doubt in the sexually experienced Empress' eyes of how far

they had gone!! Gayle's pale blue silken strap there on the table told its story!

"I didn't mean.....!" Gayle breathed, terror showing in her azure eyes as she looked up into those of Darlanis. Her older sister, Maris Jord, was the very woman who was giving this lovely tall golden Empress so much "trouble" right now, and Gayle had no doubt that Darlanis might find such "revenge" sweet to the taste! Especially since she had been using the young Prince's "love" of her for her own sexual pleasures! And Darlanis no doubt knew it!

"You're just 'lucky' it was me and not Lorraine or his mother who saw this," Darlanis answered. She knew of such things, of what men "too much" in love with a woman would do if she "asked"! Gayle having no doubt read over "A KEY TO A WOMAN'S HEART", the "marriage manual" of the 26th Century written by some unknown author way back in the year 1991 A.D.! The cool breeze through the palace windows gently now dispelling the tell-tale rich musk of Gayle's own sexual fluids that were smeared all over his face.

"I love her, Darlanis," Carl said, putting his arms protectively about the beautiful teenage Princess that he "loved" like life itself. "She's the most 'wonderful' girl I've ever known!"

"Put an engagement ring on her finger before the sun sets or I will have a long 'talk' with both Lorraine and your mother," the Empress snapped back. "And when you make love to her in the future, see that she 'makes love back' and no more of this sort of stuff!" Darlanis being very much aware of what had gone on!!! "And wash your face before your mother or Lorraine smells that!!" she added with a "knowing" smile as she turned and opened the door to leave the two to now talk things over between themselves. The Empress of California having no doubt that they had "much" to speak of together now after being "caught" as they had just been!

"You're a bit late," I smiled up to Darlanis as I sat on the leather covered sofa with the new Princess of Baja. The lovely and provocatively sensual "Lara of Trelandar" as she is often still called by those who "remember"! Dala Dai on the other side of me. Our three Princesses were elsewhere enjoying themselves on this occasion. Lynn putting a cut glass goblet filled with Darlanis' finest wine in her mistress' hand and then retiring to one side of the room where she sat staring out the window at the harbor and the anchored ships now waiting for escort. Dularn's commerce raiders of the "North" class being quite as fast as my three "Squalas"! Dala Dai nodding in greeting there at my side. She had agreed to come here more for my sake than for Darlanis'.

"I had to 'advise' a certain Prince and Princess about certain matters," she smiled back, giving Lara a smile. Darlanis is a woman of whom legends are made. Lara is a near "clone" of a 20th Century actress by the name of Catherine Bach who was noted for her incredibly "sensual" appearance. Dala Dai is a very lovely "doll", a perfectly formed brunette. I tend to find myself frequently surrounded by women all better looking than I am. On the other hand I do have raven dark hair and eyes that my husband says are very "intelligent". A slim and "trim" 5'9" figure. I am not a beautiful woman by any standards, especially not in the face, but some men, my husband for one, do find me quite attractive. "A comfort to have around", as he always says. I do also tend to be less "emotional" than most of my sex are, I feel.

"There are yet those among my people who question my wisdom in forming an 'alliance' like this with the Empire," Dala Dai smiled. It had taken all my negotiating skills to get her here! Talon would be part of a four-part military alliance with the Empire of California, Baja, and the Nevadas who controlled the country to the east of the Sierras. The area controlled by Leith being a "no man's land" where "visitors" are quite "unwelcome"! There are several thousand Montanas who could "vouch" for that!!! It is also filled with prehistoric gigantic reptiles, the result of certain "experiments" once carried out upon fossilized genes.

"Lorraine has done much to bring us all 'together'," Lara smiled. Her husband was the Prince of Baja. He had just assumed the throne after his mother, Princess Tara, was placed in "protective custody" in the ruined city of Los Vegas under the watchful eye of the Nevadas. Princess Tara's involvements in criminal activities having hopefully now finally come to an end. Her murderously infamous career (she tried to kill both me and Darlanis) and the "war crimes" that she committed as the former Warlady of the Empire having been enough in almost anyone's eyes but Darlanis' to have sent her to the execution block for her beheading!

"That she has," Darlanis admitted, giving me a smile, the black leather weapons harness she wore seemingly so "fitting" on her. She was as much used to wearing a sword and dagger as I would have been back in the 20th Century having my purse with me. The dark blue formal gown she wore certainly did "display" her. Leaving no doubts that she was an incredibly "beautiful" woman! The sensual curves of that body beneath it a "Hefnerian dream"! It is said that she is the most beautiful woman of all time. I would say that she can hold her own with the best I've ever seen!

"It's an entirely 'new world' now," Lara smiled. She was wearing a fitted and provocatively cut green silk gown that left no doubt about what hid there under that clinging silk, her nipples being "outlined" beneath, which is considered quite "risque" here in 26th Century Californian society. There is a hint of red in the rich brown hair that frames that sensual face. She is about an inch shorter than me, but also "riper" and more "busty". Jon, my husband, once said of her one time that she can "make a baby cry"! She is often called "The Prostitute Princess" among other things due to her famous "past" as a well known Trelandarian woman of "easy virtue" before Jers Bisan married her last year and made her the Princess of Baja much against his mother's wishes. The couple having to almost "exile" themselves to escape his mother's wrath at the marriage. Now Tara was safely "locked up" where she could do no harm, and Lara could finally enjoy life as the new Princess of Baja there beside her royal young husband.

"Not as 'new' as I would have liked," I smiled back at her. Tais had put a halt to my plans to build a 54 gun heavy frigate. Darlanis had rather "delightedly" told me all about that earlier.

"Perhaps it was just as well," Darlanis smiled back at me. "I prefer to live in a world where 'skill' in defending yourself counts for more than the simple ability to pull a gun's trigger." I supposed she had a "point" there. I have often felt the same.

"Like back in Lorraine's time when the private possession of personal weapons was outlawed," the Queen of Talon smiled back. I think she had her dates a bit "confused", although the private possession of firearms was actually outlawed early in the 21st Century. At least in the United States from what I know of it. It was not one of Janet Rogers' more "intelligent" acts. It is "easy" to "criticize", but Janet really did "do" what she could to make a better life for all of Humanity! And she did "succeed" for a few decades before war with the planet Mars ended it all! * * Her "New Order" was a "dictatorship", but a "benevolent" one.

"One of her more famous 'mistakes'," Darlanis smiled back as she sat down opposite from us three. I suspected Dala found my presence comforting with Darlanis there. There was still considerable "opposition" in Talon to this alliance of ours. Too many widows, widowers who yet "remembered" Darlanis' attempt a decade before to add Talon to her then brand new Empire of California!

"The 'myth' and the 'reality'," Dala Dai now smiled in turn. The first world dictator was now only a "legend", sort of like "King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table" back in my own time. There were even novels, mostly laughable to one of the 20th Century who had "been there", that had been written of her.

"I wonder if we're better off with the Priestesses than the Lorr," Lara ventured. The Priestesses of Lys had their own "intolerances", although they tended only to be directed against other religions and the practice of what is now called "witchcraft", but in my own time would have been considered more the study of the "paranormal" and the practice of hypnosis. I often used hypnosis in my own practice back in the 20th Century, but I dare not do so here after the "warning" that I was given by one of the Priestesses of Lys about the "practicing of `witchcraft'"!

"That's a ridiculous statement," Dala laughed, "The Priestesses are after all human beings, while the Lorr are nothing but `bugs'," the Queen of Talon laughed back, sipping at her drink.

"My ---," Darlanis breathed, stopping herself, although I knew what she was going to say. Aurorahad spoken much of what she'd seen there on the Moon. I wondered if Tais was really "human" after "what" she'd become. The Priestesses tended to run a "benevolent" religious dictatorship much like that of the Roman Catholic Church back in the Middle Ages. In a way they "ruled" Mankind as much as the Lorr had done from their orbiting ships. I also "knew" Raspa, the First Princess of the Lorr in a way that none other but Aurora herself knew her. I did not consider Raspa a "bug" even if she did look like a ten foot long carpenter ant!

"The Priestesses `are' what they 'are'," I interjected then. I bore Tais no dislike, having met her the year before, but on the other hand I did not feel that Mankind was much better off under their rule than we'd been under the "claw" of the Lorr. It is, I suppose, a part of my "makeup" that I do not really care that much for "organized religion", although I realize how necessary it is if one is to maintain any semblance of "social order". The social breakup of American society in the last decade of the 20th Century which "paved the way" for Janet Rogers' "NEW ORDER" is proof that Mankind "needs" something to "believe in". A point that I myself pointed out to Janet Rogers some months before that "epic flight" of mine that ended up here in the 26th Century! I do believe in "GOD", especially after having met HER on Mars, but I still feel that the Priestesses' hostility towards "technology" tends to be quite unreasoning and perhaps even a bit irrational!

"I understand that Aurorawill be here," Lara then spoke, changing the subject, there being little "doubt" in my mind that Dala had "spoken" as she had because she didn't much "like" Lara. Perhaps because Lara had not worn "nipple clips" when she should have done so. Such is not something a woman of Lara's "position" should have done, but I did not think it my "place" to comment. I knew that Talon tended to be rather "strait-laced" when it came to sex, Dularn being another example, and Lara's failure to wear "clips" over her nipples was of course a social "blunder" here. Only a woman of "low moral character" ever exposes her nipples in public there under her clothing, I was once told by Darlanis. I have no "explanation" for all of this, although the wearing of clips over your nipples dates back a long ways to before The War.

"She is a person of high authority on Mars," Darlanis answered, keeping "secret" of course her own relationship to her. Aurorais a beautiful woman, and I have no doubt that Prince Paul found her "excitingly different" from his own wife Queen Tulis. Aurora's "alieness", her "education", all would have made her a delightful "mistress" to a man married to a warrior woman such as Tulis. Somewhat the same sort of "relationship" was starting to "develop" between Bob Simmons and me before his wife interfered. Carol being a "sensual delight", but nota "intellectual person".

"And a good friend," I added for my golden haired Empress. Darlanis nodding, giving me a smile. It was a secret we shared. Darlanis and I are very close. We have stood together in battle, our swords wet with the lifeblood of our foes. We share caste. Such is "important" to us who bear the "mark" of the Warriress.

"You do have some rather unusual `friends'," Dala replied.

"It's time we joined the others," Darlanis said, getting up. Wisely putting a halt to such "conversation" before it got "out of hand". There was little "love" between Darlanis and Dala Dai. Neither woman really felt "comfortable" in the other's presence. Ten years ago they had been deadly enemies. Many lives had been lost on either side. Such hatreds run deep. Darlanis had killed Dala's husband, left her a widow with children toraise . It was not easy for the little Queen to have to deal with Darlanis now.

"You are beautiful as always," Jon said to me, setting down his glass and walking over to me. I smiled at his "flattery". I know he has no love for Darlanis, since he considers her responsible in a way for the death of his first wife, who he says I do resemble to a certain degree. She had been of the Physicians. A woman of Dularn. A month from giving birth when she had been "butchered" by Imperial forces under the command of Princess Tara. Dozens of candles and lamps now lit up the paneled room nicely. The actual ceremony of the signing of the treaty between Talon and the Empire would take place below in the palace throne room. I wondered if Tais would attend. She was Earth's "ruler". The Priestesses of Lys have the "power" of "teleportation", although they don't use it often as it requires the mental efforts of many to teleport one of their kind from one place to another. The Women of Mars have developed a form of "Gateway" that allows one to travel between worlds without the use of spaceships. Such had been used in their recent "Revolution" to transport me from the Earth to Mars where I fought at the side of Raspa against her own race on behalf of the Women. Raspa told me that the Lorr were better off living with the Women as "equals" instead of as their "Servitors" as they had been before. Raspa, like me, spoke withSHE there on the surface of Mars, changing both our lives.

"I wondered where Gayle and Carlwent? "Sharonsaid as she strolled over to me. She was the Imperial Princess, Darlanis' legal heir to the throne of empire. Blonde and blue eyed like her Empress and a beautiful young woman of seventeen. I nodded, smiled, told her they were probably somewhere "around". I had let Darlanis take her from me toraise last year. Make her into her own daughter. There is from time to time a certain degree of "emotional pain" whenever I see her. Think of her. Remember the "good times" we had together back in the 20th Century before we flew through the mysterious "Gateway" to this new world! Yet I have no doubts that I did the "right thing" as Darlanis is a far better "mother" to her than I could be, andSharon"loves" Darlanis as she could have never "loved" me. It is not something that I can explain further, but I do feel that I did the right thing.

"It's a big place," I smiled, puzzled a bit now. I did not see Gayle, my own foster daughter, or the young Prince of Talon anywhere about. I saw Prince Serak of theNevadaswith Darlanis. "The Beauty and the Barbarian" the newspapers called it. There was now war between theNevadasand theMontanas, the latter being supplied with Dularnian weapons against theNevadas. I worried a bit aboutMexico, what that "Empire" might do now. Sela Dai, the Crown Princess of Talon, talking to the lovely Lara and her husband Prince Jers Bisan of Baja. She is taller than her mother by a couple inches, but still a rather "smallish" woman, a very exquisite brunette, and perfectly formed. She wore a lovely pure white gown that contrasted well with the rich tan of her skin. I recalled that she had once been "helplessly" in love with Jers. That had been when she had been a "companion" of Princess Tara's. Princess Tara having abused Sela's love for her son for her own gain. Dala had told me much of the "relationship", of the fact she had "turned" to Princess Tara's Baja as "protection" from the Empire of California. The "politics" here are puzzling, I admit! Especially consideringTara's reputation!

"I do not think this war is really of Maris' own choosing,"Sharonsaid to me, her silky blue gown clinging to her ripening figure and leaving no doubts of what laid there beneath it. Jon nodding. He was Dularnian. It was his country that would eventually be feeling the wrath of the Empire of California. Whose lovely young women would soon be kneeling in Californian slave markets begging for a man's collar to be

locked about their fairthroats. A good percentage would have that lovely golden hair that is almost now the "trademark" of a Dularnian woman. Its "exotic" qualities here in Californiamade them seem the most desirable of slave girls. Personally I do not feel there is any difference between a "blonde" and a "brunette", but I do know a number of men who do claim that Dularnian women are "better"!

"You're not wearing any `clips'," Sharon ventured then. One could if they looked closely see my nipples outlined beneath the silk of my gown. It is considered quite "risque" to do such a thing here in the 26th Century, most women always covering their nipples by means of lovely circular "clips" fitted to the nipple. I had done so just to "upset" Darlanis and the others just a bit. Lara was "bare nipped" under her gown, but one "expected" it with a woman like her. Sharon was of course wearing her "clips". Darlanis would have "seen" to that. She is a good mother. Dala had not said "anything" about it to me, although I suppose that she had noticed. One should also remember here that Lara married the man that Dala's daughter was hoping to marry. No doubt Sela's mother had hoped that her daughter would marry, and later bear a daughter to carry on the royal line, which like in Dularn, is carried on down through the eldest daughter. There are "reasons" for this, but I do not consider them to be too "rational".

"Ohh!" Sharon suddenly breathed out, her azure eyes wide with surprise. As I spun about, several people in the room gasping with surprise, there stood Tais, First Priestess of the Priestesses of Lys, her diamond studded golden ankh gleaming in the lamplight against the lovely pure whiteness of her long gown! Her very appearance once again instantly "reminding" me of "SHE"! Of that immortal Being who is the true Mistress of the Universe! And at her side stood Aurora, Leaderess of the Women of Mars and at her other side stood Raspa, the First Princess of the Lorr!!!

Chapter Four

"Impressive!" I breathed, standing there, Tais' eyes, blue like Darlanis', glowing into mine as she smiled back at me. Once I had been the means by which SHE had transmitted a "message" to the First Priestess, a "message" I knew that spoke of events that would be happening some time in the future. Events that would involve both Darlanis and Princess Tara, although their "roles" in all this were not really all that "clear". I did know, however from what Tais had told me that Tara would become the "Antilys", the "servant" of the "EVIL ONE" who is the enemy of "GOOD". As this at the time reminded me more of the sort of "mumbo-jumbo" I've heard back in the 20th Century as a child, I paid it little attention at the time. Now I'm not so "sure" anymore as I do know that Tara seems strangely "unkillable", and both Darlanis and I "tried", neither of us with any degree of success. Even Aurora herself related to Darlanis that she sensed "something" about the Princess. There is also the "mystery" of the true identity of "Domino Tremaine", who was the last Leaderess of Earth after the death of Janet Rogers. From what evidence we now have in our possession, it appears as if she was Darlanis' child!

"I would say so too," Raspa spoke from a speaker mounted between her antennae, her black exoskeleton gleaming in the light of the lamps. Her great compound eyes like multi-faceted jewels gleaming into mine as she moved forward to greet me on her six legs, opening her mandibles wide to embrace me in friendship as I knelt before her, clasping that great horrid head in my hands. I felt once again the "touch" of her mind, saw as she saw, everything in those strange alien colors. The Lorr having a visual sense that is considerably "different" from that of human beings.

I saw Darlanis step forward, take Aurora's hands in hers. My "eyes" still those of Raspa's, which didn't "do" much for either, the Lorr seeing in a somewhat different "spectrum" than us, their visual sense going

well into the infrared range where they actually can "see" just by the heat radiated from your own body!

"We were once a 'predatory race' like you," Raspa commented. They had at that time hundreds of thousands of years before on their own world hunted a species of creature much like us in a way, but smaller. Those that they later used as their "Helpers", the Lorr forelimb ending in a claw instead of a hand like ours. While they have tools designed to overcome such "handicaps", the Lorr for thousands of years have used human women as "Servitors" to perform such tasks that the Lorr forelimb is ill suited to do. It was for this reason that they modified the human race to obtain a more "useful" servant than the original Neanderthals that they used as "replacements" for their "Helpers" there on Mars. I suppose our own evolution would have been different without them. They were the "gods", alien "gods" perhaps, who "raised" us. The same beings who we sought to destroy in The War of 2047 by means of a great comet redirected so that it would "collide" with Mars.

With a final caress I "broke contact" with Raspa, experiencing as I have before that momentary sense of "confusion" that one feels when one has been in close contact with a truly alien mind. In those few seconds I had sensed much of Raspa's own thoughts. Felt that suppressed anger she yet felt towards the Priestesses. The very same "Priestesses" that I was in my way "responsible" for by the suggestions I had made to Janet Rogers long long ago!

"From Mars to Earth by only the power of their minds!" I heard Auroratell Darlanis in low tones. It had been, I thought, a good "demonstration" of the power that the Priestesses of Lys possessed. A "power" that allowed them to now conquer the limits of time and space without the need for an "advanced technology"! * * The Priestesses do of course have an "advanced technology". One that I was instrumental in its development by my suggestions to Janet Rogers back in the 20th Century about electronic hypnosis, which I believed would be the next great development in science. It also proved to be an extremely "dangerous" tool too!

"It is a 'changed world'," I heard Darlanis now smile back.

"If 'we' had that 'technology'...", I heard Sharon breathe. The jut of her breasts beneath her gown reminded me of Darlanis'. Others have remarked upon the "resemblance" between the two now. She is "riper" bodied than my own Princess, my lovely Gayle Marn. Once again I wondered where Gayle and her young Prince had gone off to. No one had seen them anywhere about, which puzzled me! Had Princess Tara not been safely "locked up" in Vegas I would have worried a bit that she might have something to do with this!

"You were suddenly just 'here'," Lara breathed, the rise and fall of her full soft breasts again reminding me of the "comment" that Jon had made about her. The way that she "filled" her clinging figuring revealing gown left no doubt that she was a woman who any man might "lust" after. A woman who might be truly deserving of the title, "The Queen of Sex" as she is still some times called. A "sensual" woman, Lara reminds me of another that I once knew back in the 20th Century, one now dead for centuries.

"There is no such thing as 'distance' to those capable of 'movement' in both space and time," Tais smiled back at the Bajan Princess. I knew that the Priestesses had finally mastered the ability to move infinite distances in no time at all by means of space-time warps similar to those produced by the use of antimatter weapons by the Lorr in The War between Earth and Mars. I also understood that it was possible to travel through time just as one might travel through space to another world. A world perhaps circling a star thousands of light years away on the other side of the Galaxy! The Priestesses of Lys now being a part of that mysterious group of "super-beings" who called themselves "The Guardians". Beings pledged to protect less developed worlds from those more developed so that "history" of the sort that has happened here on Earth in the past will not happen elsewhere. I am well aware of what the Lorr did

to Mankind, and what Mankind has also done to those of his own race who were less "developed".

"Would you like some wine? Something to eat before we go below?" Darlanis suggested to her mother as Aurora stood there quietly beside Tais. There was an excellent selection of wines, liquors, and snacks. A half dozen of the highest officials of the Empire here at this intimate gathering who would later be witnesses to the signing of the treaty between Talon and the Empire. Yvette kneeling there on a cushion waiting to be of service. Her dark eyes gleaming bright as she watched our visitors' every move. Lynna at a nod of Darlanis' golden head filling a goblet with a fine wine and handing it to the golden Aurora. I filled a glass for Raspa, let her take it with a forelimb claw. Those about us giving the First Princess of the Lorr wide berth!

"This is a historic meeting for all of us," Darlanis said. Aurora nodding, smiling as Lynna gave her a goblet, Lynna so in awe of her that she almost forgot to let go of the goblet when Aurora took it from her hand. "Mankind is now 'free' of the Lorr." It was true, but we had only exchanged one "master" for another, I felt. Tais had already also warned us that she would "enforce" the "Edict" just as the Lorr had done, but now for the "protection of Mankind from ourselves". Like Darlanis, Tais did not think much of the more "advanced" weapons that I was capable of building. Tais feeling that Mankind had no "need" for firearms! I recalled people in the 20th Century who had shared such ideas! Man is in my opinion a "weapon-making creature". That is why Man is what he is. Why we are not like the chimps yet swinging from the trees there in Africa. It is, anyway, what I "think" of it. Janet Rogers had no more success in "outlawing" guns than did the governments of the 20th Century in "outlawing" illegal drug use.

"If you could talk to Queen Maris....," Darlanis ventured to Tais, a glass of wine now in one hand, some sort of snack in the other. She tends to get a bit "plump" if she doesn't constantly exercise. I suspect that the problem is due to having too much "food" around all the time. Too many slave girls eager and willing to bring more whenever she wishes it. She needs to live a more active life than she does. Spend more time in the saddle, or on a deck. Feel the heat of the sun, the wind in her face.

"I have already done so," Tais smiled, her eyes glowing into the azure of Darlanis'. "I feel that she is being given bad advice by her advisors regarding her relations with California." I handed the First Priestess a glass of "sparkling water", which she took, the Priestesses of Lys being forbidden to use alcohol.

"Did you tell her that?" I interrupted, being well aware that this could very well be the source of all our troubles now!

"She did not believe that I spoke the truth," Tais smiled.

"But with your powers...?" Dala Dai now ventured here then.

"And what would you have me DO?" Tais challenged her back. I knew of the POWER that she commanded, but seemed so reluctant to use. No doubt a consequence of her own mental "conditioning". The Priestesses of Lys rarely "interfered" in political matters.

Janet Rogers, who I knew as a young woman, did a number of things in her lifetime that show the results of putting too much POWER in the hands of one person. The destruction of Meccaby a thermonuclear missile being one example. She was in the last decade of her life an absolute dictator much like Hitler or Stalin or Chairman Mao. Benevolent, yes, but also "hard", and able to order the deaths of thousands should they disobey her wishes. She sent tens of thousands of people to "corrective labor camps". Did a number of "other things" not now widely known. The fact that she is now "worshiped" as "OUR LADY" does not mean as that she was all that "good" as Mankind's first and only World

Leaderess. In many ways the Priestesses of Lys are perhaps the best "answer" to such problems, I now feel after considerable thought. I do not think that "another Janet Rogers" would be a "solution".

"It's obvious that Darl Jord has filled her head with lies against me," Darlanis breathed, standing there beside her mother. I knew of him, of what he was like. He had raped Darlanis, his younger "sister", when she had been but a young teenage girl. Darlanis had then been "disowned" by Queen Tulis for telling such a tale! Maris Marn, too "ambitious" for her own "good", had later married the Prince of Dularn shortly before the death of the former Queen of Dularn due to some sort of an "inoperable" brain tumor. Dularn like Talonbeing a "Queendom" where now only a woman may rule. Such policies I consider a misunderstanding of history. There was only one "Janet Rogers". Women do not have some mysterious ability to do a better "job" of things than men.

"I can't intervene in your affairs as long as neither you or Dularn violate the 'Edict'," Tais explained. The Edict being a law (not sometimes well enforced immediately) that prohibited the invention, development, or use of weaponry past that of say the Twelfth Century. I had violated it several times now without any response from the Lorr, although Tais was a different matter! Darlanis having already warned me about the use of black powder, nitroglycerine, and my famous or rather infamous "napalm bombs". The last of course were not technically in violation of the Edict as they did not represent an "advance" in technology. I was allowed to retain use of my airplane, "Black Lady", but I was not allowed to use it in any military sense as I once had! I had however "other alternatives" that I now planned to put into use!

"You might reconsider your policy of 'non-interference'," Sela Dai suddenly spoke up from beside me. Tais smiling back. I knew what the "answer" to that would be even before Tais spoke.

"I believe you'd feel 'differently' if we did," she smiled. I found myself in agreement with that. The history of religious organizations that have involved themselves in "politics" is not something that needs to be "repeated" once again here in the 26th Century. The Catholic Church's intervention in politics in the 20th Century doubtlessly had "effects" that in their way led up to The War between Earth and Mars in 2047. There is little if any doubt in my mind at least that "population pressure" was part of the cause why Earth was willing to fight a war with the Lorr! And the Catholic Church's opposition to abortion and birth control was one of the major reasons why the Earth became overpopulated in the first place. I "explained" such to Janet Rogers, but she tended not to believe that "population" might be a serious world problem because of the "fact" the United States had no trouble "feeding itself". Such was a "point" she always brought up in our talks. In my conversation with SHE there on Mars it was explained to me that "Christianity" was a "perversion" of her own teachings, and that the intolerance of the Priestesses of Lys towards it and other religions was thus completely "justified". As SHE said to me, one of the worst "sins" you can commit is to "reproduce" in an irresponsible manner with no thought for the future. A "sin" I fear much of humanity was once "guilty" of! I consider it "proper" that our birthrate is now "controlled" by the Priestesses of Lys. That no woman can become pregnant without their permission. They take their "responsibilities" seriously. They are, after all, our "GUARDIANS", our "PROTECTORS".

Chapter Five

"Mankind must eventually learn 'self-government'," Tais explained further. "You are no longer children who need a spanking from time to time to make you aware of the 'rights' of others." Princess Sela is a quite 'spankable' wench, I might mention here.

"So you will let thousands of people die in battle just to prove your `point'," Sela Dai snapped back, not at all impressed! I was just as glad that Sanda Talen, my Prime Minister, was not here as she is always eager to get into a political "discussion". Sanda believing despite all the teachings of history that the old fashioned idea of "popular democracy" still has some value after its being rather discredited by its own historical failures! It turns out that she is "right" in a way, but that's another story as they often say, and nothing that I want to get into right now!

"And what would you have me `DO'?" Tais purred back, there being a "dangerous" edge to her voice now. Sela was dangerously unaware of the true nature of the being that she now was facing I knew from what I'd seen of this woman's "paranormal powers"!!!

"Use your `abilities', whatever they are, to determine the `truth' and then see that `justice' is done," Sela snapped back!

"And what is `truth', what is `justice'?" Tais smiled back, a glint of "steel" now in those azure eyes. Sela was "smart", but no mental match for the First Priestess whose intelligence I knew even considerably exceeded my own. Raspa by my side like a black statue as she took all of this in through her own ears. A Lorr has no "voice", but they do have a hearing sense like ours. They are not "insects", but their biological nature is "alien".

"That Dularn is the `aggressor' in this conflict!" Sela snapped back. Everyone else standing about, watching, and keeping their thoughts to themselves. As a matter of fact, I don't think anyone but Sela would have been "brave" enough to challenge Tais the way that she was doing now. And I could only pray to SHE that Tais would understand why little Sela spoke as she did.

"Perhaps I should transport you to the North Star out at sea and let you argue the point with Queen Maris herself," Tais then "suggested" with a smile. I have no doubt that Tais did know its location too! There is very little that now escapes the surveillance of the Priestesses of Lys. I speak from my own experience.

"Enough of this!" Darlanis snapped. "The issue is not whether or not Dularn or California are `right', but the issue of how we are going to resolve this conflict without getting into another winless war like the last one!" That had dragged on for years and years, and had cost thousands of lives on either side! And nothing had ever been "settled" either, I knew so very well!!

"Queen Maris is a woman of good character, although she is not of as high a moral character as one might wish," Tais spoke. Her words puzzling us all at the time, although considering what sort of "powers" she has, perhaps she knew of what she spoke of. Upon consideration, I believe that Tais was referring to Maris' marriage to a man she didn't love just to gain wealth and power. The Priestesses of Lys are not "anti-sexual" like the "Christian" religions of my time, but they do speak out against "actions" and "activities" which would be "hurtful" to others. I did not believe that Maris was "happy" in her marriage to Darl Jord, and there is considerable "evidence" that her taking personal command of a raiding vessel as she had done "proved" so far as I was concerned that she was "fleeing" an unhappy marriage! I mention these things now as they do have some bearing upon the "adventures" that I was soon to have there off the coasts of Dularn!

"I'm not `interested' in Maris Jord's `character'," Darlanis snapped back. "I'm only interesting in stopping this damn war!"

"But you should be, since it is her own character that determines `much' of what she does, your highness," Tais pointed out in reply, giving the Empress of California a smile in return.

"What does her 'sexual faithfulness' to her husband have to do with anything?" Sela Dai ventured, although Tais didn't exactly say that if you will look back just a few paragraphs here.

"A person carrying 'guilt feelings' will often behave in 'counterproductive ways'," I answered for Tais, such being a part of my own training as a "shrink" back in the 20th Century. I am incidentally more "intelligent" than Aurora or Darlanis. I do not consider myself the mental equal of Tais or Raspa for that matter. I also acknowledge that Janet Rogers was my "superior". Janet was an extremely "intelligent" woman, and very "capable".

"If I ever get in sword's reach of her she won't have any more 'problems' at all to worry about," the Princess of Talon now snapped back. She had met the Queen of Dularn in combat ship to ship. Exchanged several broadsides with the North Star before the outclassed raider turned away and fled the scene of battle. Poor seamanship on the part of Sela's "landlubber" crew having allowed the North Star to escape from the heavier "Squala" class three masted schooner she had been commanding. The "North" class is both "handy" and "fast". The "Squala" class schooner is even "faster", but not as "handy". There was also "Swiftstar", which was both as "fast" as my "Squalas" and quite a bit "handier" if not as "seaworthy" as the heavier and sturdier "North" class is.

"You should 'adopt' her," Darlanis suggested to me, a smile curving her perfect lips as she stood there taking this all in! I nodded, gave her a smile back in return. I did like the little 5'2" "spitfire" of a Princess with a rather "maternal" affection! Sela Dai being the sort of a woman I'd be proud to call "mine"!

"We'd probably better get this 'treaty' of yours signed," Tais then suggested to Darlanis, perhaps hoping to avoid further argument with the little "spitfire" from Talon there at my side.

"This is a proud and historic moment for all of us here," Darlanis spoke to everyone watching as Aurora and Tais initialed the treaty of alliance between Talon and the Empire of California that Dala Dai had just signed. I wondered if it really mattered all that much. We were like small children playing our war games out in the front yard while overhead roared mighty bombers carrying the H-bomb. If there was to be "war" between California and Dularn it would be because this one white gowned woman allowed it to happen, I mused to myself as I stood there beside my husband. I was not drunk, but neither was I now completely sober. I wondered if all those there in the great throne room understood the true meaning of Tais being here. That "SHE", not Darlanis, was the person who truly ruled the Empire of California. The crowds there on the floor and gathered on the balconies hushed in awe at being in the very "presence" of this legendary woman. Darlanis' security was tight. Her warrioresses everywhere. I suspected we were being "shown" who was the true "ruler" of the solar system.

"Lorraine," Aurora said, touching my arm, those lovely jade green eyes looking into mine as Raspa stood silently at my side. She is tall, 5'9", near the same height as Darlanis. A woman who appears "ageless". One who has seen the stars from out in space. She had "risked all" for a "dream" that had now been suddenly taken from her. We had been told that we, Human, Woman, Lorr, were all "unworthy" of being allowed to travel to other worlds outside our own solar system. For us of Earth it meant little, but I suspected that to Aurora, it had meant the crushing of a long held "dream". The Women had their "freedom" now, but they had merely freed themselves of one "master", the Lorr, to find a new "master" whose power they could not so easily free themselves of. One who had told them like little children that they could not "cross the street". I suspected Aurora in a way "blamed" me for what had happened, as I was "responsible" for the Priestesses in the sense that I had been the one to "suggest" them to Janet.

"I'll leave you two be," Jon said to me, strolling off. I saw Sela dancing with the captain of Squala, Mark Berson. He is tall, blond haired. Like a "Viking" from a long distant past. I thought it a good "match" even

if she was the Princess of Talon.

"I once had a 'dream'," I said to Aurora. She nodded, her own recent experiences no doubt allowing her to almost sense the thoughts that passed through my mind just then. I had once thought I had the "answer" to every problem that the human race faced. Now I wasn't so "sure" anymore. The ideas, concepts I had discussed with Janet Rogers had been flawed by my own "arrogance" in believing I had "all the answers". That the best "solution" to Man's problems was a benevolent dictatorship by someone "intelligent" enough to "guide" Mankind on the path to the stars. Janet Rogers had been my "choice". In some ways it had been a "golden age", but only for a few decades. It was, I knew, possible to "do it over" once again with the Priestesses of Lys. Yet, I wondered if "that" really the "answer"? I no longer felt "sure" any more of what I had once so confidently believed in before. I no longer believed that I had all the "answers" anymore.

"I did too," Auroras smiled, glancing at Tais. I knew of the Valkyrie there on the Moon at Farside. In theory it could reach the stars. We had, however, been "forbidden" the stars by Tais. Others, beings living on other worlds, had decided "such" for us.

"I fear we have all 'lost' our 'dreams'," I said to Aurora.

"We are as 'little children' before 'them'," she said then. There was little need to ask who she was referring to just then. The true "rulers" of the Universe considered us as "barbarians". They, "THE GUARDIANS", had "spoken to us" through the lips of Tais. Had imposed upon us all their own version of the "EDICT". We would not be allowed to use the "starship" there on the Moon. For all of us the stars would remain only just "points of light".

"WHAT DID YOU TWO DO!" I gasped, seeing that silver neckchain there about Gayle's lovely throat. There being no doubt in my mind of what these two "children" had just done either! And what Priestess had been "dumb" enough to marry a pair like these? Such were my thoughts as I stood there "stunned" with surprise as the pair came strolling in as if nothing important had happened!

"Darlanis 'suggested it'," the young Prince of Talon smiled. I didn't think his mother would be that "delighted" with things! He was legally old enough to marry, but neither Dala Dai or I had thought either Carl or Gayle was really "mature" enough for it!!!

"And I agreed that it was a good idea," Gayle now added, her arm around her husband. She suddenly seemed a lot more "mature"! More a "woman" now, and not the "child" that I had loved so much! The gleaming links of the silver chain around her throat telling its own story to anyone who saw her that she was now "his" wife!

"I see," I breathed, glancing across the room to where the "topic of discussion" was now busily talking with her own mother. Carl's mother now strolling up like an approaching thundercloud, the look in her dark eyes speaking much of how she had felt having her own royal son and my beautiful foster daughter suddenly "disappear" and then come back married to each other! I didn't know then of course what Darlanis had "seen", or I would have had some choice comments of my own to make to Gayle about certain matters! As you will note, I had feared such a thing happening!

"Carl! Why didn't you speak to me first!" the little Queen of Talon breathed, her dark eyes burning up into mine as I nodded in agreement. Neither of us were that "delighted" with this turn of events, but neither of us really knew what to do about it now!

"I love her, mother, and she agreed to marry me," Carl told his mother as she stood there, "fire" in her

dark eyes. It is quite obvious where Sela gets her "spirit" after you meet her mother. Dala Dai turning, giving me the sort of a look that said entire paragraphs and chapters without even saying a single word!

"Oh, Wow!" Sharon breathed, having stuck her nose into this! Lara and Jers standing to one side, while Darlanis spoke softly to Aurora. I saw Lynn speaking to Yvette, the guards at the door watching, their expressions "wooden" as I now glanced up at them. Sela hanging back, along with Jon Richards and Prince Serak. I suspected that Darlanis had some "explaining" to do here too!!! The couple dozen Imperial V.I.P. 'S smiling to themselves as they stood there near the table holding their drinks and snacks. Yvette, Lynn, and Serena whispering to each other, all with delightful smiles at this utterly surprising turn of events. Dala and I glanced meaningfully at each other. It was time to confront a certain golden haired Empress and learn the truth! Find out just what laid behind this new and shocking state of affairs!

Chapter Six

"Lorraine and I have things to discuss with you," Dala said. Darlanis nodded, her azure eyes glowing into ours. She is extremely beautiful. Very "regal". A fitting woman to rule the Empire of California. She is also a very excellent "politician" as I have well learned since we first met. And a woman who is often too willing to "use" others for her own purposes. It was this last factor that I now suspected had played its "role" here. The marriage of Gayle to Dala's son would give the Empress a certain "edge" in political relationships she hadn't had before now. A "strengthening" of the new treaty between Talon and California.

"This sudden marriage of your son to Lorraine's adopted daughter no doubt," Darlanis smiled back, glancing over to where the others stood talking. "I never dreamed that they would go get married so soon when I spoke to them earlier this afternoon."

"Then you actually knew something was 'up'?" I now snapped, angry that Darlanis would have kept such a thing secret from me. That was, of course, assuming that she had actually "known" that our young couple was planning to get married, which I did doubt! I didn't think that even Darlanis would do something like that! On the other hand I couldn't really be "sure", knowing Darlanis!!

"They are 'young' and 'in love'," Darlanis now smiled back. That was "obvious" from looking at the couple as they stood there talking to Sela. Carl having his arm possessively around Gayle. I suddenly realized how "mature" Gayle had become in the last few months. The jut of her breasts, buttocks telling its own tales!

"My son is only 'sixteen'," Dala Dai now pointed out in icy tones. Gayle was a year older, and considerably more "mature" in certain ways due to the life she had lead. I wondered about Darlanis and Gayle? She was "Dularnian" as was Darlanis herself. I wondered too if Darlanis hadn't wished to "cement" this alliance of ours by getting my beloved Gayle to marry the Prince of Talon? Darlanis sometimes puts "politics" over personal considerations as I have mentioned a bit earlier in this chapter. I hoped not. I didn't think I could ever forgive her for something like that!

"Do you doubt that she will make him a good wife?" Darlanis asked. Darlanis is the sort of a woman that is "smarter" than she looks. A lot of people have made that mistake. I have too.

"No," Dala admitted with a quick glance up at me. She could hardly answer otherwise while I now

stood right here beside her. Even if she thought the marriage was a "mistake", she couldn't come right out and "say" that my beloved Gayle was not a suitable wife. Darlanis no doubt knew that. She had us both in a "spot" now. I had little doubt that he would make Gayle a good husband in turn. He certainly was deep enough in love with my Princess.

"Your son is a bit 'inexperienced', but I think that will pass with time," Darlanis observed, giving Dala Dai a warm smile. Gayle was "experienced", although only because she had been a slave girl. Otherwise she really didn't "know" too much, I felt. On the other hand I had noticed my "marriage manual" missing a couple days ago, that famous "A KEY TO A WOMAN'S HEART" supposed to have been written by a woman back in the 20th Century who had signed herself "Carol". It is basically a book on "making love".

"You are 'hinting' at something, Darlanis," I said to her. I didn't like her keeping such "secrets" from me in this matter!

"Does he have a slave girl of his own in Talon?" Darlanis asked the Queen of Talon, for the moment ignoring my question. I had no doubt that she had "discovered" something we knew nothing about. Darlanis can be like that at times. An annoying "tease". I resisted the urge to take her by the throat and throttle her!

"I didn't think he was 'old' enough for one," Dala answered. Talon is a bit like Dularn that way. They try to "ignore" sex. I suspected that had been a mistake. A more "experienced" young man wouldn't have "fallen" so hard for Gayle like Carl had done. Gayle is a beautiful young blonde, but she is not a "Darlanis".

"And you probably had a mother's natural hesitation in telling him about 'the facts of life'," Darlanis added with a smile. I had no doubt that Darlanis had "seen something". And I also suspected just what Darlanis had "seen"! Gayle had been "caught in the act". And I had little doubt what sort of an "act" too!!!

"You caught them in 'bed' together," I interrupted with a smile, thinking of what it must have looked like to everyone concerned! Gayle is a beautiful girl, with lovely long legs and a firm trim figure that has drawn the attention of a number of men! No doubt it had been quite a "surprise" for everyone right then!

I saw Auroracome strolling over, her jade green eyes glowing. I wondered what she "thought" of all this. There is no such a thing as "marriage" on Mars, although the Women do form "relationships" with each other. Such relationships are of course "lesbian" as there are no men on Mars, and the Women have about the same "attitude" towards men that certain "feminists" of my own era had. As reproduction is carried out by the use of a "cloning" technology the Lorr developed thousands of years ago, I suppose that the thought of a heterosexual relationship to most of the Women would be almost "unthinkable". Aurora of course did experience one, although I suspect even she did not "understand"! She once said however that it was not a "pleasant" experience for her, and that she'd never "do it" again with a man for anything!

"Our young couple took it into their heads to get married," I said to the Martian, Aurora considering herself one. Raspa now strolling over on her six legs, her compound eyes gleaming in the light from the lamps and the myriad candles that lit up the room. Everyone there being well aware by now of what had just happened!

"It is perhaps 'wise' to do if one is to form a reproductive relationship," Auroras smiled back, perhaps knowing little of such things. Her own relationship with Prince Paul having been brief. I suspect that Aurora had not expected to become pregnant with Darlanis as swiftly as she had. Unlike the women of my own era, the women of this era rarely have abortions unless the fetus is found to be faulty. It is not

"right to life", but just the way that they view matters. Of course, most women are implanted with a contraceptive device that prevents unwanted pregnancies anyway. "If `others' do not interfere I think they have a good chance to live out their lives together," she then added with a glance at Dala. I had no doubts of just "who" she was referring to either!

"I don't know if it's a good idea, Sela," Dala said to her daughter as the lovely Miss Dai stood there at my side. "Even if Dularn can do nothing against us, still to declare war on Dularn is an act that could be fraught with very serious consequences." The sun was gone there in the west, only a red gleam there on the horizon telling of its former existence. It was chill now, the full Moon bright as it floated up over the mountains to the east. The three of us taking a bit of "air" there on the roof top now.

"All we need is a privateering commission so that Lorraine and I can go after Maris and her North Star," Sela answered. As I couldn't get Darlanis to "act" now, this seemed the best way!!!

"I will have to think it over," Dala Dai promised. I could understand her fears. Such an "action" could have serious political consequences for her back in Talon. Perhaps, I thought to myself, we should look "elsewhere". The Nevadas didn't have any naval forces, but perhaps they could "use" some, I mused then. I had no objection to sailing under the Nevada flag just as long as I got a "crack" at that damned Maris and her infamous North Star!

"Lorraine," Lara spoke, interrupting, glancing back to Jers. I could see the goose pimples there on her bare shoulders. I was glad that Sela had gotten over her earlier hostility towards Lara. Lara was perhaps a better "wife" to Jers than Sela would have ever been. Sela was more beautiful, being a very small and lovely brunette, but Lara was a very "sensual" sort of woman, which I did not think Sela was. I would be proven wrong later on here, but you'll just have to finish the story to see it for yourself. In any case it is a good "match", and I am happy for both of them. Like me, the lovely Sela now has her "captain". And no, we never did "get" Maris either, but I suppose it is just as well considering how Gayle would have felt had she ever learned that I had been responsible for her sister's death. In any case we did teach the Dularnians a "lesson" that they won't forget for some time! Fighting as privateers under a flag that they no doubt were shocked to see flying over my own mastheads!

"There was an attack by a Dularnian raider on a Bajan ship," Jers said to me, his teeth chattering a bit against the chill. A warrioress on guard wrapped in a heavy cloak watching us both. I nodded, gave him a consoling smile. As long as Darlanis refused to "act", none of us were safe from the prowling raiders that now came out of the darkness and then went back out to sea almost unopposed. The mighty Californian navy now being reduced to nothing but an "escort service" for slow and fat merchantmen creeping from port to port down our long vulnerable coastline.

"Will you take a `commission'," he said to me suddenly. "And teach that damm `blonde' that we won't stand for this shit!" He was of course referring to Queen Maris, although one could I suppose also think of another "blonde" who we all knew very well!

"You realize," Jon said to me, "That I can't go along with you on this `expedition' of yours." I nodded, kissed him on the lips. He is a good husband. He gave me "space" to be "me". We got along well together. We both had our "memories" of the past, but we did not let them rule our lives. Our marriage was strong. I could see the ships at anchor there through our bedroom window.

"I never expected `that' of you," I answered. This was "my" war, not his. In a way I felt "responsible". Maris had once been a slave girl on my estates. She would still be such had I taken more pains to see that she was also kept properly chained!

"I've already lost one wife," Jon said to me. "And you mean even more to me than she did." That pleased me a great deal, although I really didn't think it was fair to his memory of Alexis.

"There's always Sanda Talen," I smiled back. Sanda had once been hopelessly in love with Jon. She had even "offered" herself to him one night. At the time she had been married and Jon turned her down, feeling that no man of "honor" would ever "bed" another man's wife even if she was "willing" to be so "bedded".

"But she's not `Lorraine'," Jon smiled, pulling me down on the bed, undoing the tie to my robe, pushing it open so that I was then "bared". His hand caressing my nakedness as his lips sought mine. Jon says that I make love even better than Yvette! That I'm a lot "better in bed" than was Maris Marn, his former "love" before we met. And that really pleases me, I might add! Especially when I think of what she "lost" and what I "gained"!!!

"You're making it `hard' for me," I breathed, squirming. Back in the 20th Century sex was nothing really important to me. I considered it highly "overrated", just something that they used to sell stuff. My husband had little interest in "pleasing" me.

"Send Sela in your place," Jon suggested. I had no doubts she would give a good account of herself if she ever met up with Maris Jord again, but I did not think she was up to the task yet!

"I've got a personal `score' to settle with Maris," I said.

"She's just a damm `gold-digger' who'll get `hers' someday," Jon answered, his hand down there between my thighs doing things to me that made it hard just then to think of such things! He is very "knowledgeable" in such things too. Tall, dark, handsome.

"I wouldn't mind having her around as a slave girl," I said, my hips lifting almost involuntarily beneath his erotic fingers as they explored those inner recesses of my now drooling vagina.

"She's probably `good' for that," Jon agreed, mounting me.

"But she'd have to `console' herself with my men," I said. It was getting a bit hard to think about such things just then. I felt him slide deep into the heated moistness of my inner self.

"Maybe you could `teach' her," Jon suggested, biting my neck. Hard enough to leave a mark that Darlanis would see later. I drew up my knees and locked my thighs around his hips so that the penetration would be deeper. The action also allowing me to play a more `active role' in things by the movement of my hips.

"There's a good `trainer' in Trella," I breathed, biting him back. My legs tightening around his hips as I lifted myself to him. My nails digging in. I bite and scratch when I make love.

"Her name is `Lorraine'," he breathed, his arms around me.

"And she is `good in bed'," I breathed, arching, lifting.

"The `best'," Jon agreed, our lips pressing together. Our tongues meeting, fencinglike two swords. I lifted myself again. Took what was given me. And welcomed it into my inner recesses! The climax rippling through my loins making me sigh with delight!

Chapter Seven

"Please inform Commodore Dai that we are now ready to raise anchor," I told Captain Mark Berson of the Squala as he nodded and gave the orders to the signals' midshipman there waiting. The Seahawk with its "seasoned" crew already had the anchor hove up short, ready to set sail. Jers is extremely "competent". Perhaps not as "experienced" as a long time sea captain like Jon Richards, but I had no doubt that his abilities at least equaled those of Maris Jord! Commodore Dai was of course the lovely Princess of Talon. I considered her capable, if "inexperienced". Such had been the "telling factor" in the battle between the Seawolf and the North Star, I had "determined" in my investigation.

I turned and waved towards the heavy 56 oared trireme Janis that would be escorting a number of merchantmen south to Baja, then on to Talon's little seaport of Parth there at the foot of the mountains where it would meet up with the Star of Baja, a 50, Tara's former flagship, another heavy trireme. The two then serving as escort vessels along with a smaller bireme for any merchantmen wishing to make the voyage back north to California. The thought going through my mind just then that I might never "see" Jon again. Never again to be held in his strong arms. I could end up slid overboard like so many others I've seen sewed up in a hammock for that last voyage to the bottom of the sea! A catapult shot at my feet to speed me to my "final destination"!

"Signal from the Janis, your majesty," the signals midshipman breathed, somewhat awed by the fact that his Queen was standing right there only a dozen feet away. I could read the flashes of light just as easily as he could, and without a telescope too!

"Good Hunting?" the young man breathed, looking at me. I nodded. We were "hunting big game". A beautiful golden haired Queen. Her younger sister was now the Princess of Talon. I wondered how Gayle was getting along with her new "mother-in-law". The lovely city of Trellas spreading out there before us. Mobs on the docks to see us off. Among them somewhere was a quite pregnant Prime Minister. The famous Lady Sanda Talen of Trelandar. It was less than a year since Sharon and I had flown into this era through one of those strange mysterious "Gateways" caused by the use of anti-matter weapons in The War between Earth and Mars.

"A good day for it," I smiled back. Spring was now in its full glory. The birds singing in the trees, building their nests for the next generation. The Peasants in their fields praying to Lys that it might be a "good year". The year was 2566 A.D. That is what I called it, although to all my friends it was 519 A.W. Less than a year ago I had been a practicing psychiatrist in LA. Unhappily married to Jack Duval, the president of Duval Computer. Filled with dreams of what might someday be that I shared with a young dark haired woman then working her way through college. A young woman who would someday become the first world ruler. We had at the time shared so much. Sanda reminded me a lot of Janet Rogers in a way. I felt that Trelandar was left in "good hands".

There was a soft breeze off the sea. It would be necessary to either tack our way out of the harbor or be towed out like some bunch of fat merchantmen behind biremes rowed by convicted felons. It is the policy here in Trelandar to castrate such men. Women are merely sold into slavery. This is not a society where convicted criminals "get off" with easy punishments like they did back in my time. Here if you commit a crime, you pay the price! It is also a lot cheaper than keeping people in prisons, I find! * * The practice of enslaving felons was introduced by Janet Rogers in the 21st Century. I recall once commenting to her that it made more "sense" than imprisoning people for long periods of time at great

expense to the taxpayers. The money obtained from the sale of the "slaves" is used to compensate their "victims" after the costs of their trial and so forth is first taken out. The "value" of male slaves is low, no more than half a dozen gold crowns at the best, while "that" of women is considerably higher.

"Ships to tack out one by one in order of sailing," I ordered. Jers and I had worked out a plan of sailing that we felt would make our force as "effective" as possible. Spreading the squadron out so that each could watch as large a part of the ocean as possible. I thought we might get "lucky", and catch one of the Dularnian raiders (there were about half a dozen now out there somewhere) in our "net" as we sailed north to distant Dularn. A country that less than a year before I once had looked upon as a "home" for Sharon and me under protection of Princess Janis of Dularn. How different "things" would have been had she lived! She had died in Jon's own arms, a victim of a crossbow bolt fired by the dying pirate captain of the Seahawk. Now Maris Jord, that golden haired slut of a "gold digger", was the Queen of Dularn, and what a "disaster" that had now been for everyone!

Jers was technically a part of my command, although I was very much aware of the "political realities" of the situation. We were technically "privateers" sailing under a commission from the Prince of Baja. The Dularnians would no doubt consider us in other terms. Darlanis would keep her "promise" to Queen Tulis. I supposed it was a way of keeping her promise not to attack Dularn. How "effective" five heavy schooners and two light schooners would be was another question. We had the speed and the firepower to deal with almost anything that Dularn could muster against us, but on the other hand we could only operate for a period of about six months before cold weather drove us back south!

I watched the little Arrow lift anchor, catch the wind in her sails, and sail a zig-zag path for the entrance to the harbor. The Seahawk following, Jers' long experience at commanding her showing as the big three master took the wind. Sela's own "Squala" class, the big Seawolf, following. The lack of experience among the crew showing a bit as she fell off a little before catching the wind. No doubt the lovely Miss Dai, Talon's Crown Princess, sister-in-law to my Princess, was "sweating" a bit now!

"She'll learn," Mark smiled. He was a handsome devil. One who could "stir" the blood of any red-blooded 26th Century woman. On the other hand he was the best captain that I had in my navy. I do not count Jon here, as he was my "Sealord" and not actually a commander of a ship as such any more than I was even although I was at the moment in command of this squadron of seven schooners.

"She's a very capable, competent woman," I smiled in reply.

"And 'beautiful' too," Mark smiled. Princess Sela Dai was.

I watched the next ship, the "Nighthawk" raise anchor. Fall off a bit before catching the wind. Its captain a bit better at his trade than Seawolf's had been. He had no doubt taken pains to see that things would be so. A big three masted schooner is easy to handle if you understand the relationship of the sails to the wind and how to apply it to move your ship where you wish it.

The third ship, "Corsica" now hoisting sail, its anchor hove short just ahead of us. Mark barking orders to his men as they dashed about the decks getting things ready. With a fore and aft rigged ship you do most of the work from the deck, although it is necessary to ascend the masts to set the topsails and so forth.

Behind us I saw men running across the deck of Huntress, a heavy two masted schooner. No match in a fight for a big "North" class schooner, but such a ship could "delay" one long enough for a "Squala" class to come up and finish the job! Corsica ahead of us now setting sail, drifting back a bit before taking the wind. Both Huntress and Corsica were being commanded by women captains. The Corsica by Valerie

Dunn, and the Huntress by Janice Hill.

"Our turn", I breathed. Mark nodded, his eye on the flags, the ripples in the water as the wind now blew across the harbor.

"Hoist the anchor!" Mark called. "Jib and spanker!" The entire harbor seeming to swing about as Squala fell off, took the wind and then responded to the pressure of the sails as the main sail was hoisted. Mark ordering the yard "loosened" a bit as we started to pull up on the Corsica just ahead of us. The line was already a bit "ragged" as the various captains hoisted more sail!

I watched Trella seemingly moving back, there being no sensation of actual movement in these calm waters. The Huntress now following close behind, a bit of white foam showing at her bow.

"Signal `ships to assume patrol formation'," I ordered. The Arrow was now already well out beyond the mouth of the harbor. I saw the Seahawk relay our commands. Jers was "competent". Another like Jon Richards, but without the "combat experience".

"I'm running that bunch of `landlubbers' and `clodhoppers' I've got through sail drill," Sela said to me as she stepped aboard the Squala, the sun now but a pale glow there in the west as we laid hove to, gently rolling somewhat now in the swell. I don't think she realized that her activities were quite visible from the other ships through a powerful telescope, especially one like mine. After her "losing" the North Star, she was "touchy". I suspected the problem was her captain, a grizzled old seadog who didn't believe women "belonged" at sea except as slave girls. I had the "hunch" that he wanted to make Miss Dai "look bad" even if it meant letting an enemy ship escape capture! I am not without my own "resources" when it comes to such things, and although I could not "prove" it, I did suspect that the captain of the Seawolf was willing to "betray" his own "cause" just to get back at being placed under the command of a woman like Princess Sela! While the men of the 26th Century do not usually have the "male chauvinism" of men of my own era, you still on occasion meet one.

"I'm switching commands with you and giving you Squala," I answered. I had no doubt that Mark would enjoy having Sela Dai on board his ship, Sela being a radiantly beautiful woman if a tad short so far as her height went. Miss Dai's seagoing attire being a clinging tunic and skin-tight hose that showed off the perfection of her legs and a teasing bit of her rounded buttocks!

"I don't want to give up the Seawolf," Sela pleaded, the twilight a red glow in her face. Mark and his officers standing there silently on the quarterdeck waiting. I shared her feelings about such things. But I needed my force to be just as "effective" as possible, and I could much better deal with a "stubborn" captain than could Sela Dai. Her small size for example making her appear much less "imposing" than a taller woman like myself would be. I also had the nautical knowledge which Sela did not have as yet to know whether or not a crew was doing their "best"!

At that moment the boat from Seahawk hooked on and I had no more time to stand there and argue with Sela about such things as much to my surprise Lara climbed up on deck, her halter and short leather skirt as revealing of her figure as that of any slave's!

"Is there.....?" I breathed, wondering why Lara was here?

"My husband tripped on the quarterdeck steps and broke his arm," Lara smiled. Adding that she had no doubt he would soon be back in control of things. Lara is "competent", surprisingly so.

"I can send someone from Squala if you need help," I volunteered. Lara did have her officers, but they

were used to Jers, not to her, and she might be having a bit of trouble right now.

"As long as we're out in 'open' waters we're O.K.," Lara smiled back in reply as Sela stood there watching, thankfully keeping her thoughts to herself just then, much to my pleasure. The Seahawk would be more difficult to handle in confined waters, but those we would not be getting into for a couple weeks yet when we reached Dularn and ventured into an area that I suspected the Dularnians never thought we would ever come. One where we might for a time at least teach them the meaning of "seapower"! The other captains now coming to Squala's side keeping me busy as Mark guided the two Princesses down below to my lovely cabin.

"Lara," Sela breathed softly, touching her arm as the Bajan Princess prepared to leave, the odor of liquor mingled with that of the sea there in the Squala's stern cabin. I watched silently as the scene unfolded there before me. There has always been a subtle "tension" between the two women. Sela feeling that Lara used "sex" to win Jers away from her, while Lara in turn resented the fact that Sela was a woman of "breeding", a true "Princess", something that she could never be. Sela is also the better looking of the two, although Lara is more sensual in her appearance.

"Yes?" Lara answered, seeming to tower over the smaller woman. She was five eight to Sela's five two. She was also wearing high heeled boots, which made her taller yet. Sela was too, but in her case it really didn't make all that much of a difference.

"I think Jers made the 'right' decision," Sela spoke softly. I had always thought so too, as Lara was more "maternal" and "protective" than Sela would have been had he gone and married her. I suspect that Jers had wanted a woman who would be just that to him. Lara of course had the advantage of being "good in bed". I suspect that her "abilities" in that field are "overrated", but no doubt she is the equal of anyone I've known. She reminds me a bit of a woman I used to know back in the 20th Century, although they didn't look anything alike. A woman who I once "wronged" much to my shame. I am not a person of "sterling character" by any means. There are things in my past that I am not proud of. No doubt the day eventually will come as it will for us all when we will have to "answer" for our sins. When I will stand before SHE like those before me to face Her judgement.

"I think I've been a better wife to him than I might have been otherwise just because he still has his memories of you to keep me 'on my toes'," Lara smiled back. I had wondered about that. If Jers still "felt" anything for the lovely Princess. I knew that Sela had "given" herself to him, that she had bestowed upon him her virginity, which was "important" to a girl like her. Talon being a country like Dularn where such things were thought to be of importance. Such is also true to a certain extent in California among girls of the upper class, although not to the point that it is in Dularn, which is very "Nineteenth Century" in a way. In Dularn it being almost "expected" that a girl of the upper class will still be a "virgin" at the time of her marriage!

"We have things to do," I interrupted, clearing my throat.

Chapter Eight

"I don't understand any of this," Captain Charles Hawkins of the Seawolf complained as I stepped aboard, the way that the crew stood to "greet" me leaving no doubt as to the lack of discipline aboard this ship. The condition of the deck, the slackness in the rigging I noted upon coming aboard leaving no

doubt that there was but little "discipline" aboard this ship of my command! Men who take little "pride" in themselves or in their ship will I feel not be the "best" in a fight either. Others may disagree, but I have found that a "taut ship and crew" will do "better".

"I want this deck so clean I will be able to eat my breakfast off it in the morning, and this rigging will be tightened up until it sings in the wind!" I snapped back, standing there in the lamplight before him. I am tall, five nine, and an utterly "different" woman than had been Sela. I have a "reputation" for being "hard" too!! A part of it being no doubt due to the bone structure of my face which makes me appear quite "stern" looking. I wore a flowing black silk dress, long, with leather trappings. A broad brimmed hat with veil, and a pair of high heeled boots.

"But...!" captain Hawkins gasped, glancing at his officers.

"You have your orders, carry them out!" I snapped back. I had no doubts now why this ship had allowed the North Star to escape her. Sela had not been completely "honest" with me. She had tried, for what reason I didn't know, to conceal the "truth" from me. In any case it didn't matter any more. The Seawolf was a new ship, only a few months old, and to be allowed to get into this shabby condition spoke of an utterly incompetent leadership!

"Then tomorrow after breakfast," I snapped, "This ship will be put through battle drill and sail drill until I feel satisfied that it is fully capable of 'beating' anything that Dularn puts up against it!" I would "make or break" this officer and all his men or know the reason why! And I would do the same with the other five ships until I had a force under my command capable of dealing with whatever came our way! That they would soon be cursing my name under their breath I had no doubts, but such is necessary if you are to expect men to do their "best" in battle!

"Aye, your majesty," captain Hawkins muttered, there being no other possible "answer" that he could give to one such as me!

"This is not a 'happy ship' like the Squala," Yvette said to me in French as she unpacked my things. I nodded, thinking of what could happen should I "push" too hard. I might very well be the "greatest swordswoman who ever lived" as some said, but there was a limit to my own abilities, and mutiny was always a danger! There was a case during the last war with Dularn where the crew of an Imperial bireme did actually mutiny and turn their ship over to the Dularnians. Darlanis had taken "action" then to see that such "incidents" didn't happen in the future, but there is a fine line between "discipline" and "abuse" and one could never be sure just when that "line" was crossed or what would happen then!

"I want you to talk to the 'ships' girls'," I said to her. I wanted to get to the "bottom" of this state of affairs just as soon as possible. I wondered why I had not investigated affairs aboard this ship earlier when the North Star had escaped Seawolf? I hadn't instituted the court martial that I perhaps should have done simply because of my personal relationship with Sela Dai. I had merely taken her word for it that poor seamanship on the part of the Seawolf's crew had allowed the North Star to "escape" her.

"Oui, mistress," Yvette smiled, getting out my things. At least the stern cabin was clean, although I had at least expected that. The stars gleaming over the sea through the open stern windows. The Seawolf was a powerful swift ship. That a "North" class raider could have escaped her now seemed hard to believe...

"And find out what you can about the engagement with the North Star," I ordered, speaking in French so that we could not be understood by anyone listening. Yvette and I often do so, the language giving us a certain sort of "intimacy" that I do enjoy!

"Is the deck to your `satisfaction'?" captain Hawkins asked as I came up on deck the next morning. During the night we had slowly sailed north, keeping a close lookout for the enemy ships. The height of our mastheads such that I hoped we might be able to take one by surprise. Being "faster" than the "enemy", I felt we stood a good chance of "taking" any raider that we spotted after a long stern chase. True, the Dularnians would no doubt extract a "price" for any of their ships we took, but that is the nature of war whether it is fought on land, or on the sea, or up in the air as it was back in my own time so much only "legends" now.

"Now `keep' it so," I answered, leaping up into the rigging. My skirt loose enough that I had free use of my legs for such work. No doubt a few of the crew saw more than they should have of their Queen, but I didn't care all that much anyway right now! I have long thin legs, not the best to "show off" in tight hose.

I am not overly "bothered" by heights unless the ship rolls or if I have to do something more than just climb to the top of a mast. The man in the crow's nest regarding me with something of a grin as I scrambled up beside him, the ocean stretching out before us, the sails of the other ships visible there on the horizon both to the east and to the west of us. We were sweeping an area of about fifty miles from the coast on out to sea. Upon spotting any sail, especially "fore and aft", signals would be exchanged and the squadron would be sent to engage the enemy. I was rather hoping that any Dularnian, outnumbered seven to one, would simply "surrender" rather than be foolish enough to fight, but one could never tell. I suspected that in any case we could expect that the men of the North Star would fight for their beautiful golden Queen regardless of the horrible odds facing them.

"Signal from Huntress!" the lookout called down to his captain, Sela Dai jumping at bit at the sound of his voice as she stood there on Squala's quarterdeck and looked out over the gleaming rolling ocean. Well aware that Mark was "watching" her.

"Sail bearing three thirty, fore and aft rig," the Princess of Talon heard the signals midshipman call out as he peered through the 16x50 telescope at the distant sails there on the azure horizon that was the lithe and swift two masted schooner. The words "fore and aft rig" sending a shudder of terror through the young Princess. Still brightly vivid in her memory was burned the scenes from the last time she had commanded a ship in battle. The catapult balls smashing down on deck, the deadly ballistae bolts that had killed the ship's girl right before her! The paralyzing terror that she, Sela, was the "target" of enemy missiles directed by that golden haired "Valkyrie" that now ruled Dularn! And now once again she would have stand there on a quarterdeck and let herself be the "target" for their own weaponry! * * It takes a special sort of "bravery" to endure such. I myself would much rather prefer to face armed men blade to blade than to have to stand on a quarterdeck and face enemy fire without being able to do anything but give orders to "return" such fire back!

"Signal the others, `possible enemy in sight, will investigate'," Sela answered in a soft voice as Mark looked over at her, the little Princess' nails digging into the varnished railing as she stared towards the now hidden enemy ship and fought her fear.

"Get those topsails up, set the stunsails!" Mark ordered, standing up there on the Squala's quarterdeck like some "Viking". He wondered about this little brunette who Lorraine had placed in command of their squadron. This little Princess from Talon, that hidden exotic land that was more the stuff of "legend" than anything else. A land where women like her rode the backs of great birds into battle. She didn't seem to be the sort one would expect to see in battle. She was too beautiful, too "feminine", he thought to himself. Not like their awesomely competent Lorraine!

"Beat to quarters, rig for battle," Sela spoke softly. He nodded, looking into those dark lustrous eyes.

He could see the sweet feminine curves of her body beneath her tunic, the trim tapering of her legs beneath her hose. The sword there on her hip seemed out of place on such a woman as did the symbols of a commodore there on her shoulders. Mark suspected that she was not a woman that men would take "seriously" until they saw her in battle. That had probably been her trouble there on the Seawolf earlier, he mused to himself as he regarded Sela standing there.

"Why are you staring at me?" Sela suddenly spoke. Mark had not realized that she had been aware of how he had looked at her. Mentally stripping the Princess of her attire as she stood there.

"You are a beautiful woman," he smiled, hoping she would accept that. He was not used to taking orders from a woman like her. Lorraine was "different". She looked the part of being what she was. No one could ever doubt that she was "competent"!!

"This is not the time for 'that'," Sela Dai answered softly. Mark nodding, giving her a smile and then turning away from her.

"Squala's signaling," the lookout suddenly spoke from beside me, the blinks of the carbide lamp visible there as I read the Morse code flashes. The lookout peering through his telescope at them, although I could "read" them easily enough without one. I do have good vision for my age. Better still than most people's. I do need "reading glasses" however for "fine print" sometimes...

"Looks like we've 'caught' something," I smiled. I could see the Squala turning away, the topsails being hoisted, men setting the stunsails there between the masts. I was very proud of my flagship, its captain, its men. If the enemy was indeed the North Star I could expect to see Maris Jord kneeling stripped before me in chains or dead on her deck between it was lunchtime!

"Better them than us," the lookout muttered to himself.

"And what do you mean by that!" I snapped, seizing him!

"That damm 'bitch' sailed circles around us!" the man protested, "And that little Talon beauty just stood there not giving a damn either!" I wondered: Had Sela "froze" during the battle? And what of Captain Hawkins? What "role" if any did he play in all this? And why was "discipline" now so "slack" on this ship?

Chapter Nine

"Signal from Huntress!" Sela heard the midshipman cry out. "Enemy in sight! Am now in pursuit!" Sela could see Huntress' top sails there on the azure horizon where the blue green sea met the glowing azure of the sky. A few wispy clouds floating above. Squala bashing through the swell as men scurried over her deck like ants when their nest has been disturbed. The ballistae being now wound up, the arms of the catapults drawn back. Javelins and catapult shot now being readied for use. The warrioresses in their chain mail checking their bows. The new Imperial compound bows that allowed one to "reach out" to two hundred fifty yards.

"Ask if they can make out the type of ship," Sela spoke in soft tones. She prayed it would not be the North Star. Her own brother was married to the younger sister of the Queen of Dularn.

"Query received," Mark breathed as the message was sent. He did not envy the captain of Huntress. The Dularnian could very easily wheel about and put "paid" to Huntress easily if she couldn't outmaneuver the heavier ship. The Dularnians were fast, perhaps even faster than the Huntress. He did not envy its commander out there racing across the blue-green ocean! On the other hand Janice Hill was perhaps their most "able" commander now!* *This was her "rank" at the time these events took place. (LR)

"Message from the Queen," the first lieutenant observed, watching the signal light flash there from Seawolf's deck. Mark nodded, smiled to himself. He would need no "help" in this task! No Dularnian raider was a match for a ship like the Squala so far as he knew. Especially not with Huntress there too to help out!

"Tell her we can handle it," Mark smiled, glancing at Sela. Wondering to himself what a woman like her would be like in bed? He had held that small slim body in his arms, felt its curves pressed up against his when they danced there in the royal palace of the Empress. She had been "friendly", but yet "reserved", the sort of a woman who quickly let you know what your "status" was!

"My confidence is with you all:Lorraine'," the midshipman read, watching the flashes there from the Seawolf's forecastle. "We are ordered to relay her words to Huntress," the boy added.

"Message received, your majesty," Captain Charles Hawkins said to me, his gray eyes burning into mine. I wondered if he feared that I might now order the Seawolf to support the Squala as it grew smaller by the minute there on the gleaming horizon?

"Why did you 'lose' the North Star when this ship is supposed to be 'faster'," I suddenly spoke, wishing to get to the "bottom" of these "rumors" and "innuendoes" that were being spoken about Sela's apparent lack of "courage" while under fire! Since she had faced me back there in La Paz with only a sword against my terrifying Lorr force saber, I did not doubt her courage in a fight, but battle at sea where you must stand there and wait for the enemy to fire upon you does take a special sort of "courage"! I wondered if even I would prove adequate to that!!!

"We got off a couple good broadsides into the North Star, but we got taken all aback and before we could recover the North Star sailed off into a fog bank and we lost her in the fog," he answered almost as if he had earlier rehearsed these very words!

"That was some pretty 'lousy' seamanship!" I snapped back. A schooner, even a big heavyweight like Seawolf can be easily gotten back under control by proper use of the sails, especially the jib and spanker, which are the "control sails" for a fore and aft rigged vessel. The jib controlling the bow while the spanker in turn controls the stern of the ship. The jib serves to push the ship off the wind while the spanker in turn pushes it into the wind. By loosening or tightening these sails you can sail the ship without a rudder, a trick that I'd often done on Squala!

"We took some pretty heavy losses and the crew was pretty 'inexperienced' in taking in and letting out sail under fire," he answered, his voice just a bit too "calm" for my own liking now!

"And Sela?" I asked, wondering what his answer would be.

"She stood right here and watched everything," he answered, looking over my shoulder at the Nighthawk some miles off to the east. The Corsica quite invisible, being below our horizon now. I could just see the tips of Squala's mastheads now as she sailed out further to be assistance to the Huntress. I

hoped the young but experienced commander of Huntress had enough sense not to try to engage one of the swift three masted Dularnians or there wouldn't be much left of her little "command" after such a fight!

"And afterwards?" I challenged, my eyes "burning" into his.

"Sela said that our marksmanship and seamanship `needed work'," he answered. She had put that in her report to me too. The heavier firepower of a ship of this class should have been more effective against a ship such as the North Star than it had!

"Then I would suggest that we work on those `problems'," I smiled back, hoping that my suspicions about Sela weren't true!!!

"What do you make of her?" Mark called up to the look out perched there in the crows nest a good ninety feet over their heads. Sela's dark eyes looking up into his. He felt the urge to take her in his arms, hold her close, and stroke that thick black hair. She didn't belong out here, not a woman like her, he mused to himself. Maybe someone like Lorraine, who was probably the greatest warriorress who ever lived, but not someone like her! Sela was the sort of a Princess who should grace some royal palace, not stand on the deck of a "man of war" and face enemy fire!

"Three masts, well raked, and bigger than the Huntress," the man called down. The Dularnian was running for it. A wise "move" considering the sizes of what was now in pursuit of him!

"A `North' class," Sela breathed softly, standing there. Dularn had three such vessels in commission. North Wind, North Star, and Northland, the latest and newest of the class. There was also Swiftstar, which would be a match in speed for even the big "Squalas" although no "match" in a fight of course for one!

"They say she's a very beautiful woman," Mark mused then.

"If you prefer that type," Sela answered, a bit annoyed although she could not say just why it was "important" to her now. Mark smiled to himself, and turned away before the beautiful little Princess of Talon noticed the look there now on his face. He had no doubts now that she was "attracted" to him, and that he just might, if he "played his cards right", even do "better yet"!

"We're pulling up on Huntress," Mark announced a moment later, the smaller schooner now hull up on the horizon ahead of them. The mastheads of the Dularnian visible now as she fled to the North. Towards distant Dularn from which she had once come!! A row of clouds there on the distant horizon breaking the blue of the sky in that direction, Mark noted with some displeasure now!!

"We could take that little Imperial, your majesty," the officer spoke, looking into the beautiful emerald eyes of his golden haired Queen. The North Star's sails drawing well as she fled her little pursuer, Maris Jord being "experienced" enough to know that no such vessel would be chasing her unless there was something "bigger" following just behind. And that no doubt might just now be the Squala itself with Lorraine Richards in command!

"And if we turn and fight, what happens if one of Lorraine's big `Squalas' comes sailing over the horizon?" Maris challenged.

"We `outfought' that last one, that `Seawolf'," he argued.

"And can we expect that level of 'incompetency' again?" the Queen of Dularn challenged. She had "lucky" that time. Far more "lucky" than she or any other Dularnian commander deserved to be!

They had been careless, feeling "safe" in the fog banks when the big Imperial "first rate" came suddenly sailing out of the fog towards them. Only her seamanship and the skill of her experienced and seasoned crew against the incredible incompetency of the Imperials had save the day! And that was something she knew Lorraine would never allow to happen again! No doubt those responsible had already suffered court martials for their actions. The Warlady of California was not one to stand for such things!

"Sail Ho!" the lookout called down. "Dead astern too!" A chill of terror momentarily grasped the young Queen's heart. Her question had been answered. There was a "support" ship for the little "annoyance" chasing them. And anything Lorraine had was sure to be "big" enough to deal with the North Star in a fight!!!

"Battlestations, rig for battle?" her officer asked her. A question for which there could be but one answer if they were to live. Ahead was a line of clouds, "storm clouds", and "safety"!

"Set stunsails, everything we have," Maris answered him. In the green depths of her beautiful eyes he saw not the terror that now clutched at her young heart. That dread of a certain tall and stern featured brunette before whom she had once knelt as a slave girl. The terror of knowing of what could happen to her! * * I had the opportunity to discuss these matters with Queen Maris when I was recovering from the nearly fatal wound I received from being shot by Darl Jord. It was a rare chance to "see" myself as another might see me. I had never understood why Maris was so "terrified" of me, but I now suspect the "answer" and who was the person "responsible" for so terrifying Maris. (Lorraine Richards)

"And if we can't outrun them?" the officer breathed, glancing back despite himself at what was now coming in pursuit. The three masts all in a row that spoke of an Imperial "first rate"! And the way it raced after them spoke of a well trained crew too!

"Then we take as many of them as we can with us to greet Lys," Maris answered, her hand on the golden hilt of her sword. The rise and fall of her firm young breasts beneath the blue of her tunic speaking the truth of her feelings. She was a beautiful woman, one who many men had at one time or another "lusted" for. She had given her heart only to one, and he was married to another, to that tall stern featured brunette who terrified her! * * Maris Jord claimed in my conversations with her that she did indeed love Jon Richards, but that he did not love her in return. Jon "claims" the opposite. I have written in "2565" that she "spurned" his offer of marriage. Saying to him that she had no wish to become the wife of a mere Dularnian sea officer. It is my belief here that Maris has convinced herself that she actually did "offer" herself to Jon, but that "he" turned "her" down! (LR)

"Perhaps it's 'better' this way," Maris mused to herself. Better than the humiliation of being married to a man who had as a teenage boy raped his own younger sister. A man who had little use for her even as a mere "figurehead" while he ruled Dularn by intrigue and the selling of "favors" to the highest bidder! She would "die bravely in battle" and no one would ever know that she had taken command of this ship only to escape a loveless marriage with every day a constant humiliation as her husband paid more "attention" to his many slave girls than he ever did to her now!!

"I wonder?" Mark mused to himself, unaware of Sela there.

"Wonder what?" Sela asked, touching his arm. His strength, his manhood a comfort to her just then.

She wanted him to take her below, use her as a woman, make her arch and moan, sweat, and make her forget what laid ahead for them if the Dularnian fought! Only her pride, her "breeding" prevented her from speaking thus!

"Why Queen Maris is willing to take command of a raider?" he smiled. That had been the topic of discussion among everyone now for the past month now that it was known that she was the captain of the North Star. That she had stood on its quarterdeck in battle, tall and golden, an example to her crew and everyone else!

"Perhaps Lorraine's suspicions are true," Sela smiled back.

"Close up on the Squala," I ordered, the mastheads now almost gone below the horizon there ahead. A faint line of clouds speaking of a storm there in the distance. We could still "lose" the Dularnian in such a storm, I knew from what Jon had told me.

"Get the stunsails set!" captain Hawkins barked. He seemed "competent" enough to me, although one can never tell about such. There is a "difference" in being able to command a ship and do so in battle when the enemy's missiles are flying about your decks!

"Signal the rest of the squadron to set full sail," I said.

"Those damm landlubbers!" Hawkins barked, it being obvious that the crew lacked something in "seamanship". They having a certain "slackness" about them, much like the ship itself, I noted. How well they would do in a fight was something else too!!! I would not have cared to face Maris Marn and her North Star with the Seawolf. Not with the sort of lubbers that I now had to use!

Chapter Ten

"Carson here thinks that big Imperial is our own Squala that Jers Bisan took last year with the Seahawk," the first officer of the North Star spoke as he brought forth the grizzled sailorman. Maris marveled at how old "salts" like him could recognize ships.

"It's the Squala sure as the Evil One," the man smiled at his beautiful golden haired Queen, Maris fighting down the terror that rose in her heart at the thought of again facing Lorraine! * * There were "reasons" for Maris' "unreasoning" fear of me. (LR)

"Lookout!" Maris called, the Queen having a clear ringing voice that carried well, "Can you see the big Imperial's flags?" Vessels that carried royalty often flying a special flag. Those of Lorraine's flew a silver double barred cross on a black field. She also had her own personal flag that only her flagship flew.

"It's the Warlady's ship, but she's not aboard it!" he called down after carefully studying the ship there with his telescope. Maris was tempted to breathe a sigh of relief at that until she realized that it really didn't make all that much difference if she was captured by any of the Warlady's own vessels!

"We could be facing Jon Richards," Maris commented to her first officer, more to make conversation than anything just then. Once there had been "love" between them before their separation. He to

command the "Janis" at sea, she to be captured as a spy in Sarn and then sold as a slave girl to a Lady Lana of Trelandar!

"Deck there," the lookout called down, "There's another of those big Imperial first rates coming towards us now." The words making Maris shudder in terror. She must have been in front of that entire squadron of Lorraine's she'd heard about from their spies there in the Empire. Five first rates and two third rates that Lorraine was taking to Dularn to spread terror and destruction among the innocent people of her beloved fair country. And what could she do to stop them? Even if she had the other two "North" class ships with her any three Imperial first rates could deal with three "Norths", and there were FIVE of the big Imperials now at sea, no doubt all eagerly lusting for her capture and humiliation as a naked slave kneeling before that Imperial Warlady! Death in battle would be a better fate than that, she mused!

"That Dularnian is flying the royal flag!" the lookout called down to the deck of the Squala. Like all those aboard he hoped that there would be a battle. That Squala would get the honors of being the ship who "took" Maris Jord, the Queen of Dularn captive. The "prize money" would be nice, but avenging the "humiliation" of the Seawolf would be even better. Seeing that damn Dularnian bitch kneeling there on deck, naked, chained, with their Queen of Trelandar standing there tall and proud beside her looking down at her cowering shivering naked body would be something he could tell his wife and children when they all got back!

"Queen Maris herself," Sela Dai breathed. She had heard much of her from others. She was the sister of her brother's wife. A tall and golden woman, said by some to be comparable to Darlanis. Why did men make such a "fuss" over women with blonde hair? Sela pondered on that for a moment. Her own brother had fallen head over heels in love with the Princess of Trelandar, and most of that had been because Gayle Marn was a tall blue eyed blonde too! The little brunette almost wishing she was a blonde!

"And she's going to be `ours'," Captain Mark Berson breathed in reply, thinking his own thoughts. He had never met the woman, or really knew that much about her, but yet he wanted to see her naked, chained, perhaps with her back yet bleeding from the whip! And with this lovely Princess, Sela Dai of Talon, standing there beside her, making her cower and tremble in fear of another whipping! So went Mark's fantasy, featuring both Sela Dai and Maris Jord. Yours truly being totally ignored for the moment as her ship bashed through the waves towards the distant mastheads of a schooner that had only the day before flew her own personal flag!

"There's no more sail that can be set, your majesty," the captain of Seawolf explained as he looked into my hot angry eyes. It was growing rather obvious to me that these big "Squala" class schooners weren't quite as fast as I had hoped that they would be! I suspected that the original design had been as good a compromise between "handling" and "speed" that could be done. While the Seawolf was doing as well as could be expected, making nearly ten knots, we were not pulling up on the Squala at all now, much to my own annoyance! On the other hand I could see that the sails were not set quite as well as they could be for making the best use of what wind there was. And trying to explain such details now to Captain Hawkins would be just a waste of breath too!

"Here, you men!" I ordered, stepping down on the tilting deck, the Seawolf shuddering beneath me as it bashed through the rollers. The growing line of clouds ahead a warning that Maris Jord might very well escape us if she could reach them first! I gave swift orders, commands, had the sails reset just a bit. The Seawolf biting a bit deeper into the waves, perhaps picking up half a knot or a bit better. The "angle of forces" now correct !!

"We have a chance," Maris Jord breathed, glancing behind her ship. The enemy first rate now hull up on the horizon behind them. The little third rate had fallen back a bit, although it too was now gamely pursuing her to the best of its own abilities!

"We'll have to shorten sail soon," the first officer breathed, looking at the clouds that now filled the sky ahead of them. The darkness beneath them leaving no doubt of the wind and waves that would be there to greet them. The growing roughness of the waves through which the North Star was now smashing ample proof of that! Maris to his horror then shook her head in reply!

"Our only chance is to sail into that with everything set," she answered, her beautiful emerald eyes glowing into his. Like all those aboard the ship he had his own secret fantasies about her. What it would be like to have her naked and warm "in bed". She was a beautiful woman, good with a sword too, he understood. Nicely "full" in the rear end, he'd noticed a few times before...

"You'll wreck the ship and leave us helpless before them!" he protested. Once the North Star was dismasted they would be easy prey for even one of the little Imperial third rates. And the Empire would see to it that she at least never ever again saw her own country! That damn Warlady of theirs would see to that!!

"We have a well founded ship, and the best crew that any ship ever had," Maris smiled. She didn't bother adding that her own skills at command were almost unparalleled among those of her sex. She was, she knew, the equal of Jon Richards or Jers Bisan. And it would be "seamanship", her seamanship, that would see them through! Her skill at balancing the forces of wind and wave against the pressure of canvas that would save them all from death or capture at the cruel hands of the Imperials now closing the gap behind them! The big first rate now only a few miles behind proof of the fate that awaited them if she failed her task! *****

"She's got to shorten sail or she'll be dismasted!" Mark breathed. He was playing it too close himself as Squala took the first of the sudden gusts of wind. The odor of rain in the air!

"Perhaps she prefers death to capture," Sela breathed beside him. Her dark eyes looking up into his. She knew just enough of ships and storms to be worried what could happen if Mark didn't start shortening sail. The North Star only a mile or so ahead!!!

"Signal Huntress to discontinue pursuit," Mark ordered. The little third rate couldn't stand the pounding that Squala could!

"Seawolf's signaling!" a man cried, pointing, the three mastheads in a row now having pulled up a bit on them, much to Mark's surprise. In previous voyages the new ships hadn't proved to be any faster than his beloved Squala, but he suspected that Lorraine could get "more" out of a ship than anyone but Maris!!!

"Don't risk ships: Lorraine," the orders read. He wondered if the Dularnians could read their signals. It was possible, he mused then. That was why the carbide lights were used. You could point them at the ship you wanted while others could see nothing. There were also signal flags, but the lights were far better and visible at a far greater distance too, he knew!

"Shorten sail!" Mark barked, men dashing up the masts to take down the stun sails and top sails, reef the main sails. He could feel Squala slow, the North Star now creeping ahead into the rain, her highly visible roll and obviously overstressed masts proof of how hard the Queen of Dularn was driving her ship! *****

Queen Maris flinched as the cold water sprayed over her like a sheet, the North Star smashing into the waves with a force that would in time loosen seams and perhaps even overstress the hull! The man at the helm her best, a sailor willing to obey her orders the instant she gave them without a second thought. Maris using her instinctive ability to calculate the forces of wind and wave directed against her ship, the speaking trumpet in her hand now necessary as she barked out orders that were instantly obeyed!!!

"Let's see if that damm 20th Century bitch will follow me into this!" she muttered, the Squala now hidden somewhere behind them by the rain that poured down upon them. She was trying to think of what to do next, as she could not keep ahead of the enemy ships forever, and unless she could manage to elude them, she would be in just as much trouble as ever once they got free of this storm! There was always the hope that the storm might do enough damage to the Imperials to drive them back to port, but Maris was doubtful of that, since Lorraine's squadron was composed for the most part of her new big first rates, and they probably were well enough constructed to withstand most anything!

"Shorten sail or you'll have the sticks out of her," I snapped, captain Hawkins looking at me as if I had just kissed him. I guessed that he thought I'd sail right into that storm without ever shortening sail at all. What Queen Maris had done!!

"Aye, your majesty," he answered, quickly giving the orders. Men dashing about, some swarming up the masts to shorten sail. I had no fears of damage from the storm, as the Seawolf was a new ship and solidly built, but there was no reason to risk the sails just to pursue that damn blonde who had been making so much trouble for everyone! Once again I ruefully reflected upon my own lack of experience back then that had allowed Maris to escape me!

"We could be sailing right down Lorraine's throat!" Maris' first officer protested as his Queen turned the North Star, the turn fraught with considerable danger considering the amount of sail that was still hoisted. Only Maris' unique ability to "see" the forces of wind and wave on her ship having allowed her to do such a thing! The North Star heeling far over as she came around in response to the rubber and the loosening of the spanker so that the jib might play its part. The hundred twenty foot three master swinging around, turning to the southeast, the rain so heavy that one could hardly see past the jutting bowsprit! Maris smiling to herself, well aware of the dangers that might come racing out of the rain towards them! It being her intention to double back, using the storm for "cover", and thus allowing her enemy to continue sailing north in the opposite direction! * * And it did work too! Maris is one "crafty" wench! (LR)

"And can you think of a better way of giving her the slip?" Maris challenged him in reply. She was soaking wet, her tunic plastered to her body. Revealing that perfect five eight figure. That same body that had once aroused the lusts of dozens of men. For a moment she thought of her younger sister, who had become the Crown Princess of Trelandar, Lorraine's own adopted daughter! Once she had dreamed of "rescuing" Gayle, of sailing with her back to Dularn, but then after she had learned what she had from Sharon, she knew that such an idea was only a mere "fantasy" now!

Maris had liked Sharon from the first, the girl being "down to earth" and nothing like her step-mother, who was out to "reform the world" whether or not it wanted to be "reformed" or not. Why Lorraine felt that her own era was so far "superior" to this was something Maris had never been able to figure out. Lorraine being obviously the sort of a person who felt that she was "superior" to everyone else, and wanted to prove it without any doubt! Thankfully First Priestess Tais had put a "halt" to Lorraine's "reinvention" of 20th Century weapons, or Maris suspected that by now she would have been facing something like a heavy frigate from the Nelsonian era! Some big square rigger with forty four cannons if

not more! Perhaps another like the "Constitution"!

"We should be through their line by now," Maris spoke to her first officer as he stood there swaying with the motion of the ship. The heavy swells rolling the North Star from side to side.

"And no one but you could have done it!" he smiled at her. It would be but another part of the growing "Queen Maris Legend"!

Chapter Eleven

"Do you see anything?" I asked, the rain now fading away to a cold drizzle. The rolling waves all that could yet be seen. I wondered if the North Star had survived the storm being "driven" the way that Maris Marn had driven it. Could the ship have sunk? There would have been some drifting wreckage, a few "survivors"!!

Just visible now in the distance to seaward was Squala, and beyond Squala was Huntress, now sticking "close" to her bigger companion. I could see the Corsica to the east, and signals had confirmed that Nighthawk, Seahawk, and Arrow had also survived. Not that I had entertained any worries about Jers, who even with a broken arm could certainly have seen his ship through a little rain storm like this one had been even without Lara's assistance.

"Nothing but minor damage, your majesty," the signals midshipman spoke, my squadron having weathered this storm without any difficulty. The only problem was: Where had Maris gone to??

"Send: 'All ships search for wreckage of North Star'," I spoke to him. I thought of Maris, of Gayle, what it would feel like to have to tell my beloved Princess that her own sister had drowned while trying in terror to escape me. That was not a thought that I liked to think about. I didn't like Maris, but I certainly didn't wish her death! And not that way, in any case!

"Our first 'brush' with the 'enemy'," I smiled as I greeted the captains and officers of the squadron there aboard the Seawolf. I had now established a semblance of discipline at least. And a feeling among the men that they were under capable command. That when their ship went into battle they could rely upon their officers and captain to see them through to the best of their own abilities. My own reputation as the Warlady of California having been enough to restore the men's confidence in their own ability to deal with any foe or ship that they might now meet up with! I saw Sela nod, the lovely little Princess seemingly preoccupied.

"If it hadn't been for that rain storm we'd have Queen Maris naked and in chains kneeling right here before us," the handsome young captain of Squala spoke as Yvette handed him a filled glass from my own personal stock. I nodded, smiled. There were a lot of "what could have been"s right now. I commanded one of the most powerful forces ever gathered since The War, but yet I had not been able to bring one Dularnian raider to battle! Maris Jord, the lovely Queen of Dularn, had once again escaped me! And where she had gone no one knew, although I had no doubts that if she was alive we'd soon be hearing about it from everyone too!!!

"Or better yet dead and sewn up in a hammock with a shot at her feet," the captain of the Corsica spoke, giving me a smile. Her gray eyes glowing into mine as I nodded and smiled in reply. She was not a

Trelandarian like the others, but Sarnian, her copper hair like a flame there in the light from the lamps. Valerie Dunn was a capable and apparently quite competent captain. I had already noted that she seemed to be a bit more "competent" than her male counterparts aboard the Seawolf and the Nighthawk too. Janice Hill, commander of Huntress, had once been her first officer. She was one of the few female naval captains of this era. Janice, sitting beside her, looked like a younger version of me!

"I'm sure, Valerie, that Lorraine wouldn't let her escape again," the captain of the Nighthawk spoke up with a smile that I suspected was also something of a leer. Captain Dunn being a quite attractive woman, if also of obviously Dularnian breeding.

"I think we have more important things to discuss," Captain Hawkins of the Seawolf interjected, giving me a glance as I stood there gently swaying with the roll of the ship. So far I had avoided the seasickness that often afflicts me, although I could not really be sure until we suffered some really bad weather now.

I spoke up then, "There are other Dularnian raiders still operating in this area, and we do stand a good chance of taking one by surprise." Just the capture of one Dularnian ship would be welcomed by all the peoples of California, and it would teach Queen Maris that my forces were able to deal with her annoying raiders! That a fleet like mine could protect all of California!

"We all know that our ships carry 'fire weapons'," Mark Berson of the Squala ventured, it having been my order that such weapons of destruction were not to be "used" unless the Dularnians used them first. There was no known defense against such! I had not brought with me any of the explosives I had once made up. There was no reason, I felt, to "irritate" the First Priestess.

"Which will be 'used' only on my express orders," I smiled. I suspected that he also found Sela Dai extremely "attractive" as they sat there side by side. She is "small", but a true delight!

"Had the entire fleet been sent after the North Star, we might now have Maris nude and kneeling in chains before us," Valerie suddenly spoke up, expressing her thoughts quite forcefully! She had now been the first to challenge my orders to hold back the rest of my ships and allow the Squala and Huntress the honors if any of capturing the beautiful golden haired Queen of Dularn.

"'Pride goeth before a fall'," I smiled back. It had not been one of my "better" decisions. I had not realized how "fast" the North Class schooners actually were. Queen Maris was also perhaps Dularn's best naval commander, its most "able" captain. I suspected that I had also "held back" because my own beloved Princess Gayle was Maris' sister, although no one had mentioned that. It was, I knew, something that could very well "color" all my military decisions. The knowledge that Gayle would never "forgive" me if I was ever "responsible" for the death of her beloved sister who she greatly admired despite their "differences"!

"We'll do 'better' next time," Sela Dai then ventured now.

"Lorraine let us 'go'," Queen Maris spoke to her first officer as they watched the sky darken there in the west, the sun now gone. "And I think I know the 'reason why' too," she added then.

"The fact that your sister is her 'Princess'?" he smiled in reply, admiring the beautiful Queen of Dularn as she stood there.

"If she had brought all her forces to 'play' we might not have been so 'lucky'," the beautiful blonde smiled back, well aware of his eyes on her and the thoughts no doubt there behind them. Maris had lived

with that ever since her body had started developing into that of a beautiful young woman back home in Sana. With the "looks" that the young men gave her, the "wolf whistles" that came from their lips when her back was turned to them. There were even those who "compared" her to Darlanis for beauty. She wondered a bit about that, recalling that her own husband had at one time supposedly raped the incredibly beautiful Darlanis back when she was a teenage girl. He had of course denied the entire affair, but Maris "wondered"? There was a certain "resemblance" between the two of them, and there were other indications that Darl Jord did look upon her in a way that Maris herself found quite distasteful without knowing why. If he wanted to "have" a woman while she was tied wrist and ankle to a bed, then he could "use" any of his slave girls, but "that" wasn't for her! And the "sadistic tricks" he played on them irritated her!

"We would have given them a 'good fight'," he smiled back.

"The objective in 'winning a war' is making 'the other guy' die for his country," Maris smiled back. She remembered reading it once some time a long time ago, it seemed. She had no wish to determine for herself if what the Priestesses had taught her as a child was actually true or not. She was too "young" yet to die!! *****

"I'm switching my 'flag' to Corsica," I smiled as the meeting ended and they all got up to leave. I was "curious" about Valerie and her methods of command. I was also curious about how she would behave knowing that I was now right there watching her?

"I'd be 'delighted' to have you aboard the Corsica," she smiled, although given the situation as it presently was there was little else that she could have said under the circumstances.

"'Warlady', Corsica!" the midshipman bellowed from the bow of the boat as the hail came down from Corsica's deck. Valerie had sent signals that I would be coming aboard. Preparations had been made to receive me. It is the practice in the Imperial Navy to announce the captain of a ship by the name of his or her ship. Such things date back to another era now mostly just "myths" now.

"Something troubling you now, your majesty?" Valerie asked as I sat there silently beside her, the up and down motion of the ship's longboat having been enough to remind me that I was not as much of a "sailor" as I would have liked! The meal I had eaten a bit earlier and washed down with perhaps too much strong drink now didn't want to stay "down there". The thought of displaying my seasickness before others of my command much annoying me now!!

"It will be all right once I get aboard," I answered back.

"I have some good brandy aboard that will settle that stomach of yours," she assured me, putting her arm around me then. I thought of another, of another ship, another time. Of Darlanis.

"Our Warlady! Our Queen!" the crew of the Corsica cried out as I stepped aboard, the greeting at least getting my mind off the nausea that had afflicted me there in the longboat as I sat beside Valerie. The evident enthusiasm of the crew, the polished whiteness of the deck, the taut and blackened down rigging leaving no doubt that Valerie ran a "taut ship". And one, I suspected by now, that could be relied upon to give its best in a fight! While I could not "see" everything, it being nighttime, I could see enough to know that the Corsica was indeed a well run ship!

"I'll try to do better 'next time'," I told the crew as they stood there in neat rows before me. "And we'll rid the seas of these damm raiders of Queen Maris!" I added. I wasn't too sure of that, but I felt certain that once we reached Dularn we could teach the Dularnians a few "lessons" that they wouldn't forget!

"I have a good ship, a good crew," Valerie said to me as we went below a moment later, the crew having been dismissed to their respective duties. The ship's girls all "healthy" looking wenches that obviously were of the sorts that could much pleasure a "tired sailorman". I suspected that Valerie had taken time to see to that. Most captains merely took what was "issued" to them and called it "good". Obviously Valerie was a very capable and competent officer. Perhaps better, I thought, than any of my others with the possible of Mark Berson there commanding Squala.

"And you take good care of both," I smiled back, stepping into the stern cabin. The sea now invisible beyond the stern windows. The ceiling beams like aboard my other ships just high enough that I could walk beneath them without having to "duck". Mark Berson aboard the Squala was not quite so "lucky" at 6'2"

"I handpicked my 'ship's girls'," Valerie smiled back. "And I insist that my officers take their 'pleasures' from among them too." Most captains allowed their officers to have their own girl. Usually she was of 'better quality' than the other women who had been sentenced to "serve" on a ship of war for their crimes. Such being the fate of women here in the 26th Century. It is more sensible than just locking people up for a period of time to ponder over their "mistakes". Economically sensible too! I suppose the women don't care too much for it, but they were the ones who committed the crimes that got them into the "fix" too!!!

"They look 'healthy'," I smiled back as Valerie got out the brandy she had promised me and poured me a good glassful of it. The furnishings of the cabin spoke much of Valerie's own tastes.

"They are of the Peasants," Valerie Dann smiled back then, handing me the glass. They were busty, wide hipped wenches. No doubt with strong female drives that would make them a true delight to the sailors. I drank deep, now feeling it "warming" me.

"Have they required 'disciplining'?" I asked. I had seen one whipped today aboard the Seawolf for minor insubordination. Stripped and tied to the rigging, then given a couple dozen where it would hopefully do the most good there before the assembled crew. One must of course be "strict" with such feminine delights. They are usually supervised by the Physician aboard, most of whom are usually women, "medicine" now being for the most part a "feminine" profession for what "reason" I don't know yet.

"I haven't found it 'necessary' as yet," she smiled back. Even on Squala it had been necessary to whip one of them in the few days that we had been out to sea. Two seamen who should have "known better" had also felt the lash since we had left Trella. I do not tolerate "drunkenness" while on duty. The "stakes" are far too high, especially aboard a sailing ship subject to wind and weather and enemy action at any time! I nodded, smiled back.

"Where do you think Maris is now?" I then asked Valerie.

"Somewhere behind us, keeping our mastheads just in sight," she smiled back. I had suspected the same thing too. We had been keeping to a regular formation. A fairly even speed too. I did not think she would have found it too difficult to do either!

"Let's just hope this works," Valerie spoke to me out of the darkness. It was a moonless night, with only the stars for light now. We showed no lights, our masts bare of sails. The ship now rolling gently in the swell. I could see from the stars and the dim shadows of the masts overhead that we were now slowly swinging about with the bow pointing towards shore perhaps a dozen miles distant. I had sent up all three officers with night glasses to sweep the horizon for any sign of a ship. The men were at their assigned battle stations. If we sighted the North Star it would be a nasty fight. Ship to ship, one of "mine" and its men against the North Star and its men. Queen Maris versus Valerie and me perhaps if we got "lucky". I reflected for brief moment upon the "interesting" idea that both she and Maris were of the same ancestry. Both were "Dularnian"! Both Warriresses. I had my five first rates stretched out in a line from about a mile from shore to well beyond the horizon. The two third rates hanging back, ready to come to the assistance of any who happened to "engage" Maris. This time she would not "escape" my squadron!

"You're taking a hell of a chance `following'Lorraine like this!" the first officer protested as he faced his emerald eyed Queen there in the darkness. "We're no `match' for any of her first rates if she decides to send some back to search for us." An opinion shared by everyone aboard the swift Dularnian raider. The general "consensus" being that it would be best to sail to the south, and away from Lorraine Richard's awesome new squadron.

"I think she will send one of her scouting vessels back," Maris answered, "And that we are quite capable of dealing with!" Maris being also well aware that there might be other "prey" that the North Star could "take" almost "underneath"Lorraine's nose! It being Maris' own intention to prove to the fearsome Imperial Warlady that she was not one who could be so easily "scared off"! Such actions would prove to the Californians that she was not a woman who might be easily "scared off" by their fearsome Warlady! Such might even convince Darlanis to return to Dularn those lands that Dularn had been forced to give up to the Empire earlier on! That part of western North American once the State of Washington.

"A fight in the darkness when we can't hardly see our hands before our faces?" the first officer protested back. Maris having forbidden the use of any lights, even below deck for fear that they might just show as a gleam off the sails there above!

"No doubt Lorraine is quite willing to take that risk," Maris answered, well aware of what she would do had the situation been the opposite of what it was. The beautiful blonde having a high opinion of her awesome waspish brunette opponent in this battle of wits here on the high seas. "And she is the best that the Empire has," the Queen of Dularn then pointed out needlessly.

"I'll tell the lookouts to keep an eye out for a scout like the one that was chasing us today," he answered. Although in the darkness it was impossible to tell one ship from another. Maris had hoisted just enough sail to now keep the ship under some sort of control. Ahead of them somewhere up ahead laid the "enemy"!

"Tell them to watch for `anything'," Maris snapped back! "Lorraine could spring a surprise on us like anything right now!" The thought of having to face me in hand to hand combat making a cold hand of fear clutch at her young heart. She knew what the "outcome" of that would be! My reputation now so awesome that it now took the very "heart" out of any 26th Century warrior woman! It being said by some that the woman had never been yet born who could face me in a duel to the death and survive the experience!

"We can load your firebombs in the catapults," Valerie Dann said to me as we stood side by side there in the darkness. I was strongly tempted to do, knowing fully well what just one good hit would do to a

wooden ship of this era. There is little defense against fire at sea. I do not know why fire was not used in the days of the old square riggers. It would have been far more effective than their muzzle loading cannon firing solid iron shot. I have my "suspicions" that it was not used for reasons of "fair play". Such tends to be considered "important" by those of the male sex. That is also why I believe wars when fought by women tend to be more "brutal" and "ruthless" than wars fought by men. There is some reason to believe this when one reads of the "acts" of Janet Rogers in the 21st Century. She could be, and was, utterly "ruthless" when she considered it "necessary" to be such!!!

"No," I answered. I would meet Maris blade to blade, bolt to bolt. Cross my blade with hers, if such was to be, and bring her to Darlanis, naked and in chains, to "answer" for her crimes!

"It is perhaps better that way," Valerie agreed, having the sailor's instinctive fear of fire at sea. I suspected that was also why fire weapons had not been used back in the time of the old time square riggers. The same reason why chemical and biological weapons were seldom used in warfare back in my own era. Why neither the United States or the U.S.S.R ever built a "doomsday machine" despite both possessing the "technology" to "do" it. Such things are not "easy" to explain without going into long and detailed explanations. It has to do, I think, with "codes" that have existed long before men ever sailed in ships on the oceans.* * I have for years been "interested" in such "questions". (LR)

"We will keep the `caste codes'," I smiled back there in the darkness, staring out into the darkness of the star sprinkled night. I wondered if we were on a "wild goose chase" after the North Star. Maris could be dozens of miles away by now, I knew!

"It is what separates us from the beasts," Valerie answered. Such is one of the "sayings" that Warrioreses often use. It is, I think, true. It is why young boys in primitive societies, when they reach their teens, are taken from their mothers and then put through painful "initiation" ceremonies so that they may become "men". This is also why the philosophy of feminism is "flawed". Why young girls on Mars, knowing not men, still yet are taught a system of "morality" and "honor" that at first puzzled me muchly! Now I understand that no society, human or otherwise, can survive for long without a "code of honor". Without a sense of "selfdiscipline". The proof lies in our own history. In the eventual collapse of American democracy at the end of the 20th Century and its eventual "replacement" by the "NEW ORDER" of Janet Rogers.* * The major "mistake" made by those of the past was to allow such "truths" to be "discredited" by those who were "discomforted" by them. Such seems to be a consequence of a political system where the right and privileges of citizenship were not "earned". Where those who paid no taxes yet had the right to vote. Such a "mistake" caused the eventual "destruction" of American society. (LR)

"We are of the Warrioreses," I smiled, touching her arm.

"An `honorable' caste," Valerie answered, perhaps smiling.

"But one sometimes `difficult'," I answered her back then.

"That which is `easy' is seldom `valued'," Valerie spoke.

"You speak of `truths' not often understood," I smiled.

"Perhaps more often not `liked'," Valerie Dunn replied.

"You are `wise' for a sea-officer," I answered back then.

"I have read of the past," Valerie answered from beside me.

"There were those who attempted to deny the biological realities of their existence," I answered, recalling certain events. The writings of women who obviously should have "known better". "Some who believed that one did not have to make hard decisions."

"There are 'fools' in all societies," Valerie Dunn observed.

"I am glad I flew through that 'Gateway'," I told her then.

"I am honored to have 'known' you," Captain Dunn replied.

"I am pleased to have had this 'conversation'," I said.

"You are 'more' than what I first believed," she said.

Maris Jord stared out into the darkness until her eyes watered from the strain. Somewhere "out there" she knew laid another ship, perhaps one of the big Imperial first-rates. One perhaps even commanded by that awesome Imperial Warlady herself! She watched a meteor burn itself out there overhead in the star spotted sky, a faint glow there on the eastern horizon perhaps a village on the shore miles away. The North Star rolling gently beneath her in the gentle swell, almost as if it was a living thing she stood upon, and not just a device of wood and canvas.

The slave girl briefly unshuttered the lantern, the glass of the Corsica's cabin gleaming back at her. Suddenly a soft warm hand pulled her around, the lantern swiftly shuttered once again!

"You fool!" Yvette hissed in the darkness, well aware of how far such a light could be seen at sea! And this foolish girl had perhaps allowed their enemy to spot them by her unthinking act!!!

Chapter Thirteen

"Quiet," Valerie said to me in a low voice, staring like me out into the darkness of the night. The men now gathered on deck, weapons at hand as we laid in wait for the enemy to appear. From time to time one could hear soft sounds and sense stirrings. They were well trained, the men and women of the Corsica. Their captain took pride in her command, in her ship. It "showed" too!

"Maris will not 'surrender'," I spoke, Valerie only a dark shadow there beside me. Like me she wore the black of the Warriress. Tunic and hose, the common attire of the fighting woman. A sword at her hip, a long slim fighting dagger in its sheath. I recalled others who had stood at me side. Others who I had later seen slid over the side of a ship with a shot at their feet to speed them to their final destination at the bottom of the sea.

"Perhaps it is for the best," Valerie answered me back.

Suddenly Maris saw a soft glow for an instant there ahead of the North Star, the glow suddenly then

winking out, the young Queen having little doubt of what she had seen! A cold shudder going through her as she quickly snapped orders in a low voice to the man at the helm, the stars swinging in the sky as the North Star came about! "Close!" Maris breathed, well aware of what had laid ahead. For a brief moment she saw a tall stern featured brunette standing there on the deck before her, saw the woman's eyes now burn into hers even although it was totally pitch dark!

"Mistress," I heard Yvette speak softly as she came up on deck with another. The other girl one of those who served aboard the Corsica as a "ship's girl". A collared wench, short skirted. Her legs a pale shadow like her face there in the darkness of the star-lit night. Valerie only a darker shadow standing beside me.

"Something wrong?" Valerie then asked from beside me. It was not the time for any slave girls to be up deck. Not now. We had given orders that the collared wenches, including my Yvette, were supposed to obey! I wondered if the Corsica had suddenly sprung a leak and was sinking beneath us! I rather doubted it!!!

"I...I," the other girl spoke in a soft and obviously terrified voice, no doubt fearing what Valerie and I might do to her!

"She showed a light in the stern cabin," Yvette spoke then. There was no need to "explain" further. At sea even a candle's glow can be seen for miles at night. And if Maris had seen it?

"Our stern was pointing south only a minute ago," Valerie pointed out. And I could trust the Dularnians to be "alert" given the situation! And Maris was, if nothing more, "competent"!

"Are you aware of 'what' you have done?" I challenged the terrified slave girl. The wench going to her knees, putting her head down, making a small ball of her body there before me. She doubtlessly knew as a rightless slave that I would have been completely justified in such a case in actually ordering her death!

"I did not think!" she wept there on the deck before me. I had no doubts that she spoke the truth. It did, however, not in the least alter the fact that she had no doubt "cost" us Maris!

"Your punishment is for your captain to decide," I spoke.

"We will sail to the south for the night, then swing north again," Maris spoke, her first officer nodding there in the darkness of the night. Hers had been the only eyes to see the light.

"It would be 'safer' if we put more 'distance' between us and their Warlady," the man smiled back. He had no wish to confront a force such as what the Imperial's Warlady now possessed!

"'Safety' is not something found aboard this ship," Maris smiled back, her azure eyes glowing into his as he nodded in reply. He thought it might be time to seek a bit of "comfort" in the arms of a slave girl, and try to "forget" about his Queen if only for an hour or so. Maris was obviously determined to die in battle rather than to return to Dularn "defeated" by the Warlady!

"You have responsibilities to your people," he replied then.

"I am fulfilling them," Maris snapped back at him in reply!

"I am trying to give you a `second chance'," Aurorahad answered only a week before. "I suggest that you sit down with my daughter and negotiate a peace settlement of some sort that both of you two can `live with'." The silvery disc had come floating down from a clear blue sky as the North Star sailed out of sight of land. Maris had no doubt that the Leaderess had used the awesome instruments on Deimos to find her ship here on the open sea.

"The matter is out of my hands now," Maris replied in turn, aware that Darlanis had refused to allow the people living in the "disputed territories" the opportunity to "vote" upon the issue. "I am fighting for `ideals' even older than my civilization," the young beautiful blonde haired Queen of Dularn had answered back.

"`Truth, Justice, the American Way'?" Auroras smiled back. A smile curving her near perfect lips as she sat there before Maris now. Aurorarecalling with a smile some of her own speeches now. The "Revolution" there on Mars still fresh in everyone's memory. They had "won", but then the Priestesses had come and taken "control" almost like if they had been but children playing a "game".

"For a people to live in `freedom'," Maris answered. "To chose the government they wish. To an `end' of Empires like your daughter's based on rule by the sword." Auroranodded back, her jade eyes glowing into Maris' green above the rim of the goblet the young Queen had given her as they sat in the stern cabin, the ship gently rolling in the swell, the sunbeams moving back and forth on the carpeting that covered the deck planking beneath it.

"You wish to go back to an `era' before Janet Rogers?" Aurora smiled back. "Back to their delusions of `self-government'?" It had been the near social collapse of that era that had allowed Janet Rogers to be as "successful" as she had been. Man had been "ready" then for a "New Order". And Janet had supplied it too! Auroraperhaps "knew" as much about that era as anyone alive now! About Janet's use of "S-E-X" as a means of "social pacification".

"I want what once was for all of Mankind," Maris answered. "A social order where every man and woman had a `say' in things." Aurorawondered privately to herself just then if Maris really "knew" what things had been like back then. She suspected not. Maris, like a lot of "idealists", only "knew" what she wanted to. Democracy had been a failure in the 20th Century, and Aurorahad no doubts that it would also be a failure here in the 26th too!!!

"I respect your courage, if not your intelligence," Auroraanswered, setting down her goblet there on the counter. "You are a woman with `ideals' I can only admire even if you are a fool."

"We continue `on' to Dularn," I said to Valerie before then going below. Signals being sent to the other ships of my squadron. I had no doubts now as to "what" had happened to the North Star. "Make all sail reasonable with the weather." I saw her nod back, heard her give the orders as I then went below to my stern cabin, pausing to stare out the windows at the dark sea. I had to smile to myself at the "luck" that had allowed Maris to escape me. I hoped Valerie would not be too "hard" on the slave girl. It had been the sort of a "mistake" anyone could have made. I could not really "interfere" in such matters without having good reason to do since the ship was Valerie's command and while I was both her Queen and "admiral", she was still "captain" of the Corsicaand the person who was "responsible" for seeing to it that the ship was fit for battle when such became "necessary".

"Come in," I answered to a soft knock on the door, Yvette now preparing me for bed, helping me into my nightshift, the blankets tossed back, my slave girl's dark eyes looking into mine as Valerie then stepped into the cabin. Her hair a warm glow in the light of the lamp swinging from one of the low ceiling beams.

"The slave girl who showed a light," she said to me, her eyes on Yvette, "I wish to know what you wish me to do with her."

"She is yours to 'discipline' as you see fit," I answered.

"Do you wish her life?" Valerie asked, her eyes not meeting mine. I suspected that she believed I would have the girl killed for her foolish act. Valerie no doubt was hoping to "persuade" me otherwise. I glanced at Yvette, smiled, and then told Valerie the "punishment" I planned to inflict on the luckless slave girl!

"Lie across my lap," I said to the girl, sitting there on the stool there on the Corsica's quarterdeck before everyone. I saw the girl's lipquiver, saw the fear showing there in her eyes as she obeyed me. Valerie taking her wrists, the first officer her ankles. I expect he enjoyed the "view" he had of the wench!

I raised the short skirt, the sun warm on my cheek as it stood above the distant shore, a few wispy clouds in the sky like mist. The ship rolling gently in swell, hove to. The drummer at my order tapping out a regular steady beat. A gasp from the girl followed the sound of my blow across those two rounded mounds. I have hard muscular hands, rather "unfeminine" hands I suppose. I am not a "feminine" woman. The hilt of a sword had hardened the palm of my right hand to a noticeable degree. It was that hand the luckless slave girl felt. Felt a total of two dozen times!!!

"You are lucky," I said to the girl as she knelt before me, her eyes moist with tears. She had not cried out, or begged for mercy. "Another would have tied a shot to your feet and tossed you over the side." She nodded, understanding her Queen's mercy!

Chapter Fourteen

"The squadron will continue north towards Dularn and await me there at the Isle of Sandor," I told Sela Dai as her dark eyes looked up with puzzlement into mine. It had been impossible to keep secret for long the tale of our own adventures the night before. The story of my spanking the luckless slave girl was already making the rounds through the squadron. It had, I thought, been something that might make me more "human" in the eyes of those who served on my ships. Perhaps now they might better understand the woman who would perhaps someday send them into battle. The woman that to most of them was a "name", little more. I planned to take the Huntress into Sarn, and speak to Darlanis. Try to convince her to negotiate some sort of "peace" with Maris. Otherwise I had no choice but to bring death and destruction to Dularn. To teach them that their coastline too was "vulnerable"!

"I don't why you even bother," Sela said to me, "Darlanis is 'worthless'." The little Princess of Talon having a low opinion of the Empress of California. One I suspected that was shared by many aboard the ships of my squadron. I did not share them, but I could understand how they felt about an Empress who now seemed to refuse to defend her own Empire against one such as Maris was!

"She has her 'reasons', I havemine," I smiled back. I was tempted to give the little Princess a hug, but knew that it might be misunderstood by many of those watching us. Sela is as I have mentioned something of a "spit-fire", but she is just the sort of a young woman that I admire greatly for what she is as a person!

"If you were Empress...", Mark Berson breathed in low tones. I nodded, smiled. I did not wish it so. Yet I knew that there were many who now thought as he did. Enough perhaps that the day might come when there would be an "outcry" even Darlanis would have to take note of. I was "Warlady", Queen of Trelandar. I am not a woman who wishes to be "more" than what she now is. Once I "was", but I have learned much since that night Sharon and I flew through that "Gateway" and ended up here in the 26th Century!

"I am your Queen, and that is all I wish to be," I said to him, taking his hands in mine. If Darlanis would not "fight", I felt there was no other "alternative" available now but to try to negotiate some sort of "settlement" with Maris over the "issues".

"I fear that things are a bit 'snug' aboard here," the young commander of Huntress smiled as she welcomed me aboard her ship. She was tall and slim, brunette. Like a "daughter" in her looks. Valerie had told me much about her, about her own capabilities. She was clad in black silk, leather, the dress of the Warriress.

"We are not far from Sarn," I smiled, "And I have sailed in worse," I added, glancing about the deck, looking up at the sails there overhead, the men standing there on deck, swaying with the roll of the ship. It was a well found ship, well commanded too! The deck a spotless white, the rigging taut, well tarred. There was "that" about the ship and its company that left no "doubts".

"It will be a pleasure to have you aboard," Janice Hill smiled, her dark eyes sparkling into mine. I thought her to be the sort of a woman that someday would "go far" if she lived. A golden chain snug about her throat, the mark of a wife of more than three years. She had, I knew, one child, a boy of around two. A husband back home in Trella. Many men will not marry a Warriress because of the "dangers" of her never "coming back" from a battle. It is "hard" on the woman too, especially if she has children. I thought briefly of little Mara, of Ta-she- ra, both of whom might never see me again too. Both had already lost their own mothers. Now they might "lose" their beloved Lorraine.

"I have heard much about you from 'another'," I smiled back.

"I hope she did not 'bend' the truth too much," she smiled.

"I don't think so," I smiled. She was not a beautiful woman, but I suspected she was a woman who enjoyed being a woman. I have "known" in my life a number of women who did not. Many of them became involved in radical political movements. Groups who sat around raising each other's "consciousness" (that's what they called it). Making themselves "miserable". Many ended up spending considerable sums of money "visiting" those of my profession. Getting themselves straightened back out after such foolishness. Janice then giving the orders that got us under way towards Sarn.

"What did happen to the North Star?" Janice Hill asked as she escorted me below a few minutes later on, the low height of the deck beams there above making me "duck" a bit, although I did find that I did "clear" the oaken beams by about an inch or so.

"My guess is that Maris decided to sail south," I replied. That is what I would have done had I been in her boots and facing a force like the one I commanded. Maris could be a "gadfly" all down the coastline of southern California if she escaped capture.

"That's what I would have done," Janice agreed with a smile.

"We'll be in Sarn by nightfall if this wind holds," Janice told me later on. I could see that she maintained good morale aboard her command. The sword at her hip left few doubts that she was also a capable and competent member of the Warriresses. I did not "envy" her with a young child at home and a husband who might not see his wife for months at a time if then. I knew of several Warriresses who had divorced their husbands after coming "back home" and "catching" them with another woman! It is "hard" on any woman to have to face such "worries" day after day.

"Yes," I replied, not really feeling that good "down there". The Huntress, unlike my bigger and heavier ships, tended to almost "bound" over the waves. The sturdy twomaster, some ninety feet in length being a fast, handy vessel, but also one well designed, I mused then, that "found out" a true landlubber like me!

"Sail Ho!" the cry came down from the mainmast far above. The man pointing with his telescope, the sun glinting off the brass tube. The other ship almost between us and Sarn, I noted!

"What ship?" Janice barked. She had a voice that carried.

"Three master, a 'Dulie' by the looks of her!" he yelled.

"Beat to Quarters, Rig for Battle!" I snapped harshly.

"You think it is the North Star?" Janice asked. I nodded.

"Be a 'nasty fight'," Janice smiled, her tone much as if I'd said that it'd probably rain before nightfall. She was of the Warriresses. We do tend to look upon such things "differently". We were even more "outgunned" by the North Star as the North Star would have been "outgunned" by one of my own big new first rates.

"We don't have their 'weight' or 'firepower', but we are a bit more 'handy'," I spoke. I would take "command" of Huntress. My "skills" against "those" of the lovely golden Queen of Dularn. Maris' ship was "faster". There was no "running away" from this battle if the Queen of Dularn decided to "fight". I had no doubt that she would. Especially given the "odds" that applied here!!!

"From deck here you can't see anything but their mastheads as yet, but the lookout says that he's sure it's the same ship that chased us yesterday. That scout ship off Lorraine's squadron," the first officer of the North Star said to his young golden haired captain. Queen Maris nodding in reply, her beautiful features showing the nervous "strain" that she was under after the events of the last twenty hour hours. Suddenly life had become much more terrifying and dangerous than before with Lorraine around. The woman living up to her legendary bulldog tenacity!

"Any other ships of her squadron in sight?" Maris asked.

"None that we can see from here," he answered in reply.

"They are 'aware' of 'what' we are?" Maris then said.

"As we know 'what' they 'are'," he then now smiled back.

"Go to battle stations, rig for battle," Maris answered. "Hoist our battle flags. This time I'm not 'running' from her." There being no doubt in his mind as to "who" Maris was referring.

"Enemy's coming about! Raising her battle flags!" I heard the lookout call down. The mastheads now easily visible from our deck now. There was no doubt now that it was the North Star!

"Hoist ours! Run up the Warlady's!" Janice snapped orders. I considered her competent at her tasks. It would be a nasty fight. In a way it would now be me against Maris. Dularn's best against California's. She had the heavier ship, but mine was a bit more "handy", easier to handle in battle. There was a good possibility that neither Maris or I would now survive the battle. The loss of life on both sides would doubtlessly be quite heavy.

"These are the times that try men's souls!" I cried out to the crew as they dashed to obey Janice's orders. "Let ours not be found wanting!" I saw faces look up at me. I was the Warlady of the Empire. The legendary "Lorraine". The woman who had been transported from the now mythical Twentieth Century to their era!

"They will give you their 'best'," Janice said. I nodded. Many would stand before SHE yet today to answer for their lives. Perhaps fate had brought us together here on this rolling sea to "settle" the issue of "who" was to control this blue green water!

Maris steadied the odd looking telescope, an instrument she knew that dated back to before The War. It had taken the best of her people's abilities to recoat the mirror, to make the repairs. The name on the side of the tube "CELESTRON" had meant nothing to anyone. It was however far superior to what Dularn could build. Even on the tripod the telescope was hard to use, but Maris did manage to see the other ship clearly for an instant in the K18mm eyepiece. The C-90's 55x bringing up the other ship amazingly close. The figures of its crew and officers concerning her far less than did the black flag that now flew over its tall masts!!!

"It's 'personal' now, isn't it, Lorraine?" Maris breathed softly, beautiful azure eyes looking out over the tossing ocean. She wondered what it would be "like" to face me in battle. There would be many deaths on both sides, she suspected. Hers, Mine???

"There will be no 'broadsides'," I said to the assembled crew of the Huntress as I stood there on the quarterdeck before them. "You will fire whenever you get a chance to make your shots 'tell' on the enemy." We were "outgunned" by the North Star. Maris had the bigger ship, the most armament. I recalled a book I had once read back in the 20th Century by C.S. Forester. A battle between a 36 gun frigate and a 50 gun two decker. This would be somewhat of the same. Maris had more "firepower", I had the "handier" ship in battle. Perhaps the "steadier" nerves, or so I hoped. Maris was young, inexperienced in a fight like this. On the other hand she had done well against one of my own ships.

"We will give you our 'best'," Janice Hill said to me. I saw the sun glint off the gold of her neck chain. She was doubtlessly an experienced Warriress. A good capable fighting woman.

Chapter Fifteen

I glanced up at the sails, gave brief curt orders that were instantly obeyed. My sword was in my hand,

shining in the bright sunlight. The seasickness I had suffered from earlier now gone. The North Star now perhaps no more than a mile off now, its own battle flags hoisted, including that of the Queen of Dularn. I had my own, the famous double barred Cross of Lorraine I favored. Two ships, two leaders of their own countries, faced each other. Maris Jord of Dularn now versus Lorraine Richards of Trelandar.

"I can see what you are doing, but I don't understand," Janice said to me as she stood there at my side. Her first officer staring through a telescope at the rapidly approaching Dularnian. He was blond haired, a rather "dashing looking" fellow. The second now at the forecastle, commanding things from there. It is best to place your officers thusly so when going into a battle.

"I am using the 'vector of forces' to our best advantage," I smiled. It is hard to explain. It is a "talent" that few have. I knew that Maris possessed the same abilities as did my husband. I had posted the best men at the spanker and the jib. One can turn a ship far faster with the sails than with the rudder. It is a skill that I have worked on ever since I got my first ship. I am "better" at it than Jon. Better too I suspected than Maris.

"I do not 'envy' her," Janice said to me. "Her" being of course Maris herself. She was capable, but inexperienced in such matters as this. I did not doubt her abilities to sail her ship, but would she continue to possess such abilities in the heat of battle? Maris was young, and I suspected also "terrified" of me.

"Which ship would you rather command in battle?" I smiled.

"Huntress is a good ship, capable," she smiled back at me.

"I would personally prefer my own Squala," I smiled back, stepping down from the quarterdeck, speaking softly to the men and women of the crew as they stood ready with their weapons. In a battle like this there would be many deaths. Many would "pass" to their next reincarnation today. I might be one of them. I saw the North Star's sails tower up into azure blue of the sky. The coastline of California a dark haze on the horizon beyond it.

"We have the wind with us," a man said, giving me a smile. I nodded, forced a smile back. I preferred it the other way. It makes the ship easier to maneuver than if the wind is behind you. On the other hand it makes it easier to close and board an enemy. I had considered such an "option", but I doubted that the crew of the Huntress would be a "match" for those aboard the North Star.

The missile weapons of the 26th Century, at least those carried aboard ships, are only "effective" against the crews as a rule. It is true that a well aimed catapult ball can do considerable damage if it strikes in the right place, but there is not much way that you can knock a hole in the enemy's hull except by ramming. I did possess "fire weapons", as did Maris doubtlessly, but such tend to be looked upon with considerable disfavor by the men and women who crew wooden ships as fire is a "doomsday weapon" from which there can be no "winners". It could be for this reason that fire was never used much as a weapon in the days of the old square riggers back in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries. Sort of like the use of atomic weapons in the last half of the 20th Century. There is little sense in fighting wars from which there can be no "winners". Such applied here in this case.

"Less than half a mile now," I heard someone breathe, staring at the rapidly approaching set of sails that was the enemy. Despite the coolness of the day I was already wet with sweat now. My dress clinging to my body, sticking to my back, to my breasts.

"Prepare to fire to starboard!" I snapped a number of surprised faces greeting me as the North Star was actually to port! "Let fly the jib, haul in on the spanker!" I cried, the man at the helm rapidly spinning the

wheel. Huntress turning like the lithe ship she was, swinging, the North Star coming around to our starboard side about a quarter of a mile away now. I wanted us to get to within two hundred yards if possible. Long bow shot. Our compound bows having an effective range of about two fifty.

"She's up to something!" Maris breathed, standing there by her helmsman. With my now having the "wind gauge" there really wasn't too much that she could "do" just then without suffering the risk of having her ship rammed by the now onrushing Huntress.

"Stand by to fire to port!" the first officer snapped, men rushing to their weapons, the warrioresses nocking arrows on their bows. The crossbowmen taking their places at the rails. A cold chill going through Maris' heart as she saw the Huntress continue to swing about there in front of her own onrushing ship! *****

"Fire as your weapons bear!" I cried, seeing the North Star rushing towards us. The ship shaking as our weapons fired! The Huntress still wheeling about, Maris' own return fire now being nothing but a few crossbow bolts in reply as we crossed her path. She was turning her own ship now, trying to run parallel to us so that she could get her own weapons into play. Her heavier ship slower to respond, although I saw her loosen up her spanker to try to swing about. I wondered how much "damage" we had done!

"Cross her bow!" I cried, "Keep up the fire on her crew!" I knew that once Maris got over her surprise she would prove to be a worthy foe. She had the bigger ship, the larger crew, and the heavier armament. She also had the famous Dularnian compound crossbow, which we did not, although our compound bows were in my own opinion probably the more "effective" of the two weapons. The jib being used to swing us about again seemingly right in front of Maris' own ship. Our continuous fire no doubt hampering her own efforts to bring her ship under control to return fire!

I could see the effects of our fire on her ship, the holes in her sails where a couple of our catapult balls had torn holes. A crossbowman on the forecastle taking aim at me, then dropping his weapon to clutch at an arrow from one of our own archers. I had armed our "ship's girls", everyone who could pull a string!!!

Janice with drawn sword directing our fire, while keeping another eye out for the sails, her "first" standing there on the quarterdeck next to the helmsman. Her golden haired counterpart on the North Star doing much the same. Her own lack of battle experience showing here. Before she had fought a poorly handled, poorly fought clumsy first rate, and while she had taken a heavy beating, she had shown considerable "mettle" in the battle. Here however she was fighting a different sort of battle, and her own lack of battle experience and skill at ship handling was showing! While she was a skillful sailor, as she had already shown, Maris lacked experience "under fire", and she had so far been mostly on the "receiving end" of my own fire without being able to do much in return. A state of affairs I did not expect would continue!!!

"She's swinging around with us!" someone yelled, although I could see that for myself. Maris using her jib effectively to get her ship turned about almost in its own length, it seemed now as the North Star now for the first time was able to get its own broadside into action! And there was nothing that I could do now to prevent it! We had done considerable "damage" but not enough!

"MayLysBe MercifulTo Us!" a man breathed beside me, winding up the windlass on a ballistae. The North Star now coming into position to fire its first broadside into us. I could see Maris standing there, her sword gleaming in the bright sunlight.

"Let fly the jib! Helm hard to port!" I cried. We would have to receive Maris' "blessings", but perhaps

we could make it just a bit "harder" for her own marksmen! The Huntress slowing beneath us as she came up into the wind, The North Star firing as she went by, a javelin transfixing a woman, pinning her to the mast. A man, his head a bloody mass, lying there on the deck, a pool of blood staining the white planking! Something whipping by my face, a blurred streak. Perhaps a crossbow bolt. A man there on the deck, clutching at one stuck in his thigh. Janice at my side, her dark eyes wild, grabbing at my arm. Something stung my side, a spent bolt perhaps as I turned. I saw a man fall, a ballistae javelin piercing him! The ship still was turning, but with the first officer at the helm, the helmsman lying dead at his feet. The North Star falling back, the crew at the ballistae beside me firing a bolt. A catapult ball smashing the rail. The enemy's marksmanship left nothing to be desired, I noticed then.

"We can't stand a broadside to broadside battle!" she cried, although that was something I was doing my best to avoid as long as I could! Maris now taking the wisest course and letting fly her own spanker to swing about her own ship to starboard. Thus to bring our ships back into their original configuration that they had been when this battle had started! Men running across her deck as they were across mine to follow orders!

"I'm not running away from this!" I snapped. She nodded. Like me she bore the brand of the Warriress there on her arm. Maris herself was of the same caste. She would not "run" either!

"It will be an honor to die at your side," she said to me.

"To 'fight' at my side," I corrected her. I fully intended to win this fight against Maris! To put "finished" to her career! I would see that bitch either naked in chains or dead at my feet! Or we'd "stand together" before SHE for our judgement!

Huntress was swinging up into the wind, crossing its "eye", while the North Star came about in the other direction, the distance now separating the ships a good quarter mile if not more. We had taken "losses", but I suspected that Maris had taken more. Now that she was "wise" to my own fighting style, she would be even more dangerous. She had the heavier ship, the larger crew, and superior firepower. I on the other hand had the "handier" ship, and the advantage of having some "experience" in battle!

"How bad?" Maris asked, the second officer dead from an arrow fired from the Huntress. The Imperial compound bows had been an unexpected weapon. Shorter ranged than her own crossbows, but with a rate of fire that it took several crossbowmen to "match"!

"She's got an entirely 'unorthodox' battle pattern, but we'll get alongside that damm Imperial 'witch' and teach her what for, your majesty!" the first officer exclaimed as he stepped up beside his beautiful golden haired Queen. Maris had remained up on the quarterdeck during the battle, calmly directing her men. Giving her orders in a clear ringing voice, directing their fire.

"Her ship is 'handier' than ours," Maris answered in reply, "And better commanded," she thought to herself with a grim smile.

"We took eight dead, four wounded, two of whom probably won't ever see Dularn again," the officer then added, looking at the golden haired beauty there before him. Wondering as he had before what it would be like to make love to a woman like Maris! He could see the sweat there on her forehead, the way that the Queen's clothing now "clung" to her, well "outlining" her figure.

"The 'butcher's bill' will be a lot bigger than that before we are done," Maris answered in level tones. And she could very well be one of them too. Tossed over the side with a catapult shot at her feet to

speed her descent to the bottom many fathoms below! Her young life snuffed out like some candle flame. And who would care? Her faithless lecher of a husband would find himself another woman, one perhaps more "submissive" than her, to sit on the throne of Dularn while he "sport"ed" with his slaves!

"She won't `fall' for your `tricks' again." Janice warned. We had lost a total of six to the enemy's missiles. In a broadside to broadside battle we couldn't match the heavier ship, but I had no intention of fighting the sort of a battle that Maris no doubt wanted me to fight. Nor did I wish to attempt to "board". To fight it out with swords and pikes against superior numbers.

"Then I will just have to `supply' one that she will," I smiled back. I was well aware of the fact that the North Star was the "faster" of the two ships, although I did not think that there was really that "much" of a difference. Maris being a more capable commander of her ship than Janice was of hers, I thought. The differences in speed in any case being less than half a knot at the most, which gave me the "option" of trying to draw Maris in towards the coast, where I might just get "lucky" and meet up with an Imperial warship capable of dealing with the North Star! Darlanis having a couple of schooners similar to the North Star. Light three masters of a design I had once "considered" for mine. Hopefully one of them might be at sea instead of sitting in port!

"I plan to let her have the `wind gage' this time," I smiled. I suspected that if I "baited" a trap Maris might be just willing to "sail into it" for me if I did it just right too!

"Dangerous," Janice warned, her dark eyes glowing into mine.

"If I `fall',do the best you can to `cripple' her," I said. Janice nodded, her expression leaving no doubt as to her feelings about the matter. "Including boarding if nothing else `works'."

"It has been a pleasure to serve with you," she smiled.

Chapter Sixteen

"I wonder what `she's' thinking right now," Janice mused, her dark eyes glowing into mine as she stood at my side. The North Star now swinging back about to face us perhaps three eighths of a mile distant. I had ordered the now blood-stained deck cleared of bodies, the wounded taken below for treatment by the ship's physician. There would soon be more for her attention. I might be one of them. Perhaps to watch my own arm or leg being removed after it had been smashed by a catapult shot!

"Probably just as `scared' as we are as we stand here," I smiled back as Janice nodded in reply. I knew that the Huntress couldn't "outrun" the North Star, although their advantage in speed would not be very great. That "option" was denied me now. Janice suddenly knelt and handed me her sword. I kissed the hilt and handed it back to her. Such is "meaningful" to my own caste.

"She's a `crafty bitch', that Imperial Warlady," the first officer mused to his beautiful young golden haired Queen. Maris nodding, while wondering what "trick" I might pull on her this time! She was now also concerned as to the possible damage that her ship might suffer this far from Dularn, as well as the loss of life that could render it almost impossible for her to continue on without first returning to Dularn. And to

return to Dularn with the knowledge that she had not "beaten" the Imperial Warlady was something she didn't like to think about for long. Certainly not when there might well be "those" who would doubtlessly call into question her painful decision to declare war upon the Empire of California! Especially not when it was public knowledge that Darlanis herself was actually opposed to the war between them!

"I think we all underestimated her," Maris smiled back.

"Helm to starboard," I snapped, studying the wind. Calculating the "vector of forces" both for the Huntress and for the North Star. There was a point to which the enemy craft could not sail even with its "handy" fore and aft rig. Whether or not the Huntress could lie any "closer" to the wind than the North Star was doubtful considering what I knew about the design of Maris' own ship, the "North" class being a new design with one main keel and two smaller ones on either side that came into play when the ship was heeled into the wind. The Huntress' movement forcing Maris to either chase me around in a great circle or attempt to tack to a position where I would be. In any case I planned to "tease" Maris until she did something "foolish" that I could take "advantage" of. She was a highly "competent" captain, but young and inexperienced. I had to admire the woman however, despite my own feelings about her. She was cautious, but able to exploit any "chance" she got to carry the battle to me. Sort of a female version of my own Jon, I thought to myself, recalling that he and Maris had once been lovers. The thought of Jon with her, of the two of them being together, of making love, irritating me considerably just then, although just "why" I really couldn't say then!

"She's 'cautious'," Janice said with a smile, having spoken to the first officer. Another man now at the helm. The thought occurring that Janice looked a lot like me. That probably confused the "enemy" a bit. We were dressed pretty much the same. Black silken flowing skirts to below the knee, leather trappings. Quite practical attire for fighting women aboard a sailing ship. A woman who "exposes" too much of herself "distracts" the sailor.

"She's making her move," I said, the North Star now sailing close hauled to a point somewhat ahead of us. I had suspected that Maris would do something like that, tiring of this "cat and mouse" game that I was now "playing" with her. "Helm hard to port!", I snapped, "Let fly the spanker, haul up the jib!" The Huntress wheeling about, leaving Maris to pursue as she might!

"She's coming about," Janice breathed, standing by my side. Maris had let fly her jib, swinging her ship around through the "eye" of the wind, then resetting it as she came about after us!

"I want our longest ranged ballistae mounted on the quarterdeck," I ordered then, regarding the North Star there behind us.

"You can't do much 'damage' with just one ballistae," Janice pointed out to me. I nodded. I probably couldn't, but I thought I might just make Maris' crew a bit "nervous" being fired upon! I did not think that Maris' ballistae were quite the equal of our own, as we carried fewer, but somewhat "heavier" weapons than did the Dularnian warship. I having "standardized" upon the same type of ballistae and catapult for both my small ships and my large ships. The weapons having a range of about a quarter mile. The North Star carried somewhat "smaller" weapons, but more of them. In a broadside to broadside battle it is the number of missiles that count, not so much the force by which they are "delivered" upon the enemy. However, I do not like to "fight" such sorts of battles, and thus had armed my own ships differently. I put more "value" upon the lives of my people than do some others.

"We'd better make more sail," Janice added, glancing back at the North Star, which was now slowly pulling up on us a bit now. I was heading towards Sarn, the coast just a haze there in the distance. Maris

no doubt aware of the "dangers" that awaited her there. I suspected too that she was wondering what to "do" now.

"Pass the word I want the crew to `moon' the North Star," I smiled to a rather "shocked" Janice. She nodded, and carried out my orders. Dularnians are a "strait-laced" people. They are in many ways like those of the Nineteenth Century. I wanted Maris to be "angry". I wanted her not to think too clearly right now! "And tell our ship's girls to strip and flaunt themselves before the North Star," I added with a smile. I wanted to make those Dularnians aboard Maris' ship just a bit "distracted". It is too easy on a sailing ship to make "mistakes". I was hoping for one!

"Fire!" I snapped, judging the roll of the ship beneath us. The ballistae snapping forward, the javelin flying forth, a dark dash against the azure of the sky. Janice at my side, watching through our best telescope. The range was about a quarter mile. We were driving the Huntress hard to keep ahead of the enemy. I hoped that nothing would carry away, or we'd be helpless before the bigger and heavier Dularnian. Maris might "win" her victory over me by "default", and I certainly didn't want that to happen!

"I think we hit, judging from their reactions," the brunette said from beside me, the black of her attire leaving little doubt that she was of the Warrioreses. We looked almost like mother and daughter although Janice was "prettier" in the face than me.

"Maris is ordering up `more sail'," I smiled, barking orders to our men to do the same. Both ships were being driven "hard"!

"She doesn't make as much `leeway' as we do," Janice noted. The North Star's tri-keel no doubt accounted for that, I thought.

"We are a `sloop of war' and she's a `frigate'," I smiled. Janice giving me a puzzled look for a moment before nodding back.

"I didn't know that you knew of such things," she said to me as we stood together. We had sheathed our swords, the men now skylarking on deck despite the closeness of the North Star there behind us. I had given orders that such was to be done just to upset Maris a little. I wanted her not to feel "confident" about what might happen should we actually engage in a "ship to ship"!

"Fire!" I snapped, a second javelin being launched towards the North Star. It takes about thirty seconds to recock such a weapon. The ballistae greatly resembling a gigantic crossbow.

"You hit their forestay!" Janice cried with delight! The heavy cordage swinging there in the wind. Maris swinging her ship up into the wind to take some of the strain off her masts!

"Let fly the jib! Helm hard to port!BattleStations!!!" I cried, ordering the Huntress about. We had "evened" the odds!!!

"We are going to fight, and mayLysbe merciful to us," Maris breathed in low tones, her first officer nodding. The young midshipman who had taken the second's place looked terrified, she thought to herself. The damage, while easily repaired, did for a few moments greatly handicapher own ship's abilities. Just long enough she suspected for me to put a couple good broadsides into her beloved North Star! And there wasn't a thing she could do!!!

"Fire as your weapons bear!" the beautiful golden haired young Queen cried, her sword gleaming there

in the sunlight. She had been called a "Valkyrie" by some aboard the North Star. Her golden beauty, her royal status, all made her like some "goddess" to them. For her they would sail to the gates of hell if she so commanded. Others busy repairing the damage, well aware of the enemy's archers, of the Huntress' own missile weapons firing now!

"OhLys!" Maris breathed, seeing the enemy fire! So aware that her young soft tender feminine body might be their "target"!

"Fire as your weapons bear!" Janice snapped, glancing over at Lorraine standing there next to her "first". The woman having shown them all that she was everything "they" said that she was!! The Huntress coming about, pounding the yet crippled North Star! Janice saw the enemy fire, saw a man next to her flung back, his body transfixed by the enemy javelin like a fly pierced on a pin!

Then to her horror she saw her "first" there on the deck, a javelin piercing his body, and Lorraine on her knees beside him! The woman's dark eyes burning into hers as she shook her head! A bolt, unnoticed by either, suddenly flying across the rail to take the Warlady in the left thigh, making her stumble and stagger as she then grasped the framework of a ballistae for support!

"We `got' Maris," Lorraine gasped through gritted teeth. "I watched her `fall'." Janice nodded, her mind numbed with horror.

Chapter Seventeen

"You live, my Queen," the first officer of the North Star said to Maris, whose headache felt like she'd been hit with a sledgehammer. The ballistae bolt from the Huntress having struck the rail beside her, spun in the air, and stuck the side of her head, knocking her instantly unconscious! The horrors of the sick bay about her, the men and women moaning and groaning, like some scene out of the "Hell" of the old time "Christians" she'd once heard tell of. The motion of the ship telling her that the North Star was once again under sail, hopefully away from danger!

"The `enemy'," Maris breathed, the "enemy" to her being not the enemy ship, but the tall waspish brunette whose flag had flew over its mastheads. Had they killed Lorraine? Was she "free" of the woman finally? Such thoughts raced jumbled through her mind!

"We may have `got' Lorraine in our last barrage," he smiled. "I saw her drop to the deck in any case beside their `first'." * * It will be noted here that I was not "hit" at this time, but was attempting to do what I could for the "first". (Lorraine)

"And the enemy?" Maris asked, wondering what had happened.

"Turned away and sailed towards Sarn," the man smiled back.

"We may find Darlanis an even worse enemy now," Maris said, thinking of what the future might hold now for her own country. And then there was her own sister, Gayle. What would she think? Dularn could be in even greater "trouble" now with Lorraine dead!

"I did not give orders to withdraw," I said, the physician regarding the bloody bolt she had just withdrawn from my thigh. It had been necessary to push it all the way through. I didn't like to think what it would feel like once the drug wore off that kept me from "feeling" such things. Janice nodding, giving me a smile. She had gotten through the battle without a "scratch"! I had not been so "lucky". I would bear the scar there on my thigh for the rest of my life. Limp for several weeks at least now if not longer! I had lost considerable blood, also "weakening" me.

"Maris fell," she replied. "You were wounded. I did what I felt was best for the ship and its men. That will be my defense at my court martial if you decide that is what you want to do." Perhaps recalling my orders to carry the fight to the bitter end! I nodded, aware of what could have happened to us all in a fight! She had done the "right thing" to "withdraw" in such a case too!

"I'm making you 'captain' of the Huntress if you want it," I answered. "And there'll be plenty of Dularnians to fight where we're going to." She nodded, her dark eyes holding my own then. I thought she had done the "right thing" in disobeying my order. With Maris "gone" there was no reason to continue on fighting!!!

"You've been wounded!" Darlanis breathed, her azure eyes instantly flooded with concern as she regarded me sitting there in the stern cabin of the Huntress with my leg on a cushion. She is stunningly beautiful. Awesome. Like some "goddess" out of an ancient mythology. Captain Janice Hill of the Huntress at my side, helping me write my report. My thigh was painful. I was not in the best of moods. Sharon was fortunately somewhere else. I dismissed Janice and asked her to wait outside. What I had to say to Darlanis was not something I wished any one else to hear.

"There are eighteen dead men and women up there on deck for you to say a few last words over before you leave," I said to her as she seated herself beside me. "Brave men and women who died because you refused to even 'negotiate' with Maris!" Darlanis nodded, her eyes a deep beautiful azure as they burned into mine.

"You know as well as I why I couldn't," Darlanis answered in level tones. We had "discussed" exactly this issue only a short time before. Darlanis felt that allowing the people in the "disputed territories" to vote upon which country they wished to be allied with would be "disastrous" in the long run for the Empire. Starting a "precedent" that others might later on "exploit". We did have the "example" of Trelandar, but Darlanis did not consider that in quite the same light, saying that it was a one time "thing" that would never happen again. Without me, of course, Sanda Talen would have never been able to start her "Revolution".

"Maris may be dead," I answered, telling her of what had happened. What I'd seen. Perhaps it was "better" this way too.

"If she is, we're in more 'trouble' than ever," the Empress replied. "Maris at least was 'decent', which is more than what my 'brother' can claim." Dularn is a Queendom, ruled by a woman. There was no doubt in either Darlanis' mind or mine that the next Queen of Dularn would no doubt be a complete puppet of Darl Jord! She would doubtlessly be both "beautiful" and "dumb", I thought!

"It could be an 'opportunity' for you," I replied, Darlanis' beautiful azure eyes glowing into mine. She was still Tulis' daughter so far as most everyone knew, there being only a handful who knew that she was actually the daughter of Aurora of Mars. I was also aware of the fact that Darlanis was a wonderful public speaker, the sort of a speaker who could "sway" people, and that only the year before she had quite successfully managed to put a halt to the "Revolution" started by Sanda Talen in Trelandar. I knew

of the "role" that Sharon had played in all this, but still I had no "doubts" that Darlanis was a woman who once she had put her mind to it, had proved herself to be quite a bit "more" than what even the very "capable" Sanda Talen had ever first believed!

"There is too much hatred of me in Dularn," Darlanis smiled.

"The `same' was true in Trelandar," I pointed out in return. Yet we nearly "lost" the Revolution to Darlanis. I among others had made the "mistake" believing a woman as beautiful as her was not too "smart". Darlanis had proved me and Sanda both "wrong"!

"What do you suggest that I do?" Darlanis smiled in reply.

"Dularn could become another `Trelandar'," I smiled back.

"If Maris didn't die, there might be `hope'," she answered.

"I too hope that she lives," I answered the Empress, recalling a conversation that had not been that long ago. I had at the time voiced the "opinion" that it might be "best" for all concerned if Darlanis allowed the people living in the territories to the south of Dularn to be allowed to vote on which country they wished to belong to. Dularn or the Empire of California.

"Allow the people in the `disputed territories' to `vote' on whether or not they should `belong' to California or Dularn?" Darlanis had challenged me back. Such made "sense" to me, although Darlanis had then pointed out that Lincoln had refused to do just that back in 1861! Maris had proposed such a vote, knowing fully well what the "outcome" would be. She then had used this as a "propaganda tool" against us, saying that she was willing to abide by such a vote, while we were not. The people in the area concerned I might note here being mostly "Dularnian".* *This was ultimately done, but not until late in 2567. (JBB)

"You allowed the people of Trelandar to `vote'," I answered.

"The `political realities' gave me no other choice," Darlanis had smiled. "And there is no doubt what would have `happened' to me had we decided to `fight it out'." I nodded, remembering. I would have had to kill her, and that would have `cost' me too! There being no doubt in my mind what Sharon would have thought had I ever killed the beautiful Empress in a sword-duel!

"There are no `easy answers', are there?" I had smiled back.

"Aurora wants one of your ovums, you know," Darlanis smiled, changing the subject as we sat there in the Huntress' stern cabin. I knew about that. I had told Aurora I would think it over too. I wasn't too sure that I wanted to do it. I have never had a child of my own. I certainly didn't want her raised by Aurora!

"I want to raise her," I said to Darlanis, seeing her nod.

"We are further now from `peace' than ever," Darlanis said, returning to our original earlier topic of discussion. If it was true that Maris was dead, then we could look forward to another war of the sort that had just ended last year. One that might drag on year after year without any "end" in sight. On the other hand I was a more "competent" military leader than Darlanis or Princess Tara for that matter, and I did believe that it was just "possible" that we might be able to win this new war with Dularn!

"I'm going to Dularn to teach them to `mind their manners'," I said to Darlanis. Hopefully their next

Queen might be more willing to see "reason" than Maris had been. I suspected that in Maris' case it had been something "personal" there between the two of us. Just "what" it was I didn't know, and I thought now it would be a secret "buried" at the bottom of the sea with her!

"I wish there was 'another way'," Darlanis said to me then, filling a goblet, handing it to me, then filling one for herself. "Sometimes I wish we were like the Lorr. They've lived in peace with themselves for over fifty thousand years." I smiled, sipped at the wine. The Lorr are not like human beings. They are more like the insects that they resemble in their appearance. It is a society more like that of the ant nest than anything else I know.

"A completely and totally 'stagnant' race," I smiled back. I knew much. The Lorr themselves were of the sort that had to be "driven" to do anything. Had their sun not started to turn into a red giant they would have never even developed spaceflight. It is the work of their "Servitors" that made Mars what it is. The lovely Women of Mars who I recently "helped" gain their freedom.

"Mars has shown us that human beings can live together in peace for centuries," Darlanis pointed out with a smile in turn. "And they certainly haven't been 'stagnant' in their technology."

"Would you want to live in a society like that?" I asked. The Women of Mars are all lesbians who reproduce by cloning their own ovums. It is a sociological "dead end". More like a "monastery" or nunnery than anything else I can think of. A race of women who look upon us of the Earth as being greatly "inferior" to themselves. I cared little for such a social order. For its own "philosophy" of life. It reminded me too much of the Lorr's. Of certain rabid feminists that I had known in the 20th Century.

"I think that deep down inside you like war, fighting," Darlanis said to me. "That is why you 'are' the way that you are. Why you are so violent a person in your own thinking," she said.

"Maybe I'm just a 'bitch' who understands a few things," I smiled back. I had shared so many dreams with the young Janet Rogers. Telling how every problem the human race faced could be "solved". She did a pretty good job, although we never agreed upon the subject of "population control" as such. That I believe was perhaps Janet's biggest "mistake". That was what made The War happen, I think now, although there is no way of knowing. Too many people, not enough "resources" left. Mankind had "needed" Mars too much for our own good. The Lorr hadn't understood.

"You're a 'barbarian' despite the fact that you came from the Twentieth Century," Darlanis smiled back, a hint of laughter in her voice. Serak was back with his own people, I knew too. Leading his Nevadas in their fight against Dularn's own allies.

"There is a 'time', a 'place', for such as me," I said. I felt that here in the 26th Century was just the right place too!!

"Perhaps there is," Darlanis smiled back, getting to her feet. "And please don't get yourself killed," the Empress spoke, looking down at me as I sat there. "We need you too much." I nodded, reached out, clasped her hands in mine. Looked up into those beautiful azure eyes. We have shared much together, Darlanis and I. Stood together side by side in battle against a common foe. We do love one another. I have no better friend in this era than Darlanis. We do argue, "disagree" on a lot of things, but yet when it "counts", we stand together, side by side, the two greatest fighting women of all time. Two women, who if only for a brief moment of history, did "make a difference". Darlanis of California, and one "Lorraine of Trelandar".

"How's the leg now?" Janice asked as she stood there on the quarterdeck. The newly repaired Huntress

taking the wind well, the sails all now full bellied, hard. The spray leaping over the bow, the wind singing in the rigging. The sun shining brightly.

"Sore," I smiled, thinking how "lucky" I had been to have survived the battle. The total toll of dead had been nineteen. The last one, a young woman, a "ship's girl", having died there in Sarn, holding the hand of her beautiful golden haired Empress. I had seen Darlanis weeping, the tears running down her cheeks.

"There were a few minutes after you fell that I felt as if I was all alone with no one to turn to," she said to me. I nodded, thinking of Maris. We had no way of knowing if she had survived or not. She had been young, beautiful, so full of life. Her own sister was my Princess Gayle, now the Crown Princess of Talon. I dreaded eventually facing Gayle, telling her that I was "responsible" for her own sister's death in battle. I had "lost" much.

Chapter Eighteen

Maris stared out over the dark sea, the stars bright in the black vault of the sky above. She was cautious to keep a good lookout for Imperial warships, especially those of Lorraine's. A large bruise there on the side of her head still yet "tender" to the touch reminding her of how close she had come to dying then!

Maris' mother had died when she was but a child, the forests of Dularn harboring many dangerous beasts such as dire wolves, one of which had killed her mother shortly after she'd given birth to her younger sister Gayle. While her father had remarried, their stepmother had never really been the "mother" to the two girls that their own mother would have been, Maris had felt. There had been a "distance" there, especially between Maris and the woman, although Gayle had "accepted" her without too much difficulty, being much too young to remember her own true mother.

Maris had grown up "hard", the sort of a girl who "expects" little from others, and who goes about with a "chip on her shoulder" expecting trouble and often finding it too! Her relations with men were often stormy, perhaps because of her own problems that led her to seek "trouble" where none existed. She had ended up a slave girl in California, where for the second time she'd known love, but in the arms of a man who was married to another, and she, Maris, now only just a slave! A mere collared wench who was actually the "property" of a lovely little Imperial girl!

She had been "happy" as such, despite her low status, until Lady Lana was killed and she became the slave property of the new owner of the estates, yours truly, who had utterly terrified her! Maris believing from what she was told that I wished to "use" her as women sometimes "use" slave girls for their own sexual pleasures. The idea of being forced to perform "oral sex" on me apparently so terrifying this young Dularnian maiden that she immediately sought at great danger to herself to escape me or to actually die in the attempt! Maris being willing to risk "all" in a small boat sailing to Dularn to an "easy" and no doubt comfortable life upon my estates as a "pampered pet" of little Mara's!

"So `where' did Maris get this `idea'?" you ask here. I do have my suspicions, considering what happened afterwards. You do recall here of course that Maris' "lover" was married, and that his wife was very much "aware" of the fact that he was "sporting" with Maris every chance that he got. And Sanda Talen certainly had it "in" for Maris, whom she apparently hated with a passion!!

Maris and I once had a long talk about all this, although I fear we will never be "friends" of any sort, Maris and I looking upon things quite differently, but I do understand more now than I did before, including Sanda Talen's own "role" in all this too! Sanda having used another slave girl to "torment" lovely Maris!!!

At the moment however her thoughts were not upon me, but upon another, one tall and golden, who had been much "different" than she had first believed from what she'd always heard of her! One with whom she had "shared" so much there last fall in Dularn as the Queen of Dularn laid dying, and subject to wild delusions.

"Why are you my `friend'?" Maris mused, looking out over the sea. "And are you truly my `friend'?" the Queen of Dularn mused, recalling all the attempts Darlanis had made to prevent this war. She did not think that Darlanis would "turn the other cheek" any more. Especially not if Lorraine had been killed in the battle!! *****

"Darlanis isn't the `same' any more as she used to be," Janice said to me as we shared wine and cheese there in the stern cabin of the Huntress. We had spoken much of things, perhaps because we both had much "bothering" us. Janice's "doubts" at being able to command the ship under fire without me at her side, and my own conflict with Darlanis over the conduct of this war!

"I suspect that others have given her `bad advice'," I said, breaking off a chunk of the cheese we were both "working" on. I suspected that Aurorahad expressed her "opinions" to Darlanis. Darlanis tended in my opinion to listen "too much" to Auroranow.

"I think Darlanis is `weak'," Janice replied, nibbling at the cheese. "She listens `too much' to the `advice' of others."

"Her `problems' relate back to her childhood," I answered.

"She is a woman with `doubts' about herself," Janice smiled.

"We are making good time," I smiled, changing the subject. The winds had been "favorable" since we'd left Sarn, and Janice had put the crew to work getting all the speed out of the Huntress that the ship was capable of. Such was also of course good training for the twenty odd "new hands" that we'd taken aboard.

"I wonder what happened to the NorthStar?" I mused, giving Janice a smile. We had, I hoped, seen the "last" of Queen Maris! With Maris dead and Princess Tara safely in the hands of the Nevadas, I didn't think we had that much to worry about anymore! Darl Jord had never impressed me as being very competent at much.

"If they're heading back home we might meet up with them," Janice smiled. I suspected that the war with Dularn was over.

"Ship straight ahead!" the lookout called down to us. I wondered if it was some "laggard" from the squadron, although it would have to a long ways behind to be that close to us now! On the other hand it could just be the North Star going back home!

"Friend or Foe?" Janice called up, although there was no way of really telling from this far away as yet, I mused to myself.

"She's Dularnian!" the man called down after a long look through his telescope. Janice used the big 16x50's as look-out telescopes, which did allow one to identify ships further away. I had a big 24x75 mounted on a tripod there on the Squala, although the optics weren't that good, the telescopes of the 26th Century leaving a bit to be desired when it came to such things due to the lack of the proper glass to manufacture objectives. I can actually "see more" with my own Martian 10x60's than with it!

"The North Star?" Janice spoke, glancing at me. I nodded.

"We'll meet under a flag of truce," I answered her back.

"Still flying the flag of the Queen of Dularn," Janice said, the ship obviously being the North Star as it came up into the wind. I could see here and there the marks of hasty repairs, the ship having taken a good pounding from our own weapons. We probably looked better, having spent a couple days in Sarn refitting.

"And we didn't kill Maris," I smiled, the beautiful young Queen now getting down into a boat, it obviously being her intention to come to us as we came up into the wind at long bow shot. Janice nodding, her face expressionless as she saw the blonde.

"I see you didn't manage to 'dodge' all our missiles," Maris smiled as she saw the cane that I used to "ease" my injured leg. I tried not to have to use it any more than what was necessary.

"You are a more 'capable' commander than I gave you 'credit' for," I smiled back. Maris had given me a good fight once she had understood my own fighting style. She was a very capable woman, I suspected, one who I had perhaps underestimated earlier.

"And you are as 'good' as the tales they tell of you," Maris smiled back. Neither of us actually liked the other, but as we did "share" the same caste, we did have certain things in common.

"And this is Janice Hill, my captain," I said to Maris, introducing the two women. Janice hesitating for just an instant before taking the hand of the Queen of Dularn. I knew how Janice felt about Maris, but this was not the time to show such emotion.

"You are a very 'able' captain," Maris said to her with a smile. I was once again struck by resemblance of Maris to Darlanis. She does look an awful lot like a "daughter" of Darlanis. More so than does An'na or Sharon for that matter, I might add. * * I suspect too that Maris' appearance has had its influence on Darlanis. Maris is just "young" enough, and Darlanis "old" enough that they could have been actually "mother and daughter".

"I fear I would not have done as well as Lorrainedid," Janice smiled back, giving me a smile. I don't think that Maris really had any doubts as to "who" had been commanding the ship. Two "living legends" had come together in "battle". We had both "proved" little except to prove that we were both good fighters.

"You were 'lucky' that I picked this ship, not another," I smiled to Maris. With Corsica there would have been no "doubts". It would have been a "bloody" battle doubtlessly, but the outcome would have never been in "doubt". Not as long as I was in control of things. Maris would have ended up either dead or kneeling at my feet, a stripped slave. I suspected that she knew it!

"Our losses were 'heavy'," Janice spoke, changing the subject as Maris and I faced each other there on the Huntress' deck.

"The consequences of a war that shouldn't have happened," a beautiful young Dularnian Queen smiled back, glancing at me then. I wondered why Maris spoke with such "oiled" words. The war was after all one that she had "started" with her attacks on Californian shipping. While it was true that she had been "provoked" by Princess Tara, both Darlanis and I had pointed that out to her!

"I find myself in `agreement' with you," I smiled back.

"You `do'!" Maris gasped softly, perhaps not believing her ears. No doubt she thought of me as a blood-thirsty "Warlady"! I have something of a "reputation" that way. Not all "deserved".

"This is not a `war' any of us can `win'," I said to her.

Chapter Nineteen

"A little more `roomier' than mine," I smiled, seating myself on the cushions there beneath the North Star's stern windows and tucking the flowing long black silk dress I wore about myself. The ship gently rolling in the swells. I found the North Star an excellent design, sort of a "compromise" between ships such as the Squala and the Huntress. Somewhat like the light naval frigates of the Eighteenth Century. Maris' "taste" in furnishings was rather "spartan" however, I noted. Nothing like the "luxury" that Darlanis usually surrounded herself with. This was a capable, competent fighting Queen, perhaps a feminine "Nelson"!

"I'm sorry, but my slave girl was killed in the battle," Maris smiled. I nodded to Yvette, who opened up the wicker basket she had brought from Huntress. Maris at least did have a well stocked wine cabinet, although I had taken the precaution of bringing my own too! It had taken both Maris and Yvette to get me down into the longboat with my bad leg the way that it was. I had found Maris surprisingly "capable", "competent" at such too!* * I "like" Maris in a way, although I don't have as high an opinion of her as Darlanis does, for example. Maris is the sort that back in my own time would have been called a "gold-digger". (LR)

"I understand how you must feel," I answered, watching Yvette fill my glass. Maris reminded me of Darlanis, both in her face, figure, and her own personal mannerisms. She had once been my "property" and had worn the slave collar. I had earlier wondered what had so terrified her of me that she had taken the "risks" that she had to escape by a small sailboat all the way to Dularn. The voyage had however made her quite famous! She is the author of a book detailing her adventures. My "role" in it as you might imagine here is not very "flattering" either!!! I had picked up a copy of it there in Sarn before I had left too. It had been very "interesting" reading, let me also mention here! I had also learned things about Maris I'd never known about too!

Maris and I have "conversed" twice now, sharing our feelings as fighting women. We are not "friends", but we do share the same caste, and we are of course are "interlinked" through Gayle. It is through this means that I have reconstructed certain parts of this book so that you, my readers, might better "understand". I have also tried to show Maris' thoughts as accurately as I can.

"I could never force a woman to `do' to me what I was told yours are required to do to you," Maris suddenly spoke, her eyes holding mine. She had been told that she was to be my personal slave and that she would be required to "service" me whenever I wished! This is why few slave girls ever wish to be

sold to a "mistress". A lot of women who own slaves do however allow them to use their fingers to give them sexual release, which is of course more pleasant for the girl. This is generally done while the "mistress" lies on her stomach and the slave stands at her side with a hand up between her legs. The "mistress" can then entertain erotic fantasies while the girl uses her fingers and thumb to give the "mistress" sexual release. A well "trained" girl will also suggest erotic fantasies for the "mistress" to think about while this is all going on. Most women are "bi" enough that being so "handed" by another woman isn't too "offensive" to them. The use of "fingers" is the most common way that two women will make love, at least in my own knowledge of it. It is also a good way for a man to give a woman repeated orgasms. I used to "counsel" married couples in such matters back in Los Angeles. Things really haven't changed that much either! The book, "A KEY TO A WOMAN'S HEART" is a bit too "exotic" for my taste, I might mention here, although it is of course "popular".

"And that was why you fled my estates," I smiled back, recalling what she had written in her book about me. What she had been "told" about me. The "lies" she had been told. I had no doubts either as to "who" the "guilty party" was either now! Sanda Talen had no doubt felt it justified considering that Maris had utilized her own beauty, her "blondness" for her own benefit! Maris' book of course makes her look quite "innocent" of any possible wrong doing, which is not how things actually "were" then. I would "respect" Maris far more if she was "truthful" about it! Maris being the sort of a woman who "uses" her sexual attractiveness for her own advantage without any thought of anyone else! Darlanis will do the same, so Maris isn't the only one at fault!

"I know its common enough, but I find it `disgusting'," the young Queen answered, Maris apparently having an unreasoning horror of lesbians, which isn't that unusual in cultures like hers. In her book she accuses me of being "one", and also states that I had picked her out to be my personal slave which is partly true. The rest of what she writes about me (SHE HARDLY KNEW ME) is just simply "bullshit" and nothing else. I didn't strip her, or ever "do" anything to her as a matter of fact but ask her a few simple "questions" about Dularn and about her "treatment" on the estate.

"It's common enough on Mars, I understand," I smiled back. While I do have such "feelings" at times towards other women, I have never actually allowed myself to succumb to them, being well aware of the consequences of being so "caught"! In any case I never considered Maris as a fit "lover" for myself! The closest I ever "came" to "something" like this was with Lana. "Love" between two women is often less "sexual" than what is "thought". * * Two women can have a "relationship" without having sex with each other. One can become extremely "close" without having sex. This is the sort of a "relationship" that I have with Darlanis.

"Let's change the subject to something else," Maris smiled.

"I'm not in a position to make a `deal'," I said to her.

"You remind me a bit of Princess Tara," Maris commented.

"I do not care to be `compared' to her," I snapped back.

"You are `hard', `ruthless' like she is," Maris answered. I supposed it was "true" in a way, although Tara is "cruel", and I am not. I do not "delight" in the suffering of others. She did.

"You are the one committing `aggression' against us," I told her. "We did not `attack' you despite whatever you think." This has been "written up" in Darlanis' book and there is no need here to go further into it. Princess Tara's own part in this is quite well known. That of Darl Jord is also "known" now from records Tara kept. "Records" that Jers turned over to Darlanis and me.

"Darlanis is well known for her `trickery'," Maris ventured, sipping at her wine, her eyes burning straight into mine. She was trying to "provoke" me, but not having any success as yet. I decided that I did not like Gayle's older sister either too much! She certainly wasn't "anything" like my lovely Princess, I mused.

"Darlanis did everything she could to `avoid' this war," I said. "And if you remember, you were the one who started this."

"After your raiders launched attacks on us," Maris smiled.

"Those ships were Princess Tara's, not ours," I retorted.

"So' you say," Maris smiled, sipping at her wine. Yvette there to one side, her dark eyes first on me, and then on Maris. The gold of her slave collar gleaming there in the light from the stern windows. I could see the sea, the sky, clouds drifting by. The ship rolling gently on the swell, the rigging creaking as it did. I could hear the voices of men, their footsteps overhead.

"Just order your ships back to Dularn and I'll order mine to return to California," I answered in level tones. I knew Jers would go along with that. What Darlanis "thought" made little difference here as she was not actually "involved" in the issue in this case since I was "legally" acting as a Bajan "privateer".

"And the territory that Californiatook from us in the last war?" Maris snapped back. I wondered "who" was advising her now? Unlike Darlanis, who is very well aware of her own "limitations", Maris is the sort who thinks that she is "smarter" than she is! I had no doubts either that Darl Jord had his "hand" in affairs!

"You can discuss that with Darlanis," I suggested in reply.

"She `listens' to you," Maris said to me. "Tell her that I am willing to consider any `reasonable' solution to this war." I had no doubts either "what" Maris considered to be "reasonable"!

"I have spoken to her," I smiled back. "She will not `bend' on the issue of the `northern territories'." I suspected that I knew the "reason why" too. Darlanis had "lost" Trelandar to me. I suspected that she feared she would lose "face" if she gave thenorthern territoriesback to Dularn after the "price" in lives I knew the Empire of California had "paid" to get them from Dularn! "On the other hand, were you to agree to some sort of `alliance' with the Empire, I am sure Darlanis would give you thenorthernterritories. "I didn't think Maris would "bite", but I thought it worth the attempt. Maris at least was an "honorable" Queen.* * Maris is of the Warriresses, and does keep the Codes. (LR)

"Then Darlanis would have `everything.'" Maris retorted back.

"It would be to your advantage to `consider it'," I replied.

"I also understand that you possess certain `weapons' of your own," Maris smiled, her azure eyes glowing into mine as she sipped at her wine. She is a beautiful woman, but a "whore" too. The sort of a woman who would marry a man just to enrich herself! That is why Jon once said to me that she "belonged" in a collar! Maris having rejected him to go to bed with Darl Jord just in the hopes that he might someday marry her and make her a Princess!* * Maris of course has a different "viewpoint" of all this. (LR)

"I could have destroyed the North Star," I answered her. I felt a tinge of pain in my thigh as I shifted my position. I do not have "good legs" and I thus prefer to wear my skirts "long". My leather trappings went

well with the long flowing black silk. The cane that I was forced to use now close at hand on the bench.

"The 'Caste Codes'?" Maris ventured, crossing her legs. Nude, chained, locked in a slave girl's collar she'd bring about fifty gold crowns I "estimated". Perhaps sixty in a good market. She wore the tunic and hose of the Dularnian woman in deep blue. She is as I have said a beautiful woman, but with the "morals" of an "alley cat". Sort of a "blonde Princess Tara", but not cruel like Tarawas. She is a popular Queen, and a good public speaker although I think Darlanis is "better" when it comes to doing it. A woman who considers herself "smarter" than she actually is too.

"I consider them worth 'keeping'," I answered her in reply. I found this "game" of "mental chess" delightful, especially as Maris was no match for me mentally. I may not be "beautiful", I suppose, but I do have a "good head on my shoulders" as they say! My I.Q. when tested back in the 20th Century was almost equal to that of Janet Rogers herself. That is probably why Aurora wants one of my ovums too. I would like to have a daughter, but I am not sure if I want her to be a perfect "duplicate" of me or not!

"And my sister Gayle, how is she?" Maris then ventured now, changing the subject again. I was tired of arguing "politics".

"Married to the Prince of Talon," I smiled back at Maris.

"She will make him a good wife," Maris then smiled back.

"I think it important that you write her," I said then.

"You do 'love' Gayle, don't you?" Maris smiled at me.

"As much as if I had given birth to her," I smiled.

"Perhaps she can come to Dularn," Maris ventured.

"That is something to be discussed," I answered.

Chapter Twenty

"I don't 'like' you and I'm sure the feeling is 'mutual'," Maris said to me as we came up on deck, the sun now considerably lower there in the west. "But I do think we 'understand' each other considerably better than we did," the young Queen smiled. Maris had agreed to a "cease-fire", to negotiations between Dularn and California. Now it would be up to Darlanis to make the next move. I wondered what Darlanis would do! I recalled our "talk". The "opinions" that Darlanis had expressed to me then. I wondered if Darlanis really "understood" the situation anymore.

"Don't try to 'exploit' Darlanis' feelings for you," I warned Maris, "Or you could find yourself in even worse trouble." Darlanis' hesitation in reacting to Dularn's attacks having made the Empress quite unpopular among certain "segments" of society! There had even been those who spoke out now that a certain Queen of Trelandar might make a better "Empress" for Californiathan Darlanis. I feared what the consequences of "that" could be now! All of Californiacould now be torn apart in a bloody civil war!

Darlanis stood tall and golden in her famous mesh before the Senators and Representatives, the precious jewels of her crown sparkling in the light from the many lamps. Her words ringing out clearly in that great assembly hall as she said that California had "turned the other cheek" long enough and that it was now time to put an end to Dularnian plundering of innocent Imperial vessels! The cheers that echoed in that great room at her words leaving no doubts that Imperial California would soon be taking "action" both at land and at sea against Dularnian "aggression". The tears that filled her azure eyes as they cheered none noted. Once again brave men and women would die for their golden ruler!

"Darlanis has asked for a declaration of war against Dularn," the woman spoke, stepping through the "Portal" that allowed one to "step" from one world to another as easily as one might travel from one room to another. Auroranodding, her jade eyes now filled with concern as she stood there at Raspa's side.

"She is like all her kind a 'barbarian'," another commented. "A simple beautiful 'savage' with a sword on her hip and a 'lust' for blood in her heart." The negative shake of Aurora's head was unnoticed. The tears that filled her eyes were quickly wiped away before any saw. It would not seem "proper" for their Leaderess to weep. A "gamble" had once been taken. Its "outcome" had not been "expected" as it turned out to be. Again Aurorawondered if she had done the "right thing" to let her own daughter grow up as she had. It was a "question" that Aurorahad pondered many times now without any "answer" ever being forthcoming. *****

The schooner that left the great capital that night was the fastest that the Empire possessed, a slim lithe two masted ship quite capable of "showing its heels" to anything afloat. The Sea Breeze was not a "warship", but it could fight. Its weapons few, but of a range that rivaled those of any first rate in the Imperial Navy. It was Darlanis' new private "yacht", and built from the designs of a "twenty meter" 21st Century racing yacht. Its masts towered up some eighty feet into the sky, giving it a speed even a full knot faster than the swiftest of my own "Squalas"! A tall beautiful golden haired woman impatiently pacing its small quarterdeck urging the warrioresses who made up its crew to even greater efforts to draw the last knot of speed from the wind. A cold icy fury now burning in her heart towards one she had once felt might be a "friend". This time, Darlanis vowed, she would see to it herself that the young Queen of Dularn met her "fate"! * * The "motivations" of Darlanis are of "professional interest" here as they clearly illustrate the "love-hate" relationship that was often found in my own professional practice back in the 20th Century before I flew through the "Gateway" and ended up "here"! According to my theory here, Darlanis developed due to Maris' appearance and "youth" a sort of "maternal relationship" towards the Queen of Dularn based upon her own secret fantasies she had. "Fantasies" that I believe were caused by the loss of her uterus and the knowledge that she could never again ever bear a child. The inherent and dangerous "instability" of this "relationship" caused a complete "turn-about" when events caused Darlanis to "confront" her own emotional feelings towards Queen Maris! (LR)

Comment by Darlanis

Lorrainesometimes tries to "read" into people's actions much more than actually exists. While I felt a certain degree of "affection" towards Maris there in Dularn while Queen Tulislaid dying of a brain tumor, I never looked upon her as a "daughter"!

"I feel 'strange' escorting the North Star like this," Janice said to me that night as we shared wine and cheese there in my cabin, the Huntress rolling gently in the evening swell. There was just enough wind to fill the sails, to keep us moving.

"If Maris will withdraw her forces and agree to negotiations with Darlanis I have no objections to withdrawing our squadron," I answered, although personally I did not "trust" Maris too far! The woman was in my own personal opinion a "user" and just that!!

"I feel as if I'm 'betraying' the memory of those who died," she spoke, holding the goblet of wine there in her hand, looking down into the swirling liquid there. I nodded, understanding how it must have been for her. I myself felt "uncomfortable" with this! There had been too many deaths already to make it "easy" now to forget what had happened. There were widows, widowers, children who would never again see their mother or father because of this.

"I just hope that Darlanis doesn't 'give away the store'," I answered, meeting her eyes with my own, a look of puzzlement now going over her features as she tried to figure out the 20th Century "idiom" that I had used. I rather doubted in any case that either the Senate or the Assembly would go along with anything! There was so much anger directed towards Darlanis now that it was quite possible that the two bodies would attempt to dispose her! Such was "possible" under our new Constitution, I knew, although it was likely to throw all of California into a bloody civil war!

"There were 'rumors' in Sarn that the people of California might soon be expressing their 'displeasure' with Darlanis," she replied, looking up into my eyes as I nodded in reply. I dreaded what could come of all this. I knew what can happen when the people rise up against their rulers. I'd seen that in Ireland! And I "knew" who the people would pick as their new Empress too!!

"This must still seem pretty 'strange' to you," Darlanis said to Serena Novak as the blonde nodded in reply, Lynn sitting there by the stern windows enjoying the mild breeze off the sea.

"Like something told by our 'story-tellers' around the campfires," Serena smiled. She was a true "barbarian", and still at times felt more "comfortable" in buckskin than in a silken gown! She wore a brief dark leather skirt, a matching halter, sword and dagger, the attire comparable to that she had once worn before. Darlanis was attired in her beautiful golden mesh that had once made my Sharon "compare" her to a 20th Century cartoon character.

"Like us having a 'Warlady' from a time before The War, and a hidden secret city of 'Martians' beneath the mountains east of Talon," Lynn smiled, fascinated like many Californians by the beautiful blonde from the ruins of a place she called "Muskegon".

"And the fact that we have never learned to 'live in peace' with ourselves," Serena smiled back at the dark haired delight. She was well aware of the frequent conflicts between her own people and those of the American Indians that lived in the area now. Neither the "white" or the "red" man had any use for "blacks".

"I wonder if that is as 'desirable' as everyone thinks," Darlanis answered. "Those societies such as Leith and that of the Lorr on Mars are almost completely and totally 'stagnant'." There being no doubt in her mind that I had been "right" in this. That perhaps I was the "second Janet Rogers" of myth and legend!

"It won't be long now before we reach our destination," Mark Berson of the Squala spoke as he stopped by the small black clad figure standing there by the rail. He had gotten to "know" Princess Sela Dai quite well by now, but his attempted "romance" with her had never gotten off the ground. She was "friendly", but yet seemingly "wrapped" in problems of her own that she had refused to "share" with anyone else. Sela's dark eyes looking up into his as he stood there beside her, the little brunette's white

teeth gleaming faintly there in the starlight. A cool breeze off the sea chilly enough that a cloak about her body felt pleasant.

"And then into battle as soon as Lorraine arrives," Sela answered. Would she "freeze" again as she had before when the enemy's missiles came whistling over the railings? When she stood there and felt that there on the enemy's decks someone wanted her "dead"! That they were actually taking a "bead" on her own body!

"With ships like these we'll teach those Dularnians a lesson that they won't forget for a while," Mark laughed back in reply.

"Don't 'underestimate' the enemy," Sela answered him back. She'd seen for herself how "effective" a "North" class ship could be even against one of Lorraine's own mighty "Squalas" in battle!

"All I 'want' is a 'crack' at that damn North Star," Mark smiled, recalling how they had pursued it into a rain storm and then "lost" the enemy vessel. "And seeing that Dularnian bitch kneeling nude and in chains before our 'Lorraine'," he concluded.

"I'll feel a lot 'better' once we have Lorraine back," Sela answered. Keeping to herself the terrors she felt being in "command" of the squadron during the absence of the famous Warlady! Sela's greatest fear being that she would have to command the ships in battle, where her "inexperience" might well show badly!

"I'm hoping that means I won't be seeing the 'last' of you," Mark ventured, throwing "caution to the winds" with the Princess.

"This is her 'flagship'," Sela answered softly, looking up into his eyes, the beating of her heart now pounding in her ears. Her arms with a mind of their own suddenly reaching out to him!

"My mother's down there somewhere," An'na spoke with a smile as she sat there at the controls of the Starfire, the great gleaming cigar shaped spaceship moving at near sonic speeds some ten miles over the dark star-lit ocean there below. The sweep of the radar having as yet detected nothing as Sarn now fell astern.

"Their sailing ships don't really show up that well," a woman of Mars at the radar screens replied, watching the scanners. It was easier to detect the ships visually, the craft showing up well against the cooler waters on which they sailed. Water to a woman of Mars being a liquid you drank or washed with. The idea that you might be able to float upon it was something very alien!

Chapter Twenty One

Serena Novak stared out over the polished wooden railing at the gently rolling dark ocean beyond, the stars bright in the sky overhead. She was familiar with large bodies of water, Muskegon having been built on the shores of Lake Michigan centuries ago, but there was a "different" feel to the ocean than to that great lake. Especially since her own people had nothing like these ships she was now sailing on, or civilization worth noting. Her own society just barely out of the "Stone Age" in a lot of ways, and subject

to the predation of half-human savages like those who had tried to kill her for "food" before Darlanis' intervention! "Niggers" infected with that horrible disease Auroracalled AIDS!

There had been "rumors" and "tales" of more "advanced" societies far to the west, but Serena had merely smiled at the tales, believing that they were in the same category as the stories told about "creatures" that walked erect like men, but had horns and scales instead of skin. Now she knew that such tales were true!

She enjoyed her life at the great palace in Sarn, the bright lights, the handsome men who came "courting". The tall golden Empress who had told her so much. The teenage Imperial Princess with whom she had shared so much of her own life in Muskegon, Serena herself being but three years older than was Sharon Duval!

Serena herself was a woman with a "talent", hers being the ability to transmit her own thoughts to others of her people at times. It was not a "reliable" ability, but it did come in "useful" at times for the young Princess to possess such "abilities". "Talents" such as hers not being unknown among her own people.* * I suspect that Serena's people practice hypnosis as a part of their own cultural rites. Such was also done by the American Indians and other groups in the past. From my own experiments with such things back in the 20th Century with Janet Rogers, I believe that hypnosis is the "key" to unlocking the secrets of the mind. The utter "hostility" of the Priestesses of Lys to any such "experiments" in this field is but further proof I feel. (Lorraine)

"Look!" the woman who was captain of the Sea Breeze gasped, the great gleaming shape of the Starfire now floating down towards them. A faint glow about the craft speaking of its drive.

"I'll inform Darlanis that we are going to have `visitors'," Serena smiled, recalling that the Starfire was Darlanis' Anna's.

"There's no need for that," Darlanis spoke, strolling up beside them, a warm cloak wrapped around her briefly clad figure. The Empress a magnificent woman, tall and golden, a true beauty.

"Impressive," Serena smiled, looking up at the Starfire. It was a considerably "bigger" ship too than most Martian "saucers".

"It is commanded by my daughter, my `true' daughter." the Empress of Imperial California smiled back. Serena nodding back.

"You must be proud of her," Serena spoke as they watched the Starfire hovering just astern perhaps a hundred feet up from the roiled waters of the Sea Breeze's wake. The craft glowing softly as it hovered now over the ocean below, a great silvery cylinder.

"Very much so," Darlanis then smiled back in reply as they watched the keel bay now opening to release a small silvery slipper shaped craft which quickly dropped to their quarterdeck, the blonde woman at the controls giving them a friendly wave of her hand as she stepped from the craft! For the first time in a long time Darlanis felt true feelings of love towards this young woman who had lived most of her life on another world seen only as a spot of reddish light in the sky. A world ruled for fifty thousand years by gigantic ant-like aliens from another star system!

"I'm glad that you're here," Darlanis said softly to An'na, taking her hands in hers. "There is much that we should share."

"They told me in Sarn that you have declared war on Dularn," An'na answered softly in reply, well aware of what "that" had "cost" her mother! Darlanis nodding, giving her daughter a smile in reply. An'na's own silvery attire reminded her much of Leith. Of that hidden city beneath the mountains where "Martians" lived!

"A war of `defense', not of `aggression'," Darlanis smiled. An'na's beauty leaving no doubts as to her true parentage either.

"Staying `south of '48'," An'na smiled in reply. Such being the northern most boundary of the Empire of California. Darlanis having always claimed that the Empire was the "successor" to the original United States of America, which had bordered Canada on the 49th parallel. Dularn's "claims" however going down to '46. Almost to the seaport city of Tarth (possibly Seaside, OR), which Darlanis had always rejected. This being the area in "dispute".

"If we could use `that'," Serena breathed, regarding the Starfire as it floated there in the sky directly behind them. A smile curving An'na's lips as she nodded in the negative, well aware of what would "happen" should she agree to such a thing!!!

"I'm `bound' by our version of `The Edict'," An'na smiled.

"Perhaps it's just as well," Darlanis smiled back in reply. Possessing the "powers" of a "god" didn't make one any "smarter".

"I long for the `good old days' when we had an Empress who was `out to conquer the world'," Janice said to me as we finished our wine and snacks. "This `new Darlanis' of ours bothers me a lot." I nodded, completely in agreement. I was "bothered" too!!

"I think Queen Tulis' death affected her more than anyone realized," I smiled back in reply, although my own personal opinion of the matter was now "different". I suspected myself that Darlanis had now let her own relationship with Aurora affect her! She was becoming more "like" Aurora day by day, I thought too. I suspected that Darlanis was now trying to prove to her mother that she wasn't the "barbarian" that Aurora had once spoken of!

"I think you would be a better Empress than Darlanis," Janice said to me. "With you there would be no `fooling around'."

"On the other hand `peace' is usually preferred to `war'," I smiled. I am "Warlady" of the Empire. The position "suits" me.

"There is a time for `peace', a time for `war'," she said.

"And it is time for us to `tend to our duties'," I smiled, hearing the chime of the ship's bell as the "watch" was changed. *****

Sela Dai was a sweaty hot squirming "delight" there beneath the blanket, the sort of a woman who demanded "more" of a man than just "intercourse" as Mark quickly found there in his cabin. The regal calm cool Princess that she appeared to others concealing utterly sexy "delights" there beneath that lovely exterior!

"Yes, yes, let me be `yours'," she whimpered, kissing and biting, her nails clawing at him as she

shuddered in climax there beside him, three of his fingers filling her hot drooling sheath! A hot little tongue eagerly licking in his open mouth as Sela's moist hot lips covered his. The wench a true "delight" in bed!!!

I stepped out on to the deck, Janice nodding to me as she stood there beside the helmsman. The sails pale shadows above. The North Star gleaming with lights there ahead and to starboard. I had put down my observations in my personal diary for future reference. I often find it "helpful" too in dealing with others.

"How goes it?" I asked, putting my hand on her shoulder.

"I just don't feel 'right' about it," Janice answered.

"No doubt 'they' feel much the same about us," I smiled.

"My 'first' had a wife and baby girl in Trella," she said. He had been young, "eager", perhaps dreaming of command someday!

"The human race has yet never learned to live in peace," I answered. The only times there is has been "peace" on Earth has been when it has been "imposed" upon people. One may speak of a "Pax Roma", of imposition of "peace" upon Mankind under Janet Rogers. No doubt the Priestesses could do the same if they wished. On the other hand "civilized" societies like those of the Lorr "lack" something "vital". Mankind needs a challenge. Something to keep life "interesting". I am perhaps a barbarian. Darlanis once accused me of being one. I suppose she is right. On the other hand I am glad I live in a society where one might hold a sword in their hand. Face a foe blade to blade. Then I think life has far more "meaning" to you than it would otherwise.

"Perhaps it is just as well then that 'The Edict' exists," she answered me there in the darkness, her features lit up by the light there in the compass as she checked the ship's heading. I nodded, smiled to myself, recalling the C.S. Forester stories I'd read as a girl. As a "french girl" who didn't "like it" too much that "my country" was always "losing" to the British! I used to make up my own "stories" where France "won" against the English!

"Otherwise this would have been a sixteen gun sloop against a 'twenty two'," I smiled back, guessing at the number of guns that a ship the size of the North Star could have carried on it.

"Whatever," Janice answered, a puzzled note in her voice. Apparently she wasn't "acquainted" with Mr. Forester's novels, I mused, smiling to myself, recalling the adventures of his famous "Captain Hornblower" there back in the late Eighteenth Century.

"I wish 'she' was on 'our side'," Maris Jord said as she stood at the stern windows, looking out over the rolling blackness of the ocean. The lights of the Huntress visible there.

"If our 'Princess' hadn't gotten herself killed.....," the first officer smiled, secretly admiring the figure of his Queen.

"Lorraine 'beat' me," Maris spoke, looking out the windows.

"We couldn't 'beat' her, and she couldn't 'beat' us," he answered, sitting there, admiring the rounded curves of her rump. Maris wearing the common tunic and hose of the Dularnian woman.

"Huntress is a 'third rate' and we are a 'second rate'," the Queen of Dularn answered, turning, facing him. "And Lorraine was 'beating' us regardless of what anyone thinks about it now." The young Queen well aware of what the realities were in this matter!

"She's 'older', more 'experienced'," the officer smiled. A vision of Maris naked going through his mind as he looked at her.

"Less than a year ago she was living back in her own time," Maris answered. "A time where a ship like this didn't exist."

"She's 'learned a lot' then," the officer smiled back.

"She's the 'Lorraine Duval' of legend," Maris said.

"She's the 'enemy' of our people," he replied.

"'Bother' you riding one of these?" An'na asked as Darlanis clung to her on the little slipper shaped "floater" as it flew over the dark chilly waters below. An'na being well aware that a lot of people were "bothered" riding on a "floater" with nothing but open space around them, the lack of any "enclosure" often being quite "disturbing" to anyone in the least fearful of heights.

"I didn't realize how 'cold' it would be," Darlanis replied, the little craft racing through the air at perhaps seventy or eighty miles per hour. The Starfire following somewhat behind. Her bare legs being exposed to the onrushing air passing by them.

"We can go back to the Starfire if you want," An'na said.

"I can 'stand' a little cold," Darlanis laughed in reply, ducking her head down so that it laid alongside An'na's and was thus more out of the wind that blasted past the low windshield. The craft itself being quite similar to some "flying motorcycle".

"I love you, mother," An'na spoke softly then in reply.

"And I love you, my daughter," Darlanis spoke softly.

Chapter Twenty Two

"It's probably just as well that we won't be serving on the same ship," Sela Dai said as Mark held her close, the wake beneath the stern cabin's windows just visible now in the darkness.

"I didn't expect our 'professional relationship' to change," Mark said, tucking the blanket about Sela's nakedness just a bit. Loving the "little spit-fire" more than ever after all this now! Sela being a fantastic little lover there beneath the bedcovers!

"Once a man 'knows' a woman, they can never look upon each other the same," Sela spoke softly, her

eyes looking up into his.

"Because the `mystery' is `gone'?" Mark smiled back at her.

"And because the `reality' is different from the `fantasy'," Sela smiled up at him, well aware that she might not have been "quite" what he had "expected". She was no "Lara Warsan", her own love-making skills, while "adequate", were not the equal of a woman "trained" in the "art of making love". That had been the situation she felt with Jers, and because the older, and much more experienced Lara also "understood" things that she had not!!

"You're `hot and squirmy', the way a woman should be," Mark smiled back, kissing her, that delightful tongue quick to tease! So far as "he" was "concerned", she was "another Lara Warsan"!!!

"You have `visitors'," the new first officer of the Huntress said to me as he opened the door and admitted two women, one a tall golden haired beauty in provocative golden mesh, the other in a silvery form fitting jumpsuit that was almost the "trademark" of a world now only a glowing point of light in the sky!

"You are escorting the North Star?" Darlanis said to me, An'na there at her side. The true daughter of the regal Empress.

"Maris survived the battle," I answered in level tones, getting painfully out of the bunk with a hand from Yvette, my leg stiff, painful. Pulling a robe about myself as Yvette turned up the lamp. My only attire like Yvette's a warm woolen nightshift. "I've gotten her to agree to a cease fire and negotiations too."

"She's exploited my friendship for far too long," Darlanis snapped, much to my surprise just then. I wondered if there had been another attack by some Dularnian raider somewhere. One that had finally "taught" Darlanis the "folly" of not "fighting back"!

"I see someone `knocked a little sense' into that thick skull of yours," I smiled back, Darlanis settling herself on the padded bench beneath the stern windows. She was tall enough that she had to keep her head bowed to avoid the deck beams overhead when she stood. In her high heeled boots she stands about 6'2". She is incredibly beautiful, a woman who is truly awe-inspiring.

"Let's just `say' that I've finally discovered what's `important' and what's `not'," Darlanis smiled back, giving An'na an affectionate hug as she then sat down there beside her mother. I suspected that there had been a strong "change" in relationships.

"You are hurt," An'na observed, her eyes now meeting mine. The cane, the limp now a dead giveaway that I had been injured.

"In the `line of duty'," I smiled back, An'na now nodding.

"The Senate and the Assembly have agreed to a declaration of `self defense' against all Dularnian `activities' south of '48," Darlanis smiled, her eyes glowing into mine. I nodded, stunned a bit by this new surprising sudden "change of heart" by Darlanis.

"Maris isn't going to `go along' with that," I smiled back.

"Everything `south' of '48 is ours," Darlanis answered me. Such was once true, I knew, recalling the

original border between the United States of America and Canada along the 49th parallel further to the east. The issue here is "involved", and not easy to explain. Darlanis however feels that everything up to "48" is part of the original United States of America, "her country"! The Empire had made claims as to its own historical foundations.

"The Dularnians claim everything down to '46 is theirs," I smiled back. That was nearly down to Tarth, as I recalled then.

"What they 'claim', and what is 'theirs' are two different things," Darlanis answered with a smile. "I am not going to hand them over part of what once was the United States of America." I knew that Darlanis considered the Empire to be the successor to the old USA of the 21st Century. She looked upon herself as being an "American". She even flew the old American flag upon occasions along with the newer Imperial flag of Imperial California. She had a map of the old forty eight states, and she did claim that "all" of it properly belonged to her. No one ever had paid any "attention" to these claims, but I knew they did exist! * * The reader will no doubt point out here that the area in question is not "exactly" on the 48th parallel, but for the purposes of this story I have assumed here that it would probably be referred to as "48" by our characters. Just how much "territory" Darlanis "claimed" as hers is also something I don't wish to get into here, as it has little bearing on the story as such. (JBB)

"It could be a long war," I pointed out. Maris was never going to agree to Darlanis' claims of everything below '48 being hers. Especially as nearly everything down to '46 had once been under the control of Dularn before Darlanis took it from them! "Sam" having run from just below the ruins of San Francisco to what is now Orgon. The area north of it being claimed by Dularn.

"Perhaps the people living in the area from '48 to '46 could vote upon the issue of to 'whom' they'd like to 'belong'," An'na suggested brightly. Darlanis giving her a "look", shaking her lovely golden head. Personally I thought it was a good idea too! Darlanis, I knew, differed on this. I suspected I knew why too!!

"'America' in 1861 fought a bloody civil war on that issue," Darlanis answered. She obviously did know her American history! Darlanis thinks of herself as being another Lincoln, FDR, etc. I consider her in a somewhat "different" light than that, however. She is to me what Janet Rogers "might have been" had I been there to "guide" her, to help. Darlanis "means well". She is in my own considered opinion one of the "nicest" monarchs of any era. Probably the most beautiful, I suspect too, compared to the past. Janet Rogers was an "attractive" woman, but not a great "beauty".

"We don't need to repeat the mistakes of the past," I said. An'na's idea made a lot of sense. I suppose that the ghost of old "Abe" wouldn't have gone along with it, but the American Civil War was a sorry waste of life over "something" that could have been resolved much better by other means. Naturally I didn't expect Darlanis to go along with anything like An'na's idea. * * She eventually did only after a long drawn out "winless" war. See also "2567" for additional further details of this. (JB)

"You allowed the people of Trelandar to 'vote' on a similar issue," An'na pointed out to her mother, giving her another hug. Darlanis is an excellent public speaker, far better than I am. I had no doubts however that many in the area would "vote" for Dularn as they were culturally more "Dularnian" than "Californian".

"I didn't have a 'choice' in the matter," Darlanis answered, regarding me. We had come very close then to a bloody civil war. Darlanis had been "wise" enough to "bow" to the "reality" of the situation and allow the people of Trelandar the "choice" of their relationship within the Empire of California. It had worked well then. I saw no reason why it couldn't be done again with those who lived in the now disputed area

from '48 down to '46, although it was likely that they would vote to belong to Dularn, not the Empire of California. Especially with Maris as Queen of Dularn! On the other hand we might just convince Maris to join our side!* * I had "suggested" this to Maris, pointing out the "advantages" of being "allied" with the Empire of California. She did not at the time feel that such would be a "good idea" just then. (LR)

"You couldn't `win' the last war you fought with Dularn," I pointed out. That had been fought between Darlanis and her own "mother"! There had been considerable "hostility" between the two that had finally only been resolved in the last days of Queen Tulis' life before she finally committed suicide, dying there in Darlanis' arms miles about Dularn while flying in my Black Lady.

"I have a better `Warlady' this time," Darlanis smiled back. Princess Tara had not been "successful", but she wasn't really all that "competent" at such either. I was and Darlanis knew it.

"You promised Queen Tulis you would never attack Dularn," I pointed out, well aware of what Darlanis' own emotional condition had been then. To a woman like Darlanis, such a promise would carry an awesome emotional "burden" should she ever "break" it. And I personally didn't consider Darlanis too "stable" either!

"I don't plan to `attack' Dularn," Darlanis answered me.

"You plan to have me do it for you?" I smiled back at her.

"I recall that your Prime Minister once pointed out to me with considerable `pleasure' that Trelandar had the `legal right' to act against `pirates' in `self defense'," Darlanis smiled. I was the Queen of Trelandar. I was also familiar with our Constitution. And with the "treaty" that we had with Darlanis' Empire. Sanda had once taunted Darlanis with such "legal technicalities", considering Darlanis just some "beautiful dumb blonde". I have a higher opinion of Darlanis than that. She is blonde, beautiful, but she is also a lot "more" than just a "barbarian swordswoman"! Much "more" than just another "Lana Clarkson", whom she somewhat reminds me of, Ms. Clarkson having been in "THE BARBARIAN QUEEN". One of the few such that I ever enjoyed back in the 20th Century.

"I am presently `serving' under a 'commission' from Baja," I smiled. That was the "legal technicality" I was now "using" so that I might "act" against Maris without "involving" the Empire.

"My 'promise' to Tulis was that I would never `start' a war with Dularn," Darlanis spoke. "I did not promise her that I would not act to defend the Empire against Dularnian aggression."

Chapter Twenty Three

"Darlanis arrived last night, and has left this morning," I said to Maris as I handed her the declaration of "defense" that the Imperial Senate and Assembly had voted. Holding back for the moment the letter that Darlanis had written declaring that she would never agree to giving up one inch of Californian territory!

"I feel you do not `agree' with all this," she said to me.

"Darlanis believes that she is `another Lincoln'," I said.

"And do you `agree' with her?" Maris suddenly challenged me.

"We need to rise above our own history," I said to her then.

"I wish you were Empress of California," Maris said to me. I fear that for an instant I stood there utterly "dumbfounded"!!! "I feel in a way you understand us far more than Darlanis does."

"I think `others' want war between Dularn and California," I said after a brief moment's hesitation for thought. War can be extremely "profitable" for certain people. One thinks of the "armament industries" of my own era. Such exist in this era too. I had made the suggestion to Darlanis that I "deal" with Maris. Fortunately Darlanis had been thankfully quite "agreeable" to my suggestion. "Peace" had been almost in my grasp before all this!

"I think someone wants to see Dularn's culture destroyed," the young Queen answered, walking to the stern windows, staring out. "We do represent a political philosophy that Janet Rogers was strongly opposed to." I nodded, well aware of such things. I suspected that "they" didn't much like my own ideals either!

"That would `explain' certain incidents I've never been able to `explain' satisfactorily before," I mused, deep in thought. I recalled the crossbowman who "someone" had hired to kill me. I'd always "blamed" Princess Tara for that, but was she guilty of it? The woman who had "hired" the man had been veiled to the point that nothing could be seen of her face, and she had worn gloves. Could she had been one of the Priestesses of Lys? Did they feel that I was a "danger" to them with my own knowledge of hypnosis?

"This gives me no `choice' but to fight," Maris said to me.

"I have suggested putting it to a vote of the people living in the area, but Darlanis wouldn't hear anything of it," I said.

"That's all that I'm now asking for," Maris answered back.

"I fear that neither of us has any choice now," I replied.

"We can at least keep the Caste Codes," she said to me then.

"They are of `some value', I believe," I smiled back at her.

"And worth `keeping' despite what happens," Maris answered.

"I'm glad someone knocked some `sense' into Darlanis," Janice said to me as I stepped back aboard the Huntress. The North Star now filling its sails, tacking out further to sea. I had warned Maris to keep well clear of my squadron, as I had no wish to see her die just because "they" wished to have war between us!

"When the deck is littered with our own dead, then tell me if you think war is so `wonderful' then," I snapped back at her!

"We are being followed by a cloaked space craft," the woman told An'na as she nodded. Darlanis standing at her daughter's side, the golden mesh of her attire giving her a "barbaric" look.

"A `what'?" Darlanis breathed, looking down at her daughter.

"The Priestesses of Lys have space craft," An'na spoke. The "power source" of such craft was now thought to be "anti-matter". The craft had been detected by the Lorr for centuries, but as their performance far exceeded that of any Lorr ship, there had been nothing that the Lorr could "do" about the matter either! A concerted effort by the Women had been put forth to match their awesome technology. Aurora obviously was not going to allow the Priestesses of Lys to have the "final say" if there was anything she could do about it, her lovely daughter thought with concern!

"It is a `dangerous game' that Aurora plays," Darlanis said.

"I fear so," An'na replied, looking up at her lovely mother.

"Mankind once `played' such a `game'," Darlanis smiled back.

"They `underestimated' the Lorr," An'na now smiled in reply.

"As Aurora now `underestimates' the Priestesses," Darlanis answered back. She had no doubt that Aurora possessed the equipment that could produce hypnosis, but few of the Women possessed even the most rudimentary of mental powers like the Priestesses!

"Grandmother is a `proud' woman," An'na observed. Darlanis nodded. She feared for the "worst" should Aurora ever attempt to "confront" the Priestesses of Lys, who had only a couple months before demonstrated their power in a way that none could mistake!

"Where is Aurora now?" Darlanis asked, thinking that it was perhaps "time" that she had a long serious talk with her mother.

"On Mars with Raspa," An'na answered, looking at the viewscreen. The sky now that deep azure of some fifty thousand feet.

"Send me to Mars with your `Portal'," Darlanis spoke in level tones that left no doubts as to her "determination". An'na nodding, giving orders to one of the Starfire's crew, it being necessary to first put Darlanis through "decompression" so that she would not suffer the "bends" due to Mars much lower atmospheric pressure, that of Mars being only a tenth of the Earth's.

"And to what due I owe the pleasure of this visit?" Aurora smiled as she took Darlanis' hands in hers, this being the first time that Darlanis had ever "visited" the Red Planet! Its lower air pressure, lighter gravity leaving no doubt that the beautiful Empress of California was now a very long ways from her own home!

"You are not yourself this morning," Captain Janice Hill of the Huntress said to me as the ship took the waves, the sails drawing well as we raced towards the north. Towards the Isle of Sandor where we would then meet up with the rest of my squadron.

"I thought I `knew' Darlanis," I smiled back, staring out to sea. I had originally "feared" that Darlanis would "give" Maris whatever she asked for, but then instead Darlanis had refused to even negotiate with Maris, saying that what belonged to California would remain California's. And I wondered what her mother's role was in all this? I had much to ponder over that morning.* * I believed at this time that Aurora had "advised" Darlanis.

"We have the `old' Darlanis back," Janice smiled at me.

"At least the one we are all `familiar' with," I smiled.

Captain Mark Berson of the Squala watched Sela Dai as she walked among the busily working crew of the Squala, seeing that the ship was kept up to the "standards" that I required of it. A smile curving his handsome lips as he recalled what this otherwise "prim and proper" Crown Princess of Talon had been like the night before. Her hot squirmy body an utter delight beneath one! And the way that she used her tongue left no doubt that she was a true delight among women! Mark standing there on the quarterdeck admiring that delightful little 5'2" 34-22-34 figure that her own clothing so delightfully displayed as it clung to her sexy body!!

"Deck there," the lookout called down. "Signals from Arrow!" Arrow being the companion ship to Huntress that was now in the lead of the other ships as they sailed north beyond the northern border of Orgon. Past the territories that now belonged to their Empire of California after the last war with Dularn. The people of these lands still more Dularnian than Californian.

"What do you read?" Mark called up, Sela now at his side.

"Enemy in sight!" the man now called down with a cheer!

"Squala and Corsica will engage," Sela Dai spoke softly.

"You're not taking any chances, are you?" Mark smiled back as he barked the orders to set more sail. Sela's orders being relayed to the Corsica, who was sailing a few miles away from the Squala. Sela had no "doubts" about Valerie Dunn as a captain.

"I don't intend to `lose' this one," Princess Sela smiled.

"`Enemy' is a `North' class heavy schooner," the lookout called down to the deck there far below, Arrow having so signaled as she now fled back towards her heavier consorts. The enemy turning away as soon as they spotted the rest of the squadron!

"Beat to quarters, Rig for battle!" Mark ordered, Squala now raising her battle flags. Corsica had already done so, he noted!

"I'm sorry I snapped at you like that earlier this morning," I said to Janice as she stood there by the rail looking out to sea. It had certainly not been called for, I knew that. Janice was a true Warriorress, a professional fighting woman. Born and bred down the generations to be exactly what she was. I was not.

"I was `out of hand'," she smiled back, touching my arm. I smiled, nodded. There were others watching us. Any display of affection just then would not be proper under the circumstances.

"I think Darlanis knows what she is doing," I smiled back. Allowing everyone to "vote" on which country to which they wished to belong could eventually be "disastrous" to someone like Darlanis. Even a country like Trelandar is not really too "stable". We could end up with a whole lot of little "city-states" that would be "easy pickings" for the first conqueror who came along! That had been the "nature of things" in western north America a couple centuries ago before a King of Sarn, then a "city-state", had started "unifying" the area under his own rule. Only Dularn to the north having been a land united under

one ruler back then!

"She is the best Empress we've ever had," Janice said to me. As Darlanis was the "first", there was no real "standard of comparison" here, although I do think Janice was referring to other rulers through out history in which case Darlanis was doubtlessly the "best" that anyone had ever had since the original Janet Rogers. There even being some in Trelandar who considered Darlanis a "better" ruler than me, the Empress being extremely "popular"!

"The most beautiful anyway," I smiled back. Darlanis was.

"Making a `run' for it," Mark smiled, lowering his telescope. Looking down into those lovely dark eyes there beside him as Sela nodded. Corsica charging along perhaps a mile away now.

"It won't do them any good," Sela smiled back. The big three masters were a hair "faster" than a "North" class Dularnian war schooner. And one such ship had no chance against them both!

"Valerie's `sharp'," Mark smiled, the Corsica even seeming to draw up a bit, it being obvious that she had been "studying". He glanced up at the sails, tried to remember what Lorraine had said about such things. How one used "the angle of forces" to best advantage. The forces of wind and wave against the ship.

"Loosen your jib, tighten your spanker," Sela smiled.

Raspa quietly regarded Darlanis from compound eyes, her antennae gently waving as those of the Lorr do when they are alert. A tall beautiful blonde clad in brief golden mesh striding back and forth as she spoke, speaking now of another time, another world who had once thought to "confront" an "alien civilization".

"Man made the same `mistake' you are making, mother," Darlanis spoke. Aurora's jade green eyes burning up into her child's. "You believe that because a few of you can do little `tricks'," Darlanis added, turning, looking at Aurora and then at Raspa, "That somehow you'll be able to `match' the Priestesses of Lys."

"There are `ways' of `shielding' our ships from such things," Raspa spoke in a flat toneless voice from the speaker mounted between her antennae. "We are not quite as technologically backward as was Mankind when you race made war upon ours."

"The Priestesses have done nothing but to forbid you interstellar space flight," Darlanis answered, "And judging from both our own history and yours, one can hardly `blame them', can we?"

Chapter Twenty Four

"This one is `ours'," Mark spoke, looking at the enemy schooner there through his telescope. Corsica a mass of sails as Valerie drove her ship as hard as the wind would bear. The Squala doing the same, the rest of the squadron now falling behind.

"I don't `envy' them," Sela breathed, wondering how it would feel to be the captain of such a vessel and see your death sailing closer and closer. The vessel now hull up on the horizon.

"I wouldn't want to be their captain," Mark smiled back.

"What would you do?" Sela asked, touching his arm.

"I think Lorraine would use fire," Mark answered.

"I asked `what you would do'? " Sela smiled back.

"I don't know," he answered, looking down at her.

"They are changing course," the Princess observed.

"There's no escape that way for them," Mark breathed.

"Perhaps there is," Sela spoke, looking towards the land.

Upon another world only a point of light in Earth's night sky a tall golden haired woman stood before two others. One a yet lovely blonde haired woman clad in silver, the other a horrid creature like some gigantic carpenter ant ten feet in length! A pair that between them now ruled a world millions of miles from Earth. One Aurora, the lovely Leaderess of the Women, the other Raspa, First Princess of the Lorr. And speaking in heated words to them both was Darlanis, Queen of Sarn, Empress of California!

"Once Man believed as you, and He sought to `rid' himself of an `alien presence' by a hopefully `surprise attack'," Darlanis spoke. Raspa nodding her horrid head in agreement, her great compound eyes like multifaceted jewels seeming to almost "glow" into those of Darlanis! Her great mandibles, each tipped with a paralyzing sting, for a moment spread wide as she recalled the history of her race. Of the sudden swift attack by Mankind upon the Lorr by the alteration of a comet's orbit. And of the sudden realization that this golden haired "barbarian" from Earth spoke the TRUTH! That this woman, "uncivilized" as she might be, the sword at her side visual "proof" of her status as a "barbarian", still yet could teach them both the "consequences" of their acts!

"Your daughter is `wiser' than either one of us," Raspa said to Aurora, who nodded back in agreement. Neither had perhaps ever thought what the ultimate "consequences" of their acts might be. But yet, this very "barbarian", this "uncivilized savage", this "Earthwoman" with a sword there on her hip had "understood" what the finest minds among both the Women and the Lorr had not. That this would be a war from which there would be no "winners"!

"They're going to run aground!" Sela breathed, the Dularnian raider now only a mile or so from shore. Corsica perhaps only half a mile behind the enemy ship now, ready to make the "kill". Mark could see the men on her decks at their battle stations there in his telescope. Valerie Dunn there on the quarterdeck, her hair now glowing like a beacon there in the bright sunlight.

"Signal Corsica to hold off," Mark barked to the signals midshipman. There was no doubt now what the captain of the Dularnian raider planned to do. He wondered to himself if it would have been his choice too given the same circumstances under which the enemy captain found himself. The enemy ship now less than half a mile from shore, the Corsica holding back, but still ready to attack should the enemy suddenly

decide to fight. Sela grasping his arm as they watched the sudden puff of black smoke suddenly rise from the enemy ship. It being obvious to the Princess that the enemy captain had ordered his ship set afire to insure that it would not fall into the hands of the dreaded Imperials!

"Any minute now," Sela breathed, the enemy ship only a few hundred yards from shore now, trailing a haze of white smoke as a few flames shot from its stern, while smoke now wreathed the ship as it raced towards its own destruction there on the rocky shore!

"There he goes!" Mark breathed, watching, seeing the ship swing about, one of the three masts falling, the flames now even visible without the aid of a telescope. Corsica turning away like a jilted lover, resetting her jib as she went about on the other tack. He could see the enemy's crew throwing themselves into the cold waters, leaping from the burning decks of their ship as the flames now bit deep into the painted wood, the tarred rigging, the canvas of the sails. The ship now dying there on the rocks, a cloud of smoke from its passing rising up into the azure of the sky like some grave marker marking its final end. A number of naked women among them fleeing off down the shoreline.

"Send a boat in," Sela spoke. "We will pick them up." Mark nodded. They might have useful information that they could use.

"I keep thinking that you were 'right' and Darlanis is 'wrong'," Janice said to me as we shared a late lunch together. I had suggested that the people living in the "disputed territories" be allowed to "vote" as to which nation they would belong. Darlanis had pointed out that such would set a very "bad example" for the rest of the Empire. That it might even result in its own disintegration back into a group of warring little city-states! There are "parallels" in history to back up Darlanis' "theories".

"I'm a 'reluctant Warlady'," I smiled back. There is a tendency by some to believe that I "glory" in war, in seeing people die. That I actually take "pleasure" in such things. I fear the reality of the matter is that I do not. I am "good" with a sword. Perhaps as "good" as any woman who ever lived. I also do a good job of commanding armed forces in battle. Of guiding the crew and officers of a ship in a ship to ship battle on the seas.

"You 'licked' Maris and her North Star in battle," Janice smiled. I didn't think so. I think Maris would have "won", but at a very high price. One so "high" that there would have been hardly enough "hands" to sail her ship back to Dularn. And I do not think she would have been one of those to ever see it again!

"I am a 'crafty old bitch'," I smiled back, sipping at my wine. We still had plenty of fresh food yet, although the time would come when we'd have to start relying upon the salted stuff!

"And the best Queen that Trelandar ever had," Janice smiled.

"Sanda should be having her baby any day now," I commented, changing the subject, remembering the good times we'd both had.

"An impressive woman, but no 'Lorraine'," Janice answered.

"I've been 'lucky'," I smiled back. I considered it that. I remembered that Aurora had asked for one of my ovums to clone.

"No one else could have done what you've did," she replied.

"At the time I didn't consider I had any choice," I smiled.

"One less," Valerie Dunn said as the captains of the squadron gathered there about the table in the Squala's stern cabin. The end of the Dularnian raider having "sobered" them all a bit. With them were several women, Californian women who had been captured by the raider, and then freed from their chains when the captain had decided to destroy their ship. They had been taken off the rocky shore by a boat from Squala at Sela Dai's orders.

"If your ships could patrol up and down our coasts?" one of the lovely former captives ventured, her attire ill fitting, but the "best" that could be done under the circumstances just then.

"When one has a nest of wasps in your house, it is futile to kill the individual wasps, you have to get the nest," Lara smiled back, her blue eyes holding those of the lovely brownette as the other nodded in understanding. She was Samian, another Bajan. There were about a dozen such women. Others had been dragged into the forests with the fleeing crew of the Northland, there to share their fate. Some would doubtlessly make it up to Dularn.

"Darlanis! You're Back !" Sharon exclaimed with delight, throwing herself into the welcoming arms of her beloved Empress! The strong muscular arms drawing her close against that magnificent perfumed body. Against the beautiful golden mesh that accented it like nothing else could have. Those lovely clear azure eyes glowing with love down into hers as she clung to her beloved foster mother. Darlanis being the sort of a woman with whom she could "share" everything any teen girl might. Her beloved "Shera"! The woman, Sharon felt, who might someday found a new world civilization. One that would be free of all the mistakes made by the old "democracies" of the past or the world dictatorship that had replaced them there in the first decade of the 21st Century.

"'She-Ra' has had her own 'duties' to perform," Darlanis now laughed, recalling her long conversations with her mother Aurora. With the First Princess of the Lorr, that horrid alien creature that looked like something out of a nightmare. Stroking her beloved Princess' golden hair as she looked down into her eyes. Remembering all that had transpired there on Mars just that day. She suspected that she might have averted something that could have left only ten dead lifeless worlds circling their own star.* *The "tenth planet" was discovered in 2037 A.D. by a lunar based telescope there on Farside, the famous "thirty meter reflector".

"I love you so much," Sharon breathed, looking up at her. In her high heeled boots Darlanis stood well over six feet tall. She was a woman that people looked up to. She tried to live up to their "expectations". To what Sharon yet "believed" of her.

"You are becoming a 'woman'," Darlanis smiled, holding the beautiful teenage Princess there at arms length. The "jut" of her breasts and buttocks beneath her royal blue silken tunic and matching silken hose leaving no doubts either about that "fact". She was five six, perhaps 36-24-36 or a bit more, one might note. Her beautiful golden hair now beneath a jaunty feathered cap, her azure eyes, well shaped face made her the sort of a "Princess" who never lacked for suitors among the sons of the Imperial nobility. None of them however being able to yet "win" her heart.

"You were 'with' a man not long ago," Sharon teased, the swelling on Darlanis' lower lip where her beloved Nevada Prince had playfully bitten her during their love-making yet noticeable.

"Serak 'uses' me well," Darlanis laughed, hugging Sharon. It had been only a hour ago that she had laid

hot and sweaty in his arms. The Starfire could travel swiftly when one wished it. After the nervous strain she'd been under on Mars, she had needed to be "held", to be "used" as a woman by her beloved "barbarian"!

"You declared war against Dularn," Sharon spoke softly, the tone of voice leaving little doubt as to how she felt about it. Darlanis had expected Sharon would view it so, not understanding.

"Against Dularnian aggression," Darlanis then smiled back.

"You did what Lorraine wanted!" Sharon cried. The tone of her voice "accusing". Sharon had claimed that Maris didn't want another war with the Empire of California. Darlanis suspected it wasn't really all quite that "simple" from what I had told her of Maris' own demands for the "return" of the disputed territories. She also suspected that Sharon had been too "awed" by the Queen.

"I did what 'needed' to be done," Darlanis answered, nodding to the woman on guard there. Opening the door, stepping inside.

"You listen too much to Lorraine," Sharon then accused her, closing the door behind herself. Recalling what Maris had said.

"Lorraine suggested that the issue be put to a vote of the people living in the area," Darlanis smiled, settling herself.

"Why didn't you do it!" Sharon breathed, wondering why!

"You remember your American history?" Darlanis smiled.

"Yes," Sharon answered, sitting down beside Darlanis.

"The American Civil War," the Empress smiled back.

"That was 'different'," Sharon breathed in reply.

"History will be my judge," Darlanis smiled.

Hundreds of miles from the Imperial palace in Sarn First Priestess Tais greeted the slim brunette in her silvery attire as she stood there in the middle of the room like some "ghost". Only a "fool", and Tais was not one of those, would have allowed the Women and the Lorr to go "unchecked". The work of the Women in counteracting the "mind-technology" of the Priestesses was one good reason "why" it was wise to keep a close "eye" on matters!

An observer would have heard nothing, for neither Tais or the woman there yet on Mars needed to speak aloud. With the linking of their minds one could communicate far swifter than with words! Tais smiling to herself as she heard the latest "news" from Mars!

westrolled the quarterdeck of Huntress. Her dark eyes glowing up into mine. Our boots clumping on the scrubbed planking of the deck underneath us. The officers tending to their myriad duties. Such discussions as this tended to be an "intellectual exercise" that both of us now greatly enjoyed. Janice being a woman who I considered almost like a "daughter", so much was she like me. We had shared much more than what a Queen "shares" with a captain of a third rate. I looked upon Janice as I had once upon "another"!

"I used to think so at one time," I smiled back. Now I wasn't so "sure" anymore about anything. Even about Darlanis, who I had always thought that I "knew" better than anyone else. I used to "believe" in a lot of things I no longer "believe in".

"The 'conflict' between 'reality' and 'ideals'," she smiled. Janice was a woman who could think deeply, ponder the "truths of life" like few others. I thought of Janet Rogers, who had often like Janice spoken to me like this. She had been dead now for over five hundred years. Suddenly I felt "old", "out of place".

"Between 'what is', and what you think 'should be'," I said. I had made that "mistake" myself. I hoped that I had learned it.

"Darlanis is a more 'intelligent' woman than I thought," she said to me. I suspected the same thing. Darlanis was not the "dumb blonde" that I'd often thought of her when we'd first met. * * Bleaching one's hair is quite popular among the young women of California just as it was in my own time. Often the eyebrows are also bleached, so that only the eye color tells the "truth". (LR)

"It would have been 'better' if she'd gone along with my idea of letting the people living in the 'disputed territories' vote for which country they wished to belong to," I answered her. Now it looked like we were in for another endless, "winless" war!

"I think Darlanis is taking a longer ranged view of 'things' here than you are, my Queen," Janice smiled back, her dark eyes glowing up into mine. She looked almost like a daughter of mine. We were both slim, tall, dark eyed, and brunette. We were both of the Warriress Caste, and wore the common black attire of that caste. I was the Queen of Trelandar, she but the captain of an Imperial third rate, but I think we shared much in common then...

"You believed what she said about setting a 'bad example'?" I challenged Janice. She was highly intelligent. A woman that I suspected would go far, rise high in the ranks if she lived that long. The gold of her neck chain gleaming there in the sunlight.

"What would have happened to the United States of America if Lincoln had allowed the 'South' to become its own country?" she asked. I was a bit surprised that she knew about such things. I wondered what would have happened. Would history have been the same? There would have been a "United States of America" and a "Confederate States of America". Both would have shared much the same "culture", shared the same language. Worshipped the same God. They would have been "separated" only by their politics!

"Darlanis did allow Trelandar to 'vote'," I pointed out.

"Trelandar was an independent country before Darlanis conquered it," Janice smiled. That was true. The sister of the late Queen of Trelandar was now my Prime Minister. It was said by some that Queen Paula and Sanda Talen did look a lot alike. I knew that Sanda was a highly "capable" woman. The same was true of Queen Paula. She had however made the "mistake" of fighting a personal duel with Darlanis to

resolve the conflict between them. As Sanda told me, Queen Paula didn't stand a chance against her!!

"There was also the issue that Darlanis and I didn't wish to kill one another," I pointed out. I think Darlanis knew what the likely outcome of a duel between me and her would have ended as!

"And you were intelligent enough to give Darlanis an 'out'," Janice replied. That was true. We had merely altered the basic structure of the Empire of California to allow for more a "Commonwealth" type of political system with Darlanis still Empress. Otherwise I fear that there would have been a bloody civil war between those who supported me and those who supported Darlanis. And let me tell you that Darlanis does have her "supporters" too!

"I think bringing Dularn in as part of our 'Commonwealth' is a better idea than fighting a senseless war with the country," I answered. We had done well with Talon, Baja, and the Nevadas. I thought the same might be true of Dularn if we didn't try to mistreat Maris. Darlanis however did not "see" things my way here. I did not understand this new "hostility" of hers towards Maris.

"Did I 'do' the 'right' thing?" Darlanis asked, staring down at the Earth there far below, nearly all of North America now visible there in the Starfire's viewscreen. Sharon now silent beside her, admiring the "view", "proud" of her beloved Empress. Of "what" she had now become due to her efforts for peace between two worlds. Sharon with her better education well aware of what "could have happened". There would have been, she knew, little left later but two lifeless radioactive cinders circling the sun. Darlanis at the moment however speaking not of what she had done on Mars, but of the way she had refused to "go along" with Maris.

"I think perhaps in the long run," Sharon answered softly in reply, looking at the Earth there floating like a blue white ball in space, the stars gleaming there on either side of it, a view that no one but the astronauts of her own time had ever seen. "I suppose I would have followed Lorraine's advice, knowing what I do about her," Sharon added, recalling her stepmother's awesome competency at everything she seemed to do. Darlanis nodded back. An'na there at the controls keeping her thoughts to herself then.

"I fear however that those who oppose me and what I 'stand for' would see such an action as a sign of 'weakness'," Darlanis answered. There would also be considerable "opposition" to such a move by those of her own caste, many of whose members had given their lives for the territories now under "dispute" between California and Dularn. And such an action would also add more "fuel" to the demands of the Trelandarian "separatists" who demanded a Trelandar completely independent of the Empire of California. A "return" to the old system of "independent" city-states perhaps. Life was not "easy" for a lovely golden head that wore the crown.

"Perhaps you are 'right'," Sharon answered, putting her arm around Darlanis as she sat next to the briefly clad Empress. The thought going through her mind just then that perhaps Darlanis was a "deeper thinker" than she had ever given her credit for. A feeling of "love" going over her as she hugged the tall Empress.

"I can always 'change my mind'," Darlanis smiled back, her strong arm drawing Sharon close. The Earth a blue white ball before them floating peacefully in the inky blackness of space. "I am a woman and that has always been our 'privilege' in the past."

"Isle of Sandor," Mark smiled, looking down at Sela Dai as she stood there beside him. She was a short wench, beautifully curved. One who had no "doubts" about herself a woman either.

"Now we `wait' for Lorraine," Sela answered, seemingly preoccupied then. The thoughts now going through her mind unshared.

"It will be `good' to see her again," Mark smiled, fighting back the urge to pat little Sela on the head, which he knew she didn't like anyone doing to her. Her dark eyes glowed up into his as she nodded. Sela being very much "aware" that once the famous Warlady was back in command that they would be "hunting" down Dularnian ships and attacking them. That being Lorraine's "plan" which she had worked out earlier with Prince Jers Bisan.

"And no doubt you're looking forward to the `prize money' too," the Princess answered, her voice a bit "harsher" then than she would have wished it. Once again she would be "alone" standing on a quarterdeck, directing a ship in battle. Facing the enemy's missiles, well aware that some of them at least would be directed at her. That she would have to stand there and be shot at like a lovely target with nothing that she could do about it!!

And why had she picked such a "life" for herself? That was something that even Sela couldn't seem to answer. She was a true Princess, she had no real reason for putting herself "at risk" as she had. Her mother would not have thought less of her had Sela decided to live out the rest of her life there in Talon, safe from harm. Eventually to get married, have children, live the sort of a life that most women of her own station in life lived!!

"Something's bothering you," Mark answered, "picking up" on the tone of her voice. That was not like his beloved Princess!

"Just a `mood'," Sela answered quickly, then strolling off.

"We will be up to the Isle of Sandor tomorrow," Janice said to me late that afternoon. We had made good time. The winds had been "favorable". I had driven the ship, its crew, its officers, everyone "hard". They were sharp. Ready to take on "anything".

"There is smoke there ahead on the shore," I said to her, lowering the telescope that I had been using to watch the shore as it moved past. One should always be "alert" for such things.

"Some fisherman's fire?" Janice smiled. There were a number of small fishing villages along the coast here. The people were culturally "Dularnian", not "Californian". I did not expect we'd find very many "friends" among them. Darlanis was in my opinion making a bad mistake trying to "hang on" to these people, lands.

"We will investigate," I smiled. Janice nodded in reply.

"The wreckage is definitely that of a `North' class," the first officer spoke as he climbed up onto the deck before me. I had already determined that for myself with the telescope, the Huntress now lying a couple hundred yards off the rocky shore. A naked body, female, dead, there in the bottom of the longboat. I had no doubts that she had been a captive, one who had drowned.

"And?" I challenged, the officer pointing down at the boat.

"There are footprints on the beach, men with boots, women barefooted," he answered. The women would of course be captives. The ship was not the NorthStar, that I had already determined.

"They either caught fire and had to 'beach' or they were forced to 'abandon' their ship," Janice said to me. I suspected the second as being most likely. My squadron was only a day's sail or so ahead of us now. I suspected that the Dularnian captain had decided to destroy his vessel rather than let it fall into Imperial hands. Here too he was likely to receive a "warm" welcome from the people living in the area. We would most likely not, although that did not deter me from giving the orders I did.

"We saw 'nothing'!" the headman of the little village pleaded with me as he stood there before me. Behind me anchored fore and aft a hundred and fifty yards off shore the Huntress, its catapults now armed and loaded with my firebombs. I reached up with my arm, waved. The sudden burst of flame there on the beach at one end of the village left no doubts in anyone's minds then!! Lamp oil in a gallon glass bottle with a cotton rag for a wick. Not "high technology", but yet "impressive" to any "barbarian"!

"I will burn your worthless village, your boats," I replied, my eyes "hard" as they looked into his. I had only a boat's crew behind me. That and my own "reputation", which was "awesome" enough I thought to keep him mentally "off balance". In any case I did not think that any of the villagers had the courage to face me. They had heard of Queen Lorraine of Trelendar, Warlady of the Empire of California. I had given Janice her orders. I knew too that she would obey. And carry out my commands regardless. I supposed they could kill me if they wanted to, but there wouldn't be much left if they did. I could rely upon Janice for that!

"The ship was the 'Northland'," his wife said, her eyes hard as they looked into mine. I suspected that she "wore the pants". She was tall, dark haired, muscular looking. Wore a sword too. I suspected that she had once been a Dularnian warriorress from the looks of her. Often such women "retire" once they grow old.

"And those who were aboard it?" I challenged her in reply.

"They have fled into the forests," she answered me back. I suspected that they had done so only in the last hour. There was no doubt in my mind that these people thought of themselves as being "Dularnian". That they now owed their allegiance to Maris!

"The women that they hold captive will be returned to me before the sun sets tomorrow or this village will burn," I answered in reply, standing there, looking straight into her dark eyes. I had no doubt that they knew where the women were being held too!!

Chapter Twenty Six

"We'll keep a good watch tonight just to 'make sure'," I said to Janice as I discussed matters with her in the stern cabin. I had no doubts that the Dularnians would try "something". I also had no doubts that the villagers would "assist" them too!

"You took a hell of a chance back there that someone didn't decide to put an arrow or crossbow bolt through you," the captain of the Huntress answered with a smile, sipping a bit at her wine. Such had been in my thoughts too when I had gone to the village.

"Then the village would have 'burned', wouldn't it?" I said.

"With everything the Huntress could fire," Janice smiled. I had given her orders to that effect in "writing" to do just that. "Legally" the village was part of the Empire of California, although I don't really think the people thought of themselves in "that way" except perhaps when the tax collector came on through. Their open hostility to me, their assistance to the crew of the raider left no doubts in my mind as to which "side" they were on!

"Coastal villages like this one are also why the Dularnian raiders are so successful," I then said to her, my eyes meeting hers over the rim of my goblet. A sailing ship can stay out only so long. There has to be "support" from shore. I suspected that there were villages all the way up and down the coast of California that helped out the raiders. Jon had "hinted" at such once. Raiders can pay well for their supplies. The pirates of the 18th Century were generally successful for much the same reasons too.

"And?" Janice asked, regarding me, smiling, no doubt well aware of the fact that her beloved Warlady had another "idea". I wondered if we couldn't do the same thing to the Dularnians too!!

"A ship's catapults will fire 'shot' almost a quarter of a mile," I smiled back. The people of a village would be utterly "helpless" before the "broadside" of even a third rate like ours.

"We don't have enough 'firebombs' for that," Janice replied.

"More can be made," I smiled back. I also had no doubts now that the Dularnians might attempt to "take" the Huntress tonight. "And I think the captain of the 'Northland' will attempt to take this ship tonight," I added, my eyes meeting those of Janice as she nodded back. They would get quite a surprise when they did!!

"Quiet," Janice breathed from beside me. We had taken turns dozing a bit. Everyone was armed, the boarding netting rigged. They would no doubt use the fishing boats. We were only a long bow shot from shore. The old "furlong" of Old England that had once been based upon how far a good archer could shoot an arrow.

"They will probably come between two and threeam," I spoke. "That would be the time that I'd pick for doing 'something' like this." I recalled too another time, another place, another ship.

"The men with the fire bottles have their orders?" I asked. Janice invisible there in the darkness beside me. We showed only a light in the bow, another in the stern. Common lighting practice for a ship at anchor. I wanted the Dularnians to think we'd never thought that they might attack us. I didn't think that my Dularnian captain would hesitate to try to take the Huntress, not after losing his own ship like he had. Queen Maris would not be too "delighted" at that. He would think that if he could bring into Arsana a captured Imperial, even if only a third rate, it might make a considerable degree of difference in how Maris would see things. I had no doubts that he was a "desperate" man. That he would do almost "anything" to regain his "honor" after the loss of his own ship. He had, after all, turned "tail", and ran!

"Fire the boats as soon as they come alongside," she said. That would give us needed illumination, and handicap the enemy!! I didn't want to fight this out "hand to hand" given the "odds"!

"I wonder what Lorraine is doing right now?" Sela Dai breathed as she snuggled close to Mark, her warm breath tickling his ear. She was warm, cuddly there beneath the blankets. The sort of a woman that could "delight" any man lucky enough to have her. That was what Mark thought of her anyway. Glad that Jers had married Lara and left him Sela, his delightful little Talon Princess. Her kisses, playful little bites, intimate caresses only further proof that Sela Dai did "know her way around a man".

"Getting a good night's sleep, I reckon," Mark laughed back, rolling the squirmy little delight over on her back, Sela's open thighs then welcoming him into her moist snug innermost recesses.

"Something's moving out there," I breathed, poking Janice. Nothing but a darker shadow against the lighter colored sand of the seashore, but I had no "doubts" now as to what it was then! I had no doubts too now that the villagers were "helping" them!!!

"I'll pass the word," she breathed, slipping her sword free of its scabbard as she rolled out of the cot. It would be "close work" tonight, I suspected as I followed her down on to the deck. I could hear the creaking as our missile weapons were tensioned. The catapult due to its design cannot be left tensioned for any period of time. The same is generally true of older ballistae. I had a new design under "development" there in Trelia, one that was designed much like a gigantic compound crossbow. I also had "information" from my "agents" in Dularn that the Dularians were working on the same type of a weapon, theirs almost "completed"! In military technology the Dularians always seemed to be a little ahead now of the Empire of California for reasons more "political" than anything else. Both sides were also "working" on a "steam catapult", but such a weapon made little sense for ships.

"There," the first officer breathed, pointing with his sword out over the rail. A darker shadow moving against the sea. The thought going through my mind that the people of the village doubtlessly were happy to be "helping" the crew of the Dularian raider after the "threat" I had made against their village. If such was the case we could be badly outnumbered, Huntress carrying a crew of seventy compared to the ninety or so that a second rate carries, especially if the Dularians were being "assisted" by the villagers! The "odds" perhaps two to one if not more now!

"Hold your fire until you are sure of your targets," I hissed to those with bows. There was no sense in warning the "enemy" that we were alert and "ready". Surprise was all really that we now had "going" for us, I suspected here. I slipped my sword free of its scabbard, looped the lanyard around my wrist.

"The dark lanterns are ready," the second officer breathed there in the darkness. Such would used to light our fire weapons we would use to fire the fishing boats the enemy was now using. The stars were gleaming brightly there in the sky overhead. I could see the mastheads outlined against them. A soft splash in the water towards shore spoke of a careless oarsman. I wondered if there would be swimmers. The water was really too cold for it, but the distance wasn't that far from shore for someone to try. Cutting the anchor cables is a trick that dates "WAY" back!

"The men are ready at the capstans," Janice breathed. By taking in or letting out we could swing the ship back and forth a bit. The longboat now tied on the seaward side of the Huntress. Such gave us more deck space, and kept it ready at hand for use.

"Raise the boarding nets, light and fire the broadside," I snapped in harsh whispered tones. I had no doubts that the people of the village were actively helping the enemy. Firing the village would also tend to divide our foe's forces, as the people of the village would naturally be more concerned with the safety of their own possessions than helping the raider's crew try to capture the Huntress! Such would of course also confuse the enemy, make them "less sure" of victory. Much depends upon morale.

I felt the Huntress shudder as she fired her suddenly blazing broadside, the ballistae javelins having been fitted with heads of burning oil soaked rags. Such would reduce range and accuracy, but the distance was short enough that it didn't matter all that much now! Yells and cries of alarm from the boats were ample proof that the villagers had been helping the Dularians!!!

"Drop the net!" I heard Janice cry, the boats now firing upon us with bows and crossbows, mostly the former, I noticed. Their marksmanship was poor, although there was of course little to shoot at but the hull of the ship, which arrows couldn't harm. Two of the boats now turning back to shore, leaving three to now face us. I had hoped that my firing upon the village might do just that. The "odds" were now suddenly changing to favor us! I could see flames starting to shoot up on shore, running figures.

I saw a grapple coming flying up, catch in the netting. The dark form of a boat there coming alongside. A suddenly blazing bottle of lamp oil flung into it, smashing, flaming up. The faces of the enemy wild there in the firelight. I saw the wife of the headman of the village taking aim with a bow at us. She dropping her weapon, clutching at the arrow between her breasts! The "ship's girl" beside me giving me a grin there in the firelight from the burning boat as she fitted another arrow to her bowstring. Janice had handpicked her "ship's girls". All were of the Peasant Caste. Well able to use a bow effectively. Busty wide hipped wenches who knew how to "please" a man. We were pouring a steady stream of fire into the boats now. Another one ablaze, men leaping into the water. A third hanging back, its archers busy launching arrows at us as fast as they could shoot!! A sailor staggering back, clutching at an arrow stuck in his throat. He was dead before I could reach him, although there was of course nothing that I could do. We were firing back, pouring our fire into the remaining boat. A crossbow bolt took the second officer in the forehead. Death was of course instantaneous! I saw one of our sailors take an arrow in the shoulder. We were taking casualties, but inflicting far more there on the enemy!

The village was well alight now, the dark shadows of the people dashing about. I had no doubts now that I had done the right thing in firing the village. There was also no doubts in my mind as to how these people would have voted had Darlanis followed my earlier suggestion to put the "issue" to a vote of those concerned. These people were as "Dularnian" as any of Maris' subjects! Of that there could not longer be the slightest doubt!

"Raise the boarding nettings, fire on that boat!" Janice cried, her orders instantly obeyed. The range was too close for our catapults, but we scored several hits with our fire javelins!

"Keep up the fire on that boat!" I ordered, the other two drifting, blazing, useless, deserted, men and women struggling in the cold waters back towards shore. I did not think all would be able to make it either! The water was icy cold, too cold for anyone to swim very far in it, I suspected! The boat turning away, almost drifting, Huntress turning, firing once again. The boat now afire, burning as it headed back towards shore. Our longboat, lying on the seaward side of Huntress, now coming around in pursuit. The flames from the burning village now shooting up into the sky. Sparks like meteors blazing up into the heavens. The third boat now burning, turning back, beaten!!!

Chapter Twenty Seven

"They're gone," Janice spoke, staring about there in the dawn as we searched the village, or what remained of it now. The Huntress' firepower had been impressive, especially against such a target as this. Much of course is due to good training, good command. Janice was a very capable officer, I mused to myself! I recalled too what Captain Valerie Dunn of the Corsica had said about her, about how "competent" a first officer Janice had been before her well earned promotion up to commander of the Huntress.

"Maybe," I breathed, eying the woods, waiting for the crossbow bolt to strike me down. I felt very "vulnerable" just then. I had brought with us the entire force of archers. The Huntress standing ready to fire a deadly broadside into the woods beyond. I had no doubts that any attacker would pay a high price for us!

"Two dead, three wounded," she smiled. The enemy had taken far greater losses from what I'd seen so far. We had fired upon a "Californian" village. However, the people of that village had been "aiding and abetting" the enemy. I wondered what Darlanis would make of all that. Just then I really didn't give a damn! Her sudden "unpredictability" too was something that bothered me. I had seen the bodies lying there on shore. There was no "doubt" that the people of the village had indeed assisted our foes too!

"We didn't get the women back," I said, giving her a smile. I hoped the Dularnians hadn't just slit their throats and left them to rot. That is sometimes done, but rarely here in 2566 AD.

"Most men won't give up a woman they've helped capture," she smiled back. I supposed that it was true. We had however proved to the enemies of the Empire that we knew "how" to "fight". I had no way of knowing if the captain of the enemy raider had survived or not. Perhaps it was just as well that he had not. I did not think Maris would much approve of what had happened here.

"I am gaining a 'reputation' like Princess Tara," I smiled. I wondered what Darlanis would think once she learned of this???

"Ship is the Huntress!" the lookout called down from the masthead. Sela Dai breathed a mental sigh of relief. Lorrain was back in command of things. No more arguments between her and Jers with Lara sitting there smirking to herself over what to do. Jers feeling that the squadron should be split up into two parts, while she, Sela, wanted it kept together as one powerful force.

"We've got our 'Warlady' back," Mark smiled down at her.

"You've been wounded!" Sela breathed as I climbed aboard the Squala. My leg was getting better now, but it still bothered me a bit, especially if I didn't keep it exercised and limbered up like the physician aboard the Huntress had warned me to do daily. The dampness of the cold sea air didn't do it any "good" either!

"Took a crossbow bolt in the thigh when we met up with Maris and her North Star," I smiled back, stepping up on to the deck, listening to the cheering as my men and women "greeted" me back.

"You took Huntress up against the North Star?" Mark gasped.

"That was what I 'had' when we 'met' up," I smiled back.

"You're truly a 'Warlady'," Sela Dai smiled as she recounted her apparently mostly uneventful voyage up the coast of Imperial California. The only "excitement" having been when the squadron had encountered the "Northland", which had destroyed itself to avoid capture. I merely smiled and nodded, well aware that I might not have heard the "last" of all this once Darlanis heard! Especially the part about my destroying a "Californian village" from the sea for what I would claim was "aiding and abetting". I recalled another war, one no longer remembered now in this era.

"A lot of people died, and for what?" I challenged her.

"I didn't mean it that way," Sela quickly replied.

"I'm just not in a good mood today," I quickly smiled.

"The ship from Trella arrived a few hours ago," she said.

"Your mother has 'come through' for us," I smiled in reply. I now had an "air force" to use whatever way I saw fit. I was no longer limited to what could be seen from the top of a mast. I now once again could effectively apply my vessels knowing exactly "where" the enemy was, while he in turn was unable to find mine!

"I am dividing our force into two parts," I said. "Seawolf and Nighthawk will patrol just to the south of here, engaging any of the raiders they can meet up with going north and south. They will have Arrow as their scouting vessel." I felt that this way I might be able to slow down a bit the predation that was taking place against the Empire. There was also no doubt in my mind now that those who lived in the "disputed territories" favored Dularn and its Queen over California and its Empress. I'd seen proof of that myself when the villagers assisted the surviving members of the crew of the Northland in an attempt to seize the Huntress. I also felt here that these three ships were not as "sharp" as the rest of my squadron, and thus such a division would insure that I had only my best for the actual "Assault Upon Dularn" that I now planned. That would be Squala, Corsica, Seahawk, and Huntress.

"The ships under my command will attack Dularnian shipping between the island and the mainland," I smiled, this being an area that the Dularnians considered almost their own "lake". I did not think they would be expecting an attack in these waters. Or the use of Talon's Tarls and their lovely "bird girls" either!

"Getting past the ramships patrolling around Arsana might be a problem," Jers spoke up, his sensual Lara there at his side. I recalled what Jon had once said about her. She is a busty wench!

"I plan to enter through the northern passage," I smiled. I would sail up the western coast of Dularn, taking on anything that I could, and then whip around the northernmost rocks and sail back south around the tip of the island into the waters between the island and the mainland to the east. Strike a swift and powerful punishing blow against Dularn, then scamper back out before Maris could bring up her forces of ramships to stop me!

"There's a narrow rocky passage that you'll have to almost 'feel' your way through there at the northern end of the island," Jers said. "Dularn also maintains a small fortress right at the worst point to prevent exactly what you are thinking of," Jers then added, playing the role of the "devil's advocate" here with lovely Lara at his side. Her eyes glowing into mine there across the table. I felt like C.S. Forester's Captain Hornblower again.

"We will land a force under the command of Captain Dunn of Corscia sufficient to take the fort by surprise from the back," I smiled, "While the ships keep their attention directed towards the sea." Valerie was a trained Warriress, she knew small unit tactics, all the sorts of things that a Warriress should know about like attacking fortifications. I am of the caste, but I've never had the training most Warriresses get. Most Dularnian military fortifications are actually "manned" by members of their "militia", which are not the "equal" in my opinion of seasoned fighting forces of the sort that I had under my command. Dularn does not have a large army or navy. It depends upon a "defense in depth" based upon its militia. Such had proved effective up against Darlanis' forces, but my military tactics were different!

"We now have the means to observe the enemy's movements," Sela breathed, glancing at the other two young warrior women of Talon who now sat beside their Princess. I had been forbidden by Tais to use Black Lady for military uses, but I now had another form of "air force" that might be just as effective in its way! One that Tais could not complain violated the "Edict" either now!

"I've never flown a Tarl over open water before," Sela said, her dark eyes meeting mine as we looked at the gigantic bird now perched up there on the mainmast crosstree of the big Corsica. I nodded, "envying" the small black clad delight there before me. The gigantic birds are almost "unique" to Talon itself, and are, I believe now, the product of past genetic manipulation by Leith. They are vicious creatures, and must be raised from hatchlings. Their high metabolic rates require considerable amounts of food, and they are carnivores with an almost insatiable taste for fresh meat. Not the sort of a creature you'd really want flying about!

In appearance they resemble a cross between an eagle and a hawk, with a wingspan of about thirty five feet or so. These are "big" birds, let me kid you not, and seeing one in the "flesh" is an experience that you won't forget for some time. They have the same hollow bones as any bird, and despite their size, are not all that heavy, two strong men being able to pick one up. They are considered a terrible threat to small children, and the mothers of Talon watch over their children carefully for fear that one might come swooping down out of the sky and seize one to carry off to its nest. They are also known to the Nevadas and to those of eastern Trelandar where it borders on Talon to the east. This is perhaps the "most dangerous" creature ever "used" by Man.

"Do you think you can do it?" Valerie Dunn asked, regarding both Sela in her form fitting leather "bird girl" costume and the gigantic creature now perched up there in our mainmast crosstree. Sela carrying nothing but a small slim blade and a long Tarl whip to help control her vicious and often dangerous feathered mount.

"I can 'try'," Sela smiled back, climbing up into the rigging. A small delightfully curved figure clad in tight leather, the Princess of Talon was a true "delight" to the masculine eye!

"She's got 'guts', that's for sure," Valerie said to me as we watched Sela climb up the rigging to where the bird perched. Tarls as a rule always launch themselves off something, and are usually unable to get off the ground with a rider on their backs. They are actually a soaring bird like a condor or eagle, and lack the ability to take off into instant flight like a smaller bird.

"When she's ready swing the ship so that she can take off into the wind," I replied. Even so I wasn't "sure" that Sela's bird would be able to stay in the air after leaping off its perch up there, and should it fall into the water we'd have to fish out poor Sela Dai before she drowned in these almost icy cold waters!

"Your airplane would have made more sense," Valerie smiled.

"I'd like have the Starfire under my command," I smiled.

"I'd like to be in Tarth making love," Valerie smiled back.

Sela Dai's now rapidly beating heart seemed to leap into her throat as the great bird finally leaped into the air in response to her kicks and the sting of her riding whip. The mighty wings flapping as the Tarl swooped down towards the sea below, almost as if it so wished to die there in the waves! Then it struggled back aloft, her hands in its feathers as she held the reins, the great flap of the wings bringing back once again memories of other times. Of her own teenage years when she had first been taught to fly the great birds! To become a "bird girl" of Talon!

The saddle was small, more just a set of leather straps that served to keep her on the bird's back between its neck and wings, a "bird girl" usually carrying only a small blade and her short composite bow and a quiver of arrows. The birds themselves were by no means "tireless", and one wished to "spare" the bird as much as possible. Riding a bird was far different than flying in an airplane, the play of the muscles between one's thighs leaving no doubts that one was riding on a living being, not in some device developed by a technology now mostly legends few really believed anymore. The "ride" was also quite "swoopy", with a quite "noticeable" up and down motion from the wings that took a good "stomach" to tolerate for long. One could easily become airsick.

Ahead of her the misty dark haze that was Dularn, a land in which she could expect to find only enemies should anything happen to her bird. Below her now only rolling ocean, a cold choking death should her bird falter in its flight. And not expecting to be "riding", she had allowed herself to put on unnecessary weight over the past few months, which meant a greater burden yet for her bird to carry, Sela's hundred and ten pounds being heavier than was usual for a "bird girl" of Talon, most of whom usually held their weights down in the hundred pound range. Mark may have "enjoyed" his "heavier" Sela, but the bird certainly didn't!

Well behind her now was the Corsica, all its sails set, with Squala and the Huntress somewhat further back along with the small swift schooner that had brought the birds from Trelandar. A seagull squawking in terror as the Tarl flew by it. Sela having no doubts that the Tarls would be "usable" outside of Talon! While their military "effectiveness" had been "overrated" by Darlanis and others, the great birds did offer a way of gaining military "intelligence" that nothing else could equal. And Sela knew just how "important" that could be to someone like Lorraine!

Overhead a watery sun gleamed in a hazy sky, the shoreline ahead now spotted with patches of fog. The fog blowing back against her face like a wet mist as the bird flew thought them. Sela navigating pretty much by landmarks and what she recalled of the map that Lorraine had showed her earlier. Ahead somewhere was Arsana, her objective, where she would observe for herself what preparations had been made for possible attack from Imperial California. Such would also determine whether or not it might be possible as Lorraine thought for her ships to steal on past the Dularnian defenses. Sela doubted it, but it would save considerable time if it was "possible", Lorraine had pointed out to her.

Flying at about a thousand feet, the great bird carried her through now growing patches of fog, the trees sticking up through the haze there beneath her. She could feel the bird's breathing, the beat of its multiple hearts, Tarls having two, unlike other creatures. The leather of her form fitting attire wet, damp now from the fog as ahead of her now she saw the outskirts of Arsana spreading out before her almost half hidden by the growing fog.

The city was walled, the walls about fifty feet high. Such could be scaled, but with difficulty, especially if defended. It had proved impossible for Imperial troops to do so in any case! Darlanis had tried it, but with little success for her "trouble".

Sela swooped down low, feeling as I have felt while flying Black Lady that I had "nothing to fear" from

those below. Darlanistoo made the same "mistake" flying out over the plains as she has narrated in her own story. The little Princess experiencing a "thrill" as she saw the people flee in terror there below her!

Suddenly there was a blurred streak as something whizzed by her, the beautiful young Princess of Talon realizing that she was being fired upon by crossbowmen! That one bolt could kill her mount and cause it to crash into the buildings there below her!

Sela urged her bird into a dive, leveling out only a dozen feet from the ground, trusting to the bird's own eyes and instincts as she clung to her feathered mount. To attempt to rise higher out of crossbow range would only make her a better target! The "climb" of a Tarl carrying a rider so slow that there would be no doubt that such an action would be almost suicide for Sela!

No airplane could have flown the path that Sela's bird was now flying, the great feathered monster swooping between the buildings, between trees, soaring across Arsana itself at only a dozen feet or so above the ground. The leather clad figure of its rider almost unnoticed now upon the great feathered terror!

Most Dularnians had never ever seen a Tarl, although the birds were of course known to them as being creatures of "legend" more "myth" than reality! No doubt, Sela mused to herself, they would think of Tarls much differently now than they had before!!!

Now she was over the great central plaza, swooping low over the fountains and the low growing trees, terrified faces looking up at her, mothers clinging to their children as she flew just over their heads. Her speed so great that no one had "time" now to even react to her passage until after she was gone on past, her great feathered mount far swifter than the fastest unicorn!

"I feel 'responsible' for Sela," I said to Valerie as we stood together and looked out over the sea. Much of Dularn now hidden in the growing fog. I wondered if I should have sent Sela out instead of one of the other "bird girls" of Talon. It was true that Sela would collect more "useful" military information than would the other two young Talon warrioresses, but I hated to "risk" the Crown Princess of Talon like this even with her own mother's approval. It was true that Dala Dai did want her daughter to become something "more" than just the Princess of Talon, but risking her life like I had didn't now seem the way to do it!

"She impresses me as being a rather 'competent' little wench," Valerie smiled back, Sela's beautiful face and curvy feminine figure leaving little doubt that she was a beautiful woman! She was also brave and courageous as I had learned when she had nearly killed me that time back in La Paz. She did seem a bit "nervous" about things at times, but that I felt was understandable given the fact that naval warfare was completely "alien" to her given her earlier military training as a Talon "bird girl".

"I wish though she was safe back in Talon," I answered.

Sela Dai, banking her bird no more than twenty feet above the ground between two buildings perhaps would have thought the same thing just then, had she had the time to consider such ideas then! A woman screaming, cowering back as the Tarl swooped by her only a few feet away, its rider completely unnoticed. Sela's bird swooping up over the royal palace of Dularn, the flagstaffs whipping by, the bird now almost brushing the water with its wingtips as it flew out over the harbor as swiftly as Sela could urge it. Here once again there was danger, both from men with crossbows and the heavier weapons of ships lying at anchor. The beautiful Princess of Talon reflecting briefly upon the idea that Talon's "bird girls",

carrying firebombs, could destroy any ship!

She flew into a welcome bank of fog, urging the bird up a bit, gaining a bit of altitude at the cost of speed, and the bird's own growing fatigue from its hard driven flight across the capital of Dularn at better than fifty miles per hour! The damp of the fog wetting her face, chill against her sweat-damp body there beneath the leather of her riding attire. Sela was very much "aware" of the fact that she was "all alone" over a hostile country that would view her only in terms of whips and slave collars if she ever was to fall into the hands of those now below! The fact that she was the Princess of Talon might mean "little"!

"Why do I do this?" Sela mused to herself, flying out of the fog bank now perhaps a hundred yards up in the air, the great bird still climbing slowly with heavy beats of its tired wings! Making mental notes of the ships there at anchor, the North Star not one of them yet, she noted to herself in passing. Not that it really mattered all that much, but it was something that Lorraine would doubtless like to know about, Sela mused to herself.

"Why do I 'drive' myself like this?" Sela mused, heading her bird out to sea, back towards where Lorraine's ships should now be. A heavy fog now growing rapidly there before her now making Sela very much aware that she really didn't know where the ships were! And there was no other "friendly" landing point anywhere!!

"Lys, I don't like this!" Sela breathed, scared now. Her bird was becoming exhausted, and there was nothing but water now beneath her! And a land filled with enemies there behind her!!! Even if she flew across the strait, the people living on the other side of the strait would merely turn her back over to Dularn! Doubtlessly stripped and bound, perhaps only after she had been "enjoyed" by her captors. That too Sela dreaded, knowing well how a captive woman could be treated by men. Especially if she was a member of a hated enemy group. Such had happened to a number of Californian women captured by her own people, and Sela did consider her people more "civilized" than those of other nations!

Without weapons, Sela carrying nothing but a small blade, she was also well aware that once she landed she might also have trouble controlling her bird, a Tarl being a dangerous carnivore. And once she fled into the woods, then what? There were other dangerous beasts, dire wolves, great bears, all creatures that would enjoy rending her tender flesh. She was a long ways from Talon. From her own country nestled there between the mountains.

"Sela's in trouble!" I snapped, seeing the fog rolling in. She had a compass, but no way to guide herself back to us. And I knew that the "flying time" of a Tarl was quite "limited" too! I saw Valerie nod, standing there at the rail. The fog had already hidden Dularn from view in that direction. "Blow our foghorns so that Sela can find her way back to us!" I ordered, knowing the terror that poor Sela must have felt flying over this fog, over the cold hostile waters there below, the bird sinking lower as it became exhausted from its long flight to Dularn and back. Why had I allowed Sela to make the flight instead of another? I loved the little Princess of Talon almost like a daughter, and I had been the one to send her out to her death here in this fog!!!

Chapter Twenty Nine

"We should anchor and wait out this fog, your majesty!" the first officer of the North Star protested to

his beautiful Queen as she stood there on the quarterdeck. The sails above them now dripping wet as the big schooner slowly crept through the heavy fog. The land ahead now invisible as the fog closed in around. Her beautiful golden hair now coated with fine droplets of mist. A man at the bow now casting the lead, reading off the "depths".

"And if Lorraine's squadron is somewhere about?" Maris challenged, her eyes blazing green fire into his. She was "nervous", "jumpy" now that the North Star was only a few miles from "home"!

"They wouldn't dare be this close to Dularn!" he protested.

"I'm not going to take that `chance'!" Maris snapped back. "Not with someone like Lorraine!" Maris thought then to herself.

"By the mark six!" the man with the lead cried from the bow. Maris was now "feeling" her way through the fog with soundings. Relying on the charts, on her own guesswork as to their location.

"Still plenty of water," Maris smiled, glancing at the compass. The North Star drew only three fathoms, or eighteen feet. The only danger was from uncharted rocks off the coastline now.

"We've lost Sela!" I cursed, smashing my fist down on the oak of the Corsica's rail. I could see nothing now but the fog! The fog had come suddenly drifting in like a ghostly evil enemy.

"There is still `hope'," Valerie said to me, putting her hand on my shoulder. I brushed it roughly off, limping over to the other side of the quarterdeck. What would I tell her mother? That I had sent her daughter off to die a horrible death at sea!

Sela Dai took her exhausted bird as high as she could, the tired beat of the wings leaving no doubts now as to her own fate! There was no chance now of making it across the strait, and she dreaded to turn back to Dularn where only death or slavery waited for a woman like herself! Below her only the mists, the cold sea that would quickly take her young life should she not reach land! Then through the mists below there was a sudden brief glimpse of a ship. Of masts! The fog blanking out the view even before she could determine what sort of ship it was! Was it one of theirs? The Corsica, the Seahawk, the Squala, or the Huntress? Or perhaps the ship that had been sent up from Talon with their birds?

"It's not your fault, Lorraine!" Valerie cried, shaking me. The mist cold, wet as it blew past our masts, the sails dripping wet. I could think only of Sela struggling in the cold waters! The horror in her eyes as the choking water now filled her lungs and she sank beneath the surface to sink to the dark depth below. Why? Why had I sent her instead of one of the other bird-girls? Why had I been so "eager" to risk Sela's young life on this task!

"No!" Sela gasped, the ship suddenly looming out of the fog below her as her bird dived, the rake of the masts, the flag at the masthead leaving no doubt! The ship was a "North" class! An enemy ship! The North Star itself, Sela saw to her horror then!

In its exhaustion the bird set its wings and extended its talons despite the frantic tugging on its reins by its beautiful rider, its only thought now to perch on the main mast crosstree!

"What in the name of Lys!!" Maris gasped, seeing the awesome form of the Tarl come swooping down out of the fog and slam into the main mast crosstree, the great birds almost a legend to those of Dularn. Maris herself having never seen one outside of a zoo!

"A Tarl!" the first officer breathed, seeing the rider, one of the bird-girls of Talon. And Talon was part of the Empire!!!

"No!" Maris cried, one of her warrioresses setting arrow to her bowstring to shoot at the bird. The figure of a woman in leather on the bird's back looking down at them. A small dark haired woman that the Queen recalled seeing somewhere else then! The Princess Sela Dai of Talon! Gayle's own "sister-in-law"!

Sela had no doubts that her bird would be "dangerous" once it recovered from its exhaustion and demanded meat for its belly! The Tarls of Talon being one of the most fearsome carnivores of all time, one that could even turn on and rend its own rider! A golden haired woman, clad in blue, now climbing the rigging towards her. Sela had no doubts that it was Queen Maris herself!

The Princess of Talon slipped from the saddle, keeping one hand on the bird's trappings, the top of the cross tree being wet and slippery, with at least a fifty foot fall to the deck below! A foot rope, set about four feet below the mast, was designed to be used by anyone who needed to work up here. Sela, with her excellent sense of balance, her "head" for heights, needed it not!

Sela watched the Queen venture out on to the cross tree, her cautious fearful movements leaving no doubt in Sela's mind that Maris was not the sort that should be trying such things now! A scream of terror escaping from Maris' throat as she suddenly then slipped and fell! The beautiful blonde clutching with fingers like claws at the footrope there below the mast, hanging fifty feet above her own deck, her feet kicking helplessly in thin air!

Without thinking Sela dashed along the top of the crosstree, then with a quick flip that a circus aerialist would have admired the little Princess dropped to the footrope beside the Dularnian Queen! The little brunette reaching down, clasping Maris' wrist!

"Grab my leg!" Sela breathed. "You're too heavy for me to lift!" Sela explained, Maris outweighing her by twenty five pounds or so. The Princess of Talon then putting everything she had into drawing Maris up, the Queen grabbing at her as Sela drew her painfully up, the woman's weight almost tearing Sela apart!

"Lys!" Maris gasped, clinging tightly to the little Princess! Well aware that Sela had just doubtlessly saved her life!

"You should be more careful," Sela smiled back. The men and women below cheering as they saw that their beloved Queen was safe! A sudden gust of wind suddenly blowing the fog on past! Revealing less than half a mile away a heavy three masted ship!!! The flag flying there at its mastheads the double barred cross!!!

"Enemy in sight! Battle Stations!" I cried, pointing, the North Star drifting out of the fog there to port as the wind now blew it back towards Dularn. There was something "odd" about the ship. Some big dark object there in the rigging that puzzled me!

"That's a Tarl perched in the rigging!" Valerie cried, roughly grabbing me, shaking me in her excitement. Forgetting I was her Queen, her Warlady as she saw the great bird up there!!!

"Sela!" I breathed. "She's got Sela!" How Sela had found the North Star in the fog I didn't know, although considering the closeness of the ships it perhaps wasn't that surprising either! The thought going through my mind that Maris might use Sela as a hostage to insure her own safety! The very thought of "that" making a blood red haze of fury swim before my eyes like a fog!!!

"Give orders! Run up a flag of truce!" Sela cried, shaking Maris. Seeing the activity aboard the Corsica, the ship already now turning, the jib having been momentarily "freed" to swing the ship around. There being no doubt that Lorraine was in command!

"Deck!" Maris cried down, "Run up a truce flag!" The sweat wet beneath her tunic, the little dark eyed Princess beside her!

"They're running up a truce flag," Valerie said to me. I saw it myself flying from the North Star's flag rope. It was the only thing that Maris could have done. She had Sela as hostage!

"Stand down!" I cried to the men. There would be no fight today. I only hoped that I might be able to convince Maris to give me Sela. She could keep the Tarl if she wanted as a trophy!

"Thank God you're safe!" I sobbed, clutching Sela to me as I would a child, crushing the little Princess to my bosom, stroking the dark damp hair as I regarded Maris, Queen of Dularn standing there. Overhead the flag of truce that I had now ordered flown.

"She saved my life," Maris said to me, explaining in a few words how she had fallen from the main mast cross tree. I nodded, holding the little Princess in my arms. I had my Sela back!

"We have to get my Tarl," Sela said, looking up at me then.

"She's got a lot of `guts'," I said to Maris as we watched the Princess of Talon creep out to the end of the Corsica's main mast crosstree, holding a big piece of raw meat on a pike to entice the bird to jump from the North Star over to my own ship. The two ships now lashed together to hold them side by side now.

"Your masts are even higher than mine," Maris breathed.

"I'm not referring to that," I smiled, "But the bird."

"Are they that `dangerous'?" Maris asked, looking up.

"About like a lion or tiger," I answered, watching Sela.

"There is a second trireme coming," Valerie interrupted us.

"I'll take care of that," Maris spoke, barking swift orders.

"There is more courage in that curvy little figure of yours than in a woman twice your size!" I told Sela Dai as Dularn now became just a bluish haze there on the horizon astern. I had seen Sela stand there on that cross tree of Corsica's sixty feet above the sea, and feed that horrible monster of hers by hand! Holding chunks of meat in her hand, letting it take them from her with a beak that could have taken her

arm off with one snap! She would make Mark Berson an excellent wife, I mused privately too!!

"A bird girl always feeds her bird," the Princess smiled.

"I think that Lorraine is 'right' and you are 'wrong'," Sharon said to Darlanis as the two stood there looking at the map. "Although I think we need to do 'more' than just give the 'disputed territories' back to Dularn to insure a lasting peace."

"And what you would suggest?" Darlanis challenged the girl, a tone of "annoyance" showing a bit in her silvery toned voice.

"We need to extend the 'Commonwealth' idea," Sharon said, looking up into the beautiful azure of the Empress' lovely eyes. "Bring together Dularn, Sarn, Trelandar, Talon, Baja, the Nevadas, even the Montanas into a union of nations working together."

"It will not be 'easy'," Darlanis answered, studying the map. There was a considerable distrust even now between those of Talon and those who supported her. Adding Dularn would be even worse, especially considering the hostilities that had existed. And the Nevadas and the Montanas had fought each other for centuries now. Then there were other groups like them further east!

"But I think it could be done, if you wanted it done," Sharon said, putting her arms around Darlanis, looking into her eyes. "You are the 'second Janet Rogers' they talk about," Sharon said.

Chapter Thirty

"We might be able to sneak on past Arsana at night," I suggested. The strait at this point was about a dozen miles across. "Especially if there is a bit of fog to help conceal us," I added. Sela nodding, her dark eyes meeting mine. Arsana had three heavy triremes in its harbor. Slow, heavy vessels. With any sort of a wind my ships would easily "show their heels" to such!

"And Maris could easily 'bottle us up inside'," Jers said, his wife's eyes glowing into mine as she sat there at his side. Bring up enough ships to deal with even forces like mine. Maris was a competent military commander. One could "rely" upon her.

"Your original plan probably was best, Lorraine," Janice of the Huntress smiled. She had gotten to know me quite well now.

"It is something that Maris won't be expecting us to do," Valerie of the Corsica said to me as she sat across the table.

"I think we might be able to destroy Maris' triremes," Sela said. "A gallon jug of lampoil, and an attack from the air with all three birds at the same time." Her two companions nodding.

"I would assume that by now Maris has men with light ballistae and heavy crossbows just waiting for you three to come," Lara smiled. "That's what I'd do if I was in her place and I knew of the three of you." I suspected that the busty delight was right!

"I'm sure that your Tarls can fly up higher than anyone can shoot, can't they?" Mark of the Squala ventured with a smile. I had no doubt that he was quite "stricken" with the Princess from what I had heard from others of the "relationship" between them!

"Above a thousand feet we'd be safe, but hitting a ship from that distance might be difficult," Sela pointed out. I supposed that it might, considering that no one had ever used Tarls like that before. Given the birds' short range, we would have to almost launch them in sight of Arsana, which also meant "trouble"!

"Be better at night," I ventured. Sela shaking her head.

"Tarls won't fly at night," the Princess then pointed out.

"I think we'd better stick with our first plan," I smiled. I had no doubt that was I willing to risk the lives of Sela and her two bird girls that I could do a lot of "damage", but at the same time I could hardly justify "wasting" their lives for such! No doubt someone else like Princess Tara would have done so, but I am not the sort of a military commander who "throws away" the lives of those under her. It has never been my policy to do so! Especially in a "war" that I now considered a "mistake" to begin with, it being obvious to me at least that Maris wasn't really "asking" for that much, especially considering that the people who lived in the "disputed territories" now favored Maris anyway!

"There's an awful lot that needs to be 'worked out'," Darlanis said, considering what Sharon had suggested as she regarded the map of North America there before her. The teenage Princess smiled back, her eyes meeting those of the Empress of California.

"Maris is pretty 'reasonable' once you get to know her," the young Princess smiled. She had liked the young Queen a lot too! A whole lot more than that "creepy" husband of hers, who looked upon a woman like she was some sort of a sub-human form of life!

"I suppose that Maris could help settle things with the Montanas," Darlanis ventured, thinking. Perhaps there could be someday another "World Federation". Much depended upon the Priestesses of Lys and their willingness to allow Mankind to rebuild again what once had been. Their hostility to such was something that Darlanis had often "wondered" about all her life.

"And this time we won't repeat the 'mistakes' Janet Rogers made," Sharon smiled, taking the Empress' hands in her own then.

"Don't 'touch' me!" Maris snapped, Darl Jord's eyes burning into hers. The man disgusted her, especially the way that he leered at a woman. "Stripping" her with his eyes like he did! She was tired, and sleep was uppermost in her mind just then too!

"You are still my wife," Darl now grumbled, standing there.

"I don't want to make love to you!" Maris snapped back.

"You're just a 'cheap slut' with a crown," he snapped.

"Damn it! Just Leave Me Alone!" the young Queen now begged.

"My next Queen will 'want' me," he growled, closing the door behind himself. A shudder going through the young blonde at the thought of what his words might "imply". Poison, a crossbowman, there were lots of ways of getting "rid" of an "unwanted" Queen!

"He evil man, kill you if get chance to do so," the slave girl said, her dark eyes looking into Maris'. She was Nevada, a wench from the plains. Her English poor, her loyalty assured. Maris didn't like owning slaves, having been one herself, but as Queen of Dularn she had to do a number of things she didn't like!

"A world full of enemies," Maris breathed, going to the window that overlooked the harbor. "'Enemies' out 'there', and now 'enemies' here at 'home'," she breathed softly to her slave girl.

"Among my people if a man and woman can't live together they get the village council to make them 'single' again," she spoke.

"It's not that 'easy'," Maris answered, aware of the laws. Getting a divorce wasn't the problem, but the "cost" was. She held her crown only as long as she remained married to Darl Jord! And if she continued to deny him her body long enough he would be able to divorce her even on those grounds, making it even worse!

"You need to do much thinking," the slave girl spoke softly, touching her arm. The woman's dark eyes looking up into hers.

"Inform the captain of my guards that I am leaving for Sana tonight, and ask her too to pick three women to escort me," Maris spoke, her eyes moist with tears. There would be orders for the first officer of the North Star. When the ship completed its refit he was to sail to Sana and pick her up there. She was of the Warriresses. Death in battle was "better" than life with "HIM"!

"Take me with you, mistress," the slave girl spoke softly.

"You are much 'safer' here than with me," Maris answered.

"You are a 'good mistress', not like others," she said.

"Then La- ra, you shall come with me!" Maris laughed.

"An object falling from any height, ignoring the resistance of the air, falls at a velocity of sixteen feet per second adding sixteen feet per second velocity for every second it falls," I said to Sela and her two bird girls. "The flying speed of a Tarl in level flight is about fifty miles per hour. Thus to hit any object on the ground with anything dropped from a Tarl we need to merely calculate the time it will require to fall from a known altitude, allowing for the speed of the bird over the ground." The others there giving me the sort of a "look" that I recalled everyone gave me when we had discovered that computer last year. "In the first second the object falls sixteen feet, in the second second it will have fallen forty eight feet, in the third eighty feet, the fourth a hundred and twenty eight feet and so forth." Even my own mathematical abilities now requiring pencil and paper to figure out the time it would take for an object dropped from a Tarl flying at a thousand feet to strike the ground. "About seven seconds, according to my figures," I said, looking up. The look upon their faces making me smile a bit to myself. No doubt my already "awesome" reputation as a "thinker" had been added to!

"And from a Tarl flying at fifty miles per hour at a height of a thousand feet you will have to 'lead' your

target by about five hundred feet," I smiled up at the lovely Princess of Talon.

"That is why Tarls are not more 'effective' than they are," one of the girls smiled. She was small, dark haired like most of the women of Talon are. "And why we always dive to 'attack'."

"Over two trireme lengths," Sela breathed softly, thinking.

"Closer to three, my Princess," the other girl interjected.

Maris was tired, almost exhausted as she climbed up into the saddle of her unicorn, the armor of the three warrioresses with her gleaming there in the torch light. La- ra, her slave girl, a small figure huddled on a horse next to her. The Queen of Dularn throwing back her golden head, breathing deeply of the night air. The thought of long years ahead of being married to Darl Jord not something she enjoyed thinking about. Was being the Queen of Dularn worth it? Once she had thought so, but no longer. Once the war with the Empire was "over" she would have no "excuse" as she had now for taking command of a ship, for being away from Arsana! "I was better 'off' as a slave girl in Trelandar!" she muttered!!

I watched the sun rise there in the east over the wisps of fog that floated up from the waters, the ships close to shore, a careful watch having been kept during the night as we crept without lights towards Arsana. Sela and her two girls at my side. I wondered again if I had made the right decision. Destroying the three triremes would give me almost a free hand, as Dularn had nothing else available just then to oppose the forces I now had!

"Be careful," I said to Sela, briefly taking the little Princess in my arms, crushing her to me despite the stares of the others there on deck. It was much like sending a daughter out to battle, knowing that there was always the chance she'd never return! I would have liked to go myself, leaving Sela behind, but the bird would have never flown with my weight, even if I did know how to fly one, which I did not. It taking months of training to learn how to handle the great birds in flight. They are vicious unpredictable creatures, not to be "trusted", I knew.

"I will, Lorraine," she said to me, stepping back.

"Good Morning, my Queen," the slave girl La- rasaid to her golden haired mistress as Maris pushed back the blankets, she and her women having spent the night no more than ten miles from the capital city of Dularn. The misty strait there before them visible through the trees, the sails of four ships gleaming with the ruddy light of the rising sun! Lorraine's deadly small squadron!

"They are releasing those great birds!" one of the Queen's women spoke, viewing the ships through a small telescope as she stood there on the shore watching the ships half a mile off. The thought going through Maris' mind that despite what had happened to the Princess of Talon the day before Lorraine was still willing to use her new "air force"! Such told much of the woman, the golden haired Queen thought. Her "bulldog tenacity" well known!!

"We must return to the city!" another of her warrioresses spoke, seeing the ships. Maris smiled, shook her head in the negative. She doubted if it would do any good now. Lorraine was establishing her "command" of the seas surrounding Dularn. The awesome Warlady of the Empire proving to those of Dularn that as long as she was in "command" no Dularnian ship would be "safe"!!!

"It is in the hands of Lysnow," the Queen answered her.

Chapter Thirty One

"A demonstration of swordsmanship while we wait," I said, the crew of the Corsica, both male and female, gathered below on the main deck. Valerie didn't look too "delighted" at what was "planned" for their "entertainment". The city of Arsanavisible there to port, the Squala following close behind, Seahawk next, with Huntress now somewhat ahead of us, the small schooner from Talon bringing up the rear. The Tarls were now only specks there in the sky as the rising sun beamed down on us, a fresh and rather chilly breeze coming off the ocean nicely filling our sails.

"Your leg's still bad," Valerie spoke softly, perhaps thinking that I might "hurt" myself fencing with her. That wasn't too likely. Valerie Dunn was tall, with fiery hair like the rising sun. Her ancestry was Dularnian. Her parents having come from this land that we were now attacking. I wondered what she thought of that. Whether or not it really "mattered" to her now.

"I'll go 'easy' with you," I smiled, "teasing" her a bit. I have a reputation, well deserved I supposed, of being the "best". I am tall, agile, with incredibly fast reaction times. Perhaps the finest swordswoman who has ever lived, although I don't have any way of really knowing that. I suspect, however, it is true.

"Oh, very well!" Valerie snapped, coming at me. I parried her thrust with ease, just standing there, not even moving a bit! Only my arm and the foil I held in my right hand then moving! Valerie tried again, with the exact same results. I made no attempt to attack. I let her "try" again. Again the same results!

"Damn!" Valerie breathed. She was said to be "good". Such can take the "heart" of any Warriress to face me. To realize just how "awesome" I can be when I wish to be. I am the world's best. Some say the "best" that ever lived. It is possible too.

"You can 'do' better than that," I said. Valerie tried, attempting a whirling thrusting attack to throw me "off balance". It was of course a failure. My reaction times were quicker than hers. She was "good", but I faced a number who were "better".

"I don't believe it!" Valerie breathed out, standing there.

"I've spent my entire lifetime developing the skills I have," I said. Swordsmanship has been my favorite form of "exercise" since I was but a girl in my early teens. It is usually the only form of exercise that I take. Recently, however, due to my injured thigh, I had been doing other forms of exercise to keep myself "fit" such as pushups. Such is important for a member of the Warriress Caste. The sword however is my favorite weapon, my favorite form of exercise. I am not a "beautiful" woman, I don't have a "good figure", nor am I really that "good" an archer despite the practice that I've had. Darlanis is better at that than I am. I am a good military commander, but I suspect that there are others who do as well if not perhaps better still. I do have one outstanding quality, and that is my swordsmanship!

"Let me try," her first officer suggested, eying me. I expected he had a "surprise" waiting in store for him. He thrust at me, his foil slipping on past my shoulder as I deflected it, a small rounded bit of metal suddenly touching his exposed throat!

"You were `careless'," I smiled. In real swordplay he would have of course been dead. I suspected that he knew it too now!!!

"I always thought no woman could be `that good'," he gasped.

"A woman can be as `good' as any man," I smiled back at him.

"There is only one `Lorraine'," he breathed, stepping back.

"Don't `underestimate' any woman you face," I smiled back.

"There is `smoke'," Valerie spoke, looking through the telescope. At least one of our bird girls had made her "bombing run" successfully. We were now perhaps three or four miles from Arsana. The city there ahead of us making me think of other cities. Ones now only history more legend than fact. Walled cities built in an era before the invention of gunpowder. Arsana was such.

"If Darlanis had possessed Tarls.....," Valerie breathed. The outcome of the war against Dularn might have turned out a lot differently, although I suspected that the birds wouldn't be all that "effective" against a city built mostly of stone as Arsana is. I doubted if Talon really had "understood" the uses of "air power" in any sense anyway. Their war against Darlanis had been purely "defensive". That, I think, spoke much of them as such. I recalled too that Dala Dai had "known" of Leith Aurora having done so through the use of electronic hypnosis so that there was no way that such a "secret" could ever be forced from Queen Dala! The Women having had for years "secrets" that only they knew of. Led by that amazing blonde "Leaderess" of theirs Raspa "trusted".

"We will close the city," I ordered, limping to the railing.

"Your place, my Queen, is with your people!" the warrioress spoke as Maris saw the smoke now rising from the direction of Arsana. The city, being of stone, was not all that "vulnerable" to Lorraine's attack, but there was no doubt that the birds no doubt had "other" objectives! And what was to stop Lorraine from using her new aerial weapon against all of Dularn? How long would it be before there were more birds, more riders? All commanded by that little Talon Princess serving under the Imperial's Warlady!

"Yes!" Maris cried, flinging her saddle over the back of her unicorn. "I am still the Queen of Dularn!" The other woman's eyes meeting hers. Lorraine had made a "revolution" in Trelandar last year! Perhaps she could do the same here in Dularn too now!

"We got two of their triremes!" Sela gasped as she scrambled down the rigging, her bird perched there on the main mast cross tree like some gigantic eagle or hawk, which Tarls do resemble!

"You're going out again until her ramships are no more!" I snapped. We were close enough to Arsana now that the short range of the birds was of little concern. I had ordered the North Star spared. It was of little threat to my own ships, no match for anything but perhaps the Huntress or the smaller Talon schooner! I knew of Maris' love for her own ship. I had "hopes" for Maris! I thought despite whatever Darlanis did I might be able to somehow put an "end" to this "war" between us that neither "wanted"!

"They're attacking us again!" the warrioress cried, pointing with her hand. Maris nodded, driving her spurs into the flanks of her big unicorn stallion. She thought of her beloved North Star, now doubtlessly

only burning embers! Dularn was defenseless against this new Imperial "weapon"! Against their Warlady!

"The city is of stone, they can't harm it that much!" one of the other women cried out from behind her. Maris was well aware of that fact, but she was also well aware that there were other things that could be dropped from the air, such as "darts" of the sort that could be fired from catapults! * Cast iron missiles like crossbow bolts! Such were supposedly another of Lorraine's "new weapons". Weapons now from drawn from every era in history! * At the time my squadron left Trella these were still in the "testing stage" and did not reach us until the Tarls did. It is interesting to note here that Maris was quite familiar with all my own weapons, indicating the excellent network of spies and agents that she has in operation within the Empire itself. (LR)

"We have no way of fighting back!" Maris cried, feeling a blood hot fury go through her at the thought of what the Imperial Warlady could do to Arsana if she decided to do it. Flight after flight of the birds, firebombs and darts falling from the skies! And would there be even more birds? Even more "bird girls" from hidden Talon? Was there any "limit" to this awesome woman's own powers? Was Lorraine indeed as some said "another Janet Rogers"!

"Their ramships are now destroyed," Sela said to me as she scrambled down the Corsica's rigging. Arsana now only a mile or so off. The smoke from the burning ships now darkening the sky. I had just given the people of the 26th Century a good demonstration of the uses of "air power" that I was sure wouldn't be forgotten! I recalled a similar situation back in the 20th Century. There had been the belief that no airplane would ever be "effective" against a battleship. After a demonstration of "air power" and one had been "sunk", they had learned their painful "lesson".

"They are now powerless against us," I told Valerie as she nodded, the look in her eyes one that made me smile to myself. I knew the thoughts that went through her mind. She had just seen the true meaning of "air power". "Air power" that I commanded!!!

"The birds will require a considerable rest before we can use them again," Sela said to me. I nodded. They had well proved their "value" to me. Only Black Lady would have been more "effective", and Tais had forbidden me to use that. The Tarls of Talon were not as "effective", but they did do the "job". On the last flight each bird had carried two gallons of lamp oil. I did not think that there was much left anymore of Dularn's Navy now! * * Most of it was destroyed in the earlier war with the Empire, I might note here. Queen Tulis made no attempt to "replace" the older and now "obsolete" ramships, but instead started building a fleet of commerce raiding schooners. Maris did the same. (LR)

"Close the city to half a mile," I said. I was curious to see what Maris would do now. I was hoping that she would decide that negotiations with Darlanis made "more sense" than warfare!!!

"You have to 'DO' something about this!" Darl Jord cried as he grabbed his wife's arm. Maris' hate filled emerald eyes burning coldly like ice into his pig-like face as she dismounted. "Lorraine's destroyed most of our Navy!" Maris smiled. To her the old ramships were badly "obsolete" anyway, especially in the sort of naval warfare that was now developing. Much to her own pleasure the North Star had survived, and she had no doubts either that Lorraine had "spared" it for a reason! It being quite "obvious" to her that Lorraine had merely wished to show that the Empire now possessed the "power" to destroy the navies of its own enemies without any "risk" to its own ships by the use of Tarls!!

"And what do you 'suggest' that I do?" Maris hissed, brushing away his hand. "Go run back to your slave girls where you belong!" she snapped, disgusted at the man. Her women glancing at each other, it

being common knowledge now that the relationship between Darl Jord and his lovely wife was quite "loveless"!

"You've got to `trick'Lorraine, capture her,do something!" Darl Jord cried. "She's even more `dangerous' than Darlanis!"

"Violate the Caste Codes?" Maris snapped back coldly!

"She has to be killed!" the fat pig-like man cried!

"Get away from me!" Maris cried, shoving him away!

"Someone's got to `act' to save us!" he protested!

"Signal from the city," the midshipman said, looking through his telescope. I had expected such. I would take the Huntress into the harbor while the other three larger ships remained at anchor outside. I "trusted" Maris, but it is wise not to ever do something that might just "tempt" certain people a bit too far!

Chapter Thirty Two

"She has done what even Darlanis could not," one of her advisors spoke softly behind her as Maris watched the boat from the Huntress tie up to the dock and two black clad Imperial Warrioreses step up on to the dock. One in the uniform of a naval captain, the other the Imperial Warlady herself, the famous Lorraine Richards, Queen of Trelandar, a golden tiara in her hair! The Warlady yet limping a bit despite her best efforts not to show how bad she'd been hurt by a crossbowman off the North Star!

"If we take her `hostage' then we can deal with the others!" Darl Jord had whispered only a few minutes before when the ship had come sailing into the harbor. The truce flag flying at its mastheads. The idea was "unthinkable" to a Warrioresse like her! The preservation of the Caste Codes was drilled into all members of her Caste as something you lived by and fought for! What Darl was "asking" was simply so "unthinkable" for any Queen of Dularn!

Maris watched the two women walk towards them,Lorraine yet still limping a bit, while her companion, captain Janice Hill of the Huntress nervously glanced about herself at the armed men and women who made up the Dularnian Queen's own personal armed force. There behind them in the harbor still smoldered the wrecks of her navy, although Maris had been surprised to see that all the rest of the vessels there had not been touched by the aerial bombing!

"I wish we `had' you instead of Darlanis," Maris smiled, extending her hands to Lorraine. That had recently been one of her own fantasies. She really didn't like the woman that much, but she did admire her, respect her for what she was as a person. It had been delightful to have Sharonas her guest, the young Princess having told her about the 20th Century, and about Lorraine!

"It could have been," Lorraine answered her with a smile. They were, despite their "differences", still yet caste sisters!

"We must talk....!" Maris spoke, then gasping with horror! DARL JORD WHIPPING OUT WHAT SHE RECOGNIZED WAS A FLINT-LOCK PISTOL AND FIRING IT AT LORRAINE!! CRYING, "DIE, IMPERIAL BITCH!!!" THE QUEEN OF TRELANDAR FALLING BACK INTO THE ARMS OF HER CAPTAIN!

"I've--AHHH!" he screamed, Maris' dagger driving deep as a blood red fury swam before her eyes at what he had done to them!! Destroying his own country's HONOR as he had done with his act!!! For such an act there could be but one "reaction"! DEATH!!!!!!!!!! Whatever fate had in store for her now, she had at least done the only thing that any Warriress could do in such a case as this!!!

"Lorraine," Maris sobbed, going to her knees, the Warlady's blood already staining the silk of her dress over her bosom, the dark eyes of Janice blazing with hatred into hers as she held her Queen! The dark eyes of the Warlady now burning up into her own!

"Never thought it'd end like.....," she spoke, her head then falling back. The horror in Janice's eyes leaving no doubt that she believed the worst of those around her. Of Maris herself! * * It appears here that Janice believed I died when I lost consciousness. Such is the best explanation for what followed. (LR)

"YOU KILLED HER! DAMN YOU ALL TO HELL!" Janice cried, leaping to her feet, dashing for the boat still waiting there by the dock! The horrified Dularnians making no attempt to stop her!!!

"She's alive!" Maris gasped, feeling the weak pulse there in the Warlady's throat. The body of Darl Jord, her dagger yet buried in his heart there on the stones of the courtyard. "Summon the Physicians, Get the Priestesses!" the Queen snapped! Maris bunching up Lorraine's clothing, pressing it against the bullet wound in her chest! Aware of little but the woman lying there before her on the stone. The Imperial she had killed for!

"If she dies, we're doomed!" Maris breathed, looking up.

"Huntress signaling!" the midshipman cried, Sela Dai standing there at Mark's side. The ship was also flying its flags upside down! There had been some sort of "fuss" there on the dock, but the distance had been too far for even their best telescopes!

"Lorraine murdered!" the signal flashes read! The words like a blow to the little Talon Princess! Mark grasping her arm, hurting her with his grip, but just then she felt nothing! A cry of horror going up as the message was now translated to the crew!

"I should have KNOWN! I should have KNOWN!" Maris sobbed, the captain of her warriresses holding her hands. Whether the Imperial Warlady lived or died, a horrible stain had been placed upon Dularn's honor by Darl Jord's action. True, he had paid for it with his life, her own dagger buried to the hilt in his heart, but Maris dreaded what the future would bring! If Lorraine died, there would be a war between Dularn and the Empire that would end only when her country was no more! And would it be just the Empire??? Lorraine was said to be friends with both the Women and the Lorr! Should Aurora and Raspa take action, there would be nothing left but a radioactive wasteland of molten bubbling lava! * * She did not know of course of what the Priestesses of Lys were.

"The ships have sailed away," another spoke then to Maris. There had been no attack by the birds, or anything else. Maris dreaded what would happen now. She suspected the worst of it!!!

"We have the bullet," the Physician said, holding a bloody bit of "something" in her fingers. Lorraine's blood! "She is a strong woman. Perhaps she will live, but this sort of weapon..?"

"Oh Lys! Give me her life! Take mine, but give me hers!" the Queen of Dularn wept for the shame that had been put on her! * * I tend to believe that these conversations are accurate. (LR)

"What will we do now?" Valerie of Corsica asked, Janice of the Huntress having once again repeated her tale of what she had seen. Janice knew of such weapons, Lorraine herself having one! * * The "effectiveness" of firearms is overrated by those of the 26th Century. This may account for what happened later on. (LR)

"We avenge our Queen," Mark snapped, glancing at Sela Dai.

"No one ever thought it would come to this," Lara spoke. Lorraine had seemed to them all almost "immortal". So "awesome". A woman from a past now mostly legends and myths. The same woman who had been "responsible" for Janet Rogers, for everything else!

"We teach these blackguards what revenge means!" Jers spoke!

"Lorraine put me in command of this force," Sela spoke, standing up, drawing her sword, "And upon my blade I swear that I will avenge her death!" The others then drawing, doing the same!

"How bad?" Maris spoke, the Priestess' eyes glowing into hers. Lorraine seemed "small", her face drawn, pale, her hair a tangled black mass on the white of the pillowcase. Her breathing was almost imperceptible. She now appeared almost as one dead!

"She is alive, but her life is now in the hands of Lys," the white gowned Priestess answered the young Queen of Dularn. There had been none who had spoken against her for killing her husband. Such a "crime" as he had committed had horrified everyone! Maris had done the only "right" thing that she could have done, all now spoke. People were already leaving the city, fearing what might soon be descending from the skies, tales having been circulated of what could soon be happening. Maris feared not the birds, but what would happen should Lorraine die and Darlanis learn of it!!!

"She is my sister's foster mother," Maris breathed in reply. Gayle was Princess of Talon. Sharon was the Imperial Princess.

"This is a bad time for our country," the Priestess said.

"Make signals to Nighthawk, Seawolf, and Arrow to rejoin the squadron," Sela ordered, standing there. The Dularnians would "pay" for what they had done. She would teach them all what the meaning of "honor" was. They would feel her fury again and again as the seacoast villages burned, as men and women would learn to "fear" the ships that flew the double barred cross of Lorraine!

"It will be done, your highness," the midshipman spoke.

"Have the captains report on board as soon as possible," the Princess of Talon added. The Arrow would carry the "word" south. Sela had no doubts that Darlanis would declare war upon Dularn!!!

Maris, Queen of Dularn gently moistened the lips of the woman she had once tried to kill in battle. Lorraineyet lived, but would she recover? The bullet had narrowly missed her heart, the beautiful blonde Dularnian knew, but her injuries were serious!!! It would be dawn in a few hours, the start of a new day. There had been no reports of the Imperial ships since they had sailed back down the strait towards the ocean. Perhaps they were returning to Sarn. To notify Darlanis of what had happened here!* *The capitol of Dularn occupies the same area as the present city of Victoria on the island of Vancouver. The "disputed territories" over which this "war" was fought consisted of an area of territory from Cape Flattery down to Grays Harbor and east to Olympia. This area was considered "Dularnian" by Queen Maris, but was considered a part of the Empire of California by Empress Darlanis. A "study" of a map of the area is quite "interesting".

"Lorraine, you must live!" Maris wept, the tears rolling down her cheeks. She had at one time hated this woman, but now?

"Oh Lys, give me her life, forgive my sinful ways!" Maris prayed, her face buried in her hands. Suddenly she felt the touch of a hand and looked into the dark eyes of La- ra, her Nevada slave girl. The girl's eyes "understanding" as she nodded.

"You are good mistress," La- ra said, "Whatever they say."

I was aware of pain, of difficulty breathing, of soft whispers beside me. Of two women speaking, one in the accents of Dularn, the other in the accents of a woman of the Nevadas. The memories flooding back. Of Darl Jord and his pistol. Of Maris wild-eyed plunging her dagger into his black heart. Of her face looking down into mine as I tried to speak. Of Janice holding my head as I had slumped there to the cobblestones of the courtyard there before the harbor. Then only "nothingness" as I lost consciousness. I could see Queen Maris, the gold of her hair, a dark haired collared slave girl speaking to her in soft whispers.

"Janice!" I tried to gasp, only a croak escaping my lips!

"Lorraine!" Maris gasped, going to her knees beside me!

"Janice, where is Janice?" I whispered, my mouth so dry.

"Here, drink," Maris breathed, pressing a cup to my lips.

"Not your fault," I gasped, "Not your fault." I wanted her to know that. The fact that Darl Jord had possessed a pistol was only a further proof of his involvement with the infamous Tara!

"The ships are gone, as is your captain," Maris said to me. "I think they believed you dead," Maris then quickly informed me.

"Be 'bad' if they go to Darlanis," I whispered, fighting to stay conscious, to keep my thoughts from wandering off in every which direction. I wondered just what Princess Sela would do! I had a pretty good idea now of the extent of my injuries. Maris' doctor had at least been "competent" at her craft, I thought. I wondered if Maris had called in any of the Priestesses of Lys.

"Is there anything I can do?" Maris asked, her eyes glowing into mine. I told her I didn't think so. I

wondered why Janice had gone running back off to the ships after Darl Jord shot me! Why she didn't at least stick around long enough to see if I was actually dead or not! The thought going through my mind that she probably had "thought" as did most people of this era that anyone shot with a gun died instantly of the bullet! That explained it!

"Wish Darlanis had agreed to my suggestion," I breathed, the exhaustion such now that I could feel myself "losing it" again.

"Rest now, Lorraine," Maris said to me, stroking my forehead. I tried to tell her that she'd make a good nurse, but that was just too much for me then as the "darkness" came flooding back and I drifted off into a deep slumber almost like a coma!

"Your prayers have been answered, mistress," La- rasaid.

"At least she knows the 'truth'," Maris answered back.

"Lyshas been 'merciful'," La- rareplied softly.

Chapter Thirty Three

"Maris," I breathed in a whisper, looking up into her face as she held a cup of cool water to my lips, her other hand behind my head holding me up so that I might drink of it. Her eyes so much like Darlanis' orbs looking down into mine. She looked "haggard", almost "exhausted", the signs of nervous strain visible there on her beautiful face. I had a pretty idea now of what had happened from what this lovely young golden haired Queen had told me earlier. It was now in the evening, I having slept most of the day in a near coma. I was very weak, almost helpless. My thoughts yet confused. Yet I knew that everyone "needed" me now! I knew what Sela would do, or rather attempt to do. Darlanis too would be another. If something happened to me now there would be a war like the entire world had not seen since the 21st Century!

"I will try to contact your ships," she spoke softly, easing my head back on the pillow. I could see the fire crackling there in the fireplace, smell the odor of burning wood. I find such things pleasing to the senses. I am, I suppose, a "barbarian". A woman who was "out of place" in the "civilized" world of my own time. A woman who "understood" TRUTH that others tried to deny! Even Janet Rogers, may SHE bless her memory, didn't "understand"!

"You will find that they will not respond to your signals," I spoke in a harsh whisper, fighting to explain "things" to her!

"I will take the North Star, go myself," she smiled, stroking my cheek reassuringly. I don't think she was really thinking "too straight" here herself. I had no doubts what Sela would do!

"You will be going to your death!" I gasped, reaching out to her, trying to make Maris "understand" the "realities" of things!

Sela Dai, Crown Princess of Talon, checked the girth straps on her Tarl, seeing to it that they were in

good condition. A "birdgirl" who was "careless" about such things didn't live long! The distant shoreline of Dularn clearly visible there from the mainmast crosstree on which she now stood, the houses of a village visible if one used a good telescope. The little brunette giving the deadly "drop" beneath her little if any "attention" as she waved to her flying companions now readying their own birds. Then hoisting herself into the "saddle", she waved to the watching men below, the ship now swinging about into the wing so that the birds might be launched. A Tarl requiring such "help" especially when burdened down as these three were each with a rider and some dozen quarts of lamp oil in glass jugs. Sela recalling then the comment I had once made about "aircraft carriers" only a few days before! Her dark eyes suddenly filling with tears as she urged her winged mount aloft with a swift vicious kick of a spurred boot, the hatred for everything "Dularnian" burning hot in her heart as she sought revenge for the death of her Warlady.

Sela brought her bird down in a swift dive and released the flaming jug of lamp oil, the village beneath her already burning! People running here and there in terror, while from the sea the ships poured a constant stream of fire upon their fishing boats! Sana, the birthplace of Maris, now Queen of Dularn, was the first to feel the little Princess' hatred. It would not be the last!!!

"I don't know what to `do'," Maris spoke softly, pacing the room, her footsteps padded by the thick carpet as she went to the window and looked out into the darkness of the night. The flickering firelight highlighting her aristocratic features as she turned to face me. She reminded me very much of Darlanis then. I wondered just where Sela would take her vengeance. What it would be? Dularn like Californiawas very "vulnerable" to attack from the sea. With the Tarls Sela could attack almost anywhere! And if Darlanis brought more Tarls with her, more "birdgirls"???

"Can I be moved?" I asked in a hoarse whisper. It would be necessary to find my squadron. Let them know that I was alive!!! Put a stop to this before the horrors of war consumed everything!

"Any unnecessary strain could kill her!" the Physician said, looking into the burning hot azure of her Queen's eyes. I had no doubt that she was probably right. My own medical knowledge was adequate to tell me that I was seriously wounded. I had been extremely lucky. Another inch and Darl Jord would have killed me!

"We will avoid any `unnecessary strain' then," I said to the woman. Maris nodding, her beautiful face filled with "concern". The North Star was only ship suitable for such a task as this.

"It is `your decision'," the Royal Physician said to me.

"I am of the Warriresses," I answered her. Maris nodded.

"Maris," I said to the Queen, her tired eyes looking into mine. "There is something that you can do for me." I dreaded to ask it of her, knowing what the Priestesses of Lys thought of the use of such things, but it would help my recovery considerably!!!

"I'll fetch La- ra," she smiled, getting to her feet. La- rabeing her Nevada slave girl, who had been helping her attend me.

"This is something I need you to do," I answered, hoping she would understand why she had to "do it" and not another. Maris getting pencil and paper, writing down my words, which I feared did not make a lot of sense to her. It would be "necessary", I carefully explained to her, to do "exactly" as I instructed her!

"This is `witchcraft'," she breathed, the tone of her voice leaving little doubt that like all those of the 26th Century she was taught by the Priestesses of Lys to "shun" such arts as mine!

"I `founded' the Priestesses of Lys," I answered in a level voice. "Some of what they teach is not completely `true'." The Queen of Dularn nodding, going to the door, locking it, slipping home the bar. I thought such wise considering what I wished her to do. I did not know if it could be done. I would be putting my life in Maris' hands, and also much "more" than just my life! Once in the state of hypnosis, Maris could implant any "suggestion" in my mind she wished, and I could only "trust" that she would not attempt to "exploit" my helplessness for her own ends!

"It seems so `simple'," she breathed, looking at me lying there before her. I had decided to use the "candle flame" technique as being the easiest for Maris to use. I had no idea if she could hypnotize me or not, but it was well worth the attempt!

"It is also something that can be easily `misused'," I warned. I think that is "why" the Priestesses are opposed to it.

"You `trust' me to do this to you?" Maris breathed softly.

"We are `caste sisters'," I replied with a smile for her.

"I am a woman of `honor'," Maris said to me. She was.

"It is done," I said to Maris. I didn't know how successful she had been. She was not an expert hypnotist like me. Yet I had hoped that she might beimplant some sort of "suggestion" in my mind that would speed my healing. She nodded, smiling a bit.

"I thought it would be `different'," she smiled, looking down at me lying there before her. I expect she had heard the old tales that still circulated. The Priestesses of Lys I felt might be responsible for much of such. They were absolutely opposed to the use of hypnosis by anyone but themselves, although they did not of course call it that. I had no doubts that they possessed the secret of perfected electronic hypnosis to induce trance levels impossible to obtain by any other means. Such, I believed, explained many of the "myths" that are told about them. Their awesome powers are based upon exploitation of a technology that I first introduced in the 20th Century. I am their founder, although I suspect that they do not much "care" for that "fact".

"Get some rest," I said to her. She nodded, left me.

"That soup smells good," I told Maris with a smile as La- raspooned some out into a bowl the next morning so that she might feed me. I was still very weak, but my mind was at leastmore clear than before. I could once again think clearly, and "plan"!

"We have felt the first of your squadron's vengeance," Maris suddenly said to me in level icy tones. Her eyes burning hot down into mine as her slave girl gently started spooning the soup into my mouth. I had expected it would be about now we'd know.

"It is what we `expected'," I pointed out to her in reply.

"They struck atSana," Maris breathed, repressed fury in her voice.Sanawas the village of her birth. It is on the southwestern coast of the island perhaps a hundred miles from Arsana.

"Was there much loss of life?" I asked. I knew of Sela's temper. I had hoped that perhaps "cooler heads" would prevail. Valerie and Janice were "hot headed" like Sela, but perhaps Jers?

"There was ample `warning' for the people to flee," Maris replied in icy cold tones. I suspected that there was however little "left" of the village. The "firepower" of a squadron the size of mine is awesome by 26th Century standards. Sela of course also had the Tarls. Doubtlessly they had been put to use! "There were seven ships in the attack," the Queen of Dularn added. My total fleet had numbered eight with the ship from Talon. That meant that Sela had sent a ship south to Sarn, to Darlanis!

"How long before the North Star will be ready for sea?" I asked. Maris' emotional reactions to the news of the destruction of Sanadid not surprise me too much. Her father was the mayor of the village. It was the place of her birth. I suspected that Sela had decided to destroy it exactly for that reason too now!!!

"We should be ready by noon," Maris replied in level tones.

Chapter Thirty Four

"Careful!" Maris breathed as the sailors lowered me into the small boat that would take me out to where the North Star was anchored. She was nervous, jumpy, her nerves obviously bad now! I hoped she would settle down a bit once we reached the North Star. We might need all her judgment as soon as we reached the ocean! The barometer had been falling steadily in the last few hours.

"I'm a `tough old bitch'," I assured her, taking her hand.

"If anything happens to you....," she breathed. I nodded.

"Everything will turn out all right," I assured her, forcing a smile. We would have to catch up with Sela. That might be a bit "difficult" as I had no idea what the Princess would do next!

"I wish....," Maris breathed softly, the oarsmen taking their places. I wondered what they thought of all this? Of their own Queen going to sea like this with the "enemy's" very own Warlady!

"The day will come when we will all live in peace," I said.

"Give way!" the midshipman squeaked, "awed" by being in the same boat with two Queens. Maris was of course more "impressive" than me. I fear I was not just then very much to look at either! My face was pale, drawn, my hair a tangled mass, my body covered by blankets. I probably looked at least a good hundred if not more! (I am referring here of course to how people in the 26th Century look at such ages, as I am of course only an actual "40")

"Mankind has been fighting wars for thousands of years," Maris answered, perhaps more to herself than to me as the oars bit into the calm waters of the harbor. The North Star's masts now towering up into the cloud sprinkled sky, while a growing darkness to the west made me worry what the weather might be there!

"Some have been `justified', some have not," I said to her.

"Those who fought in them no doubt thought so," she said.

"It is too easy to see the `enemy' as `different'," I said.

"As something `hateful' to be destroyed," she smiled back.

"Frogs, slopes, geeks, honkies, wops, hunts," I agreed.

"Yours was a century of wars," Maris noted with a smile.

"I `gave you' Janet Rogers," I pointed out with a smile.

"You had no way of knowing about the Lorr," Maris replied.

"I think the Priestesses of Lys are of `benefit'," I smiled.

"Who you `founded'," Maris observed back with another smile.

"I fear I am `guilty' of much," I smiled back at her then.

"I don't like the way the barometer is falling," Maris said, standing there on the quarterdeck of the North Star as Ilaid on a cot beside her. She had first wished to have me put below, but I would not hear of it. I had no wish to be alone just now. To lie there in her stern cabin not knowing what was going on above!

"I think you are as `good' as Jon or any of my people," I said to her. I had absolute confidence in her abilities to sail her ship through anything. Maris' eyes for a moment glowed into mine as she nodded. I had been studying the North Star's design. I had a pretty good idea now of what the ship was capable of. I had no doubts that it was well commanded. The crew well trained. Maris, I suspected however was a woman plagued with "self-doubt". In that she reminded me much of Darlanis, another much like her. Both grew up without having a mother there when they needed her.

"I intend to reach Sanabefore it hits," she answered, her keen green eyes missing little as the North Star smashed into the now growing seas. Maris carrying more sail than what one would consider "wise" considering the weather. A "driven" woman, I thought to myself, lying there, swaying in my cot on the North Star's quarterdeck, a bit of spray from time to time wetting my face. The sky above now growing dark, the clouds moving swiftly.

"Or perhaps drown us all in the attempt," I smiled back at her. Maris nodded, smiled, tucked the blanket up a bit about me.

"I am Maris Marn," she said. I understood then her emotion. She had used her maiden name. Darl Jord was but a "bad memory".

"The weather grows worse, your majesty!" the North Star's first officer spoke, his voice filled with concern, and perhaps a bit of terror, the North Star now smashing into seas almost a dozen feet high in height. The spray now flying the length of the ship. The sky ahead dark, black, reminding me much of another time a little less than a year ago. The thought making me smile. I wondered what the 20th Century would have made of this beautiful Queen of Valkyries and her crew of "nordic barbarians".

"I have eyes," Maris snapped, dismissing him, glancing down at me. I saw her lips quiver, but no sound

came forth from them. I knew what she wished to ask, but dared not for fear of "losing face". She is a "proud" woman, Queen Maris of Dularn. One who I admire much even if we are perhaps "enemies" thanks to Darlanis.

"My confidence is with you," I said. She had so far done as well as I could have. I saw little cause yet for concern as long as she remained in command. She was fully as "competent" as my own husband. A better "captain" I thought than any of my own!

"I wish things were `different'," she breathed softly back.

"Dularn can never defeat Californian battle," I said. Darlanis was not a good military leader, but there were "others" who were. I thought of Lady Tirana. Once she had been Darlanis' Warlady long ago. People had noted how much we looked alike. I flinched as a spray of cold water suddenly splattered across my face. Maris was driving the North Star dangerously hard for such weather. My big first rates like Corsica could stand such, but the North Star was not as heavily built. Maris needed to order a reef in her main sail, and loosen up her jib and spanker a bit!!!

"The water's too cold for swimming," Maris suddenly smiled, giving the orders to do exactly what I thought she could do now!

"Getting worse," Maris spoke, giving me a smile. I felt myself in agreement with that. I would have normally have tried to either drop sea-anchors (a special sort of weighted sail that you drop into the ocean to help keep your ship from drifting so much) or simply "run for it", showing just enough sail to keep my way. I didn't much care to be this close to shore in such weather too! Even my big heavy "Squala class" first rates couldn't take this! The lighter North Star now "pounding" heavily, the creaks and groans leaving no doubt in my mind that the ship was overstressed to the point that Maris would either have to "yield" to the weather or have her ship start "breaking up" there beneath her! They had spread an oilcloth over me to protect me from the spray.

"How far now?" I asked. I was not that much familiar with things. Maris of course knew just about where she was in relation to Sana. The coastline easily visible there to starboard. I did not give much for our chances if we were driven ashore in such a storm as this. It was starting to rain now, the lightning flashing in the sky. The thunder like a giant beating on drums. The waves were I guessed fifteen to eighteen feet in height now. Whitecapped monsters that came dashing up to smash into the ship.

"Around that point there," Maris answered, pointing ahead.

"Is there a safe harbor on the other side?" I asked her.

"Safe enough," she replied, giving me a smile in turn.

"Your majesty!" the bosun cried, "We're taking on water!"

"Put the men on the pumps!" Maris snapped, standing there!

"I used to `envy' those who lead such lives as ours," I said to Maris. I don't think she "understood" just then what I meant.

"Let fly the spanker!" Queen Maris screamed over the sound of the storm. The North Star coming about, the water spraying over the side in a great sheet as I laid there cold and soaking wet on the cot. My teeth chattering from the chill as I watched. A wave, higher than the others, suddenly heeling the

North Star far over as she came about, the entire deck tilting, men stumbling, clutching at ropes, weapons, anything to hang on just now! And there suddenly before us the yet smoldering ruins of what had been Sana! Maris barking out her orders as the North Star like a defeated warrior now came limping slowly into the anchorage.

"Oh Lys!" I heard her whimper, standing there, seeing all!

"It was like 'something' out of a nightmare," Maris' father, Tarl Marn, the mayor of Sanaspoke. The handsome blond haired older Warrior glancing at me as I laid there on Maris' bed, still shivering yet from the chill and exposure. I prayed that I would not come down with some sort of respiratory illness as I had little doubt that it might well be the "end" of me now if I did!

"Was there much loss of life?" I asked, dreading the answer. I was very weak, chilled to the bone, muchly aware too of things! Of the "hatred" that no doubt was directed at me for all this!!!

"Only one, and she died trying to get something out of her house when it was in flames," the mayor replied. The people had fled into the forest behind the village. Sela had apparently not sought life, but only the destruction of property. Such had been my own orders to those under my command when we had left Trella.

"My orders are being obeyed then," I answered softly. I saw Maris' eyes burn into mine like hot coals as she understood! "My mission here was to demonstrate to the people of Dularn that I could destroy everything on the coasts of Dularn from the sea."

"There was a war in your era...," Maris breathed softly.

"I served in that war," I answered. Maris nodded back.

Chapter Thirty Five

"Twentieth Century Warfare?" Maris "snapped", the anger showing now in her voice as she stood there. That of the 26th usually didn't kill civilians as a rule, although Princess Tara had made "war" upon most everyone. My husband had lost his first wife to Tara's bloodthirsty attack upon a small island south of Dularn. The evil former Bajan Princess was well known to be the sort that left nothing alive behind her! I was however also well "aware" that Maris' own forces had attacked several coastal villages in California. Taking gold and women as their "booty" like the pirates of the Seventeenth Century. While Maris herself had never done anything of the sort, others certainly had! I didn't consider her "outburst" as being anything but her own emotions! A woman, older, crippled, sitting there quietly watching us both. Maris' own stepmother, once a commodore in the Dularnian Navy. I suspected "she" was the source of much of Maris' "abilities"...

"Sela destroyed only property, and nothing more," I said. I took a considerable degree of pride in her amazing self restraint considering the degree of "provocation" she had been given here! Many would have spread "death and destruction" like some plague! Apparently the "discipline" I had tried to instill in my own people had been more "successful" than I had hoped at the time then!

"They could have taken all our young women," Tarl Marn pointed out to his royal daughter. "Took

everything of value," Such was commonplace in warfare in this era. The women would be taken to slave markets, sold. Few if any would ever see their own homelands again. Even as Queen of Trelandar I had not been able to "do" anything about the matter. The men of this era are not the "wimps" of my own time. They are "aware" of being "men". They are willing, if necessary, to use "violence" to "protect" their own "interests". Even Sanda Talen had opposed me in this. There are "issues" that can be "settled" only on the battlefield. This was not clearly "understood" by the democracies of the past. Not all "issues" can be "decided" with the "ballot box". There are in all these matters "winners" and "losers". I understood, I believe that Janet Rogers "understood". I doubt that others did. I once pointed out to her that if the white race ever became "racially aware" as it once was, the various "minorities" might find things just a bit more "difficult" than they had in the past. It should be noted here that here in the 26th Century there are no "civil rights laws" or anything like them. One "earns" one own status in society now. There is much to be said for our system. The "status" of women, for example, is probably "higher" than it was back in the 20th Century, but women have had to "earn" their status, and it was not "given" to them by some "Supreme Court" as was done back in my own era. There are far fewer blacks, but this is mostly due to the after-effects of The War and the "race war" that followed just afterwards. Most of the black population in the 21st Century United States was killed in the bombings when all the major cities were destroyed by the orbiting Lorr battle discs in 2047 A.D. At the present time there seems to be very little "racial" prejudice as such any more, perhaps because the "blacks" of the 26th Century have learned over the centuries to "behave" in ways that do not trigger off any such reactions.* I * I do not "count" the "niggers" living in the ruins of Muskegon as they appear to have been effected by both radiation and AIDS. Aurora says "genetic deterioration". She is probably "correct". I strongly suspect that the blacks of the 20th Century would have done much "better" than they had they taken some "concern" about controlling the "activities" of certain members of their race. I note here that other "groups" in the past faced much the same sort of a "problem" and resolved it quite well by social control! Had the blacks of the past done the same they probably would have had much less "problems" than they did by taking the route they did of using "laws" to force people to behave in ways that they would not have behaved in otherwise. One does not "solve" racial problems by passing laws, although those of the 20th Century did not understand such things. Janet Rogers did, and Darlanis does. And with these "truths" stated, let us return now to my story...

"I suppose so," Maris admitted grudgingly to her father. I could understand how she felt seeing the ruins. Sanawas the village of her birth, of her childhood. She had emotional "ties" here. I had, or rather Sela had, destroyed all that she had held dear here. She still yet looked upon herself as "Maris Marn of Sana". That was her own "identity". How she "thought" of herself as. Now Sanawas but smoldering ruins, the rain now pouring down finally quenching the last of the fires my own forces had started with their missiles and firebombs. I had seen such before, a long time ago, in another land now "legend". "Technology" changes, but war remains the "horror" it has always been. This was not clearly understood by some back in the past. Death is death regardless of if it is caused by swords or perhaps by some energy beam fired from a spaceship above the atmosphere!

"Which way did the ships sail when they left here?" I asked. My original plan had been to sail around the island in a clockwise direction, doing as much "damage" as I could while doing so! Hopefully this might cause Maris to come to some sort of "terms".

"To the north," the woman answered, regarding her step daughter. I suspected that there was "bad blood" between them... There was about her a "competent" look, making me wonder to myself just a bit then if perhaps she was another a little like me?

"We will set sail at first light if possible," Maris said. I could hear the sound of repairs as we spoke. Maris was not one to waste time. I considered her one of the most "competent" people I'd ever met. I had no doubt that she was an "able" Queen.

"I am very proud of the woman you've become," her father said to her. Maris nodding, blushing a bit, much to my surprise!

"I've always wondered what you would be 'like'," Tarl Marn said to me as we ate. La- raat my side helping me as I hardly yet had the strength to chew my food. Even carrying on a conversation for any period of time exhausted me. I was sleepy, tired. I suspected I was running a fever, but that was to be expected.

"I fear I don't look like a 'living legend'," I smiled.

"She is 'that' and everything more," Maris spoke up.

"I once had a 'dream'," I said to them. Maris smiled.

"She is perhaps 'responsible' for 'everything'," she said.

"You are in our history books," Tarl Marn said to me. I had been quite surprised when I first learned that from Princess Janis there last year aboard the Ronda. Janet Rogers of course had thought highly of me. Perhaps she had tried too hard to live up to what she thought I would have expected from her. Unfortunately she did not follow all my advice! I suppose such is to be expected. Neither Darlanis or Sharon always follow my suggestions.

"I fear the 'truth' does not match the 'legend'," I smiled. Maris' step mother giving me a smile as she nodded in reply then. Marta Marn being the sort of a woman who I suspected might well have been a "legend" back in her own time, I mused to myself now!

"There was one of 'wrote' of you," Maris smiled. "She was perhaps an enemy of yours back in your era, although on the other hand her descriptions of you in some ways seem quite accurate."

"And just 'who' was that?" I asked her, quite puzzled now.

"Did you know a 'Carol Simmons'?" Maris asked me. I nodded.

"She was a woman I 'knew'," I replied, recalling her well.

I also remembered the incident between her and Jack that had ended my "relationship" with her husband. My husband having put his hand underneath Carol's skirt when she bent over her oven, the "touch" having made her "jerk" and burn herself on the edge of the oven! She had whirled about, seized a large meat fork, put it up to Jack's throat and warned him in no uncertain terms what she would "do" if he ever "touched" her like that again! I tried to "soothe" things over a bit, but Carol already "had it in" for me because my "friendship" with her husband and I never saw either her or Bob, her husband, ever again. They no doubt now lie together in some forgotten grave, one of the most loving couples I've ever known. Carol was a true female much like Lara!

"She wrote three books about a 'NEW AMERICA' that existed in the Twenty Second Century after some great natural disaster," the Queen of Dularn explained, "And you were the 'Princess Tara' in each one of them!" My character in the books being "Queen Lorraine of New California", said "Queen" being a most "unpleasant" person in some ways, although she was also said to be "the greatest swordswoman of all time" which may just be "possible" too!* * I could be "modest" and deny it, but it is probably true. (LR)

"I do have my `fans'," I smiled back, a bit "uncomfortable". I supposed however that Carol had her "reasons" to dislike me. I was something she could never be. The novels do exist, although they are only now in fragments and the entire series is "lost". In reading these, I have however formed the theory as "fantastic" as it may sound that Carol Simmons is the very same "CAROL" who wrote that famous book, "A KEY TO A WOMAN'S HEART" which is probably the most widely read book in existence if you exclude "THE BOOK OF LYS" which is the "Bible" of this era. "A KEY TO A WOMAN'S HEART" is the book every mother "hands" to her son when she sees that he is starting to "notice" that there are "two sexes"! I doubt that there is a married couple (assuming they are able to read) anywhere in the civilized world that doesn't have a copy! * *The "author" in my opinion may well have been Carol Simmons as she was in many ways much like "Lara". This was of course also the "book" that Gayle and Carl read that got them into "trouble". The book, I should note, was obviously written by a woman! (LR)

In the "NEW CALIFORNIA" novels Carol Simmons introduces the concepts of "clips" and "strap", of "neck chaining" women, although the "neck chain" was the "mark" of a slave girl, and not that of a wife as it is now. Her women are also "shaved", I may note here, although this is also a part of her famous treatise. If my "theory" is right here, and I don't see any reason to believe otherwise, given the evidence I now have, it appears that a certain "brownette" I once knew, and rather unjustly "hurt" by my own actions, judging from what she "wrote" of me, actually did influence the "future" as much as I or even Janet Rogers did!

"Perhaps she `knew you' better than you thought," Maris said, I fear a bit unpleasantly just then. While I had not been "responsible" for the burning of Sana, I had of course been Sela Dai's superior officer, the one responsible for bringing her here to Dularn in the first place. On the other hand I think Maris' own reactions were a bit "unfair" to me as I was certainly doing the best I could to put a halt to things as quickly as I could!

"We all have our `enemies'," I smiled back at the Queen.

Chapter Thirty Six

"I'm sorry for how I reacted there," Maris said to me after her parents had left to see to the possible rebuilding of Sana. "I guess I'm not as much of a `Warrioress' as I thought I was." I could "understand" her feelings. Sana had been her "home". I was however rather surprised that she would apologize to me now. She was not the "sort" of a woman that I'd expected such from.

"War is always a `shock' to the senses," I smiled back.

"Another would have `taken life'," Maris answered softly.

"Princess Sela Dai is more `level headed' than I expected," I smiled back. It would not have surprised me that much had she sacked Sana and taken women and gold. Such is commonplace here in the 26th Century. I was very "proud" of my little spit-fire!

"I think it is more the `example' you have set," Maris said.

"I fear I do not `live up' to my `reputation'," I smiled. There were those who thought of me as another

like Princess Tara. I suspected now that Maris had probably been one of them too. I wondered what things would have been like had I kept Maris better chained than I had. Would she have become another "Gayle" to me? On the other hand Maris was an adult woman, not a teenage girl. She also had had a "chip on her shoulder" that Gayle never had.

"Perhaps because few `understand'," she smiled down at me.

"I wonder why I do the things I do," I said, looking up at her standing there before me. I had come very close this time to dying in a "conflict" that seemed to have little "bearing" on my life as Queen of Trelandar. Had Maris avoided attacking Trelandar I would have had a difficult time raising the forces I had!!!

"We are women with `ideals'," Maris smiled back. She had "hers", I had "mine", and Darlanis had "some" all of her "own"!!!

"There is no `second Janet Rogers'," I said to her. Maris' eyes for a moment burned down into mine. "We have for too long looked for a `savior' to come and `save' us from our own folly." There were those of course who looked upon me as just such too!* * I have also suspected from time to time that Darlanis views me as a sort of "hired gun" to go out and do the "fighting" for her.

"I want a `better world' for my children," she said to me. Most women in this era expect to bear and raise children even if such is only a relatively "minor" part of their lives. With a lifespan of a hundred and thirty child rearing does not take as much of a woman's life as it did back in my own era. I too often wished to bear a child before I got any older, although without a "dispensation" from the Priestesses of Lys I had to wait until my third wedding anniversary before I might have my implant removed. Such is perhaps a wise policy considering everything, I suppose.

"Every mother has wanted that," I smiled back at the Queen. I supposed someday she would marry again. She was young, beautiful, and the "sort" of a woman who could have her "pick" of men. She stands about 5'8" and also reminds me "somewhat" of Darlanis although her facial features are not the "same" as Darlanis' are.

"I want my children to be `proud' of their mother," Maris said, staring out into the darkness past the stern of the ship. I could hear the sounds of men walking the deck above us, the common ordinary noises that one hears aboard a ship at anchor. The sound of someone hammering on something. A woman's voice.

"I'm sure yours will be," I said to her. Maris nodded.

"My sister has done well for herself," she said then.

"I did try to be a good mother to her," I answered back.

"Why did you let Darlanis take your daughter?" she suddenly asked, turning about, looking down at me lying there on the cot.

"I felt it `best' for Sharon," I answered. This has always been a "sore spot" with me despite the fact that I "know" I did do the "right thing". Darlanis is a better "mother" to Sharon I feel than I would be. At least Sharon didn't run off and get herself married at seventeen like Gayle! (I still think Darlanis had "something" to do with all this, although she denies it all!)

"You are the 'Lorraine Duval' of legend," Maris said softly.

"I am but a woman who 'tries'," I smiled back at the Queen.

"And not just a 'M.P.S' like me," Maris smiled back then.

"M.P.S?" I breathed, the words strangely "familiar" to me.

"There was a 'book' written back in your time," Maris said.

"'M.P.S.!' I smiled, remembering. Janet and I had tried to "refute" it over several nights of "discussion" without success. It had been written by a "Jerome Bigge" who lived in Muskegon. I had planned to sometime go "visit" the author, but never got the chance to do so. "M.P.S" (Members of the Privileged Sex) is a book that tells "truths" that most people tried to deny. While it is "biased" (I don't consider myself "privileged") I suppose it was once rather "popular", considering that it is still printed here in the 26th Century although almost "unknown" in California. It is often the sort of a book that a husband will sit and read in front of his wife just to "bother" her a bit. Especially if he glances up at her from time to time and "nods" to himself! * * To the 26th Century reader the book in parts makes little sense due to the changes in technology and the nature of society. The "fact" of female slavery, the legality of prostitution and pornography, all tend to reduce the "power" of women as such. It should also be mentioned here that divorce here in this era is less "favorable" to women than it was back in my own time. (L.R.)

"Hands on deck! All hands on deck!" the bosun cried. We were about to get "under way". The wind was not "favorable". I was glad that Maris was in command. I wouldn't have cared to have tried to sail the North Star out of a little harbor like Sana 'sin a wind like this. The seas were still high, I noticed.

"A good ship, a disciplined crew," Maris smiled then to me.

"And commanded by Dularn's finest captain," I smiled back.

"If I had a Warlady....," Maris breathed, regarding me.

"You couldn't 'win' against the Empire," I answered her.

"I don't wish to 'win' anything but 'peace'," she replied.

"Sometimes 'that' is harder to win than anything else," I said. It didn't seem to be something in any case I could "win"! It seemed that ever since Sharon and I had flown through that "GATEWAY" into this era that it had been nothing but conflict of one sort or another. I'd been "responsible" in a way for a "revolution" against Darlanis, something others had "done" in my name so to say. Fortunately Darlanis had "understood" the situation, although I suspected that she didn't "trust" me to much in a way, knowing well that there were those in the Empire who considered me to be a more "competent" ruler than she who now sat on the throne of empire. And then there was the recent "revolution" on Mars that had broken the dominance of the Lorr over the Women. And the activities of the Priestesses of Lys who had shown all of us their own terrifying powers. I wondered if they had the power of timetravel? There was also the "mystery" of Domino Tremaine. A woman who would be born to Darlanis sometime in our future, who would travel back in time to the 20th Century or the early 21st. A woman who would live to become the last Leaderess of Earth after the death of Janet Rogers. Whose last remains Darlanis and I had buried there near the ruins of the home of Bob and Carol Simmons. If she had been what she had "claimed", the implications were awesome indeed, especially with what we now knew of things!

I watched Maris now giving the orders, saw the ship being brought up to the anchor, men standing ready at the yards. I am a good sailor, but I would not have cared to sail out of here in this wind. That Maris felt herself "capable" told much of her.

"You would not `attempt this'?" Maris suddenly spoke to me.

"I would `kedge out' with the wind as it is," I answered. "Have boats place the anchors, then draw the ship up to them with the capstan." The "risks" of running aground were considerable. The sky was still mostly cloudy, the wind high, the air chill.

"I value your opinion, but I think...", she smiled back.

"I regret we serve opposite sides," I smiled up at her.

"That is an `opinion' I think I can share," she smiled.

"Look lively there! Stop thinking of your doxies!" Maris cried in a loud voice. She was "alert", well aware of things. I had "confidence" in her. More so than in any of my own captains in so far as sailing a ship went. In combat it might be another story, I suspected. Maris had little experience "under fire". I listened to her give her orders. Felt the ship move beneath me! Felt the wind fill the sails. Maris obviously had the "feel" of the North Star. It was to a certain extent her own "design".

I am of the 20th Century yet in my thinking. I can still be surprised by what a woman can "do" when she wants to. I suppose I shouldn't be by now, considering my "experiences" in this era.

The North Star was swinging under the pressure of the wind, the sails well filled, taut. I heard Maris snap her orders, the ship swinging about like a frisky colt, the "handiness" of the Dularnian fore and aft rig obvious in these tight quarters. None of my heavier ships would have been as "handy" as this, I noted!!

I saw the land seemingly spinning about, the North Star now on the other tack, dangerously close to land, to the shore of the natural cove that made up Sana's harbor. Maris was cutting it "close". A lot closer than I would have dared with my own ships!

"Let fly the jib, haul in that spanker!" I heard Maris cry! The North Star coming about just in time, taking the wind now on the other quarter. Maris standing there beside me, the wind in her lovely golden hair, her emerald eyes like beautiful gems as I saw her glance down at me for just a second. The "meaning" of her glance had not been missed. Maris did have her own "pride"!!

"You do handle her well," I smiled at the Dularnian Queen.

"Ship design is a matter of compromise," she smiled back.

"But the `skill' of the captain also counts," I answered.

"It is obvious that you are of the Warriories," she said.

"I hope we are not on a wild goose chase," Maris spoke.

"If Sela is following my plans, she should be somewhere ahead of us," I answered, spooning the soup into my mouth, feeling its welcome warmth go through me as I laid there on the cot. The clouds had

mostly cleared off, and I "welcomed" the hot sun.

"Causing death and destruction wherever she goes," Maris snapped back a bit "unpleasantly", I thought to myself just then!

"She has avoided taking life as far as she could," I pointed out, suspecting as I spoke that I was just wasting my breath now.

"She is not exactly an 'Imperial'," Maris smiled back at me. We of the Empire had the reputation, justified or not, of being a society of "barbarians" in the eyes of the Dularnians. We tended to view them in the same light, of course, considering them much as a gang of "Vikings" out to plunder whatever they could steal!!

"I would also worry about what Darlanis might 'do' if she learns of what has happened," I pointed out. If Sela believed me dead, and there was no doubt now that she did, then she might well send a message to Darlanis, and I had little doubt of "what" Darlanis would do! That beautiful blonde had a "temper", that I knew well from personal experience, and she would doubtlessly react much as I would have reacted had our positions been reversed!

"That has been a 'consideration' of mine," Maris admitted.

Sela Dai, a Princess of Talon, stared out over the restless sea, the bright sunlight reflected off the waves dazzling her eyes. It still seemed impossible that Lorraine was dead. That the incredible famous Warlady of the Empire of California was no more. Gone as if she had never existed. Yet, Sela vowed, she would see that Lorraine's death would be avenged! She would see to it that the Dularnians "paid" for the dishonorable actions of their damm Prince. That Queen Maris herself was brought to justice to answer for her crimes against the people of California!!!

"You think deep thoughts, my Princess," Mark said to her as the Squala tore through the waves, the sails drawing well in the fresh breeze. A bit of spray from time to time leaping up to wet the deck. "You seem weighed down by your 'responsibilities'." A pair of lovely dark eyes rising up to meet his as she now nodded.

"She was too 'trusting'," Sela answered, looking out to sea.

"Perhaps it was just Darl Jord," Mark answered, wondering if anyone would take that into consideration now. He rather doubted it. Lorraine had been "popular", more so in some respects than Darlanis herself. There would be thousands willing to fight. He supposed that Darlanis herself would doubtlessly lead them now...

Chapter Thirty Seven

Sela Dai had flown several times in Lorraine's airplane, although such was nothing like flying on the back of a living bird. The swoop of the wings, the heat of the feathered body between one's thighs, was nothing like flying in some mechanical device!

There before her was the large village nestled in its cove, the fishing boats and a couple small two masted schooners resting at anchor. Behind their Princess the two other bird girls of Talon on their feathered mounts, each bird burdened down with a dozen quart bottles of lamp oil. Such "firebombs", while crude by 20th Century standards, were still effective against wooden buildings in an era without any modern fire fighting equipment. Beyond the village the evergreens that covered much of Dularn...

The afternoon sun was warm on her body, the cloud sprinkled sky lovely in the late Dularnian spring, but the leather clad little brunette paid little attention to such things just then. Of considerably greater "concern" just then was the task at hand. Of bringing fire and destruction to the innocent people below!

"You're driving her pretty hard," I heard the first officer warn his Queen, Maris seemingly as "driven" as her ship was now!

"And what do you `suggest' that I do?" Maris snapped back, the tone of her voice like the warning snarl of a great predatory beast. The man shrinking back, well aware of her icy cold fury!!

"The speed of my squadron is limited to the slowest ship," I pointed out. On the other hand I had selected the best that I had available. Even the cargo schooner from Talon was "fast". I considered it possible that Sela had sent the cargo schooner back to Californiato inform Darlanis of my "death" instead of losing one of my warships. Such would have been what I would have done.

"I wish to catch up with your `Princess' before she does any more damage or takes innocent lives," Maris answered me back, the very tone of her normally friendly voice leaving no doubt as to the considerable emotional strain that she was under right now.

"You know your ship, its capabilities better than I do," I smiled back at her, enjoying the warmth of the sun. The cool fresh breeze off the ocean. I had "confidence" in Maris as a captain. She was probably more "capable" than any of mine were!

The man was an experienced big game hunter. The crossbow was "Californian" in design, capable of shooting a bolt a quarter of a mile! At a speed of sixty miles per hour a swooping Tarl is hard to hit. So "difficult" as a matter of fact that in the war between the Empire of California and Talon over a dozen years before only a few birds had ever been hit by enemy missiles. Missiles fired from the ground as the great hawk like birds swooped with their lovely riders over Darlanis' military forces below them. It was, I suppose, more a matter of "luck" than anything else to hit such a "target" with any crossbow at such distances.

Sela Dai's first inkling of "trouble" was when she suddenly felt her bird "stiffen" there beneath her, the crossbow missile having pierced it through one of the double hearts a Tarl has! A stiffening of the wings as the bird went into a glide was only a further hint of serious trouble! Its refusal to respond to the reins or to the strike of her whip leaving no doubts that it was badly hurt! And to her horror it obviously intended to land in the middle of things! Right down in front of the blazing houses!

The bird hit hard, stumbling, going down, Sela yanking herself free of the safety strap and jumping clear, well aware that she had come down right in the midst of the infuriated villagers!

"Kill her!" Sela heard cry, drawing her slim dagger, aware of how helpless she was before dozens of infuriated men and women as the villagers rushed to surround her, waving weapons of all sorts and yelling obscene curses at her that left no doubt as to what her "fate" might be at their hands. One even suggesting

to the others that she be thrown into one of the burning houses just as "punishment" for what she and the other two had done! Others now pointing out to sea, at the ships as they came in one after another in a line, firing their own missiles and lamp oil fire bombs at the anchored vessels waiting helplessly to be destroyed!

"We can send a landing party," Mark protested. Valerie Dunn shook her head in the negative. The villagers would be "waiting" in the forest. The arrows would be swift, deadly. All adult Dularnians were trained in the use of the sword, the bow. Such had not been clearly understood at first by those of the Empire. The "loss" of the Princess of Talon was a serious "blow" to their cause, but both Valerie and Janice had held out for going on with their mission despite the loss of first Lorraine and now Sela. A tear glistened unnoticed in his eye as he nodded back in reply.

"Smoke, your highness," the first officer said to Maris. I saw the look on her face as she turned to regard me for a second!

"It will be like Sana," I said to the Queen of Dularn then.

"You are a 'Warlady'," Queen Maris answered me back then.

"Bring her!" the mayor snapped, her husband at her side, a powerful Dularnian longbow in her hands, a quiver of arrows on her back. She had red hair, the color of the sunset, and the "look" of a woman who has lost much. Sela Dai, stripped, bound wrist and ankle, could only kneel there and await her fate, her long black hair half covering her features as she saw the ship...

"We captured this one," the mayor said, holding Sela by the hair so that she must look up into the features of the Queen of Dularn. "The ransom she will bring will help a bit to rebuild."

"So you are Lorraine's little 'spitfire'," Maris smiled at the beautiful naked Princess of Talon, glad at least that the enemy squadron had been deprived of this woman's leadership now!

"The others will carry on, Dularnian bitch," Sela snapped!

"If you wish, I will slit her throat," the mayor suggested.

"That would be a waste of a good woman," Maris smiled back.

"LORRAINE!! YOU LIVE!!" Sela Dai cried as she dashed across the North Star's deck, as naked as the proverbial "jaybird", her hands still yet bound behind herself. A number of the male members of the crew taking pleasure in the observation of her too!!

"I'm a tough old bitch," I smiled, giving her a warm smile!

"Lorraine!," Sela sobbed, going to her knees, Maris bending down behind her, freeing her hands so that she might embrace me.

"We have a kind of 'truce' right now," I explained to Sela.

"When that ship reaches Darlanis....," Sela breathed back.

"It will take time for Darlanis to gather her forces," I answered. Hopefully I would be able to "settle"

things with Maris before the Empress of California launched her attack on Dularn...

"I want you to cooperate fully with Queen Maris," I said to Sela as the Princess of Talon nodded. The North Star was driving hard through the waves in its attempt to catch up with my raiding squadron. Maris' azure eyes "hot" as they "burned" into Sela's.

"I'm not sure 'who' will be in command now, or whether or not they will continue on," Sela said, Maris nodding in reply. I had given my orders, but how well they might be obeyed now was another question. I suspected Prince Jers would be in command now. He was "experienced", and "capable" for one so young. I often now suspected that Lara had a lot to do with things too. She was both "mother" and "wife" to him, I had noticed earlier...

"I suggest that we continue our present course," I spoke.

Captain Mark Berson of the Squala watched the sun setting there in the west, the glowing red orb gleaming over the waves. Prince Jers Bisan was in "command" now, following the orders of a woman now only a "memory". A woman who had been born in the 20th Century, and died in the 26th. A woman of "legend", and yet one he had much admired, both for her courage and her intelligence. He watched a slave girl saunter across the deck with that provocative "walk" that many such developed after a period of time. He could find a few moments of "forgetfulness" in her arms, but then it would be just as "bad" as ever, remembering Sela Dai, his beloved little Talon Princess. Did she live, or had the villagers killed her? There was a remote possibility, Valerie Dunn had pointed out, that they might eventually take her to Arsana to be ransomed back to Talon. That was assuming that they hadn't just slit her throat, which he feared was much more likely considering how high feelings would have been after having their village burned by Sela and her other two bird girls. And when Darlanis learned of "what" had happened, what would she do? It looked like it was going to be a long war, doubtlessly "winless" like the last one, with thousands of lives on both sides being wasted!

"One thing I can say is that I've gotten first class care," I laughed, Sela sitting there watching me eat, with Queen Maris' green eyes like beautiful precious jewels glowing down into mine.

"You are lucky to be alive," Queen Maris said to me then.

"I was just lucky that woman mayor could control her people," Sela Dai spoke softly. She had told me much of what had happened to her. I rather tended to agree with her opinion too.

"We are a 'civilized people'," Queen Maris smiled back.

"Lorraine and I wouldn't be here right now if you'd minded your own business," Sela Dai pointed out in reply, regarding the lovely Queen of Dularn as we sat there in the stern cabin of the North Star. The sky astern already growing dark as night fell.

"She is a 'spitfire', isn't she?" Maris laughed in reply.

"One I think highly of," I smiled back at the Queen.

Chapter Thirty Eight

"The lookout has spotted a light ahead," the man spoke, Maris tossing aside the blanket, slipping down on to the deck, her brief night shift slipping high, revealing much of her thighs. I saw Sela raise her head, her eyes darkness in the pale shadow of her face. The slave girl La- rastirring, watching silently as I watched Maris throw her clothing on and follow the man out on to the deck. I wondered if we had found the squadron or just some innocent merchantman now sailing along the coastline of Dularn?

"What happens if they don't believe our signals?" Sela asked, slipping out of bed, padding over to where I laid on my cot. That had been a question I had been musing over myself now. The North Star was no match for any of my first rates, which were a bit "faster" too than the North Star, if not quite as "handy".

"Let's face that problem if and when it comes," I answered.

"Princess," the man said, bowing a bit to Princess Lara as the Seahawk followed the other ships, the Huntress in the lead. The starlit sky lovely, a bit of a chill however in the night air that made the Princess of Baja thankful now for her warm cloak.

"Yes?" Lara answered, turning, the throaty purr of her voice like a sensual caress. She was a woman many men had lusted for. But only one had ever won her heart. Earning the undying enmity of Tara Bisan, the former Princess of Baja, now a prisoner of the Nevadassomewhere in the ruins of what once had been Los Vegas.

"The lookout on Arrow believes there is a ship behind us," he said. The Arrow a few miles astern of the larger first rate keeping a close watch astern, although she personally considered such almost a "waste of time" considering their own "force" now.

"I'll inform my husband," the Princess of Baja answered. "And don't signal the Arrow," the Princess added, well aware that such signal lights could also be seen by the ship somewhere behind Arrow. While Arrow would be hard pressed to deal with any Dularnian raider, especially those of the "North" class, the Seahawk would easily best such a craft, especially with Jers in command. Only Maris Marn, the Queen of Dularn herself his "equal"!!

"Have me brought up on deck," I said to the golden Queen.

"Your majesty," the midshipman interrupted, all excited!

"What is it?" Maris snapped, not all that "pleasantly"!

"The ship ahead is turning about," he squeaked back.

"My people are 'competent'," I smiled at Maris Marn.

"You have signaled the other ships?" Prince Jers asked. The officer nodding, Lara in her shortskirt an erotic delight. The very sort of a woman that any red blooded man might dream about!!

"There is little doubt we are being followed by a raider," Lara spoke, her eyes then meeting those of her royal husband. "Arrow has decided to investigate," she added with a smile then. The captain of the Arrow was eager for "glory", she understood. Especially after the accomplishments of the Huntress' captain.

"No Dularnian is a 'match' for the Seahawk," the officer pointed out, eying Lara, who without her cloak wore little more than a slave girl might. Her well filled halter and the shortness of her leather skirt leaving no doubts as to her femaleness. The Arrow would be no match for a "North", even although Huntress had done well against the North Star with Lorraine in command...

"Come about, set all sail, go to battle stations," Jers answered, glancing at his provocative sensual brownette Princess. "I'm tired of burning innocent fishing villages," he added then.

"Could be an Imperial third rate, your majesty," the first officer said to his golden haired Queen as he came sliding down the rigging to the quarterdeck. I wondered if it might be the Huntress. I knew Janice would not hesitate to attack the North Star even at the cost of her own command. She would charge in, driven by hatred, use fire, and thinking of nothing but revenge!!

"Come into the wind, drop your sails, have your people stand away from the armament," I spoke to Maris in level tones then. I saw her nod, her eyes "flashing" for a moment as she stood there. Such an "action" is commonly regarded as being one of surrender! The North Star was well lit, something I'd warned Maris to "do".

"Do it!" Maris snapped, seeing the "questioning" look on her officer's face there in the soft glow from the binnacle's light.

I watched the sails of the other ship like pale dim ghosts there in the starlight, the Moon having set an hour or so ago. I mused over the fact that a ship with a black painted hull and black sails would be nearly invisible at night. Such might have certain "advantages" I mused, especially for those carrying out "raiding operations" against a foe with a "vulnerable" coastline.

"It is not your 'Huntress'," Maris said to me. She was a "younger" woman than me, and must have had nearly perfect vision!

"Perhaps it is just as well," I smiled up at the Queen then. "Now signal them and 'inform' them that Queen Lorraine sends her 'greetings' to those who have faithfully served her," I "added".

"I trust you know 'who' I am," I smiled up at the second officer of the Arrow as he bowed to me. I wore my golden tiara. I had Maris at my side, with Sela Dai propping me up just a bit... Signals from the second ship now approaching indicated that it was the Seahawk. And in the distance behind it the other ships. The rest of the squadron I had once commanded before all this...

"They 'said' you were dead," he breathed, regarding me as if he'd just seen a "ghost". I had come close to dying, but I had no doubts now that I'd see Trelandar again. See again those dear to me. Embrace an Empress tall and golden, perhaps even once again someday walk the arid sands of a world only a point of light in the Earth's night sky. Kneel before the ruler of an alienworld, take her antennae in my hands as sign of deep trust...

"I'm a 'tough old bitch'," I smiled back. I suppose I am.

"There is a term," I said to Captain Janice Hill, who nodded, "One unfamiliar to this era, but yet known in mine of 'going off half cocked'." She had indeed done so, perhaps with cause...

"I do believe it," she smiled, regarding me with affection.

"It is 'time', I believe," I said to those all crowded into the stern cabin of the North Star, "To 'bury the hatchet'." What "another" might make of all this was no longer my "concern" now. I was growing rather "tired" of fighting Darlanis' wars for her!

"There will be those among my people who will 'demand' revenge for what has been done," Queen Maris said to me in reply.

"That is 'your problem'," Princess Sela said to Maris.

"You should 'adopt' her," Maris smiled at me in reply.

"I already 'have' three or four children," I smiled.

"I would not care to make war on Talon," Maris said.

"And I would prefer to die of old age," I spoke up then.

"I would have thought with a sword in your hand," she said.

"The 'legend' and the 'reality' are not the same," I pointed out. In the 20th Century I had looked upon such a life as I lead now as being a lovely fantasy. Now I was getting tired of being "in harms way", of fighting battles, risking my life for another!

"Yet you are 'said' to be the greatest 'warrioress' of all time," Maris said, regarding me as I laid there on the stretcher.

"I happen to be rather 'skilled' with the sword," I smiled.

"The woman has yet to be born who can face her," Sela said. She seemed to have a puzzling "hostility" to Maris, I noticed...

"Which causes certain people to believe that I enjoy mortal combat, the shedding of blood," I spoke, regarding them all then. The gentle roll of the North Star was soothing, making me sleepy.

"You are of the Warriresses," Valerie Dunn pointed out, a glass of Dularnian wine in her hand. Such vintages are a rather "exotic blend", being "produced" from fruits other than grapes.

"Perhaps some of my 'fantasies' rubbed off on Janet Rogers," I suggested with a smile. I had "shared" much with the Earth's first Leaderess. Perhaps more than I should have done considering what eventually happened. Or did "others" have a hand in it?

"In a way we of this time are the 'result' of your ideas," I heard Jers say, his arm around his provocative and sensual wife. A woman who in many ways reminded me of "another" I'd once known.

Chapter Thirty Nine

"You felt," I said to Maris, the breeze off the ocean blowing her hair, the sunlight dazzling my eyes a bit, "That all I had to do was give an order and this conflict between our two societies would be over?" I suspected that Maris had held just that idea! Perhaps it is "understandable" considering "who" I am. Many people still feel that I am "the `second' Janet Rogers" that will "rescue" all of Mankind from its own foolish "follies". Since the "first" eventually "failed", I fail to see the "reasoning" here that "another" would do any "better" in the long run...

"I am tired of a war we can never win, against a foe that is determined to conquer the world in the name of an `ideal' that died over five hundred years ago," the Queen of Dularn answered. We were now sailing south, the North Star leading my squadron.

"Darlanis does have her `dreams'," I smiled in reply.

"Of an `empire' that can never be," Maris answered.

"I think she sees it differently," I smiled back.

"Sail Ho!" the lookout called down then to us.

"Perhaps it is Darlanis," I smiled back at Maris.

"Impressive," I said to Maris, seeing the ships.

"We have `faced' her before," Maris answered back.

"I see you came prepared for war," I said to Darlanis.

"I came to avenge your death," the Empress smiled back.

"Doubtlessly Maris' would have been among them," I noted.

"That `thought' has crossed my mind," Darlanis admitted then with a "glance" for Maris. I suspected that Darlanis would have also preferred it to be "blade to blade" in a personal combat... She is truly "of" the Warrioreses in the full sense of the term.

"It is said that your skill is second only to hers," Maris spoke, giving the Empress of California a "smile". I had once in passing mentioned such to Maris. Darlanis is awesome in a fight. I can "best" her, but it takes everything I have to do so too... Darlanis' "attire" was that golden mesh for which she is famous. She is awesomely beautiful, like only one "other" who ever lived. It is "said" in the old history books (the ones I have) that the woman Domino Tremaine (who we believe to be a "daughter" of Darlanis) was so beautiful that she could almost "hypnotize" men...

"I think you would have found it `adequate'," Darlanis said. I could sense the "hostility" that she felt towards the Queen of Dularn. Such "puzzled" me as Darlanis had at one time looked upon Maris in a quite different light only a few months before...

"I would prefer to live in peace with you," Maris said then.

"I share such feelings in return," Darlanis smiled in reply, the "smile" one that I sensed did not betray her true feelings...

"On the other hand you and I both know that Dularn cannot ever allow part of itself to be taken over by 'another'," the Queen of Dularn spoke in level tones. Regarding the tall blonde haired beautiful Empress of California from lovely green eyes as we sat there together now in the stern cabin of the North Star. The tension between the two women like the gathering of a storm.

"The territory you 'claim' was part of the United States of America before 'The War' and thus rightfully belongs to me," Darlanis retorted, her own voice leaving little doubt as to what her own feelings on this issue were. "I'm sure you have copies of the old maps," the Empress added, holding Maris' eyes with hers. Darlanis having maintained for years that she "represented" the old "United States", although I considered her "claim" here to be rather "fictional", as she certainly didn't control that much of the United States save for the States of California and Oregon. It is probably "correct" to state here that Darlanis does "represent" in a way what those of the past would call "civilization". The area in dispute consists of what would have been the State of Washington back in my own era, I may note here for the curious. In the last war Darlanis' Empire was able to conquer about half of it with heavy losses due to the Dularnian militias which acted mainly as a guerrilla force operating behind the Imperial lines. This, the southern half of what once had been the State of Washington was now "claimed" by both Dularn and the Empire. This is also where, I might note, that I had my "adventures" aboard the Huntress with the people helping out the crew of the Northland. The people in this area consider themselves "Dularnians" just as much as those who live beneath the "maple leaf" flag of Dularn.

"Now I know where the term 'dumb blonde' came from," I said.

"I take it you do not 'agree' with me?" Darlanis challenged.

"Objectively you have no claim in the legal sense in as so far as I know you have no blood relationships dating back to that era," I pointed out. It was true that her "daughter", if Domino Tremaine had been her daughter, had been the last "Leaderess" of the Earth, but this was something nearly impossible to prove now. "Also the nature of your 'parentage' would not indicate that you yourself are an 'American' in the sense I would have thought of." Darlanis was in reality "half Martian", although this was a "secret" that few knew but those close to the Empress of California.

"And Maris?" Darlanis challenged, not all that pleasantly!

"Is a 'Canadian' according to everything I know," I said.

"This woman carried out raids on Californian territory," the Empress pointed out, her azure eyes burning into those of Maris. "She is 'objectively' by our laws little more than a 'pirate'."

"I suppose a 'trial' of some sort could be arranged," I smiled. "We could have a 'jury' of the Priestesses, the Lorr, and the Women, all of whom I would assume would be 'impartial'."

"I see you are not yet recovered from your wound," she said.

"It is my belief that this present conflict was started by Darl Jord under instruction from Princess Tara Bisan of Baja," I answered. "As you will recall, there were a number of strange 'incidents' and 'attacks' which leads me to believe that Tara had a ship built similar to my own Squala which was used for raids on Dularn, and maybe there is also another 'North Star' somewhere."

"The design of my `North class' was well known," Maris said.

"As was that of the Squala," I pointed to Darlanis in turn.

"I have no desire to have an `enemy army' on my northern flank, or a fleet of `raiders' standing ready to `pounce'," the Empress of California retorted, "Nor another `bunch' of `revolutionaries' of the sort I had to `deal with' there in Trelandar."

"You cannot win friendship at the point of a sword," I said.

"You wanted this `war' against Dularn, I didn't," she spoke, reminding me of comments that I had made a few months before now.

"Darl Jord is dead," Maris said, "And from my own dagger."

"He did rape me when I was a young girl," Darlanis said.

"I have removed the chain from about my neck," Maris answered. A widow usually either has the chain "blackened" or wears a black cloth about her throat as a symbol of mourning. Maris had done "neither", as was "proper" considering the "crime" that Darl Jord had committed that had resulted in his own death! "And I have taken back my maiden name as proper," she now added.

"The people in the `disputed' territories are `Dularnian'," I said, telling Darlanis of my "experiences" with the villagers. People who had quite willingly "helped" the crew and officers of the "Northland" to attempt to take the Huntress while anchored close off shore. "They have no `love' for your `Empire' either."

"I have `lost' Trelandar to you, and I am not going to let everything I've ever fought for slip away now," Darlanis snapped. It was obvious to both me and Maris how Darlanis felt about this. I had discussed this matter with Darlanis earlier to no avail...

"You have a `decision' to make," I said to the Empress then. "You can either become what Sharon sees in you, or become just another `conqueror' like hundreds more have been before you." I knew how Darlanis felt about Sharon, how proud she was that Sharon saw her not as an "Empress", but as a heroic "righter of wrongs". "And that, Darlanis, is a decision only you can make."

"I think you will find it more `comfortable' on Sarnian Lady," Darlanis answered, sitting there on the bench beneath the stern windows. "It is rather `spartan' here," she smiled then...

"About where are we now?" I asked Maris, an idea "coming".

"About fifty miles south of the strait," Maris smiled.

"Would you care to join us?" I suggested to Darlanis.

"I see you have full use of your mind," she smiled.

"This is close enough, anchor!" Maris snapped. I suspected she was a bit "nervous" despite herself. Gathered further out to sea was perhaps the greatest fleet that had ever set sail in this time. Darlanis' and mine together numbered over two dozen heavy ships of war. We had between us half a dozen smaller vessels. I knew too that Darlanis also had tarls and bird girls to fly them. That big blonde tends to be

more "competent" than people realize!

I could see the village ahead of us there spread out along the shore, a few people peeking out at us here and there, although I suspected that most had taken to the forest for safety.

"This is territory that is still controlled by Dularn," Darlanis said, her eyes holding mine. The "dividing line" was a bit further to the south. I didn't think it would have made any difference. Those who lived to the north of Porlan had little love for the Empire of California. Or, I suspected, for its Empress!!

Chapter Forty

"Careful!" Darlanis ordered, the men of the North Star paying her little heed, their own captain standing there watching. I was still quite weak, despite the attentions of both Maris' and Darlanis' physicians. What I really "needed" right now was the services of a Priestess, but such will not serve on ships of war. The boat, rocking on the waves, there below me as my stretcher was lowered by sheers from the North Star. I saw Darlanis reach up forme, steady the stretcher as she stood up in the longboat. A seaman off the North Star foolishly grinning to himself as he looked up underneath the Empress' brief golden mesh micro skirt.

"You should have stayed on the ship," Darlanis said to me.

"And deprive you and Maris of my `wisdom'?" I teased her.

I watched Queen Maris now swing out on a rope, lower herself down into the boat. The look on her beautiful face left no doubt in my mind as to her thoughts in seeing Darlanis fussing over me.

The mayor of the village was a woman. Such is not uncommon among Dularnians, where the "status" of women is much higher than it is to the south in the Empire of California. I suspect that the reason is due to the fact that the Dularnian woman is trained in the use of weapons. Such also naturally gives her a different "outlook" on life I feel than that of her "sister" to the south. To Dularnians "freedom" and the "bearing" of weapons are two sides of the same coin. One wonders here... I still remember Janet Rogers' feelings about the "right to keep and bear arms"... We never did "agree" upon that topic, I should perhaps note here.

"Your majesty," she spoke, bowing her head. Dularnians do not kneel before their monarch as Californians do before theirs. I watched the clouds slowly moving across the azure vault of the sky. Saw a seagull circling. There were perhaps a hundred or so people gathered, watching, all of them above the age of thirteen or so armed. The Dularnian mother teaches her children to use the sword and the bow if their father fails to do so. She takes pride in such things. In the fact that she is a free woman living in a free country. I think that is why Darlanis was never able to "conquer" these people. Her army could occupy territory, but could never win a lasting victory. I do not think that even with the weaponry of the 21st Century such would be possible now. I am of the Warrioreses. Such things are "understandable" perhaps only to one of my own caste. Janet Rogers was not a "Warriorress", even though I understand now that she was fairly proficient in the use of firearms from what records we still have of her. She, like Darlanis, did not "understand" certain "things".

"I have brought with me those who do not believe that you are happier with the flag of Dularn flying

over your village than the Imperial Tarl of the Empire of California," Maris answered... The mayor was light haired, although not quite a true "blonde".

"Your `exploits' are well known, as are `hers'," she said, regarding me. No doubt her viewpoint of me was somewhat "different" from that I might hold. There are always two sides to these matters. To those of Dularn I represented something terrifying. "And my son died in battle fighting against `HER'," she added, a look in her eyes as she regarded Darlanis that left no "doubts"!!

"The Empire of California represents the `future' for Mankind, a return to the `glories' of an age that is now but `legend'," Darlanis answered with a smile that I was sure was forced.

"I know `enough' of that era `she' comes from to know that I would not wish to live in such a society," the mayor answered. I supposed that she could read probably as good as I could. Most Dularnians can due to their system of universal public education. Such is "supported", I might note here, by a system of taxation, not upon the entire population as was done during my time, but upon parents, who pay taxes according to their own income levels.

"And just how much `do' you know?" I challenged her back, a bit "curious" I must admit here to see how much she did know of my era. I knew that Queen Maris and those of the upper classes did know quite a bit about the history of my time and that of Janet Rogers which followed it, but did such "knowledge" also extend to mere fishing villages like this one perhaps fifty miles south of what was once Cape Flattery back in the late 1980's?

"I know that you used machines to travel about in, that you used great silver birds to fly in the air, and that you possessed weapons that could kill at a distance half way around the world." Her eyes burning down into mine as I laid there on my stretcher.

"We also had the electric light to turn night into day, the telephone to call people anywhere on the Earth, computers to help us work, and so many devices that would seem only `magic' now," I replied, wondering why I was "arguing" with a barbarian like her?

"And a government that `ruled' your lives even worse than `hers'," the mayor quickly answered, nodding at Darlanis standing beside me. "I for one would rather live in her `Empire' than in the time from which you came," the blondish woman smiled back...

"Perhaps she is right," Darlanis smiled at me, "Considering some of the things that you have told me of your era." There is no doubt far more "freedom" now than there ever was in my own time. There is legal prostitution, pornography, no "vice" laws, oris there restrictions upon the carrying of weapons. There are no "drug laws" like whatwe had , nor is there all the "licensing" and "regulation" that made up my 20th Century American society. Even Janet Rogers' "World Federation" was "freer" in some ways...

"I do know enough about your era to know I would never wish to live in it either," Maris now interjected, just to "rub salt in the wound" a bit, I suppose. I often wonder what Janet Rogers would have made of all this. She was one who believed that there must be "limits" to freedom, that if guns were "outlawed", then it would be easier to control crime. She was "successful", but not because of her policies regarding firearms, but more so because she introduced a system of castrating all violent criminals quite like what is done now. On the other hand I would like to see what Darlanis or Maris would do if they had to deal with the sort of "problems" that Janet Rogers had to deal with all the time that she was in charge of things. It is perhaps easy to criticize from a vantage point five hundred years in the future, but at the time I suspect Janet tried to do the best she could...

"There is something to be `said' for this one," I smiled.

"You would find the `Empire' of today different than the `Empire' you fought only last year," Darlanis spoke then, getting to the "grist" of the matter here. I knew quite a bit of "what" Darlanis had done, although I think Sharon had a lot to do with it. Darlanis was trying to live up to an "image" of herself that Sharon herself had gotten from a 20th Century "cartoon" series...

"I have `heard' of such things," the mayor now "admitted".

"But it is still the `Empire'," Queen Maris interjected. I watched the seagull circling overhead dive down, steal a fish from a fisherman's net while he had his back turned watching us.

"There is also Trelandar," I pointed out, "Where we now have our own independent nation within the Empire itself," I retorted. "Born in a `revolution' that I did have some responsibility for."

"And Talon is now a `part' of what the Empire is becoming," Darlanis "added". I had understood that she did have tarls and bird girls from Talon there in her own fleet. Obviously she had finally managed to settle things with Dala Dai during my absence.

"You have forgotten the Nevadas," Maris added sarcastically.

"My Prince does not let me `forget' I am a woman," Darlanis smiled back. Maris' marriage to Darl Jord had been "unhappy"...

"You're probably `good' at `that'," Maris snapped back.

"I did learn a few things from Lara," Darlanis smiled.

"You could debate each other another time," I suggested.

"Didn't really `accomplish' anything," Darlanis said to me sometime later on when we were alone and could speak freely. We would spend the night in the village and leave in the morning. I was admiring the workmanship of the furnishings there around me.

"Perhaps you `accomplished' more than you thought," I said, looking up into the beautiful azure blue of her eyes framed by that lovely golden hair. She is the sort of a woman you are forced to "admire" despite yourself. That was my first "impression" of her when I first laid eyes upon her there on the Ronda.

"What do you mean?" the Empress asked, propping me up a bit, holding a cup to my lips so that I might drink. I knew she had slave girls who could have done this, but she preferred to do it herself. I am perhaps the woman that Darlanis most "admires"...

"The people here saw the `woman' as well as the `Empress'," I said as Darlanis lowered the cup from my lips. Maris, despite her own beauty, had in a way looked rather "plain" alongside her. Such was, I supposed, due in part to Darlanis' "exotic" attire.

"Most men who see me do notice that `fact'," Darlanis smiled, getting up, walking about the room. I wondered what one "Hugh Hefner" would have made of Darlanis, Empress of California?

"Which is `why' you dress the way that you do," I answered.

"A woman's beauty can be a `weapon' just as the sword she carries," Darlanis replied, giving me a smile as she stood there. She was considerably "smarter" than many people believed she was.

"And sometimes one must `give' in order to `get'," I said.

"I will consider it," Darlanis promised me with a smile.

Chapter Forty One

"I knew you'd be more `comfortable' with me," Darlanis said, fussing over me like a mother with a sick child. Sarnian Lady now rolling in the swell like only a flat bottomed trireme can. These big galleys aren't in my opinion really all that seaworthy!

"We didn't settle anything with Maris," I now pointed out. The two women had done nothing but argue and behave like bitches. I had been rather disappointed in them both, especially Darlanis. She had stubbornly refused to listen to my suggestions that this entire "conflict" between the Empire and Dularn could be resolved if only she realized that there was just as much "justice" to Maris' territorial claims as there was to hers. That the road to peace between Imperial California and Dularn was based upon some reasonable understanding that Queen Maris was only after what had once been Dularn's before Darlanis had become Empress. I knew as sure as the nose on my face that Maris could be a useful friend instead of the dangerous enemy she was forcing her to become now!

"Someday perhaps she'll be more willing to listen to `reason'," Darlanis answered with a smile, standing there over me. The North Star had set sail back to Dularn, while our mighty fleet now set sail back home without ever firing a shot in anger!

"I think we've all learned much," I smiled up at Darlanis. Maris had learned that we too could carry out "raids" against her people. And with our alliance with Talon, such "raids" could be far more deadly and destructive than anything she could do back!!

"You did `teach' her a few things," Darlanis smiled, pouring herself a glass of wine and sitting down beside me, the sweet flowery odor of her perfume wafting into my nostril as she did.

"I have changed the `nature' of warfare," I smiled back.

"Not for the better," Darlanis answered, regarding me.

"You have an `opinion' on this?" I challenged her.

"I am thankful for the Priestesses," she smiled.

"And their limitations on our technology?" I asked.

"Especially upon your ideas of what's proper," she said.

"Like my frigate and its cannon," I smiled at the Empress.

"And muskets and all the rest," Darlanis noted in reply.

"A fleet of my frigates would be invincible," I smiled.

"Until others built the same," Darlanis replied then.

"But we would always have the 'advantage'," I said.

"You are 'truly' a 'Warlady'," Darlanis said to me.

"I only wish to live in peace," I pointed out to her.

"Your era was one of war like no other," she said to me.

"I think you are getting at something here," I said then.

"I have had time to think while you are gone," she answered. "The War was caused by us, not the Lorr, and my own daughter was the one 'responsible'," Darlanis said. I suspected that she had reread Domino's diary that we had found with her last remains...

"So?" I said, well aware of these facts. I felt they had little "bearing" in any case upon the current situation we faced.

"The 'World Federation' was your 'civilization'," she said. "It represented your ideas, your own concepts put into practice."

"As Janet Rogers and perhaps your daughter saw them," I said to her, wondering just "what" she was getting at here anyway now!

"When I first learned 'who' you were, I looked upon you as a 'second Janet Rogers' who would give us what the first had failed to do," the Empress of California spoke, standing there by the ornate stern windows of her flagship. The glare off the ocean I noted now highlighting her beautiful perfect features as she saw perhaps something that only she might see. "Visions" perhaps of a world that never could be. Of a civilization that was but now only a legend. The "reality" of that society now known only to a few historians. Those of the Caste of Scribes who love old books and the knowledge to be sometimes gained from their musty pages.

"And you learned that I am but a woman 'good' with a sword," I smiled back. I love Darlanis as if she was my own daughter. I have strong emotional feelings towards Darlanis, and she for me.

"The Empire of California is now only an 'Empire' in name," Darlanis said. I knew that. Like the British Empire of the 19th Century, time had taken its toll of what had once been its glory. Now Trelandar was independent, and so was Orgon under Queen Sharon, although Darlanis still had much to "say" about things still.

"But the 'whole' is still greater than its 'parts'," I pointed out to her. With Talon and Baja as "allies" along with the Nevadas, Darlanis and I had done well for ourselves, I felt.

"Perhaps with Darl Jord dead there can be 'peace' now," the golden haired Empress answered, staring out into the wake behind Sarnian Lady as we now all made our way back south to our homes.

"Princess Tara's organization still functions," I told her. I'd been fighting "that" in Trelandar ever since I became Queen. Like the Mafia of my own time, "organized crime" is something not easily eradicated even in a political system like mine where the Queen might "do" almost as she wished against organized crime... I had established a system of bounties, of encouraging informers.

"Doubtlessly an 'annoyance' to certain people, but nothing that we need concern ourselves about greatly," she answered back.

"Don't make the 'mistake' of underestimating that woman," I warned. Princess Tara had "friends" it seemed everywhere. "She is a woman with a mind as good as mine and the morals of a hardened criminal to go along with it," I "pointed out" to Darlanis.

"I don't think we have anything to worry about," she said.

"There is Mexico," I pointed out. The Emperor of Mexico had once offered a thousand golden crowns for Darlanis stripped naked and in chains kneeling there before him as another slave girl for his pleasure. A beautiful "trophy" to grace his growing harem...

"That is 'why' I wish peace with Dularn," Darlanis answered.

"There is something 'else'?" I ventured to the golden ruler.

"Queen Dala has decided not to allow her bird girls or their mounts to be used in warfare outside Talon itself," she answered. "She did make an 'exception' here in this case, one that I expected we can not count on in the future," Darlanis now "added".

"Perhaps she has been 'spoken to'," I ventured, suspecting just who that individual might be, "By the true ruler of Earth."

"The Priestesses of Lys have only the 'welfare' of humanity at heart," Darlanis answered. I wondered if she believed that...

"A 'theocratic dictatorship' backed by infinite power," I said, lying there on my cot. "Perhaps by LYS herself for all we know." I had once "met" LYS or SHE there on Mars last year. It is the sort of "experience" that you never forget no matter what.

"Perhaps 'that' is the best way," Darlanis answered thoughtfully, staring out the galley's ornate stern windows at the wake. "At least the Priestesses of Lys seem to have our 'best interests' at heart, which is more than you can say for the rulers of the past." I supposed that she was right. Even Janet Rogers at her "best" had not been all that "benevolent" a ruler of Mankind.

"I did have my 'role' in their 'founding'," I smiled back. I had made the "suggestion" to Janet Rogers back in the 20th Century that an "organization" similar to that of the Roman Catholic Church during the Middle Ages might be worthwhile "considering".

"There is much 'more' to you than most people realize," Darlanis smiled back, walking away then from the stern windows, stopping to stand by my side, looking down at me. "I do not think I would be the ruler I am had you not come into this time."

"I think that Sharon has had more 'influence' on you than I have," I said. Sharon almost "worshiped" Darlanis, although by now she was certainly aware of the fact that Darlanis was not the "SHE-RA" that

Sharon had first seen her as there the year before.

"She gave me 'something' that I never had before," she said.

"And you have been 'good' for her too," I admitted in turn.

"You once had your 'dreams', just as I have had mine," Darlanis spoke, reaching down, taking my hand in hers. "We have stood together, side by side, swords in our hands, against a common foe." We were, I thought to myself, "sisters of the sword".

"Perhaps the day will come Man is 'civilized' once again," I said to her. Darlanis nodding. The Priestesses of Lys possessed a nearly infinite power. What they "wished" would now "happen".

"And we will be only a few lines in a history book," she smiled back. I supposed that it was true. The children of the far future would read about us, in school books doubtlessly "censored" by the Priestesses of Lys for their own benefit. They would little know the "truth", the "reality" of what we had been.

"But we will have 'lived' in a way that they never shall," I said. "They will have never stood on the quarterdeck of a ship of war, 'faced' an enemy as I have done. They will never understand as we do the 'sisterhood' of the sword, all those 'qualities' that raise us above a mere 'survival'." I saw Darlanis nod as she stood there. She was, I thought to myself, a woman who in her own way had changed history much as Janet Rogers once had...

"The Priestesses will doubtlessly 'do' what even Janet could not," Darlanis spoke, walking to the stern windows, looking out. I supposed that it was true. They were now infinitely powerful. Mistresses of both time and space. They, or rather "those" they now served, ruled the Universe in the name of SHE who is mistress of all. That did explain why there were no interstellar Empires.

"I do not envy those of the future," I said to Darlanis now.

"They will never 'live' as we have," she smiled back at me. "And I think at least some of them will envy us," she added then. I thought perhaps that she was right, remembering my own life in the 20th Century. That of others I had known before coming here.

I relaxed in the sun, soaking up its rays there on the quarterdeck of Sarnian Lady. I had put myself "in harms way" and gained little from it. With Dala's withdrawal of her permission to use the Tarls of Talon I had no effective means of carrying the war to the Dularnians. I could launch raids on their coastal villages, as Maris and others had done to us, but for little if any gain. Such actions, while "annoying", accomplished little. We were as far from peace with Dularn as ever, I thought, watching Darlanis, magnificent in her golden mesh, lean back against the rail, her azure eyes now half closed against the sun's glare. She had her "pride", her "honor" to consider. So did Maris Marn. That had been the trouble. Neither side was willing to "give".

"We will be in Sarn tomorrow," Darlanis said to me.

Chapter Forty Two

"Princess Tara has escaped from the Nevadas," Darlanis said as her own personal Physician finished up with her check up of me. The woman having made the "comment" earlier that I was doing quite well for a woman my "age", apparently believing I was at least a century old instead of the forty that I actually am! I had been through a lot, and I suppose I didn't look that good...

"No doubt with 'help'," I growled, well aware of the problems she could cause for us. True, with Darl Jord dead she had lost an "ally" there in Dularn, but doubtlessly there were others who would be eager to "serve" the evil "Princess of Darkness". I could see the bay outside the windows of the Imperial Palace, the ships there at anchor. Tara would stir up trouble wherever she could, I knew, and there were certainly enough places for her to do so. Her criminal underworld had been something we'd been unable to stamp out despite our best efforts, and she doubtlessly had "friends" almost everywhere, I suspected, recalling our earlier efforts against her. She was an intelligent woman, perhaps as intelligent as I am, certainly more so than Darlanis, I knew.

"Captain Dunn of the Corsica stands ready to take you back to Trella," Darlanis said. The other ships had already sailed at my order back home. I saw no good reason to hold them here at Sarn when they might be needed elsewhere. Darlanis had her own navy and I had mine. We were having a problem with Mexican pirates right now, and I suspected Princess Tara's "hand" in this.

"Think we'll ever know 'peace' in our life times?" I asked with a smile, dressing myself with the Physician's help. I was able to sit up and everything now, but walking was yet a problem. I recalled my earlier conversations with Darlanis some days before. We were almost as far from peace as ever here, it seemed.

"That's what keeps us young," Darlanis smiled back at me.

"You are truly of the Warriories," I said to her then.

"As you are, regardless of what you say," she smiled.

"I trust everything is ship shape," I smiled to Valerie.

"I think it will stand your inspection," she smiled back.

"I understand that Sela left with the Squala," I observed, quickly glancing at the men, the rigging, the masts and yards. I had no doubts that Valerie was well aware of my "requirements"...

"Her finger was 'ringed'," Valerie smiled back, taking me from Darlanis, who had been supporting me during this small talk. I had not wished to be carried aboard the ship, or wheeled aboard in a wheel chair. I had managed to walk on my own two feet, with my right arm over Darlanis' broad shoulders. It had taken almost everything I had to walk up that gangplank, but I had done it...

"And her neck will doubtlessly soon be 'chained'," I smiled.

"Trella," Valerie said, lowering the telescope. I could just see the ruins of Los Angeles there to the north of the city. To most inhabitants of Trella and Trelandar such a place was a "no man's land". A place where strange beasts and even stranger men roamed. I had once encountered such a creature the year before. I recalled Sa-she- ra, her bravery, her courage. My eyes a bit moist as the memories came flooding back. She had died taking the bullet that Princess Tara had meant for me. Sanda Talen was a mother now, her son now six weeks old. He'd been born just after I'd left with the squadron for Dularn. Carl Talen's last "gift" to his wife, who I think he had truly loved despite Maris.

"Home," I answered, getting painfully out of my deck chair, and walking over to the rail, staring out over the restless sea. I was able to walk now, stand, although I tired quickly yet now. It would be weeks yet before I would be fully recovered from the bullet that Darl Jord's pistol had placed so close to my heart.

"Sail Ho!" the call came down from the masthead. "Due West!" the man called down to us, pointing with his telescope. From the deck we could see nothing. Valerie glanced at me, her thoughts showing on her attractive face. I nodded back. Trella was a major seaport. Anyone that far "out" was not likely to be a "friend". "Two masts!", the man yelled down. "A schooner!"

"General quarters, battle stations," I snapped back.

"Dularnian schooner, maybe Swiftstar," Valerie said, sliding down the rigging in a way that told much of her own experience. The large brass telescope slung over her shoulder like a carbine. Such instruments are usually used on a tripod, but can be used from a crow's nest if properly "braced". This one was a 25x75, an instrument of the sort that costs perhaps several golden crowns.

"Set every bit of sail you have," I answered in level tones.

"If we can catch them there will be a fight," she answered.

"The 'least' of my worries," I smiled. It was true that I would not be able to lead an assault from our deck to theirs, but I wasn't in any "doubt" that Corsica could "take" any third rate.

"I trust you will 'advise' me," Valerie said, then barking orders. Men dashing up the rigging to set the top sails, the stay sails and the stun sails. Corsica coming "alive" beneath us as she now smashed through the waves like a living thing in pursuit of this enemy ship just visible now on the horizon. Its own blue green sails making it almost impossible to see yet with the naked eye. That lookout had been damn "good", I mused to myself!

"Enemy is setting more sail," the lookout called down to us.

"A wise move considering the odds," I smiled back at Valerie as she nodded, standing there beside me. At least I'd reduce the enemy's strength by "one", regardless of "who" had Swiftstar now!

"Their speed will match ours, and they are more 'handy'," she said to me. I was well aware of that fact. On the other hand I had a newly refitted ship, a good crew, a capable and competent captain, and my own abilities at command to consider here. I am a better sea-officer than any who serve me. Only Maris of Dularn is my "equal" at seamanship, and she lacks fighting wits. As has been noted by others, I am truly a "WARLADY" in the full sense of the term, not just in the "title" bestowed by Darlanis.

"Life was getting a bit 'boring'," I answered with a smile.

"You are 'different' now than before," Valerie said to me.

"This 'old Warlady' still's got some fight in her," I said, recalling the comment that Darlanis' Physician had made to me then a week ago that I was doing pretty good for an "old woman".

"Your eyes are 'brighter', more 'alert'," Valerie observed.

"This 'old warhorse' still has a few 'charges' left in her," I smiled. Valerie giving me a "funny look" for

just a second. I supposed my use of an "idiom" from another era now history had confused her just a bit. Unicorns are always used by the cavalry now. Horses are only ridden by those too poor to buy a unicorn. Such things do not have "rational explanations", I might note.

"Whatever," Valerie answered, turning, yelling at a luckless seaman there below on the main deck. The ballistae and catapults now being wound up, our missiles being readied for firing at the enemy now visible just hull up there on the horizon where the sea met the sky. A number of white puffy clouds sprinkling the blue.

"Enemy is now sailing due west," the lookout called down. I glanced astern. Only a bluish haze marked the shore behind us.

"Their wives are going to have to wait another day," I said. Valerie nodding, looking backwards over the wake towards Trella.

"We're not gaining on them," Valerie told me. I was well aware of that fact. We had been doing a good ten knots for the last hour with the enemy ship still only a speck on the horizon!!

"Have the crew stand on the windward side of the ship," I said. That would reduce slightly our "heel" in the wind now and give us perhaps another tenth of a knot or so. I heaved myself out of the chair, walked the width of the quarterdeck, looking up at the sails. Valerie was "good", but I could see a few "flaws".

"Loosen up your main and spanker just a bit," I said to her.

"We're seventy miles out from land now," Valerie said to me. The sun was a glowing red ball there on the horizon about to dip beneath the sun. There would be a full Moon tonight, I recalled.

"We have supplies for at least sixty days," I said to her. The "look" on her face made me smile despite myself. Like most people of this era, sailing beyond the sight of land was something few ever did. Some of the Dularnians did, but they were more a sea faring race than those of California. "At our rate of speed we should reach Hawaii in about three weeks," I added, giving her a "smile". It was doubtful that we could keep track of the enemy ahead of us that long, but I didn't tell Valerie that!!

"Is there such a place?" Valerie asked, unaware that I was "pulling her leg" a bit here. Like most people of the 26th Century the idea of "land" on the other side of the Earth was almost like hearing that there was life on the Moon. There were even people who claimed that the Earth was as "flat" as a pancake yet!

"I'm rather sure of it," I smiled. It was doubtful that The War of 2047 had destroyed the islands, although they might be now only inhabited by uncivilized barbarian savages quite similar to those first found by Captain Cook in the Eighteenth Century. I saw no reason why the Corsica couldn't reach Hawaii in some three weeks of sailing, the ship being both fast and well fitted for a long voyage of that nature. While there was still an "Edict" against sailing to Asia, I didn't think that would apply in this case.

"We are now two hundred miles from land," Valerie said to me as I ate breakfast the next morning. All through the night we had chased after the other ship, gaining not a mile on them now!!

"All the more 'incentive' to keep the ship 'ship-shape'," I smiled back. I supposed eventually I'd have to forgo a breakfast like this one in another few weeks, but until then I had every intention of enjoying them. I tried to remember if there were any islands between here and Hawaii, but geography has never been my strong suit, and I couldn't remember just now if there were...

"The men are `nervous'," Valerie said to me, standing there.

"Hoist my flag over every mast head," I said, looking up. I saw her nod, a "puzzled" expression on her face. "The men should see then that they are sailing under the Warlady of California."

"There may be `discipline' problems in a few days," she said, voicing thoughts that no doubt had been preying on her now.

"Ships `inferior' in design to this one sailed around the world, which is round, I can assure," I answered, chewing on my bacon, which tasted just delicious, I might note for the reader. "Put the men to work, keep them busy, and tell your officers to see that there is absolutely `nothing' wrong with this ship!" I then added that I would be making a very "thorough" inspection later on in the afternoon, and I didn't want to find "anything"!

It was a beautiful day, the sails drawing well, the breeze off the sea fresh and clean, without nothing to be seen but the Pacific ocean in all directions now. Valerie had said that according to her best calculations we were now nearly three hundred miles from Trella. She claimed we had gained perhaps a quarter of a mile on the enemy ahead of us, although I rather doubted it! I had ordered stores shifted, the ship rebalanced. One could see the other ship as a speck there just before the horizon. So far we'd been able to keep them ahead of us. I wondered "who" its captain was. Who was in command of that vessel we were chasing?

Chapter Forty Three

The deck was "spotless", the rigging tarred, taut. I was very "thorough" this time in my inspection. The crew standing there watching me. I would pause from time to time, leaning back against the rail, the sweat "wet" on my body beneath my clothing. I used my eyes, my "sense" of how the ship sailed, everything. I was well aware that out here we were completely "on our own now"!

"I have no `complaint'," I said to Valerie, who was in her full dress uniform. I had worn my tiara, a black silk blouse, a leather skirt. A sword at my left hip, a dagger at my right. I allowed Valerie to help me up to the quarterdeck, stairs being a bit "difficult" for me yet. I felt it was time that the crew of the Corsica understood "what" our destination could be out here!

"We are in pursuit of an enemy ship, perhaps a pirate or Dularnian raider," I spoke. "They are presently attempting to flee us by sailing directly out into the Pacific, in the mistaken belief that we will eventually grow too terrified of sailing so far from land and turn back, letting them go." I could see them look at each other, the ship's girls to one side now whispering among themselves. They were all Peasant girls, and unused to the sea. "I am, as you all know, from the `time of legends', when men flew over this very same ocean in great silvery metal birds, when men like the Lorr could travel to other worlds, to the Moon that shines down upon us at night. Thus I assure you that this world is `round', and if we had food and supplies enough we could sail entirely around it in a year or so coming right back to where we first started." I watched them nod among themselves, perhaps overcoming their "fears" of the "unknown" in their trust in me...

"We have a well founded ship, one of the best the shipyards of Trella has ever sent down the ways, and

it is up to us to keep it so," I said, standing there, my hands on the railing before me. "We also have the 'incentive' now that our lives, yours, mine, are totally dependent upon the seaworthiness of this ship. No longer can we say 'good enough' and let it go at that. We all must give our 'best', our very lives at 'stake' if we fail in our duties." Pausing a second, I then added, "It is now perhaps four or five thousand feet straight down to bottom," seeing them nod. "And I don't think any of us want to go that route as yet now."

"You may dismiss them," I then said, turning to Valerie.

"How long are you going to keep up this 'chase'." Valerie asked early that evening after supper, standing there as I sat on the bench beneath the stern windows sipping at a glass of wine.

"We will eventually catch them or lose them," I replied.

"I think they may be leading us on," she ventured then.

"To where?" I asked. No pirate would have a "base" this far out from land. We were I estimated about four hundred miles now from Trella. Our course was still due west, the setting sun in front of us. We had ample supplies for six weeks, more if rationed. I had given orders to make sails ready for catching rainwater. Such would extend our supply if it became necessary.

"No knows 'what' is out here now, and our maps are five centuries out of date," she pointed out to me. I nodded, and suggested that a good lookout be kept. I suspected that the captain of the enemy vessel was still hoping that we'd eventually give up this chase. Most Imperial warships would have done so by now...

"All quiet?" I spoke, Valerie standing there in the darkness swaying with the motion of the ship. In the soft glow from the Moon one could still see the enemy there ahead of us. Were they "leading us on" as Valerie thought? That made little sense to me now. At the rate of speed we'd been maintaining so far we would reach Hawaii in another ten days, although our course was now slightly just to the north of that group of islands, I had noted.

"I make it five hundred miles from Trella," she answered. The Moon was high in the sky, slightly to the "west" now, I saw. It was just after two a.m. in the morning, "four bells" in the first watch, it being the century old practice to operate ships on a basis of four hours on duty, eight hours off duty. I nodded, took the telescope from its peg, trained it on the enemy...

"We'll lose them in the first storm we encounter," I said.

"Perhaps 'that' is what they are hoping for," she answered.

"They are still following us, my Princess," the Swiftstar's captain said, the brunette woman who looked up at him from the seat below the stern windows showing all the signs of nervous strain. He himself was terrified at the thought of sailing so far from land, but Princess Tara was not one that you dared to disobey. The flags of the pursuing warship left no doubt either!

"It is a warship of 'Lorraine's'," the former Bajan Princess hissed coldly, her dark midnight eyes blazing hot with anger now. The slave girl kneeling to one side keeping her head well down... Her freshly striped back left little doubt of her mistress' hot temper. Of the "terror" that clutched at the Bajan's black heart as she looked through the stern windows at the pursuing warship!!

"The maps we have are five centuries old," he now protested.

"The Earth is round, we won't fall off!" Taras snapped back!

"We can do no better than just stay ahead of them!" the captain protested. The ship was under considerable strain doing so!

"Maris Marn designed well," Taras snapped. "We will escape!" The captain now taking his leave, glad to be away from Taranow.

"Annette!" Taras snapped, the slave raising her eyes. "Serve me!" The girl getting to her feet, padding across the carpeted deck to fetch the wine jug. Then filling her mistress' goblet. Keeping her eyes down on her task, well aware of her flayed back. She hated the woman with a passion, but how could she escape her? They were hundred of miles at sea, further out than anyone had dared sail since The War so far as she knew. Tara had once spoken to her of a "French prince" who had crossed the Atlantica couple of years before, but Annette did not believe much that the evil black hearted Princess said. In any case she saw no hope of "escape" from the Princess except to cast herself into the ocean!

"You're 'worthless', Annette, you know that?" Taras snapped, the slave girl, dark haired, her vision blurred a bit due to the lack of the eye glasses she needed, nodding, kneeling down again. "On the other hand you are almost a dead ringer for Janet Rogers herself," Taras smiled, regarding the wench as she knelt there on the carpet before her. Janet Rogers herself in later years had worn eye glasses instead of the more commonplace contact lenses. Usually the Priestesses of Lys could "correct" most vision problems, but sometimes it was necessary for one to wear eye glasses.

"Mistress paid a dozen gold crowns for me," Annette said in a soft voice, kneeling there. She was slender, rather "pretty".

"At least ten more than I should have paid," Taras snapped.

"The ship chasing us cannot catch us, can it, mistress?" Annette asked, well aware that Tara perhaps had good reason for her terrors. It was one of the Warlady's, Annette Jackson knew, such having been her name as a free woman of the Scribes before the pirates had come and taken her from the little coastal village.

"Leave me!" Tara snapped, her tones making Annette leap to her feet and then dash from the Swiftstar's stern cabin to seek what "safety" she could somewhere else than in Tara's presence...

"I estimate we are almost six hundred miles from Trella," Valerie said to me as I ate breakfast. The sea air was fresh, brisk this far from land. The Pacific had so far remained so. I wondered for how long? For three days now the Corsica, every sail set, had raced through the waves almost due west, further and further from land. The constant creak and groan of the rigging, the hull telling of the terrific strain we were putting on the ship in this mad race across this uncharted, unknown ocean...

"Keep the crew hard at work checking everything," I spoke. So far there had not been any leaks or signs of excessive strain. I wondered about the ship there ahead of us. We had gained a bit over the almost three days of our pursuit, the ship now only some six or seven miles ahead of us, well hull up on the horizon now.

"According to the chart it is about twenty two hundred to Hawaii," Valerie said. We were a bit too far north for that set of islands, but I supposed if this chase lasted that long we just might end up having to seek the islands for food and more importantly water. Fresh fruits would also be important, I knew too.

It was a sudden gust of wind, nothing serious, but the Swiftstar's main topsail suddenly tore loose, flapping in the wind as Princess Tara cursed and screamed at the crew to fix it!! The loss of a knot or a bit more of speed was enough to terrify the former Bajan Princess, especially as she had seen the "Cross of Lorraine" flying from the mastheads of the pursuing warship!!!

Even with her blurred vision Annette could see the pursuing ship, its tall masts almost concealed by its sails, a mad plan of desperation going through her mind as the other ship "gained" on the Swiftstar. She had no doubt that Tara's crew would make the necessary repairs in time for them to escape Imperial "justice", but Annette had no wish to continue living as Tara's "plaything"! The Princess' disgusting sickening delight at being "lapped out" by a slave girl was something that Annette couldn't take! She would rather be dead than be forced to perform oral sex on Tara!!

"Something in the water ahead of us!" the lookout called down as Corsica raced through the waves, gaining now on the enemy ship ahead of us! Through the telescope I could see the enemy crew resetting the main top sail, fighting the blue green canvas!

"Someone holding on to a life ring," I said to Valerie, who was doubtlessly well aware of the same "fact". The Corsica now cutting through the waves at a good ten knots, spray from time to time thrown high in the air to come raining down on the main deck as we drove the ship in pursuit of this strange enemy vessel. I saw her eyes meet mine. To stop and pick someone up would delay us, allow the other ship to gain badly needed distance on us now!

Chapter Forty Four

"Let loose those yards, helm hard to starboard!" I barked, the ship swinging up into the wind, the bosun throwing the line as the Corsica came up to the woman there in the water. The mysterious enemy ship now drawing further and further away with every minute! Then as soon as the woman had been hauled over the side I snapped the orders that put us once again in hot pursuit of the Dularnian schooner now racing for the horizon and safety!

"We lost a lot of 'ground' there," Valerie said to me as a briefly clad slave girl was hauled over the side to stand dripping on the deck. I nodded. I would never leave an innocent to drown hundreds of miles out in the Pacific despite "losing" an enemy ship like now. I am in my way much like Darlanis in this.

"I am 'Annette', a slave girl of Princess Tara," the dripping wench said to me, her soaking wet shift clinging to her body in a way that left no doubts that she was completely naked beneath it. The sailor at her side holding her left arm grinning. The gleaming steel collar about her throat leaving no doubts either as to what her "status" was. Her words hitting me like a shock! PRINCESS TARA! That damn "Princess of Darkness"!!

"Valerie, we pursue that ship to China if we have to!" I snapped, my captain nodding, her reddish hair

glowing in the hot sunlight. Men already racing to reset the sails, the Corsicanow once again underway. The flags flapping overhead in the breeze.

"You are the 'Warlady Lorraine', mistress?" Annette asked.

"I have many questions," I said, putting my arm over her wet shoulders, letting her help support me as I descended the stairs.

"That is all I know," Annette said, sipping at the wine. I admired her bravery, her courage in casting herself into the sea as she had in the hope that we might stop and pucker her from the waves. Many captains, I knew, would not have bothered to do so!

"You took a terrible risk gambling that we'd save you," I said to her, the wench naked beneath the blanket I'd given her.

"Tarasaid you were in command of this ship," Annette said, letting me fill in the "rest" for myself. I wondered about that. "I knew you wouldn't let me drown out here," she added, her dark eyes meeting mine as I nodded in reply. We were almost a third of the way to Hawaii now, although our course would take us to the north of the islands by several hundred miles if we kept it.

"If I catch up with your former mistress I intend to hang her for a pirate," I said. Darlanis had been "weak" and allowed her to live. I didn't plan to be so "stupid" as all that. I'd have her hung from the main yardarm if she lived to be captured!!

"She is a very evil person, but I would not wish to see that happen to her," Annette said softly, not meeting my eyes then...

"There will be a considerable interval between the time the Sun sets and the Moon rises," Valerie pointed out to me as we stood there on the quarterdeck, the roll of the ship beneath us something that neither of us even took note of anymore. The Corsica had done well for an Imperial first rate, although it was obvious that Maris Marn's former flagship was our equal in speed!

"Double the lookouts, put two on every masthead," I snapped. I was not going to "lose" Tara if I had anything to say about it! She had also changed course a bit, heading straight towards Hawaii now. I supposed it was a "wise" move on her part considering everything. Among the islands she might stand a better chance of eluding the Corsica, although I didn't plan to let her!

"I only wonder how 'long' this can go on," Valerie answered.

"According to Annette Jackson (I had "freed" her) Swiftstar is not in the best of condition," I replied, "While Corsica is." Annette had also told me that Tara's water and food stocks were considerably lower than my own, although that meant little now.

"Barometer's now falling," Valerie pointed out to me then. "We could be in for a bit of weather pretty soon now," she added.

"Storm's coming down from the north," Valerie said as I joined her there on the quarterdeck shortly after midnight. In the light from the Moon I too could see the storm clouds gathering there to the north. The waves were larger now, heavy swells that spoke of bad weather ahead. Through a telescope I could see the lightning flashing in the clouds. A storm was what Tara needed to escape us, assuming that her ship survived the storm...

"Rouse the crew, everyone on deck, make ready to take in sail at my order," I answered, feeling the wind freshening a bit. The Corsica heeling a bit more, spray shooting up over the bow.

"All hands on deck! All hands on deck!" I heard the two bosuns yelling, blowing their whistles to hurry the men up a bit. The men dashing up from below, scurrying across the deck, and scrambling up the rigging like monkeys to the yards up above us. I didn't "envy" them there in the darkness feeling their way now!

"Tara's shorting sail," Valerie spoke, her eye to the telescope. I felt it wise that we did the same, starting with the stun sails and then the top sails. The wind picking up now, the men on the yards now muttering and cursing the rebellious canvas. Once we lost the moonlight it would be almost impossible to see!!

"Put three reefs in the main sails," I ordered, studying the wind, the 'heel' of the ship. Calculating the "stress" on the three masts. The waves were a lot larger now, the storm clouds covering half the sky. One no longer needed a telescope to see the lightning in them. It was almost possible to hear the rumble of the thunder now over the crash of the waves against the hull!!

"I want to take those stay sails down," Valerie volunteered.

"The masts will hold them," I answered, feeling the "heel".

"We're a long ways from 'home'," Valerie breathed softly.

"I want reinforcing ropes fixed to the masts," I replied.

"Tara isn't worth all of us dying for," Valerie said.

"I didn't 'hear' that," I answered, touching her then.

"We're pulling up on Tara!" Valerie breathed, the Corsica almost lying on her side now, the rigging, reinforcing ropes taut with strain. I had "eased" the yards just a bit, well aware that otherwise the sails would be torn from the yards. I was using the "vector of forces", relying upon the "feel" of the ship, its "heel", the touch of the wind on my cheek, the flap of the flags!

"Ease those yards a bit!" I barked, using the speaking trumpet now. I had everyone on deck, ready to pull on ropes and "do" whatever was necessary. I knew Corsica's "limits", and I was now sailing the ship right to them, her starboard tri-keel now completely out of the water due to the ship's extreme "heel" now! The "easing" of the yards changing the "heel" back a couple degrees, the striking of the waves against the hull driving us a bit to the south, making it necessary to loosen the jib to "rebalance" the ship. I doubted Tara's captain was as "competent". The Moon was now disappearing behind the storm clouds, leaving us in a darkness that was relieved only by the flashes of lightning!

"Damm Dulie holds together good!" Valerie growled beside me. The Swiftstar was falling back a bit, but still driving hard as Tara sought to escape. She was swinging to the south, trying to use the wind to escape us. I wondered if she was in "command" of the ship or its captain. Annette had said that he had seemed to be "competent" to her, but the word of a "landlubber" meant next to nothing in a situation like this. One of the stay sails now suddenly tearing free from its ropes, flapping in the wind like some gigantic flag to port. Men dashing up the rigging, out on the swaying yards, clinging to the safety ropes, well aware that out here in this storm anyone overboard was "lost" for good now!!

"Ease those fore and aft sails!" I snapped, the men swift to obey in the darkness as the Moon disappeared completely now. I was willing to "risk" the main mast, its sails in seeking even more speed from the Corsica. We could always get back to California with just the fore and aft masts. I saw Tara's ship perhaps a mile or so ahead now in the lightning flashes, her main top sail now rags, the yard itself apparently broken as the Corsica drew up on the other ship! I wondered how much "more" my main mast could take? Was I too reckless with everyone's lives??

"Forward ballistae! Cock and Load!" I screamed into the trumpet. Men now running to obey over our spray soaked deck! I could smell the rain coming in sheets behind us, rain that would conceal Swiftstar from me long enough for Tara to escape! Great waves heaving us up and down, the wind almost due astern now!!!

Then suddenly there was a terrible blast of wind, and with a terrible "crack" the main mast, the rigging, everything went over the side of the ship! I saw the wind hit the Swiftstar, the main sail breaking loose of its yard, flapping like some great flag!!!

"Loose the fore yards!" I screamed, my mind racing, seeking to hold the ship with her bow to the wind. If we broached to, I didn't give much chances for any of us surviving this storm... "Get that mast cut free!" I screamed, the helmsman fighting the wheel, the drag from the mast now threatening to swing us about!! I saw Valerie down among them, saw the swing of axes in the almost constant flashing of lightning, the aft sails now flapping uselessly while the aft sails held our bow towards the wind. Tara's ship now was almost hidden in the rain and the darkness!!!

Even with the fore sails helping, the ship was still being dragged about, our "drift" now almost half sideways, the waves striking on the port quarter, the heavy "slam" of the waves like that of a gigantic hammer against the hull! Then suddenly the mast was half free, and being dragged alongside the ship! The bow now turning back upwind, the waves striking now once again against the bow! Tara's ship now invisible to the south of us!

Then suddenly the last of the rigging snapped and the mast was free of the ship! Like a liberated bird Corsica once again "flew". Not as swiftly as before, but she yet could sail. And "fight", I mused to myself, well aware that damaged as we were, our speed would be far less than it normally would be now. On the other hand I had done what I had with good reason, taking a "calculated risk" that Corsica's own rigging would survive long enough to put us into range of the Swiftstar, where our heavier armament would have quickly brought Tara's ship to heel, I felt!!

"We lost her," Valerie now said to me, still gasping a bit.

"Maybe," I answered, standing there, soaking wet, chilled.

"It was a 'calculated risk', wasn't it?" she said then.

"That sudden gust was too much," I answered her back.

"I never could have done as well," she said to me then.

"We've lost Tara," Valerie said to me as the storm cleared off with the rising of the sun there to port. The Swiftstar was nowhere to be sight. Had it foundered during the storm? There would be no "survivors" out here. Only a slow death at sea. The Corsica herself was battered, her main mast now only a short stub sticking up a dozen feet or so from the deck. There was a crack in the fore mast, Valerie had told me, the men now "lashing" it so that it might hold together long enough to get us safely "home". I felt like a "failure". I had been too "reckless", too eager to capture Tara's ship. Now she was gone somewhere on this trackless ocean if she hadn't gone to the bottom from this storm!

"Set course back to Trella," I said, tired, exhausted, hardly able to stand up now. Annette at my side, her arm about me. "I have my `duties' as Queen of Trelandar," I added with a smile. It was time to go back home. "You have all done well," I smiled.

"There are four men missing," Valerie said to me as I ate a small breakfast there in the stern cabin. Over the side with the main mast, I supposed. I hoped that their deaths had been swift. There were also a number of minor injuries, rope burns and such.

"I will hold a service," I said, trying to stand, everything suddenly whirling about me as I collapsed then in Annette's arms! I was aware of Annette, of Valerie, of being undressed, then put in a bunk. I must have slept, although I had a horrible nightmare of swimming in the ocean, and watching the ship sail away!!!

"What time is it?" I croaked, seeing Annette there beside me. I could taste some sort of a broth that she must have been giving me, although I had no memories of even swallowing it then!

"Four bells," Annette answered, "The second afternoon watch," she added, which made it about six pm, I calculated then.

"The sun is still up, isn't it?" I said, determined to hold my "service" for those who had died in the cause of their Queen.

"You are very weak, your majesty," she answered. "The doctor says that you overstrained yourself and that you must rest."

"Go get Valerie, have me taken out on deck," I smiled back. "And `that' is an order from the Queen of Trelandar," I added...

"What was `done' out here last night will be spoken of for years among those who sail the sea," I spoke, propped up on a cot there on the main deck, the crew of the Corsica gathered around me now at my order. There are certain advantages to being a "Queen", I may note here. You give an "order", and people do have to obey them! "I attempted to destroy one whose evil is known to all of us, a woman who has been called, perhaps with reason, `The Princess of Darkness'. Brave men gave their lives last night for that cause. Just as they perhaps might have died in the ship to ship battle had we been successful in bringing the Swiftstar into range of our weapons." I had no doubts that Tara would have fought bravely. Even outclassed as she would have been, I have no doubt that it would have been no "easy" fight...

Pausing to gather my thoughts, I continued, "Let us therefore pray to Lys, She who is Mistress of All, that She will look upon them with mercy, and judge them not for their sins, but for the good they have done, just as we hope the same for ourselves." I felt that was the "best" I could do for them. Often I wonder how I myself will be judged when that "time" comes. Once I spoke with "SHE", who Men call "LYS" and the Lorr call "SHE-IT-ALL". I wonder if our activities have "meaning", if what we do

"matters". I like to comfort myself with the thought that it does. That because one Lorraine Duval and her step daughter Sharon flew into this era from the 20th Century that we have influenced history. As Darlanis and I once observed, we have indeed "lived" in a way that those perhaps of a distant future will only be able to envy!

"Land Ho!" the lookout called down, men dashing to the rail to look for themselves, although from deck one could see nothing.

"Took us a little longer to sail back," I smiled to Valerie. We had dared not carry a full suit of sails on the fore and aft masts. On ropes we had strung a couple stay sails across the gap between the two masts. The stump of the main mast a reminder to all of us that even the best rigged ship did have its "limits"...

"If you ever do make an expedition to Hawaii I'd like to be your captain," Valerie said to me. I wondered if someday I might just do that. There is a lot of the world I knew nothing about.

"We know that this class of ship is capable of doing it," I answered thoughtfully. While not as "fast" as the old tea clippers of the Nineteenth Century, my "Squala class" was faster than the ships that had been used for such exploration in the 18th.

"I still wonder what happened to Tara," she mused then.

And so on this note I will end my story. There has never been any news of Tara. Perhaps she and the Swiftstar did go to the bottom of the Pacific out there nearly seven hundred miles from the nearest point of land. On the other hand I doubt it as I was once told that she would become the "ally" of the being SHE called "THE EVIL ONE". The supernatural being we call the DEVIL!

Lorraine Richards

The Queen of Trelandar