

2569 A.D.!

THE DULARNIAN QUEEN

AN ADVENTURE IN THE SECOND DARK AGE OF MAN

By Jerome B. Bigge

Forward

Once again we return to the future. To a time of adventure, of "daring do", of brave men and women fighting great odds. We now again travel to Dularn, to that country we've been to before. This time, however, we see things through the emerald orbs of the lovely Maris, Queen of Dularn. Witness what she "witnesses". Fight against foes both human and "supernatural", and again face THE EVIL ONE, who we of this time know as the Christian "DEVIL"!! And for those who want to "know" what Maris Marn "looks like", I suggest you watch the soap opera "THE BOLD AND THE BEAUTIFUL", as Katherine Kelly Lang "is" lovely Maris Marn in face and figure. The only "exception" here being that Ms. Lang's eyes are "hazel".

Mention is made of "characters" who will not play a "role" for some time yet. Characters such as Darlanis' daughter, Lorraine's son, and the baby girl that Carol Simmons left with Maris to be raised by the Queen of Dularn, no doubt due to the "fact" that the Simmons were also well aware of "what" the future "held" for Mankind! (No greater "love" can any mother truly have...)

Is "demonic possession" possible? One wonders a bit here. I suggest that perhaps we don't "KNOW" as much as we think we do.

Jerome Bigge

Chapter One

I could feel the sweat cold on my naked body as I helplessly fought the bonds that held me spread

eagled there on my bed. The gag forced between my teeth now allowing me only meaningless animal like squealing sounds as the horrible "thing" opened the door and stepped into the bedroom. A horrid "thing" of rottenness and corruption, the bones exposed here and there where the flesh had rotted away! A "dead" horrid "thing" that should have been safely cremated three years ago! Reduced to ashes and then stored in an urn safely away in a vault there below my palace here in Arsana! The last "remains" of Darl Jord, once Prince of Dularn, who had died at my own hands for his violation of the Code of Honor!

"I want YOU, Maris Marn!" it spoke to me in a hollow voice, the horrible fleshless tooth filled jaws exposed where the flesh had now rotted away from its horrid face! My scream of horror in reply only a high pitched meaningless squealing as I twisted and arched, glistening wet with sweat. Now only a beautiful terrified animal fighting to break the bonds that held it helpless! Helpless before this "creature" that only the "EVIL ONE" himself could have sent to so "torment" the Queen of Dularn! "You were always so 'beautiful'," it "crooned" to me, coming closer now, a creature that filled me with horror just to look upon it! Eyeless sockets burning down into my eyes, a ghastly "glow" in them!

"My Queen, My Queen!" I heard a voice say, the creature now reaching for me, to put its horrid fleshless rotten hands on me!! I screamed, this time a loud shriek of terror, and then suddenly I found myself looking into the wide terrified eyes of Kathi, her gray eyes filled with fear as they looked into my own sea green! The voluptuous bodied blondish wench's pretty face filled with concern as she brushed the now dark sweat wet hair from my face! My entire body soaking wet with sweat, even the bed now "soaked"!

"It was a nightmare, Kathi," I said. "Just a nightmare." A woman of the Royal Guard now bursting through the door, her drawn sword gleaming in the light from the bedroom windows where they overlook the harbor there below the palace. She followed by two more, their polished steel helmets and chain mail over their warm fur lined leather jackets making them look much like the toy soldiers I used to play with as a girl back in Sana many years ago.

"It was a nightmare," I spoke in level tones, seeing them "nod" in reply. Another serving maid coming in on their heels, a woman of reddish copper complexion, who had "once" been my slave.

"Mistress should see a Priestess," La- rasmiled in reply, a heavy shawl over her shoulders against the late winter chill no fire could dispel here in the Royal Palace of Dularn. What those of the past had once called the Island of Vancouver long ago now. I thought what I really "needed" now was a man to hold me close. Someone "strong" that I could cuddle up next to so warm and soft. I "needed" a man as bad as any collared slut aware of her "sex"!

"It 'was' a bad nightmare," I "smiled", the guardswomen now leaving, nodding to themselves in agreement. This had not been the first time they'd heard the terrified screams of their Queen, although this had been the worst nightmare I'd had so far now...

"I'll build up the fire," Kathi volunteered, the bed now "cold" with the wetness of my sweat. I suspected that I didn't smell very "royal" just then either, the thought crossed my mind! Kathi tossing in coal into the cast iron stove, while La- ra, once a woman of the Nevadas, busied herself getting the fireplace going and some water heated for the bath that I badly "needed" now! The pair in their long woolen dresses a "contrast" in their way.

"It's snowing outside," I said, more to make "conversation" now than anything else, the white flakes drifting down from an iron gray sky. It was the middle of March, with spring hopefully on the way. I was "tired" of winter, of the snow and the cold. I wanted to get out, enjoy life, get the "winter fat" off myself. That little ditty, "The Queen of Dularn is broad in the beam!" no longer "funny" any more to a woman

who fought a constant battle with her weight. Who at five feet eight weighed one forty eight! Twenty pounds more than I weighed when I first became the Queen!!

"What your majesty needs..," Kathi "ventured", bringing in my breakfast while La- ra busied herself washing me down, "Is a man to keep her 'warm' at night," the grin on her face leaving no doubt in my mind as to her own sleeping "arrangements" right now. I muchly envied the wench, but such was quite impossible for the Queen of Dularn, who must observe certain social "proprieties"!

"Carol Simmons 'spoiled' her," La- ra "whispered" to me then. I nodded, smiling, well aware that High Priestess Tais would be bringing no more people from the "past" up into our own time, nor would the Simmons, a couple from the 20th Century, ever be "back" again now that they had served their purpose here in our era of restoring the "balance of power" between Dularn and California... I had their baby daughter Hope, a lovely child now eight months old who had been left with me to raise, Carol having said to me that she did not wish to raise a child back in the era from which they had come, not with what they knew about everything to come.

"As did 'others' before her," I smiled back at the Nevada. Kathi had been a slave girl on the estate of Lorraine Richards, the Queen of Trelandar before Carol had stolen her from Lorraine.

"She 'belongs' in a collar," La- ra "breathed" in reply then.

"No woman 'belongs' in a collar unless she is a criminal," I answered in level tones, well aware of the enmity growing between the two women. La- ra having been my own personal slave girl before I'd freed her, while Kathi had once belonged to the Simmons before they'd left our time to return back to their own last fall. I still missed them both, both Bob's intelligence and wit, and his wife's delightful provocativeness that left no doubts in anyone's mind who met her that she was a "woman" like few others! I still recalled too that morning there in Trelandar when she had faced the Imperial Warlady herself blade to blade, the "duel" in its way perhaps only the climax of "something" that had "driven" the lovely 20th Century brownette to become so filled with "hate" that she could think of nothing more than crossing blades with a woman who many have said is the greatest swordswoman of all time!

"Your majesty doubtless knows best," La- ra answered softly. I had spent several years in slavery in California, mostly on an estate in Trelandar, where my golden blonde hair and green eyes had made me extremely "popular" with men, although fortunately I never suffered too much "abuse" at their hands due to the rules and policies of Lady Lana, whose name had been on my collar then. I had also found "love" in the arms of a man married to another, a "situation" that later on led to serious trouble when Lady Lana was killed in battle and left her estates to one Lorraine Duval, a woman whom I was led to believe wished me to become her lover!* *No doubt Lady Sanda would prefer not to have me "mention" this, but as it is well documented by others I see no harm in it here. I am obviously a "beautiful" blonde, and I suppose Mrs. Talen saw this as a way of getting "revenge" against one she much disliked! My "epic" voyage in a small sailboat all the way from Trelandar to Dularn was the "turning point" in my life, making me "famous", and thus "eligible" for marriage to Queen Tulis' son, Darl Jord, of whom the less "said" now perhaps the better here. (M.M.)

"It is wrong for human beings to 'own' other human beings," I answered, La- ra nodding, well aware of my feelings on this now. It hadn't made me too "popular" with a lot of people, but I felt I was "right" on this issue despite whatever anyone thought now! I had not been able to "outlaw" slavery, but my feelings on the subject were well known here in Dularn, and had some "support"...

"I will brush your hair out while Kathi gets your clothing ready," La- ra replied, nodding to the former Trelandarian, whose ample rear end often got its "share" of "attention" from my men, Kathi being the sort

of a woman who enjoys "teasing" men whenever she gets the chance to do so, something that will no doubt someday get her into "trouble" despite whatever she thinks of it now!

"The blue woolen tunic and hose?" Kathi asked, holding the items up for my attention. My sword and dagger in their sheaths were fixed to my weapons belt slung there on the bedpost, a Queen of Dularn if "wise" sleeping always with "weapons" close to hand.

"We are allowing the Imperials to make the Pacific Oceanan `ImperialLake'!" the Senator exclaimed, standing there before me as I stood behind the podium upon the speaker's dais. "They have over half a dozen steam frigates in commission, and soon they will have three battleships against our two," he continued on. I knew that he spoke the truth so far as it went, but I didn't see that there was very much that Dularn could "do" about it now! A number of his companions now nodding as they sat in the semi-circular chamber, Dularn being a "democracy" with a constitutional monarch (me) whose absolute veto power often served to protect the people of Dularn from those who thought they knew "best" what the people really "needed", even if it wasn't what they "wanted"! This being a "failure" of the old democracies back centuries ago. It being known now that "freedom" is won with "arms" and lost by "ballots", such having happened back in the Twentieth Century...

"We are not without `allies'," I "answered" in level tones. "Queen Freydis is a good friend, and Sharon of Orgon, young and inexperienced as she may be, believes in the same ideals we do." This "last" had come as a big surprise to both Darlanis and Lorraine last winter, when Sharon Duval, the Queen of Orgon, had let it be "known" that she favored Dularn over the Empire in a dispute over whether Orgon should be "Californian" or "Dularnian". Sharon having maintained that Dularn was more a "peace loving" society than the more militarily aggressive Empire of California. I didn't mention Queen Valeris of the "Free Women", who was still a considerable problem to Queen Freydis due to covert assistance by the Imperials despite "agreements" they had made not to do so. This "assistance" having been carried out mostly by "Bajan traders" who were obviously very well "paid" for their "troubles"... "There are also the Wyomings, whose Prince will be here in Arsana in a few days," I added. "To sign a treaty that will unite their peoples with ours in a common bond against `those' of the south." There being no "doubt" in anyone's mind who "those of the south" were, the names of Darlanis of California and Lorraine of Trelandar names muchly "feared" by many of Dularn now with good reason.

Chapter Two

"It is a `work' of the `Ancients'," the man said, one of the caste of Builders, as he supervised his labor gang now pounding away with hammers and chisels against the reinforced concrete of the vault like structure they'd found outside the city of Arsana. "And it is obvious from its design that it was meant to `protect' something from the ravages of time," he added, giving me a smile. The falling wet late winter snow giving everything a coating of white, including the Queen of Dularn, who wasn't all that "delighted" in being called out to look at this latest "discovery"! The evergreens growing up about us now lovely tapering columns of white pointing up into the grayness of the sky over our heads. The mist of our breath, that of our animals adding its own "quality" to the scene. My unicorn, those of my Royal Guard shuffling and stamping about there behind us. The snow coating us all this wintry March day, the year 522 A.W. with a chilly coat of white* * Time was "dated" in this era from The War of 2047. (J.B.) The trio of

guardswomen with me speaking softly among themselves. My personal Scribe there at my side, quietly watching everything. A "discovery" like this would be "meaningful" to her, I supposed.

"Looks like a 'tomb' of some sort," I "ventured", standing there, the snow now coating my lovely fur coat, wetting my golden hair, the diamond studded tiara that I wore as Dularn's Queen. There was, in my opinion, little "value" in digging up the past although I suppose that those of the "learned" castes might differ with me on that. I am of the Warriresses, a "caste" not noted for "intellectual" qualities, but for the blood we "shed", the battles that we fight against the foes of our lovely island.

"Built awful 'strong' for that," the Builder grinned back.

"It's not likely to contain anything 'valuable'," I said.

"One never 'knows' about such things," he "reminded" me.

"Perhaps it contains valuable books," my Scribe ventured.

"Or a 'computer' like the one Lorraine found," I commented. I supposed a "device" like that might be "useful", although I had little "idea" why it might be, as Lorraine got little practical use of hers despite the fact that she bragged about having one... The Builder nodding at my Scribe, who now shrugged her shoulders, no doubt sharing the "opinion" that I was really just another "Warrior" who had little education or "interest" in "anything" but killing people and making war with other countries. I suppose I shouldn't have said what I did, but I wasn't in the best of "moods" just then and I just didn't care what I said now! The "fact" that they'd sent someone to bring ME out "here" was I supposed "proof" that they thought this was "important", but to me I couldn't see "why" they needed the Queen of Dularn for this. The structure was now quite obviously a "tomb", and nothing else!

"They're through," my Scribe breathed, the Builder nodding, as white as a snowman, the snow melting and running down my neck! I wondered to myself if down in the Empire they got Darlanis to come and "look" at every bit of "history" they dug up? I rather doubted it, knowing what I did about that tall golden Imperial!!

"There's something inside," one of the men called out. I smiled to myself, holding back the comment that there doubtlessly would be or those of the past wouldn't have ever built this tomb!

"Those are 'coffins', your majesty," the Builder said to me, holding the smoky torch he'd made from some pine branches twisted together. I repressed the comment that I knew what a coffin was! They were well preserved, although that didn't mean that much now as the Ancients had metals that were proof against almost everything. Those of the past building in steels that never "rusted". Like the Lorr they had even possessed the ability to travel between worlds, although this last had been their "downfall" when Mankind had attempted to destroy the Lorr with a gigantic comet "redirected" so that it would strike Mars and destroy the "ants".

"After five centuries there won't be 'much'," I answered. I was well aware that the ancients had possessed secrets of preserving dead bodies that we couldn't match today, but even so it was rare to find a body from that era still more than just bones. On the other hand someone had gone to a lot of trouble to build this "tomb", and the stainless steel coffins were obviously designed to preserve a dead body for as long as was possible here.

"We will need tools, and a place to work," the Builder said.

"I will give orders for such to be done," I smiled at him.

"Your mother was a famous Warriress," I said, cradling the little baby girl in my arms, Hope Lynn Simmons looking up at me. Carol had been my Warlady, my "good right arm", and a friend like none I'd ever had before. A woman who I had greatly "admired"... I had seen the tears in her eyes when she had held her child for the last time and then placed her in my arms, well aware that here at least she might live out her life without fear of what lived there beneath the surface of Mars. The horrid Lorr that in 2047 A.D. would come close to destroy Mankind in a great WAR... Hope was now a "Princess of Dularn", my own "daughter" under the laws of my country. In her I would still "have" my friend Carol!

"We have opened the coffins, your majesty," the man of the Builders said to me as one of my warriorresses ushered him into my private chambers where I was now enjoying my dinner. The thought going through my mind that whatever the "news" was, it could "wait" until I finished eating. The snow having quit, with a wet rain having replaced it, the wind having changed into the south. Cleo Landis, my Scribe, looking up, giving him a smile in reply. A dark eyed, dark haired woman, she was extremely "competent"...

"Were the skeletons in good condition?" I asked, chewing, the sky dark through the windows as the day now came to an end. In another week it would be "spring" according to the calendar. Such is always a cause for celebration here in Dularn, where the winters can be unpleasant due to the "after effects" of The War. Kathi holding Hope in her arms, cooing to her as women often do.

"The bodies were quite well preserved, your majesty," he answered, standing there, the guardswoman just behind him, her helmet and chain mail now gleaming in the light from the oil lamps. "And we have identified 'who' they were, your majesty," he said.

"Someone 'important'?" I smiled, wondering why it mattered? Kathi giving me a "grin", her body provocative under her attire.

"They once lived here in Arsana only months ago," he spoke. His words seeming to echo from the walls as I stared up at him!! "They were the 'SIMMONS', your Sealord and Warlady," he said now.

"I will come," I said, standing up, my dinner now forgotten. The news having completely destroyed my appetite for any food...

"We also found 'this' with his body," the man of the Builders said, handing me the strange book as I stood there looking down at the last remains of a man I had once muchly "admired"... In the other coffin had been the body of Carol, clad in a metallic mesh, a sword at her hip, the grayness of the hair leaving no doubts in my mind that they had lived for a long time after returning to their own time back in the year 1991. I took the book from his hands, his face now blurring a bit before me as I turned away, not wishing him to see the tears that then filled my eyes.

"You will seal these coffins, replace them where you found them, and 'repair' the tomb," I said, my tone of voice that of a Queen giving orders. I understood now "much" I had not before...

"It is 'late', your majesty," La-rasaid, yawning, her eyes heavy with sleep as she held a heavy shawl about herself. I had read much of the book, of things that I had known, but not really "understood" as such. It had been a story of love, of a couple so deeply in love that they died together, with their last wish only being to be buried together side by side in a tomb on what was then the Island of Vancouver, near what they knew would someday be the city of Arsana, the capital of Dularn. A short footnote by Janet Rogers indicates that she carried out their last wishes for them, although she did not of course know just

"why".

"How is Kathi doing?" I asked, aware that Kathi had been quite upset by the "find". She had been, after all, their slave.

"She is sleeping now," La- rasmlid. "The wine was strong".

"Their daughter is our Princess," I said to La- rain reply.

"Only their bodies `died'," the formerNevadasmlid back.

"They still `live' in our memories," I spoke, knowing that what they had stood for still was a part of "what" Dularn was...

(The Next Morning)

"Her arrival was completely `unexpected', your majesty!" the major domo said, the "ship" now entering the harbor much like one of ours, but flying the flags of Imperial California and Orgon!

"Sharonis not one to live by `protocol'," I smiled back.

"I need a `friend' to talk to,"Sharonsaid to me as we embraced there on the quay, her sailors in their brightly colored shirts andjackets no doubt wishing it was a bit "warmer" here... The sun leaping in and out from behind the clouds doing little to "warm" the day, although it was still "better" than it'd been the day before when we'd found the last remains of the "Simmons" in a tomb less than a mile from the city of Arsana. The children who had discovered the tomb no doubt having little understanding of "why" such a find told a tale that left no doubts of things now.

"I expect Darlanis wasn't too `pleasant' about it," I said.Sharon's attire jaunty, stylish, proper for a young Queen as her. I understood Darlanis' feelings in this, the sense of "betrayal" she no doubt felt as she had looked uponSharonas a "daughter". The "news" from Orgon indicating that Sharon and Darlanis were on opposite sides of the "issue" of Orgonian "independence"; such I knew having been "raised" by the new Orgonian Liberation Party... The Empire claimed that I was "behind" it all, which wasn't true, although to those of the Empire I was always usually the cause of everything... Their philosophy little changed from that held by certain Americans during the time of "Communism" when it was felt that there was a "Russian" behind everything that happened then!

"I feel terrible about `hurting' her like I did,"Sharonsaid softly in reply, looking up into my eyes as I nodded back at her. She is blonde, blue eyed, a "beautiful" woman in her own way now. Her green woolen tunic, fawn hose and boots were attractive. A cap and pheasant feather completing the Queen's attire. Mine was somewhat "similar", but in a royal blue I prefer.

"You have `responsibilities'," I answered, seeing her nod.

"It's not `easy' being a Queen,"Sharon"admitted" softly.

"Your people `come first'," I said, seeing her nod back.

"That doesn't justify what I `did' to Darlanis," she said.

Chapter Three

"I wonder if the 'Simmons' will ever 'return'," Sharon said to me as we walked the few yards to my palace overlooking the harbor. Her blue eyes meeting mine as I nodded in the negative. The ornate swords we both carried only a "part" of our own dress. Mine is a highly decorated weapon that has been worn by Queens of Dularn for generations, all the way back to Queen Denise herself!

"We found their last remains yesterday in a tomb perhaps a mile from the city," I answered, seeing Sharon nod, her eyes now meeting mine. They had "returned" despite Tais' betrayal of the promise she'd made to them. I know it's not her fault, but that was the way that I looked at it just then. It had affected me a lot emotionally, perhaps because of the "means" that they "used"! The "implications" of their actions leaving no doubts of it now! * * Bob told me one time that he didn't believe either he or Carol actually "belonged" in our time, but I rather tend to doubt this. On the other hand I think they were "used" by Tais for her own purposes as First Priestess as a means to "counter" Lorraine (MM)

"They 'believed' in the same things you and I do," she said, "Not in the sort of ideals that Lorraine and Darlanis do," Sharon added then, her eyes meeting mine, it being well known that Darlanis privately considered herself to be the "reincarnation" of Janet Rogers while Lorraine herself had once been Janet Rogers' "mentor" back there in the 20th Century as she herself relates. The guardswomen on duty coming to "attention" as we passed them, such women commonly being of the Caste of Warriories, "professional fighting women" in a way that was rarely known in earlier eras. It is not a matter of "skill", but more one of "attitude". As Bob once said, "There are no 'dangerous weapons', only 'dangerous people'." I tend to think that he was right on this too!

"Darlanis believes that what she does is 'good'," I smiled. Just what Lorraine felt about her own "activities" was something perhaps similar, although I think Lorraine is too much in "love" with making weapons, and thinking up new ways of killing people. Were it not for the Priestesses of Lys I have no doubt that by now Lorraine would be building up a fleet of steel armored battleships with heavy guns capable of firing highly explosive shot. She has in the past manufactured explosives, and attempted at one time to use the Tarls of Talon as an "air force" against my own country. I suspected that Sharon had a "story" to tell me, one that I had some suspicion here that I might not want to "hear" just now! This "visit" of hers to me made me "wonder" just a bit what was going on in Orgon? And Sharon seemed to be scared of something! Could she have started "something" with Darlanis now?

"So did Janet Rogers even when she was sending people to her 'Corrective Labor Camps'," the Queen of Orgon smiled back at me. Our footsteps echoing on the marble floors as our own retinues followed us. The paintings there on the walls a part of Dularn's history dating back centuries now to when the island was settled. The Queens and their Prince Consorts right back to Queen Denise.

"One never thinks of one's own 'actions' as 'evil'," I said. Dularn has had Queens in its past who "were", but who certainly didn't "believe" that they were. Only a woman may sit on the throne of Dularn, for reasons that have little bearing on things. There is too much "worship" of Janet Rogers, at least in my eyes. The woman was at best only a very intelligent "dictator", I feel! "Another" like the present Queen of Trelandar with the ability to control the minds of those who she ruled by electronic hypnosis.

"Darlanis listens to Lorraine too much," Sharon spoke then, hinting at "things" that I had "suspected", but had not known of. On the other hand Darlanis is an "ambitious" woman "dangerous" to those who live in nations bordering the Empire of California now. Said "empire" having "grown" thanks to her marriage to Prince Serak of the Nevadas, who almost "worshipped" that big blonde... The marriage of Lorraine's foster daughter Gayle, my sister, to the Prince of Talon no doubt had been politically "valuable" too.

"She has her `reasons'," I answered, well aware of this too. Our retinues now moving off, the serving maids busy as they got people settled, saw that proper "protocol" was observed here now. There would have to be a "state dinner", everything else that we would have to "have" now that Sharon had come to "visit" Dulam.

"I wonder if Man will ever be `free' again," Sharon said, standing there by the window, looking out at her ship floating in the harbor, the sails now furled on the yards, the crew no doubt hoping to visit the "fleshpots" and Arsana's dockside "dives"... No doubt the "hip swingers" would be delighted with lusty sailors and their silver coins, while the inn keepers would get their own share and drunken seamen would be a "problem" for the city's own guardsmen to deal with. The North Star, her yards bare of sails, a near sister to the ship that Sharon had used to come here now.

"The Lorr no longer `control' us," I pointed out to her.

"The Priestesses are little `better'," Sharon answered.

"They are `what' they `are'," I answered thoughtfully.

"Some of my stepmother's `handiwork'," Sharon answered.

"She `meant well'," I answered, knowing that of Lorraine.

"The road to hell is paved with good intentions," Sharon smiled back, the words making me "think" for just a minute here. Such Twentieth Century "sayings" were "alien" to one of this era. I had no doubts either that Sharon would eventually get around to telling me just "why" she'd come to "visit" me as she had here...

"I suppose it is `true'," I smiled back at the young Queen.

"I think I `trust' you more than I `do' anyone else," she said. Her words for a moment rather taking me "all aback" as the sailors say. "You're not `ambitious' like Darlanis, and you don't `glory' in war like my step mother seems to," Sharon added. The truth that Lorraine was the Warlady of California made sense. Darlanis' "pit bull", some people called the Queen of Trelandar.

"I'm `content' with what I `have'," I answered, not knowing what else to "say" just then. I did like Sharon a lot, almost as if she was a younger sister, the two of us more "alike" in some ways than even Gayle and I had been. Both Sharon and I came from "broken" homes, with step mothers that could never take the place of the mothers that we'd known. My mother had died when I was a young girl, while Sharon's had become a drunken sot from the emotional abuse that her father had heaped upon during the marriage.

"I `admire' Lorraine, but she's not `someone' who `understands'," Sharon spoke, standing there by the window looking out. "And Darlanis `expects' of me `things' I cannot ever give her..."

"You are learning that a `crown' has its `price'," I said.

"I feel a `responsibility' towards my people," Sharon spoke, turning, facing me. "And Darlanis doesn't `see' it that way... She feels that I've `insulted' her," Sharon suddenly blurted out!

"I see," I smiled. A guardswoman suddenly bursting in then before I could question Sharon further on this! The captain of my guards, Tori Wells, her ornate helmet leaving no doubts then! * * Bob Simmons used to "tease" her, calling her "Torrid Tori". I know the "story" behind this, but it has little bearing here as her 20th Century "namesake" has been dead for centuries! (M.M.)

"Your Majesty! There Is A Ship!" Tori "gasped", breathing hard, obviously rather "excited" about things here! "An Imperial Steam Frigate!" Sharon going pale, seeming to cower at the news!

"Darlanis!" Sharon whimpered, there obviously being "more" to this than what I'd thought! My captain now "staring" at the Queen of Orgon, then at me, her eyes showing her "feelings" here! Political relations between the Empire of California and the Dularnian Federation were "touchy" to say the best, especially now! Last year Bob Simmons, sailing under Freydis' flag, had sunk or damaged a number of Imperial warships assisting Queen Valeris...

"We will `greet' the Empress as protocol requires," I said. I had no idea of "what" was going on here, but Sharon had come to me, and I would stand behind her now regardless of what happened! My officer then leaving to carry out my orders as Sharon stood there looking at me, much like some child expecting a "spanking"!

"Darlanis was `pursuing' you, wasn't she?" I said to Sharon, the young woman nodding, the look of a "child" there in her eyes.

"My ship is `faster' than hers...", Sharon breathed softly. The heavy Imperial first rates with their armor plate and square rigging weren't noted for speed, while Sharon's ship was of a design that approached perfection for a fore and aft rigged vessel. She also had one of the latest steam engines for auxiliary power.

"I think I deserve to be told the `truth' here," I snapped. I could see smoke from the palace window, black smoke, the sort of smoke released by only a coal burning Imperial steam frigate!!

"There is a group in Orgon who wants me to declare our `independence' of the Empire like Lorraine has with Trelandar," the young Queen spoke, standing there at my side as I watched the black coal smoke rising up in the distance beyond the city walls. Darlanis had been forced to "accept" Trelandar's "independence", but she wasn't likely to "accept" the same in the case of Orgon!

"Which doubtlessly didn't `meet' with Darlanis' approval," I smiled, well aware from the reports I'd received of "conditions" in Orgon. I wasn't "behind" any of this, but I had no doubt that Darlanis would consider this just another "example" of "Dularnian `interference'" in the "internal affairs" of Imperial California!

"There was an `incident'," Sharon continued, her eyes meeting mine as I nodded. Darlanis sometimes "ventured" where even Priestesses feared to "tread" or so the saying goes now a days... "Darlanis got pelted with rotten eggs while giving a speech," the Queen of Orgon said, the "smile" on my own face something to see!

"It `happens' to the `best' of us at times," I laughed back, the "laugh" a bit forced as I knew the "seriousness" of this too! Darlanis was the ruler of California, and any "attack" on her was something extremely serious. The sort of a thing that could have serious repercussions! Fortunately Darlanis wasn't

the type to order people "executed" for such things, but I had no doubt that she'd been furious that any one would pelt her with rotten eggs!

"Darlanis' people got hold of the teenagers `responsible'," Sharon continued, "And she `ordered' them all enslaved for LIFE!"

"This isn't the 20th Century," I said, well aware that such a "crime" didn't really justify "that", but I supposed if I'd been "pelted" with rotten eggs I'd be pretty "pissed off" too... Punishment here in this era tends to be far more "strict" than it was back in Sharon's time, when even hardened criminals "got off" with hardly any "punishment" at all by our own "standards" today!

"I ordered my guards to take the children from Darlanis'," Sharon spoke, "Telling her that I would not allow such a thing!" The look of "awe" on my face at "this" I assure you was genuine! What Darlanis must have "thought" of all this was quite obvious!!

"Where are these `children' now?" I asked, fighting to keep my voice level at this "news". I had no "doubt" that Sharon did not understand the "insult" she'd done to Darlanis by doing this! I could only pray that I could "resolve" this without bloodshed!!

"Aboard the `Astarte'," Sharon replied, that being her ship.

Chapter Four

"I will go aboard the Imperial ship as soon as it drops anchor," I said, Tori nodding as she stood there in her armor. Her dark eyes meeting mine in a wordless "understanding" as I stood there on the quay, the Imperial first rate now coming in under steam, the smoke rising from its funnel up into the cloud spotted sky. It was late afternoon, chill, a shiver now going through me as I thought of "what" I might "face" there aboard the Empress' own flagship. That Darlanis would be "FURIOUS" I could take for granted, I expected, Sharon having had no "comprehension" of the seriousness of the "insult" she'd done to her own foster mother.

"I'd like to be a `grandmother' someday," Tori smiled back. I suspected that she already knew what Sharon had "done" and what the consequences could be if I couldn't "resolve" the matter now. She had a husband, a Physician, a couple children in their teens. With "population control" enforced by the Priestesses of Lys, there are no longer any "large" families like there once were...

"Let's just hope I can `reason' with Darlanis," I "smiled", thinking now of how much Tori reminded me of Carol Simmons, whose hair color had been much the same. I had, however, never told Tori that Bob had also told me once that she had the same "name" as that of an actress in "pornographic" movies in their own time!

"Don't wait for me," I snapped, grabbing for the gangway railing as the boat rocked beneath me, an Imperial officer looking down at me from above. I could hear orders being barked, the muffled sound of feet there on the deck above, the crew no doubt being gathered now to "honor" Dularn's Queen as she came aboard. A bit of "rust" here and there leaving no doubt that even Imperial discipline couldn't keep

up with the effects of wind and wave.

I climbed the gangway with a measured tread, wondering if I'd ever live to have "grandchildren" of my own? I was thirty years old, childless, a widow, and my "prospects" didn't seem too great now, what with Sharon's thoughtless "insult" to Darlanis' honor! The Empress herself now having been made to look a fool!

As my head cleared the railing Darlanis' band started playing the Dularnian national anthem, the Empress no doubt wishing to display to everyone that she would observe all the necessary "social protocols" regardless of the "insult" that had been done! Darlanis herself standing there on the quarterdeck, her husband Prince Serak of the Nevadas there at her side, and with them was "Pussycat", that swarthy Nevada slave girl who had served as Darlanis' "womb". The Empress herself being unable to bear children due to internal injuries she suffered some years before at the hands of Princess Tara. At the time, however, the "impression" I got was that of a "boiler" just about to "explode" from pressure! The crew, the officers of Sarnian Queen all standing there wooden faced, no doubt well aware of "what" had been done to their own beloved Empress! Darlanis is quite popular with her own people, I might note here, much more so with men than she is with women.

My own band on shore now retorted with the Imperial anthem, my orders being carried out to the letter to maintain "protocol" here regardless of what happened. The very "presence" of course of the Astarte leaving no doubts as to "where" Sharon had gone... Darlanis standing there, the sun glinting off her own tiara, her body covered by a heavy cloak against the "chill" of the breeze. She is a big "Viking" of a woman, a full five ten in height, and usually wears high heeled boots to make herself even taller yet!

"I give you `greetings', Queen of Dularn," Darlanis said to me when the music stopped, the formal phrase leaving no doubts in my mind that she too wished to observe all the social protocols!

"I fear the `one' in both our thoughts is just a bit too `big' now to `spank'," I answered back, hoping this little bit of humor on my part might "break the ice" and allow us to "resolve" this matter before it grew into something neither of us wanted... My comment here being based upon the first meeting between Sharon and Darlanis, where she did actually get a "spanking" for having "threatened" the Empress then with a cocked and loaded crossbow!

"I was `hoping' that you would be `reasonable'," Darlanis smiled back, the grins on the faces of her officers leaving no doubt that I had just "defused" a very "bad" situation here too!

"She is not of our time," I said, seeing Darlanis nod back. The sun low in the sky to the west dipping in and out from behind the clouds. The breeze chill, it being only the middle of March. I supposed Darlanis found it uncomfortable "dressed" as she was, the Empress' usual attire being rather "brief" and "provocative".

"My `authority' has been `challenged'," Darlanis said to me. A sudden cold chill going over me at the sound of her words now!

"She is but a `girl' who doesn't `understand' such things," I answered, well aware of the "Code of Honor" in such matters... Sharon wasn't even a "match" for me, and Darlanis' skill with a blade far exceeded my own, being almost a "match" for Lorraine's!

"She is a woman, a Queen, a member of the Caste of Warrioreses," Darlanis answered in level tones, standing there before me, the breeze blowing a few loose strands of that golden hair.

"A `child', a girl from another era, where `things' were done differently than they are done now," I quickly retorted now. "And think twice before you pull out that sword at your hip...!"

"Lorraine is pregnant," Darlanis "pointed out" to me then.

"In four months she won't be," I "retorted" to Darlanis. I knew that Lorraine would kill Darlanis if she ever harmed Sharon.

"My `authority' as Empress has been `challenged'," she said.

"Lys should have given you more brains, and less beauty," I smiled back. She is a stunningly beautiful woman, but not really too "smart". She is "fearless" in battle, but rather foolhardy. The officers on the quarterdeck now once again "wooden faced" as they stood there listening to this "interplay" between us two... Her husband standing there with a grin on his face, no doubt enjoying all this, the Nevada "sense of humor" often rather "dry".

"What would `you' have done, Queen of Dularn?" he asked me.

"I feel `flogging' would be more proper than enslavement," I quickly "answered" back. "Although that is of course up to her `Imperial Majesty' to `decide'," I added in "diplomatic" language, glancing at the Imperial Empress, who "nodded" in reply, her eyes, a beautiful lovely azure hue, gleaming into my green.

"Sharon shall be the one to be flogged," Darlanis spoke. I nodded, well aware that the situation was out of my hands here...

"`Gag her'," Darlanis spoke, Sharon standing there shivering in the cold, the oil torches set in the walls of the palace dungeon giving off a smoky smell as well as a flickering light that I thought "fitting" given the situation. Tori looking at me, the expression on her face leaving no doubt as to her thoughts here! The young Queen of Orgon stripped naked, and bound by her wrists to a chain hanging down from the rough stone ceiling overhead. A trio of three naked teenagers, one boy, two girls, cowering down in a corner of the room now huddled together in their own terror. The Empress herself clad in only a brief golden metallic mesh, a silver lined royal blue silken cape swinging there behind her. She wore spike heeled high boots of a beautiful "golden" leather. The precious gems of her golden tiara gleaming in the torchlight.

"I'll `do' it," I spoke to Tori, Sharon's eyes burning into mine as I then pushed the wadding of the gag in between her teeth and drew the strap around her head to hold it in place. I knew Sharon felt that I had "betrayed" her by agreeing to "this", but I saw no other "choice" now as Queen of Dularn. I had no wish to see another "war" of the sort that Dularn had fought against the Empire only a couple years ago, not over "something" like this!!

"`Stand back!'" Darlanis snapped, her eyes glistening. I did so, the whip whistling through the chilly damp air to "crack" against Sharon's naked back, the young Queen's sudden "uhh!" of pain leaving no doubt as to what she felt! The welt livid on her soft skin as Darlanis drew back the whip, a long bullwhip sort of whip, not the usual multi-stranded "cat" that is used here in Dularn for flogging "minor" criminals. The Empress now striking again, Sharon jerking against her bonds, twisting about a bit as she stood there, a second livid welt now joining the first one!!

"She will bear those marks for some time," Tori "breathed". The whip was of a sort that would cut the skin "used" as it was. Tori's dark eyes meeting mine as I silently nodded back in reply.

"I don't think she will forget again `WHO' Darlanis is," I whispered back, watching the three teenagers

watching their own Queen being "punished" for what she'd "done" for them. "And see that they do not 'interfere'," I added, Tori nodding, drawing her sword and then standing before the three, her naked blade warning enough to them not to interfere in "what" was transpiring here! Her polished gold plated helmet and gleaming steel chain mail the attire of the commander of my Royal Guard who protect me from any and all who might now wish "harm" to the golden Queen of Dularn. Her leather jacket and breeches part of the uniform she now wore. Like Darlanis and myself, she was wearing sturdy high heeledboots, the silver spurs fitted to hers the "mark" of the cavalry.

Sharonwas standing up well under the whipping, although I could tell that Darlanis wasn't "sparing her" either now, judging from the livid lash marks there across her back and buttocks now. The Empress laying on in a way that left no doubts as to her own feelings for being so "insulted" by one as dear as any daughter! The gag there between Sharon's white teeth no doubt insuring that she would not be allowed to humiliate herself by "pleading" for mercy when none could be granted! The tears glistening in Darlanis' eyes leaving no doubts as to her own true feelings here too!

I sawSharon"jerk" against her bonds, twisting about, "crying out" now,the lash drawing blood now as Darlanis "struck" the same place that she had struck before . The "snap" of the whip as it struck the young Queen of Orgon seeming to "echo" off the cold stone walls of the palace dungeon, the various instruments of torture here in this room making me "shudder" at the thought of what might be "done" to a helpless victim. The rack, the thumbscrew, the devices to twist cords tighter and tighter about one's head, all things that Dularnian Queens in the past had used upon their enemies to force from them "confessions" of "guilt", to force from unwilling lips "secrets" from those who had fallen into their hands. My late husband had performed such "tortures" upon people with an almost sadistic glee, but I had never done so, although Tori had once forced "secrets" from the lips of an Imperial spy who had been in the "pay" of the Imperial Empress... I never asked Tori the "methods" she used, although I later sold the spy into slavery, the chief Engineer of the Diana buying her. I jerked about as I thought I saw a "movement" in the shadows, my nerves taut,my more and more frequent nightmares terrifying me.

" Ahh, Eee !"Sharonsquealed into her gag, the blood now red on her naked body as she twisted about to look at her tormentor!! The young Queen sobbing, the tears running from her eyes, Darlanis herself "weeping", judging from what I saw, although this did not prevent her from once again slashing her whip againstSharon! The helpless blonde haired Queen dancing and twisting in agony as I stood watching, the horror of seeing all this filling my mind! This horrid "punishment" of a young woman that I could not stop!!

Chapter Five

"Don't 'interfere'," Darlanis snapped, flinging the whip to one side,Sharon's naked body glistening with sweat, her body now crisscrossed from shoulders to below her buttocks with bleeding welts! How many times she'd been "struck" I didn't know, but I'd say at least three dozen times, and with a whip that was made to "cut" into one's skin! The sort of a whip used on animals, not on human beings! A long cruellash a good seven feet long too!!

Sharon herself hung sobbing, a beaten animal, no longer the proud young Queen she'd been. The three Orgonian teenagers cowering in the corner of the dungeon before my captain wide eyed, a look of "terror" on their faces that left no doubts as to their feelings! Darlanis had not said what she "planned" to

"do" to them, and I knew that even if she wished their lives, there would be nothing that I could "do" about it now. She is a "dominant" woman, one "born to rule", unlike me, and I could only submit to her wishes, whatever they might be here or risk another "war"...

"Stand aside," Darlanis snapped at Tori, who quickly did so. My captain returning to stand at my side, her eyes meeting mine. I thought of Lorraine, how "easily" she'd "broken" me one time. Darlanis was much the "same", another from the same "mold". The sort of a woman who "commands", who gives "orders", who is always "obeyed". I didn't think Sharon would ever try to "resist" her again now, although this was not something I could be sure of as no doubt Lorraine might be the determining factor here some day!

"I'm glad I'm a 'Dularnian'," Tori whispered softly to me. Darlanis now speaking to the three teenagers, two girls, one boy of about sixteen. Much to my surprise he had an "erection" too! The Empress then lifting her golden mesh skirt, the first girl pressing her lips against the Californian's body, "kissing her strap" as slave girls sometimes are required to do by mistresses!

"She would have been 'Queen of Dularn' if her brother hadn't 'done' what he did," I whispered to Tori, watching the scene play out there before us. The second girl now kissing Darlanis there. The boy's erection leaving no doubts that like many young men he found a totally "dominant" woman now extremely sexually arousing!

"I wonder if Darlanis sees that 'bone'," Tori grinned back, the Empress speaking to the boy in low almost whispered tones. I suspected that she had, Darlanis being the sort of woman she is!

"She did...", I breathed, the boy reaching under Darlanis' skirt, undoing her strap, and then kissing her right on her sex! The Empress holding him now to herself while the girls watched... Sharon there in her bonds, "watching", naked, sweaty, "bleeding". The "scene" there in my dungeon one that I will never "forget"!!!

"She is an 'Empress'," Tori said to me as I shared a drink with her there in my private chambers, the fine "state dinner" we would have had having been canceled by my order at Darlanis' request. I no longer looked upon Darlanis quite the way as before. There was obviously much more "depth" to the woman than I known.

"She insisted upon taking care of Sharon herself," I said. I understood "why". They would have much to speak about, I knew.

"There is a saying, 'spare the whip, spoil the child'," Tori smiled back. "I remember my mother saying it when she had to punish me," Tori grinned, her dark eyes and walnut hair reminding me so much of one once dear to me. A woman now only dried flesh and bones lying in a stainless steel coffin outside of Arsana...

"Bob Simmons once said to me that the people of his time had forgotten the 'need' to 'discipline' children," I answered back. It had been only a matter of months since he and his lovely wife had returned to their own time, the "shock" of seeing their last remains something that still yet hardly seemed "believable" now! The "paradoxes" of time travel something I'll never get used to!!

"No doubt my daughter would have liked living then," Tori smiled, "Especially after her mother got done welting her rump." Tori's daughter having "tried" her mother's patience a few times. Diane had her mother's own "smoldering" good looks, and enough "boyfriends" I understood from Tori to make up a football team.

"'LYS' gift' to the young men of Arsana," I "smiled" back.

"I am considering a `chastity'," Tori "grinned" in reply.

"Perhaps I'm fortunate not having any children," I said. I didn't really look upon Hope as "mine", although I did love her.

"I'm glad that LYS made me a woman, a mother," Tori said. * * LYS is the name of "God" in the 26th Century, where it was "believed" with good reason that the Supreme Being was "female". I refer the "reader" to earlier books of this series for "details". It may also be noted here that early civilizations here on Earth believed that "God" was "female", the worship of "ASTARTE" being noted in the Bible and elsewhere. ISIS in Egypt was the same in Her "nature". It is only in male dominated societies that "God" has been "male". No doubt Janet Rogers played her role here too. The replacement of a "male" God with a "female" one might have been more "intelligent" than we first think, given the nature of the Universe as we know it today. One wonders here a bit. (J.B.)

"No doubt your husband thinks `so' too," I grinned back at her. Tori being the sort of a woman that might "please" any man. Bob Simmons' "nickname" for her of "Torrid Tori" wasn't too far off if a "private joke" I'm glad Tori never learned the "truth" about... I doubt very much if she would have "appreciated" being compared to the original "Torri Wells", who was something like a "hip swinger". A "prostitute" by the "standards" of our society.

"I feel a woman who wants her marriage to `work' has to work to see that it does," the dark eyed brownette smiled back at me. She was the same height as Carol Simmons had been, but her figure was somewhat different, with the woman from the 20th Century having been smaller busted and a bit heavier in the hips and legs.

"The same `philosophy' that Carol Simmons had," I said.

"I have a `favor' of you to ask," Tori Wells said to me.

"Your Queen is `generous' with her `favors'," I smiled. I've never really "felt" like a Queen, perhaps because I've never really looked upon myself as really being "royalty" as such here. In my own eyes I'm just the "captain" of a Dularnian "raider" who also happens to be the "Queen" of her country due to unusual circumstances that have little to "do" with what I once hoped to be!

"The North Star will be commissioning," Tori said to me as I nodded. The ship had undergone a complete "refit", and was now ready for sea once again to carry out my orders and commands as the Queen of Dularn. Pirates were still a "problem", and while I had no doubt that Queen Freydis was telling me the truth that she had forbidden such "activities" among her own people living there to the north of Dularn, still we did "have" a "pirate problem"...

"You will not be the first mother who has sent a daughter to sea to keep her `out of trouble'," I smiled back at the captain. I didn't need to mention to Tori, a Warriress, that there was always the "risk" that her lovely daughter might just end up sewn up in a hammock with a catapult shot at her feet and tipped over the side of the ship after a battle. Such a young woman had ended up just exactly that way a year ago when we'd "rescued" Sharon from barbaric pirates holding her for a ransom south of Alaska.

"She needs `discipline', and even a good whipping doesn't seem to `impress' her any more," Tori answered, the girl no doubt one of "those" who just can never be made to "behave" properly. This tends to be more of a problem with daughters than with sons for some reason, although just "why" is a good

question here too! Diane had already gotten into "trouble" with the "law", something I knew rather well, having used my own authority to save her from being convicted of "piracy" for the "prank" of "stealing" a ship and sailing out into the strait and then back into the harbor! I knew the "details" of the issue here, and I'd been able to get the owners of the schooner to drop the charges against Tori's daughter and the others who had been with her that night. No doubt alcohol had been a "contributing factor", but still stealing a ship is legally "piracy", and you can get hung for it too!!

"You could always let Darlanis have a `crack' at her," I "grinned", the look on Tori's face at that leaving no doubt that she didn't consider that as being "worthy" of even a reply now... I wondered too why I was so "afraid" of the darkness now, of "what" lurked there beneath the cold marble floors of my palace. My nightmares too were growing worse with time, terrifyingly so! And there were those strange "chills" that I felt here from time to time. Almost as if something from THE OTHER SIDE touched me!!

"She would make a good midshipman," Tori pointed out. She had been the one charged with sailing the old "Atlantis" out into the strait, and she did manage to sail it back safely home again! She had taken the "whipping" she got for it rather well, which spoke much of her, although I hoped Tori realized that aboard a ship of war she would be under naval discipline, which can be and often is "stricter" than anything civilians as a rule ever know.

"Like to take another voyage with me up to Sana?" I smiled back. Such a voyage is a little over a hundred miles, and ships like the North Star usually make it in less than a day. There had been a "bit of wind" last fall when I took Tori with me, and the North Star had been taking the seas heavy off her bow, while the ship had been rolling heavily in the "troughs" between the waves as we made our way north. For me it had been a chance to get a little "fresh air", have a deck beneath my feet again, even if the North Star was now "obsolete" in this age of armored steam frigates, but poor Tori had seen it much "differently" than me...

"I think I'd rather have four legs and a `horn' in front of me," Tori smiled, the cavalrywoman having had "enough" of ships! She had also turned a surprising shade of "green" during the trip, with much of it spent in sickbay "puking" her insides out.

Chapter Six

"Your majesty," captain Tori Wells said to me as she stood to go, "I think I `learned' something today I never knew before."

"And `what' was `that'?" I smiled, wondering where Kathi was now with my dinner, the sun having set well over an hour ago. I had no doubt that Tori was tired after the events of the day, and perhaps well aware as I was that we had witnessed things today we would no doubt never see again in our lives. Things that I also suspected too that Tori and I would have to "keep" to ourselves. I wondered too now why I was so afraid of the "dark", of entering areas of the palace that weren't brightly lit. I had felt an actual "terror" of the dark hidden places there beneath my palace! I had thought of speaking to Tori of these things, but dared not. I knew she would not make "fun" of me, but yet I would lose respect in her eyes, and her respect for me was a precious thing... To speak to her of "ghosts", of things "felt" but not seen, would only make her believe that perhaps her Queen was going insane! I should mention here that

Queen Tulis did to a certain degree near the end of her life, when her brain tumor took "control" of her! She eventually killed herself at the end, dying in the arms of a woman who had once been her "daughter" before being "disowned"...

"The `depth' of a mother's love for her children," she answered, her words coming as a bit of a "puzzle" to me just then.

"Sharon is not Darlanis' `daughter'," I pointed out to her, although I suspect that she knew "that" as it is widely known. I was also more aware of political issues in Orgon than was Tori. Darlanis was close to "losing" Orgon to me, especially if Sharon ever decided to turn completely against Darlanis as she might... That in turn could lead to a "war" against Dularn if Darlanis decided to try to hang on now to Orgon by force. The country also could be torn by a civil war that would leave little in its wake, especially as such a civil war would involve both our societies!

"I'd better get `going' before my husband decides to `bed' our slave girl and Diane disappears for the next six hours," Tori smiled back, then taking her leave of me. Kathi coming in as soon as she left with a dinner tray for me, La-ra there with her, carrying Hope there in her arms like a lovely little doll. I thought I would have La-ra sleep with me tonight, with orders to awaken me if she heard me now starting to whimper or cry out. Such at least would insure that I didn't suffer through the entire nightmare even if I had to endure the beginning parts of it! The thought going unbidden through my mind that at least Tori did have a husband, someone to sleep with at night, to hold her close and stroke her, touching her, the "visions" that passed through my mind then of Tori in the arms of her husband utterly "erotic"!

"Another would have `exploited' the situation," Darlanis said to me as we shared a breakfast the next morning, Sharon sitting there in bed, watching us, nibbling at her own food, keeping her thoughts to herself. No doubt she was well medicated for the pain, I thought, although I suspected that there would be scars. I did not see either Prince Serak or their slave girl Pussycat. Darlanis has a three year old daughter by the name of Artemis who was "cloned" from one of the Empress' own ova three years ago. It is believed by Lorraine that this is actually Domino Tremaine, although one can make of these things much as one will here too.

"I would not care to play poker with you," I smiled back.

"I have `risked much' in my life," the Empress smiled then.

"There is `meaning' in what she `did'," Sharon said to me.

"You took a `gamble' I wouldn't have `dared'," I told her.

"I made a `decision' that could cost me my life," she said.

"If my step mother does not `understand'...", Sharon added. Lorraine was the greatest swordswoman of all time, many believed. Darlanis herself was awesome, but no true match for the Warlady. In a sword duel between them it was likely that Lorraine would be the winner. I had seen Lorraine take on Carol Simmons back a couple years ago, a woman whose "skill" with a sword considerably exceeded mine. Not even my famous "Warlady" had stood a chance! And it was possible that Lorraine would kill Darlanis in a duel!!

"I suspect you would not have `acted' as I did," Darlanis said to me, getting up, walking to the window, and looking out. Dressed in a woolen robe, her golden hair tousled from sleep, she didn't seem so "impressive" then. Just another "big blonde" like many I've seen here in Dularn. Bob Simmons once said

that she looked like a woman called "Shannon Tweed" in the 20th Century. His wife on the other hand said she reminded her of a "soap opera" actress by the name of Brenda Epperson. One can take this as you wish, although both of them said I looked like Katherine Kelly Lang, another soap opera actress of the Twentieth Century.

"I would have never 'whipped' a 'daughter' as you did," I "answered" her back in level tones, aware that Darlanis no doubt had good reason for what she did here. I wouldn't have "done" what she had either with the three teenagers, although I had understood just "what" she was doing here, as had my friend Tori.

"You are a good Queen, a 'competent' Queen, I think," Darlanis said to me, "But you are not truly of royal blood," she then added, turning, regarding me as I sat there at the table finishing up my breakfast. "Nor could you govern an Empire like mine."

"I believe in the ideals of Thomas Jefferson, not Janet Rogers," I answered, the Empress nodding, her eyes meeting my own.

"'Minimum government', and a 'free enterprise' system," the Empress smiled back. "The Eighteenth Century, the 'Age of Reason'," Darlanis continued, Sharon sitting there grinning a bit... "When they still believed that Mankind was capable of self government," the Empress "concluded", her azure eyes meeting my own.

"Not the 'technocratic dictatorship' of Janet Rogers," I answered back with a "smile" matching hers. If Darlanis wished to discuss political philosophy with me I would be quite happy to oblige her. I had no doubts that our own "system" was superior. Even Lorraine herself has admitted that Dularn stood for the same ideals that the founders of the original United States of America stood for before the politicians turned it into something "else". Janet Rogers was an "improvement" over them, but no more than I feel Darlanis probably has "been" for the peoples of California.

"Democratic political systems work well in pre-technological societies," Darlanis answered, walking over, sitting on the bed, looking at Sharon, taking her hand in hers, stroking it a bit. I was well "aware" that Darlanis may have been a beautiful blonde, but she was also no "dumbbell" when it came to things like this!

"Our society in the 20th Century was falling apart," Sharon said to me, her eyes so much the color of Darlanis' holding mine. "We 'lacked' the 'social discipline' that it took Janet Rogers to provide," she continued on, obviously well educated in the history of the 21st Century after the election of Janet Rogers in the year 2008. "The same social discipline that Darlanis provides."

"She 'whipped' you yesterday until the blood ran down your body," I said to her, seeing Sharon nod, glance up at Darlanis...

"I 'challenged' her 'authority' as 'Empress'," Sharon said.

"Such a 'challenge' could not be 'ignored'," Darlanis added. Darlanis had "acted" as the Empress of California, "meeting" it. I had seen the tears in those azure eyes, understood her "pain".

"If Sharon had 'asked' for my 'protection'...", I "smiled". Darlanis "nodding", glancing down at Sharon, then again up at me. I did not believe that Darlanis would have "won" this time. Dularn had "allies" now that made us a "match" for the Imperials.

"I would have died the death that a Warriress often dies," Darlanis answered back in level tones. I "understood" much then. The "magnificence" of this woman that so many have spoken of..

"You are a 'legend' in your own time," I said to her then.

"I am 'She-Ra'," Darlanis smiled, Sharon nodding at me.

"Must be an 'odd' marriage," Tori said to me as we walked together out on the quay that overlooks the harbor. The Astarte and the Sarnian Queen floating there at anchor along with half a dozen other vessels, most of them trading schooners of one sort or another. The North Star was setting up her yards, the crew as such still a bit "green", I noticed as I enjoyed the brisk air.

"ANevada and a woman like her?" I smiled, "wondering" a bit myself. The men of the Nevadas view women almost as "property", whereas a woman like Darlanis would likely see a marriage as a relationship between two equals, much as any Dularnian would now.

"It's probably just a 'political' marriage," Tori grinned.

"I don't think so," I answered, recalling things I'd heard.

"I hope my daughter does well aboard the North Star," Tori said, changing the "subject" to something more "profitable" to discuss than what Darlanis and her husband "did" together in bed!

"She is under 'naval discipline' now," I pointed out to her. The sort of 'pranks' she'd pulled in Arsana would not be 'tolerated' aboard the ship, something Tori had no doubt warned her of.

"I made her read the 'rule book'," Tori smiled back. This being a heavy rather "boring" tome detailing the rules and regulations governing the operation of warships of the Royal Navy...

"I trust you have made preparations for Prince Paul Blue Sky of the Wyomings," I "smiled", the Prince being due here tomorrow. With Darlanis and Sharon here I wanted no "incidents" to happen! All I needed was for Lorraine to show up, and I'd have them all!!

"There is a steam ship out in the strait," Tori said to me.

"'Problems' come in 'threes'," I answered, seeing Tori nod.

"Ship is the 'Athena', your majesty," Tori said to me as I nodded, well aware that this wasn't a good time for the Queen of Trelandar to be "visiting". Especially not after what Darlanis had done to Sharon! True, Sharon didn't hold it against the Empress, but there was no telling what Lorraine would think of it!!

Chapter Seven

"The last time that I came here my 'welcome' wasn't too pleasant," Lorraine Richards said to me as I took her hands in my own. That had been four years ago, when my late husband had taken it upon

himself to shoot her while she was under a flag of truce. I had immediately killed him for such a "breach" of the Code of Honor, but Lorraine had barely "survived" the wound, the bullet having struck close to her heart, almost killing her then! For a time I had felt "close" to her, but later she had again become the fearsome Imperial Warlady, a tool of Darlanis' ambition.

"I hope this time it will be better," I smiled back, the Imperial Warlady's dark eyes meeting mine. Unlike with Darlanis, I felt a sense of "fear" of this woman, her total absolute "dominance" like an aura that seemed to radiate from her as she stood there. Even five months pregnant, her belly swollen, she still seemed to give the impression that single handed she could have conquered Dularn itself. She is a "legend", said by many to be the greatest swordswoman of all time, a Warriorress beyond compare although I believe this last is not true, as Carol did manage to outwit her there in Trelandar, although only "tactically" as I do have no doubt that Lorraine was the superior military commander.

"I have just come from Porlan," Lorraine spoke, her husband, Jon Richards, Admiral of the Imperial Navy, standing just behind. The emotional feelings I felt at seeing him again something that I hoped Lorraine would not "sense", as I didn't need to make any more "trouble" for myself than what I was doubtlessly into here! Once long ago we were lovers, but he wished another, a slim dark haired woman of the Physicians, who he later married. The "fact" that Lorraine herself is "slim", dark haired perhaps indicates he prefers that sort of a woman, although I suspect that my own ambitions at that time of making "something" of myself had quite a bit to do with things. In my early years I was a bit of a bitch.

"Darlanis and I have 'resolved' our 'difficulties'," Sharon quickly "volunteered", the Empress herself no doubt sweating a bit here considering what she had just "done" to the young Queen! It was a rather "nice" day, the sun shining in a clear blue sky. "Saint Patrick's Day" I'm told, March 17th, the year being 2569 as those of the "past" used to measure it so many centuries ago.

"I am 'pleased'," Lorraine smiled, standing there before us. "The 'stories' I heard in Porlan did make me rather 'concerned'," she added, her dark brown eyes seeming to "burn" into my own now. There is a "total dominance" about her that is hard to describe. Even "here" in Dularn, my own people surrounding me, my palace there behind me, I felt like a naughty slave girl who should be kneeling down at her mistress' feet and begging her forgiveness!

It is, I think, partly her "attire", usually black silk and leather, the high black leather spike heeled boots she wears, the long flowing skirt, the leather vest and trappings, the hats, the veil that conceals the "harshness" of her features. She is not a beautiful woman, although I suspect Jon considers her attractive. Then there are the "legends", the story of a woman who stood before an Imperial Legion commanded by Princess Tara, raised up a weapon from another world, and caused them all to retreat in fear of "what" stood there before them. I remember the duel between her and Carol, of whose skills with a sword I took such pride in. I saw Lorraine "play" with the woman, then cut her face when she grew "tired" of such "play". She is truly a "WARLADY" in the full sense of the term. The greatest fighting woman of all time!

"Did Sharon request 'asylum' when she came here?" Lorraine suddenly spoke. I shook my head in the negative, "aware" here of the implications of what she had said. It being obvious that the extremely "competent" Imperial Warlady doubtless "knew" the full details of what had "occurred" there in Porlan! "Would you have 'granted' it had she 'requested' it?" Lorraine asked. I silently nodded in reply, "aware" of no one but the woman there before me!

"It would have been the 'end' of the Empire if you had, Maris," Lorraine said then, standing there a few feet away from me. "For 'better or for worse', the Empire of California would have been no more," she continued, her eyes burning right into my own! "The 'end' of a civilization based upon ideals I gave to a woman who died over five hundred years ago," the Queen of Trelandar now said to me. "A return to

earlier ideals of men who lived back in the Eighteenth Century when life was much 'simpler' than now."

I could feel the cold breath of the breeze on my cheek, the warmth of the sun as it beamed down upon us, saw the way that the wind moved little strands of Lorraine's hair, saw the rise and fall of her girlish bosom beneath her clothing, looked into eyes that seemed to speak to me of ages now only dusty musty history!! I knew that I was surrounded by people, both Dularnian and from Darlanis' and Sharon's own ships, but just then there was but two women standing there facing each other, with only "ghosts" of the past for company. Thomas Jefferson, Tom Paine, others beside me, while beside Lorraine stood Janet Rogers herself, her own "child" in a way, Lorraine having been the "mother" of a civilization we now "studied" in school, read about in books, some to "admire" while others saw it only as the last gasp of a technocratic society that had died in fire, burned to ashes never to ever return.

"There is," I said to her, "Something more 'important' than the survival of civilizations, something that 'separates' us from the beasts that roam the forests, the creatures of the seas. A 'concept' if you will that separates the 'civilized' from those who know only the cut of the sword, the flight of the arrow." I saw Lorraine nod, her eyes gleam into mine as she nodded in turn.

"Perhaps there is 'hope' yet for you, Maris of Sana," the Imperial Warlady smiled, "extending" her hand, taking mine in it. "And this time we won't make the 'mistakes' that we did before."

"You remind me of a cat with kittens," I smiled to Tori as my captain of the Royal Guard checked on her guardswomen to see that everything was "perfect". Tori is a very "competent" woman, if a bit of a "perfectionist" in some ways about her guardswomen. Taking "pains" to see that I never had any reason for complaint about them. She was "strict", but "fair" I knew in her command.

"All we 'need' is one 'incident'," she answered, her dark brown eyes meeting mine as I nodded understandingly in reply now. There were a lot of people here in Arsana alone who had no love for either Darlanis or Lorraine, and Prince Serak of the Nevadas was an arch enemy of the Wyomings, which only added to Tori's own problems of seeing that nothing happened to anyone under her protection. We had already had a "problem" last night with some drunken sailors off the Athena and Sarnian Lady, the "charge" of rape the barmaid had issued against one of the sailors off Sarnian Lady something that would require the most delicate of handling. The man maintained that he believed she was a prostitute, which the woman might have "been" despite the fact she was not a member of the "Guild", there being a number of "free lancers" who refused to pay the "dues" that the Prostitute Guild required of its members. The investigating guardsmen had told Tori that the woman's skirt was as "short" as any "hip swinger's", and that it was known that she did at times "sell" her "favors" to men. This last in my opinion indicating that she probably "was" what the Imperial sailor had maintained she was, although I thought it was rather "stupid" of him not to determine her true "status" before he had sexual intercourse with her there up above the bar room... Especially as I understood she had not gone "willingly" with him!

"What do you 'think' of that 'incident' last night?" I said to Tori as she finished checking her women's appearance to see it was as "good" as it could be. Darlanis had her own "guardswomen" with her, as did Sharon, and we also now had Lorraine's too, all of whom of course had their first loyalties to their own monarch.

"Rape is rape, even if the woman is a prostitute," Tori said in level tones, as if she thought that I wouldn't agree with her. "Even a prostitute has the right to refuse sex if she wants to." The sailor in question having stated that the barmaid had refused to accept his money, claiming that she'd never consented to "it"!

"The city guardsmen who interviewed her said that her skirt was way up to 'here'," I smiled, indicating the "spot" on my own thighs. Such a skirt would have been only a few inches below my crotch. Those of

prostitutes are often of that "height", I knew.

"A lot of barmaids wear short skirts," Tori replied, "And not always of their own free will either," she pointed out to me. It not being uncommon for the owners of such "establishments" to require his barmaids to wear such attire or go find another job. "We need 'laws' to protect a woman from having to 'dress' like a prostitute or a slave girl in order to keep a job," Tori snapped! The tone of her voice leaving much "unspoken" just then, I mused!

"That is a rather 'interesting' idea, if not all that 'modern'," I smiled back, the "look" on Tori's attractive face just then leaving no doubts that she would have voiced an "answer" to my own "comment" in return had I not "been" the Queen of Dularn.

"No doubt your majesty has 'considered' such matters in the past," she answered, the tone of her voice indicating what her opinion was! An opinion, I knew that has been "shared" by many judging by the "reading" I'd done during the cold winter months!

"Do you have half an hour 'free'?" I asked, there being only one answer that Tori could give to that, considering "who" I was.

"As your majesty wishes," Tori smiled, seeing me nod back...

Chapter Eight

"I would like to speak to your mistress," I said to the slave girl, who bowed low and opened the door wider so we could enter. Lorraine looking up at me, sitting there in her husband's lap, the "smile" she gave me leaving no doubts as to her opinion of being "disturbed" at a moment like this. I don't think she'd expected anything "more" than another slave girl, whose "opinion" would of course mean nothing to a woman like her. As the hour was rather "late", I suppose she was justified in her feelings!

"If you wish this can wait for another time," I said to her, aware that I had "interrupted" something that was none of my own business. There was also the "issue" that I'd once been Jon's to the point that he'd proposed marriage to me. Whether or not Jon still had feelings for me was an issue that might worry Lorraine. When the unmarried former girlfriend is more "beautiful" than the wife there can often be "problems" of a sort I didn't wish to be.

"I 'assume' that it is 'important' or you wouldn't be here," the Imperial Warlady answered, slipping off Jon's lap to seatherself beside him. She wore a pair of silken pajamas, black, a bit of attire that looked rather good on her despite her swollen belly. Lorraine being the sort of a woman that becomes more attractive after you've known her for a while, I might "note" here.

"There is a question that has puzzled philosophers for centuries," I spoke, Lorraine nodding, her dark eyes holding mine as I seated myself opposite her, Tori "settling" herself beside me. "One that the captain of my guards has brought to my attention."

"When I address you, how do you wish me to do so?" Lorraine smiled at Tori, who for a second seemed

a bit "tongue tied" here!

"I am Captain Tori Wells," Tori answered the tall brunette.

"I address her as 'Tori'," I said to the Queen of Trelandar.

"And what is the 'question' you wish answered?" she said. I had to "prod" Tori a bit to draw the "question" out of her, but I was rather curious to see what Lorraine's answer would be to it.

"You raise an 'issue' that has been discussed by the greatest philosophers on this world since the dawn of civilization," the Imperial Warlady smiled. "Whether or not the political system has the moral 'right' to interfere in 'private affairs'. Whether or not the 'employer' has the 'right' to set working conditions as 'he' so wishes to set them." I saw Tori nodding, her eyes burning into the darkness of this woman from another time... "I recall Janet (Rogers) and I once discussed this very issue," the Queen of Trelandar continued, her husband sitting there with his arm about his wife. I suspected that he was happy with her. Lorraine is the sort of a woman that is more than just a "wife". Their slave girl, that exotic wench from an almost mythical land across the Atlantic now settling herself down there at one side.

"And did you come to any 'conclusions'?" Tori then asked the Queen of Trelandar, a bit "awed" I think of the Imperial Warlady.

"The 'answer' depends upon the sort of society in which you wish to live," Lorraine answered. "In the 20th Century this very question was decided upon the basis of 'employee rights', a quite natural consequence of the type of political system in use then. The local, state and federal governments of my time passing more and more 'laws' in behalf of 'employees' until it seemed as if they actually 'owned' their own jobs. On the other hand both Janet and I 'concluded' that the 'issue' should be 'resolved' upon the basis of 'property rights', the actual 'question' here being as to 'who' actually 'owned' the actual job. Did the 'government' 'produce' the job, or 'did' the employer here? If we have a 'socialist' society, then of course the 'job' and its 'working conditions' are properly set by the government, with the employer's only function being that of an 'agent' of the 'State'. 'Socialism' being defined here as 'governmental control' of the economic system even if 'ownership' is still in private hands as occurred both in Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy under Mussolini. On the other hand, if we have a 'free enterprise' society, then the government has no 'rights' under the law to set the working conditions as the government does not 'own' the job in question."

"Wouldn't some sort of 'compromise' be possible?" Tori said.

"At what point do you 'draw the line' here?" Lorraine asked. "'Where' do you decide that a 'line' will be 'drawn' between the 'rights' of the employer and the 'rights' of the employee?" the Queen of Trelandar smiled back. "'Who' 'makes' that 'decision'?"

"In a 'democracy' like ours the 'people'," Tori smiled back.

"There are more 'employees' than 'employers'," the Queen "smiled" back, Tori nodding. "And the people of Dularn vote for Senators who then 'pass' laws which your Queen either passes or vetoes," Lorraine said. "So eventually it is Maris who decides."

"And over a period of generations a nation becomes 'socialist'," I answered, well aware of the political "realities" here. A Queen, any Queen, tends to have "feelings", emotions involved. She does not always "act" in a completely "rational" manner... There are also certain "political pressures" that effect things.

"I don't see anything 'wrong' with 'that'," Tori answered.

"You are a Warriress, not a Scribe," Lorrainesmiled back. "I doubt that your education included any study of 'economics'."

"What 'difference' does it make if the 'government' was to 'run' everything instead of having things as they are right now?" Tori spoke. "It might even be 'better' having Maris run things."

"Those who fail to 'understand' history are doomed to repeat it," Lorrainelaughed softly, Tori blushing a bit at this now... She knew she was being made "fun" of, but she didn't understand "why". I did, but it would hard to explain to a woman like Tori! Tori was good at "small unit tactics", things like that, but she wasn't really a heavy "thinker" as such, her husband having married her no doubt because she had a very attractive face and Tori was rather full in the bust, which some men do like in a woman...

"No 'socialist state' in the history of Mankind has ever been 'successful'," I said to Tori, seeing her nod back in reply.

"In a 'socialist state' the 'government' must decide what sort of 'economic activities' people are to 'do'," Lorrainesaid. "There were countries like that back in my time, but none of them were ever economically 'successful' even with our own technology." Janet Rogers did have government "control" of "natural monopolies", but she never attempted to actually "run" peoples' lives or directlyregulate the "activities" of most people.

"We could keep 'private property', but make employers respect the 'rights' of their employees," Tori ventured in reply. She was "game", despite being far "out classed" byLorrainehere.

"There are more 'employees' than 'employers'," I told Tori. There would be no natural "limits" on what might be "voted" then and the concept of "rights" is a "quagmire" that has no natural "limits" due to the "fact" that once you start saying that people have "rights", then where "DO" you finally "draw the line"? Such actually "happened" back in the 20th Century. I refer the reader to life in theUnited Statesfrom 1992 to the year 2008 AD. From the election of Bill Clinton to the election of Janet Rogers. The "development" of a "social welfare state", the economic decline of the United States of America that caused the people of that country to eventually elect Janet Rogers as a "solution"...

"And in a 'democratic' society they will 'vote' for their own 'short term' interests despite the consequences in the long run," Lorrainesmiled. "That is why it was 'necessary' to design a political system as I did then that would allow a considerable amount of freedom, but yet would not be subject to the "whim" of the voters." I saw Tori nod thoughtfully, and then glance at me.

"Janet Rogers and her own 'NEW ORDER'," I said to Tori now.

"On which most societies of today are 'based'," Tori said.

"An 'elected legislature', a monarch with an absolute veto," the Trelandarian Queen smiled back. "The 'representatives of the people' pass laws, and then one of 'us' must decide whether or not the law is wise or stupid," she smiled, seeing me nod in reply back. I knew she had the power which I didn't to "repeal" laws once passed, something I'd been "pushing for" ever since I'd understood what the true "role" of the Queen was here in Dularn.

"What happens if you get a 'bad' Queen?" Tori smiled back.

"Can she pass laws on her own?" Lorraine smiled back at her.

"That 'Kathis' who was replaced by Tulis," Tori mused then. Tulis had been the Warlady of Dularn under Kathis, I recalled...

"Killed by her own people," Lorraine smiled, her knowledge of such "matters" surprising. Queen Tulis had been a well known Warriress. Many considered her to have been a "better" Queen than me. Especially considering the "events" of the last four years, although I doubt Tulis could have done anything more. There are also "Darlanis worshipers" (That's what I call them!) who feel that the Imperial Empress could rule Dularn better than I do. Even Lorraine has a few "fans" all of her own here too...

"It is getting 'late', Tori," I said, seeing her nod back.

"I hope I get the chance to speak to you again," Tori then told Lorraine, the Imperial Warlady giving her a warm smile back.

Chapter Nine

"I haven't 'kept' hours like this since our last war," Tori smiled to me, yawning a bit, having been on her feet all day too!

"You could 'stay' here at the palace tonight," I suggested, Tori living over on the other side of the city from the palace.

"I suppose I could 'bunk' at the guardhouse," she smiled.

"Or you could keep your Queen 'company'," I suggested.

"I've heard about your 'nightmares'," Tori grinned.

"My bed's 'big' enough for both of us," I said.

"Just as long as you 'ain't'...", she smiled at me.

"I assure you that I'm 'not'," I grinned back at her.

"I don't even 'like' my slave girl 'touching' me," she said, Tori's eyes meeting mine as I "nodded" back. My "opinions" about "slavery" were something that few people in this era shared. Not that Tori or her husband ever "mistreated" their slave girl so far as I knew, but the wench was being kept as a sort of "unpaid" housemaid, servant, and "sexual partner" for Tori's Physician husband when she wasn't "available" or in the "mood" for "sex"... Tori in this respect at least truly a wife of the 26th Century.

"This is kind of 'embarrassing'," Tori said as she removed her uniform, a well filled halter cradling her breasts. She had, I thought to myself, a "20th Century" figure, the "ideal" of later eras being smaller breasted, "larger" in the hips and thighs. The sort of a "figure" that Bob Simmons had called "Hefnerian"...

I recalled what Prince Paul of the Wyomings and I had once "done" there in the forest, the gentle breeze rustling the leaves in the boughs overhead, the birds chirping away, the little animals running about. The "sounds" that our unicorns had made as they watched us. The "feel" of his body against mine as we made love. I had talked of "running away" with him, of "leaving" Dularn, of giving up my crown, everything else just to get away from Darl...

"A Queen is just a woman with a crown," I smiled, removing my "clips" and slipping off my strap. I usually sleep completely nude, seeing no reason to wear "underclothing" when I'm in bed... La-ra had not neglected to "warm" my bed with hot bricks so that it would be nice and warm when I slipped in between the covers.

"I've always looked upon you as being 'more' than that," she answered, turning her back now to me as she removed her clips and slipped down her strap. I wondered again "why" women wore such "attire" beneath their clothing. Why the "exposure" of the nipple was something so "forbidden" when the "breast" itself wasn't? Carol Simmons having once told me that back in her own time when she was an "exotic dancer" (Such exist today, but only slave girls do it!) that it was "illegal" for a woman to "expose" those parts of her body in a public place. This of course implies that perhaps our own "style" of clips and strap commonly worn by the women of the "civilized" nations of North America dates back somehow to the 20th Century, or perhaps slightly "later", as such styles being quite "commonplace" in the "time" of Janet Rogers.

"She 'forgot' to 'shave'," La-ra whispered to me, her dark eyes meeting mine. Tori having a dark "shadow" that left little "doubt" there at the junction of her thighs that she hadn't done so for several days at least. Being a blonde, I can go some time without "shaving", as my own pubic hair is a light golden "down". I suspected that Tori probably only did so before having sex, as a number of women do. The practice of "shaving" being another of those strange "customs" that we've "inherited" from another era.

"You may 'wash' your Queen," I told the Nevada, La-ra then doing so while Tori did the "same" there on the other side of the room, the woman keeping her back to me most of the time, I noted!

"Isn't 'this' better than a bunk in the guardhouse?" I asked Tori as she settled herself in the bed beside me, La-ra blowing out the lamp and closing the door behind herself for the night. A soft "glow" through the windows overlooking the harbor telling of the Moon floating peacefully there in the star sprinkled sky.

"If 'word' ever gets out that we 'slept' together...", Tori spoke, her eyes only dark spots in the pale "shadow" of her face. "And both of us are 'barecrotched'," she added in a low voice, making me smile to myself at the delightful "phrasing" she used! The "embarrassment" of speaking so obvious too in her voice here!

"You are 'concerned' about 'protecting' the 'reputation' of the Queen of Dularn?" I laughed, slipping out of the warm bed, going to my closet, pulling down a couple of flannel nightshirts! Tossing one to Tori while I slipped the other over my naked body!

"Now no one can 'say' anything," Tori laughed, slipping hers on over herself as she stood there and then slipping back under the covers while I did the same on the other side of the bed now.

I thought it was just "part" of a "dream" I was having as I watched the bedroom window push open from the outside and a woman, one of my own guardswomen, climb down inside the room, clinging to a rope she had used to descend from the palace roof above. The thought going through my mind just then that at least "this" was something different from my usual nightmares about Darl Jord!

"Tori!" I breathed softly, watching the woman, her helmet and chain mail gleaming there in the moonlight as she drew her dagger, the polished steel blade gleaming, the weapon the long slim blade often carried by Warrioreses for close quarter work.

"LYS!" Tori yelled, half falling out of bed as she went for her weapons beside her, the woman "reversing" her dagger, throwing it, Tori's outcry leaving no doubts that she'd been struck! My friend "clutching" at herself, at the dagger buried in her chest! The blood dark, staining her nightshift, oozing out from around her fingers! THIS WAS `REAL`! NOT JUST SOME NIGHTMARE!!!

"HELP!" I screamed, "GUARDS!" The woman whipping out her sword and coming after me! Her blade, thirty inches of razor sharp steel, gleaming there in the moonlight streaming through the window as I frantically rolled across the bed to grab Tori's! The woman dashing to the door, slamming the bar across, thus insuring that anyone on the other side would not be able to enter! The door built of solid oak with a steel core, designed as a last ditch defense against an invasion of theRoyalPalace! It would take a "battering ram", and a dozen men to smash through it now!

I saw Tori look up at me as she laid there, her teeth gleaming in her face, the blood black against the pale shadow of her nightshift, more of it oozing from her chest with every beat of her heart. "Sorry I couldn't....," she muttered, softly gasping!!

I had no time for a "reply" as the woman rushed me then, our blades meeting in a ring of steel. I am a good swordswoman, able with the blade, although no where in the same "class" as such as Lorraine or Darlanis, who are true mistresses of the sword in a way that I never will be. The rapid dip and dart of our deadly gleaming blades bringing back "memories" of other times, of ships at sea, of the outcry of men and women in mortal combat! The woman's chain mail gave her a certain "advantage" over me, as she was well aware that it would be difficult for me to penetrate her armor with my blade without leaving an "opening" that she might exploit in turn. It being not unknown to "catch" a blade in such armor between the links that make it up, imposing only a minor flesh wound while the enemy in turn has the opportunity to kill!!

I could tell after the first few seconds that the woman was not my equal in skill, although her armor did give her something of an advantage here against me, one that she might "exploit" if the "opportunity" presented itself to her. She attempted to push me back against my bed, hoping to "trap" me, but I was too quick for her, wheeling away, the sound of "pounding" against the door leaving no "doubt" that my screams for help had been heard now...

"They will not `save` you, Maris Marn!" she screamed at me! I was at the moment trying to think of her name, of who she was! I have a hundred such women in my service, and while I do know them all by sight, I do not know them all by name. On the other hand this woman did not seem to be anyone that I knew, which now made me suspect that shewas not a member of the Royal Guard after all. This "pleasing" me muchly just then, perhaps for Tori's sake more than mine, as they were after all her own guardswomen!!

"You're going to have to `do` better than `that`," I snapped back, parrying her thrust, spinning, kicking her in the leg with the side of my heel, hoping that I might "cripple" her a little! I didn't want to kill her, I wanted to know "who" sent her to kill me, and "why"? Obviously this wasn't an "Imperial plot" against me, and I couldn't think of anyone else who hated me enough to try to kill me now! I do have "political" enemies, but I didn't think any of them hated me enough to hire an assassin to try to kill me! And obviously they'd "failed" in their attempt! I'd force the "truth" from this damn woman assassin even if there wasn't anything "left" of her afterwards to sell as a slave girl!

Chapter Ten

Suddenly there was A GLOWING BEAM OF LIGHT that "slashed" through the door, the door, oak and steel armor, cut apart like a piece of paper, smashing open! Lorraine standing there, a glowing weapon of some sort in her hand! Her Lorr built FORCE SABER!

"Aii!" the assassin screamed, and before I or any one else could stop her, she leaped head first from the window to the hard flagstones of the quay before the palace thirty odd feet below!!!

"See if she lives!" Lorraine snapped, that awesome competent mind instantly sizing up the situation, giving orders, my own guardswomen obeying as swiftly as if I or Tori had given them...

"Tori!" I breathed, a guardswoman holding up a lantern, the Warlady kneeling down at my side, her strong fingers pulling at my captain's nightshift, tearing it away with the dagger that had laid at Tori's side, the same dagger that had pierced her breast!

"What happened here!" Darlanis cried, suddenly running in, a naked sword in her hand, her own attire a half open silken robe. Sharon following behind, along with two more of my guardswomen.

"Assassination attempt!" Lorraine snapped. "Someone get a Physician!" she added, looking up, her long deft fingers pressing against Tori's bleeding breast, my poor Tori moaning with pain!

"Lucky she's got big boobs," Lorraine breathed, adding that the dagger had not penetrated as deeply as it would have done had Tori not been a full breasted woman. Tori, barely conscious now, trying a feeble grin as I took her hand, held it in mine, hoping that she would live, that Lys would not take her now from me...

"Will she...?" I "breathed", looking into Lorraine's eyes.

"Be off her feet for a few days, but she'll be O.K.," the Warlady assured me, Lorraine being also a Physician as well as a Warriress. She is also a "Scribe", and also something of a "Priestess" in a way, I might mention, having been the "founder" of the religion. A most "amazing" woman, if I may say so here.

"There's a lot of blood," I said, Tori bleeding a lot.

"Knife wounds 'do' that," Lorraine smiled back at me.

"She 'saved' my life," I said, seeing Lorraine nod.

"The Physician is here," a guardswoman said then.

"Won't get anything out of 'her'," Darlanis said, the woman having died of a broken neck from the fall. I had already determined that she was not a member of the Royal Guard, but just a woman who had dressed in the uniform of one, fooling the others. The Empress had "dressed" a bit, at least to "cover" herself now.

"We might not have `gotten' anything," Lorrainesmiled back. "Whoever `hired' someone like `that' probably was careful enough not to let this assassin know anything more than she needed to."

"You have `enemies' who want you dead, and a new Queen for Dularn," Darlanis ventured, regarding me as I stood there now. I had ordered the body brought inside, a couple of my guardswomen having stripped it in their search for anything that might lead to finding out "who" she was. "Why" she'd been sent to kill me?

"You have made yourself some very `powerful' enemies with your `stand' on the issue of slavery," Lorrainespoke, "Including I might note enemies within the Empire of California itself now. And `one' who is quite capable of orderingQueensassassinated."

"Princess Tara Bisan," I "breathed", remembering the papers I'd found among Darl Jord's effects. Proof of his own involvement with the evil Bajan. With the criminal underworld of Dularn itself. I wondered if there were any "limits" to Tara's power. She was also called "The Princess of Darkness" with good cause.

"A very `unpleasant' person," Darlanis "smiled" at my nod.

"Diane Wells, third midshipman of the North Star," the guardswoman said to me. Tori's daughter stepping into the palace's sick room where poor Tori now laid sleeping, her husband there at her side, her son sitting to one side, now half asleep.

"My mother...", she breathed, looking at the still figure. Diane did look much like her mother, but yet somewhat "slimmer".

"Saved your Queen's life tonight," I said then to the girl.

"I never realized until now how much she meant to me," Diane said softly, looking down at her father sitting there beside the still sleeping figure of Tori. "How much I've `hurt' her by all the things that I've done," the girl added, her eyes wet now with tears as she stood here in the uniform of a Dularnian midshipman.

"She loves you very much," I said, taking my leave of them. I recalled then that there had been a woman who had loved me very much. One who like Diane I had hated for what she had done to me in trying to teach me the meaning of discipline, of honor, of doing one's best regardless of what the "reward" might be. A woman who I had "hurt" both by my cruel words and my thoughtless acts!

"You said that when you first saw the assassin you believed that it was just another one of your `nightmares' you've been having?" Lorrainesaid to me, her dark eyes glowing into mine as we ate breakfast together, all us Queens along with Darlanis herself tall and golden, looking truly the "part" of "what" she is.

"I've been thinking of visiting a Priestess, see if she can `do' anything about them," I answered, chewing on a bit of bacon. The thought going through my mind just then of the experiences that the Simmons had with the High Priestess here in the city... "You once said that everyone living in this time, with the exception of you and Sharon, has been `mind programmed' by the Priestesses of Lys," I added, aware that this was "something" I'd better be careful to see never got to any ears that it shouldn't. As La-ra and Kathi were our only "servants", I felt "safe" here.

"The concept was `invented' by Janet Rogers and me in the 20th Century, but we lacked the computer

technology to make it work, the Motorola 68000 series and the similar Intel series of computer chips lacking the necessary 'real time multi-tasking' capability to make it possible," she spoke. The look of "awe" on all our faces leaving no doubt we hadn't understood a word of it!

"I take it however that Janet Rogers did 'perfect' it," the Empress ventured, regarding Lorraine just a bit of "awe" here...

"'Sometime' in the 21st Century before The War," Lorraine smiled back. "I know the Priestesses of Lys possess the device."

"Last year, the High Priestess of Dularn attempted to kill two 'friends' of mine, and I helped dispose of her body," I said, well aware of the penalties involved in killing a Priestess too!

"She had some sort of weapon that burned things," Kathi now spoke up, the wench having been an "eye witness" to the affair!

"There was also a flying machine of some sort," I said.

"The Women of Mars possess such devices," Darlanis spoke.

"I doubt that any of this is 'related'," Lorraine spoke up. "However, it would be a simple matter to 'program' a person to have nightmares, although what value it would be is another question unless you wished to eventually drive the person insane."

"'Who' would be your successor?" Sharon then asked me.

"She would be 'appointed' by the Senate," I answered back. I had neither children or a "Warlady" who might take my place... Hope was still a baby of eight months, which meant that I had no actual legal "sucessor" as such right now, I might mention here.

"Doubtlessly a woman more 'reasonable' than you," Lorraine smiled, her dark eyes "glowing" into mine from across the table. "And it is 'possible' from what Darlanis found below Triskelion that Princess Tara could have had a machine capable of producing electronic hypnosis left over from the time of Janet Rogers if we consider the fact that we found the last remains of Domino Tremaine in that same spot, the woman who was Earth's last ruler."

"I would certainly 'know' that such a device was used on me," I pointed out. I had no idea of what such a device would look like, but I expected it would have to be something that was placed around my head or something I had to look into, recalling how Lorraine had instructed me in the art of hypnosis one time...

"A 'command' would be given for you to forget all about it," Lorraine answered. "And you would have no way of ever knowing if such a machine was used upon you unless you were put into a deep state of hypnosis with another machine and then well questioned. As a child you were 'mind programmed' by the Priestesses of Lys. You have no 'memories' of that 'event' because you were told not to remember. In fact you were 'ordered' not to ever recall it."

"Those 'nightmares' were getting pretty bad," I answered. "That's part of the reason too why Tori was sleeping with me last night." There were even times when I feared to go into dark parts of my palace, just because "something" might be waiting for me. I was getting terrified of "shadows", of even going to bed!

"And you said that when you saw the assassin that you didn't even realize that she was 'real', and not a

part of a dream?" the Warlady asked, her awesome mind no doubt hard at work right now!

"It wasn't until Tori screamed that I knew she was real," I said. I think I could have laid there and allowed her to kill me without even making an attempt to defend myself against her then!

"Post hypnotic suggestion," Lorraine mused, regarding me...

"That assassin," I breathed, remembering "how" she'd died.

"Mind programmed to 'self destruct' in case of failure," the Warlady smiled back. "Which leaves us with either Princess Tara or some 'fraction' among the Priestesses of Lys who are in league with her," the Queen of Trelandar said, her eyes meeting my own.

"You know how to 'make' someone's morning," Darlanis said.

"Bob Simmons said he knew how Taragot the Evil One here," I spoke. "He never told me, however, just 'how' she did the deed!" And, I thought to myself, we weren't likely to ever find out now!

Chapter Eleven

"I hope you realize the 'implications' of 'what' you are saying," I answered, sitting there across the table from Lorraine Richards, the Queen of Trelandar, Warlady of the Empire of California. If Princess Tara did have the "device" which Lorraine suspected that she might possess, it would make her the most dangerous person on the face of the Earth! And if she did have "allies" among the Priestesses of Lys, it could be even worse yet...

"I hope that I am 'mistaken', that this is only just 'conjecture' on my part," the stern featured brunette answered back. "However, it is a proven 'fact' from what I have determined that the Priestesses of Lys do possess the technology of electronic hypnosis, the 'existence' of which I determined for myself when I found it quite impossible to hypnotize anyone of this era. And the fact that I could not hypnotize Carol Simmons there last year is only a further proof that the Priestesses of Lys have been actually tampering with the minds of people not even of this era."

"You are building up a large amount of 'conjecture' on very little concrete evidence," Darlanis now smiled. "And I refuse to believe that any Priestess would ever have anything to 'do' with an evil woman like Princess Tara," the Imperial Empress smiled... "And as for Maris' assassin killing herself, it is quite possible here that she did so to escape the torture she knew we would inflict upon her for the heinous crime she 'attempted' to commit."

"Additionally," Darlanis then continued, giving me a smile, "I think you should realize that even back in her own time Lorraine could only effectively hypnotize about half the people she met in the course of her 'practice', and it is quite likely that Carol Simmons would not have been one of them." I supposed that it was true, as I had done a little "reading" of my own on this. "Also," the Imperial Empress added with a smile for Lorraine, "If Princess Tara had possessed such a 'device', it is quite likely that she would have 'used' it on me to turn me into her 'slave'."

"There's something 'spooky' about this palace of yours," Sharon suddenly spoke. "Like a 'haunted house' I visited back in the Twentieth Century just before we ended up here in this time."

"You're letting your imagination run away with you," Darlanis laughed, "Listening to Queen Maris' 'ghost stories'." I saw Sharon nod, her eyes as "blue" as Darlanis' then meeting my own. I had wondered if anyone else had sensed these feelings I'd felt?

"Seen anything?" I asked, Sharon saying that she hadn't yet.

"There is a perfectly good explanation for all this stuff!" the Californian Empress laughed, Lorraine then nodding in reply, the Warlady perhaps wisely now keeping her thoughts to herself.

"She sounded pretty 'convincing'," I said to Lorraine as my carriage transported us through the streets of Dularn's capital to the great Temple of Lys there half way across Arsana itself. Darlanis having said that it was impossible for the Priestesses of Lys to be behind any of the "troubles" that I was now having.

"Explain that High Priestess who tried to kill the Simmons," the Imperial Warlady smiled back. "And just 'how' did the Evil One or whatever it was get into our plane of existence in 2579?" Lorraine going on to say that she and Bob once had a long "talk" about such matters when I had allowed the "use" of the iron clad steam powered battleship Diana against the Empire of Mexico in the war between the two rival empires last year. "In my opinion for what it's worth here the Priestesses of Lys may prove to be just as 'oppressive' as the Lorr were when they controlled us..."

"I don't understand," I said, sitting there across from her.

"I developed the 'idea' of the Priestesses of Lys as a means of giving Mankind a stabilizing 'moral force' that would be outside the ordinary political spectrum much as the 'role' the Catholic Church played during the Middle Ages from say the Sixth Century until perhaps the Fifteenth or Sixteenth. I made it a 'religion' based upon Science, not superstitious 'mumbo jumbo'."

"For which you have the gratitude of all thinking persons," I smiled back, the hustle and bustle of the busy city almost unnoticed just then. The carriage we were using being one of mine, an "escort" of the Royal Guard surrounding us, news of the attempted assassination having reached the people of the city now.

"I used to 'believe' I had the 'answer' to every problem the human race faced," Lorraine answered, looking out at the city.

"It is said that with age comes 'wisdom'," I smiled back.

"We live under a benevolent dictatorship," Lorraine said.

"The Priestesses do what is 'best' for us," I said to her.

"I am the 'sighted' in the land of the 'blind'," she said.

"I am not sure that I 'understand'," I said to her then.

"I once believed that a social order like this would be 'ideal'," Lorraine answered, looking out the carriage's window. "A simple society, where the sword was used to settle disputes, and where people

still took pride in their own craftsmanship..."

"There haven't been that many 'changes' since the time of Queen Denise here four centuries ago," I now smiled back at her. "We have perfected things, but life is pretty much the same now."

"And the Priestesses of Lys will see that nothing changes," Lorraine replied. "There will be no more 'world civilizations'. No spaceships ever again rising up on tails of flame into the sky to visit other worlds. Only a people now living as their own ancestors once did over much of the world a thousand years before. And anyone who tries to 'upset' that world will be 'dealt with'."

"You honor us with your presence," the Priestess said to me, giving Lorraine a smile as she stood there just behind me now. A sense of "peace", of a lifting of a "burden" from one's soul now going through me as I looked about the great Temple of Arsana. A few people there in the pews, quietly praying to Lys for her help in whatever "problem" they might now be facing. The great golden ankh there before us, brightly lit by candles, gleaming brightly. Overhead great panels glowed softly, speaking of a technology now only legend. Lorraine says that such things are "proof" that the Priestesses of Lys have exploited technology for their "benefit".

"Your Queen has been having nightmares," Lorraine said then.

"She believes it was possible that 'witchcraft' was used," I answered with a smile, the Priestess now giving me an "odd" look and then swiftly walking off, her long white gown lovely on her.

"'Shook her up a little there'," Lorraine grinned at me.

"I'm sure your 'theory' is mistaken," I snapped back.

"We shall see, won't we?" Lorraine smiled in reply.

"It is a 'serious charge' you bring," the Temple's High Priestess said, holding the darkness of Lorraine's eyes with her own. "Especially from one who has in the past 'practiced' it..." The three of us sitting in a small "comfortably" furnished room now off the great central interior of Arsana's own Temple of Lys. A painting of LYS, blonde, beautiful, in a long white gown reaching out to a struggling group of men and women there before her.

"I am a woman of the Twentieth Century, not some uneducated simple barbarian like the people of today," Lorraine smiled back. "I am also the 'founder' of your religion, the 'inventor' of the concept of electronic hypnosis that you use to 'control' Mankind, and I am quite familiar with the 'concepts' that you now preach. What I want to know here is if someone besides you people now has a device to induce a state of hypnosis and if such a 'device' has been used on the Queen of Dularn to cause her to have nightmares almost every night." The thought going through my mind just then that if the Priestesses of Lys "were" as Lorraine said, then they would have considerable reason to wish Lorraine out of the way... She also had what Bob would have "called" an "attitude problem".

"There are 'ways' of 'verifying' such things," the High Priestess answered, her long brunette hair lovely. "And there are also other 'possibilities' that even you haven't thought of here," the High Priestess "smiled" back at the Imperial Warlady. "One such being a 'leakage' between the planes of existence..."

"Ghosts?" Lorraine smiled, her "opinion" of such obvious. I didn't consider it "funny" however! I had no desire to continue to live in a palace now haunted by the ghost of my late husband! I'd never liked Darl Jord when he was alive, and I certainly didn't like him any more now that he was dead and haunting me in

my sleep at night! I'd do anything to get "rid" of these dreams...

"In cases of violent death such things are not unknown," the High Priestess said, telling me then to stare at her golden ankh as she now held up it there before me on its gleaming gold chain. "And the Prince of Dularn did die a violent death at her hands."

"You don't know `everything',Lorraine," I "snapped" at her.

"Look at the ankh, my Queen,don't think of anything else," the High Priestess spoke in a soft level voice. I forced myself to study the ankh, listen to her voice, shut the thoughts out of my mind,let the "power" of the Priestess flow into my own being! I felt a sense of "peace" go over me, Lorraine only a "shadow" to my senses, something I wished would "go away", leave me alone...

Once again I lived the dream, saw the horrid "thing" that was Darl Jord, but now there was no "fear", for beside me stood a "friend", a woman gowned in white, whose "power" was far greater! I saw the horror that was Darl Jord shrink back, and then creep away, the woman in white holding an ankh "upraised" in her hand.

"Well?" I heardLorraine's voice, as if far away, the blue eyes of the High Priestess glowing into mine like great jewels.

"I think it will be necessary for another to visit the palace," she answered, "And cleanse it of what now haunts its chambers. I fear too that there may be much danger for our Queen..." With this she then got up and left us both sitting there stunned!

Chapter Twelve

"What was `that' all about?" I askedLorraine, remembering nothing since the time the Priestess had asked me to stare at her golden ankh.Lorrainesitting there staring at me, her swollen belly leaving no doubts that she was a mother to be. She didn't look quite so "self assured", confident now that she knew it all! That rather pleasing me just then, as I was getting a bit "tired" of her "know it all" attitude, that "superior" air she puts on...

"I'm not sure, but I think the Priestess believes that your palace is `haunted' by the ghost of Darl Jord," Lorrainereplied. "Apparently you are `sensitive' to such things in a way that is rarely found among most people," the Imperial Warlady continued.

"The Prince of theWyomingsarrives this afternoon," I said, keeping my voice "level" so thatLorraine would not "guess" how I felt about him. The erotic thoughts that left no doubts about my own feelings towards him. If Paul "wanted" me, I would be "his".

"That Priestess of yours is `telepathic',"Lorrainespoke.

"Perhaps they are a bit `more' than you think," I smiled.

"I know Tais is `more' than she appears," Lorraine admitted.

"Silistra did `look' pretty upset," I said, referring to the High Priestess. I would have said "scared", but that didn't seem to be the right word to use here. Lorraine now somberly nodding.

"She `saw' something that she didn't like," Lorraine spoke.

"We'd better get back," I said, thinking of Prince Paul Blue Sky of the Wyomings, who was due to arrive just this afternoon. I'd met him once before, back when I was married to Darl Jord. I had "given" myself to him, just to "spite" my faithless husband!! He had been a "MAN" in the full sense of the word, completely unlike Darl Jord, who was a sadistic beast and little more than...

"The ship is one of `yours'," Lorraine observed as she stood beside me, her eyes having seen the flag, the rake of the masts. A sister vessel to my beloved North Star, swift and "handy" in a way that Imperial steam frigates are not. The Diana at its dock. The other battleship, the Orca, now was resting there beside it,

"The Wyomings have no `navy'," Darlanis "pointed out" then.

"We have a `visitor'," Sharon spoke, turning then. The sun glinting off the precious jewels that decorated her golden ankh. The First Priestess moving through the crowd with regal dignity. She is tall, blonde, and looks a bit like many of the paintings I've seen of LYS. The "fact" that she was "here" left no doubts! A lieutenant of my Royal Guard, a bit `awed' by her looks, now telling me that Tais had just ordered the palace to be evacuated!

"`You' have a `problem'," Tais spoke to me in level tones.

"We are in the midst...", I breathed, Tais nodding in reply.

"Have everyone withdraw from this entire area," Tais spoke. In the tone of her voice there was now the sound of distant thunder. The sky, only "clear" a few minutes ago, clouding up now! I saw some sort of "craft" floating in the sky, silvery, shaped much like an arrow head. Smaller than a Lorr battle disc, but yet some sort of interplanetary "spacecraft", doubtlessly well armed! From it came a "voice" like thunder, telling the people of Arsana to leave their city! To flee into the forests surrounding it...

"What is happening?" Lorraine spoke, looking nervous now! I had to grin to myself at her "discomfort" as she stood listening.

"There is a `leak' in the barrier that separates our own plane of existence from that of the astral universe," Tais spoke. There is also now a `leak' in the barrier that separates that plane of existence from the plane of existence we commonly call `HELL'..." Lorraine nodding, glancing at Jon, then at Darlanis. It was common knowledge "what" was supposed to live in "HELL"...

"We can work the ships out of the harbor," Darlanis spoke, her voice as "level" as that of Tais. Lorraine nodding to Jon.

"I am going to require your `assistance' and that of the Queen of Dularn," Tais answered back in too calm level tones now. "There has been a `shift' in the space time continuum and a `problem' that I hoped to have `solved' suddenly `is' no longer."

"Why us?" Darlanis asked, echoing my own thoughts right now!

"Maris is `sensitive' to things few are, and you have within you a `power' that I hope will be adequate to `deal' with what we will face," Tais answered, standing there, a rumble of thunder in the air now as the sun disappeared behind dark boiling clouds of a kind I'd never seen before except when a "GATEWAY" was being opened to link together two separate parts of world space time. I wondered if this time "SOMETHING ELSE" was opening a Gateway!?

"Something `spooky' about this place now," Darlanis spoke, her hand on the beautiful ornate golden hilt of her slim sword as we walked through the now abandoned Royal Palace of Dularn to descend the rough stone stairs into the dark pits beneath. I felt only "terror", the sort of "terror" that can make a woman "void" without even knowing that she is doing so. Tais now holding her ankh in one hand, and a silvery weapon of some sort in the other. I could faintly hear the sound of thunder, the sky now overcast.

"I don't know what `good' our swords will be," I muttered. What we were to "face" wouldn't be of "matter" as we knew it... I wanted to run crying and screaming in terror back out into the light, out into the outdoors! Anywhere but down into the pits!!! I pressed up close to Darlanis, like a frightened child pressing up against its mother. There was a sort of "aura" from her, like the sort of "aura" that Tais now was generating to "protect" us.

"A Warriress may know fear, but she does not let it conquer her," Darlanis spoke, saying one of the famous "code sayings" we have. "Her `companion' is not a man, but a keen steel blade." I drew mine then, the feel of the hilt comforting just then too... I could feel Tais' "power" seeming to surround us, holding back the "evil" that seemed to grow with every second, every foot we took towards the entrance to the catacombs there beneath palace.

"We are being `watched'," I said, feeling the "eyes" on me. There was "movement" in the shadows, shimmering moving "things"!

"The `power' it has over you is `drawn' from your own worst fears," Tais spoke, lighting lamps for the three of us now as we stood back to back, swords gleaming there clenched in our hands.

"Smells," Darlanis muttered, the odor of sulfur and brimstone reminding me of the odor of gunpowder. The odor of the smoke released from Darl Jord's weapon when he tried to kill Lorraine back three years before. "Something' moving in the shadows too," the Empress spoke, her voice as level as if she'd just said that it was going to rain! I could see it rather clearly, a thing of "horror", of rotted flesh, exposed bone, glowing eyes...

"What you `see' or `sense' is harmless to us," Tais said, taking hold of the heavy wooden door that led to the pits beneath the palace and dragging it open. It had taken both Tori and Darlanis to do that two days ago, but Tais did without any effort!!!

"There's a sort of `shield' around us," I said to Tais then.

"Neither of you would have made it this far without it," the First Priestess answered. Darlanis taking a lamp, holding it in her left hand, the glow of the flame highlighting her gold mesh. We descended then into the pits beneath the palace, my palace, one now no longer "mine", but the domain of horrors from another plane of existence. I wondered if any of us would survive this?

"There's `something' down here," I said to Tais then. And it wasn't Darl Jord's "ghost" by any means either, I could tell!! There was a feeling of "EVIL", of something the opposite of GOOD!

"It is coming to meet us," Tais spoke, raising her ankh up!

"Put your back to mine," Darlanis snapped, her sword raised.

"I can 'see' it," I spoke, suspecting that Tais could too.

"Ugly damn thing," the First Priestess answered me back.

"Bob once told me what 'IT' looked like," I said to her.

"There's 'more'," Darlanis spoke, swinging her sword. I could see "other things", awful "creatures" that LYSnever made. Nothing was really "clear", and I didn't want it to be right now! I knew that only Darlanis' awesome courage was keeping me going!

"Looks like a spider crossed with a lot of other things," I heard Tais say, the thought going through my mind that she might be in communication with the space ship floating over our heads! "Same creature apparently as what attacked Shalimar in 2579." I heard her saying, "But smaller in size due to its confinement." Bob had told me that the ONE he'd seen had been gigantic then...

"I see 'something', but not 'clear'," I heard Darlanis say.

"It is not 'materialized' in this time as it was then," Tais was saying, the thought going through my mind that what we needed here wasn't swords, but something far more "effective" than them! I took a swipe at a moving "shadow", saw it move back just a bit.

"What does that 'flying arrowhead' have to do with this?" I heard Darlanis ask, voicing a "question" I'd had in my mind too.

"It carries an anti-matter bomb of three hundred megatons," Tais answered. There wouldn't be much "left" after that fell!!!

"You're talking a crater twenty miles across," she answered.

"Slightly 'less' than that, but you're not far off," Tais answered. I thought of the people of Arsana, of the absolute "futility" in having them evacuate the city in face of this now!

"There are 'more' things now coming," I said to Tais then.

"The 'leakage' between the planes of existence," Tais said.

"'Who' is 'responsible' for this?" Darlanis "spoke" then. I noticed that even she didn't sound so "calm" any more now either! I was "thankful" that I had emptied my bladder just before this! I didn't want them finding the body of the Queen of Dularn with visible evidence that she had "wet" herself in her terror before she'd died. I know it sounds "dumb" now, but that's how I felt.

"I'm guessing that Darl Jord found a 'way' back," Tais said. "This 'part' of the world is a bit 'leaky' due to our teleporting people back and forth through time, and he must have come through after I teleported the Simmons back to their own time," she said. "That's also 'why'," Tais now added in explanation, "That there can't be any more people brought up to this era from the past." I wondered if perhaps I was hearing the "truth" here from her...

"You knew about this beforehand?" I asked the First Priestess. I could feel Darlanis' back against mine. Only the contact with her body kept me from curling up into a terrified ball now!

"No," Tais answered, firing her strange weapon just then. A brilliant blue white beam of sizzling energy leaping out from it!

Chapter Thirteen

"That didn't do any good," Darlanis said, her back against mine. I hadn't really thought that Tais believed that it would. What we were dealing with here wasn't "matter" as we think of it.

"I've got `it's' attention," Tais answered in level tones.

"Git!,Darl!" I snapped, swinging my blade at the "thing"!

"Figures Darl Jord would be at the `bottom' of this," Darlanis snapped, her movements indicating that she was swinging her own blade at half sensed "horrors" that our eyes did not "see"... Our lamps lit up the stones surrounding us, but not what "stood" there. That we "sensed" using other senses than our own vision.

"Building up the `field'," Tais spoke, the "things" seeming to move "back" a bit. I felt as if I was standing underneath a tree during a thunderstorm, a sort of "tingle" going over me now. "Think I've got communications established between me and `it'," she added, I assuming that she was referring to that "spider" thing that I didn't even want to try to visualize any more than I had to! Even Darl Jord's ghost looked a lot more "pleasant" now!

"That's what you Priestesses call the `EVIL ONE', isn't it?" Darlanis spoke, her jutting rump touching mine as we stood there. "'Old Ugly' standing there in front of us," she added just then.

"I think I can convince it to `leave'," Tais muttered now.

"That `gun' of yours didn't do any good," Darlanis said.

"They seem to be `afraid' of cold steel," I said then.

"Electrical polarity," Tais answered back in level tones.

"How come you picked me instead of Lorraine?" Darlanis said.

"Courage," Tais answered. "Also there is `something' about you that repels astral creatures like those now surrounding us."

"Lorraine always said I had `more courage than brains'," the Empress laughed, "And `this' is certainly `proof' enough of it!"

"There will be an electrical shock," Tais warned us then.

" Aii..!" Darlanis gasped, the "jolt" being quite painful!

"The `things' have moved off," I breathed, sensing this now.

"A `side effect' of the psychic `jolt' I gave them," Tais spoke. "We're using a Gateway to interlink two separate parts of the space time continuum," she added, her words meaning little...

"They're `leaving'...", I breathed, "sensing" that now too.

"There will be another `shock'," Tais warned us then. There was. This one a bit worse than the first, making my hair stand!

"They're `gone'," I breathed, sensing nothing more now.

"The `barrier' is re-established," Tais answered back.

"I `need' a bath," Darlanis "grinned", "And a gallon of your best whiskey to follow it," the Empress smiled at me as I nodded in reply. My own "sweat stink" now was rather "obvious" too... Even Tais didn't smell too "holy" either after all this, I noted!

"What happened?" Prince Paul Blue Sky asked, his dark eyes looking into mine as we stood there on the quay before the Royal Palace of Dularn. I had no doubts that if he took me in his arms and kissed me I would just "melt" like some simple slave girl! The sky now once again clear, the sun low there in the west over the city. I had "memories" that I wouldn't forget for a while. I hoped I wouldn't have nightmares for a month from all this now! I'd poured three stiff shots of whiskey down me like plain water!

"We chased out some `ghosts'," Darlanis grinned back. The Empress wasn't exactly "sober" by any means now. I'd never seen a woman drinking down my good Dularnian whiskey like that before!

"I thought I was the `barbarian'," my Wyoming Prince smiled. In his leather attire, the long saber at his side, he presented a quite "dashing" appearance. I often wonder if I would have given myself to him anyway even if I hadn't had that "fight" with Darl? I'd been in "need" of being "held", of having someone say to me that they loved me, that I was an attractive woman, that I was a Queen "worthy" of her crown. Darl having unfavorably compared me to any number of his sluttish slave girls, all, he "maintained", being a lot more "woman" than me! I'm not too "proud" of what I did back then, but I think you can see "why" I did it just then.

"My wife does not `lie' about such things," Serak spoke up.

"I would not dare question the honesty of one so beautiful," he said to Darlanis, who beamed rather drunkenly back in reply. "Or that of the beautiful golden Queen of Dularn," he now added. The hand he put around my waist did not meet with the "protest" I might have "given" had anyone else done the same to me just then. I do find him extremely handsome of course, but I suspect it is also his own natural "masculinity" that I find so "attractive"...

"You have a `silver tongue'," I smiled, looking up into his eyes. I could feel desire in my body, that feeling of "warmth". The whiskey "helping" things here, releasing my own inhibitions. His hair is a thick coal black, his high cheekboned face that of a mixed ancestry I find extremely attractive. His skin color is

little darker than mine, I might note here at this point now too.

"As I recall you were a rather 'tasty' wench too," he said. Fortunately he spoke this in a low whisper so that only I heard! I'd had "oral sex" before in my life, but not like he did to me!! "I also like the fact you've put on a few pounds," he said to me. To say he was "making my day" was putting it mildly here now too!

"Have you 'sold' Emily yet?" I smiled back, aware of no one but him, Emily being his personal slave girl, a dark haired Kathi type. One of those women who were born to wear a slave collar...

"I might consider it if I could 'collar' the Queen of Dularn in her place," Prince Paul smiled back, a low drunken giggle from Darlanis now leaving no doubts that she'd overheard all of this. Lorraine now whispering to Sharon as the two of them stood there.

"That gown is too tight on you, my Queen," La-ra said to me. I could see that. The "effect" was much as if I'd been "poured" into it like some candle into a mold. I wore my briefest silken strap, a wisp that would show under nothing, and my smallest and most provocative set of "clips" fitted over my pierced nipples. The thought going through my mind that Wyoming women wore rings in theirs instead of the concealing "clips" we "civilized" women wore. Having your nipples "ringed" of course made a "statement" like nothing else could about the nature of a woman's sexuality! There is also the famous "Golden Needle", which I'll get into later here. I recalled Carol Simmons, decided perhaps the gown was just a bit "tight" for formal wear, but on the other hand I sure did look "good" in it! And I was dressing up only for Paul!

"I think 'Brooke' is going to get her 'Ridge'," I said to her. La-ra giving me an "odd" look, Bob's description of the characters on the Twentieth Century soap and the "plot" leaving no doubts in my mind that this "Brooke" was going to get her man! A knock on the door now halting this little "interplay" of mine. La-ra then going to the door, opening it, Kathi and Prince Paul stepping into my room, the blondish wench in the brief leather attire of the Wyoming slave girl, a collar locked about her neck!

"What IS the MEANING of THIS!" I gasped, standing there, it being obvious that Kathi had a grin as wide as all outdoors too!!

"I am a very 'fortunate' man," Paul smiled at me, standing there, no doubt admiring the "figure" of the Queen of Dularn now. "I have just 'purchased' this delightfully bodied wench, worth at least fifty gold crowns in any 'honest' slave market for only a single copper coin," he added, patting Kathi on her jutting rear!

"I made 'The Gesture of Submission', Mistress," Kathi spoke.

"And she did so in the nude so there was no doubt," he said.

"I see," I said, well "aware" of the "implications" of this!

"I'm sure you would be worth considerably more," he grinned.

"The Queen of Dularn is 'priceless'," La-ra said to him now.

"The 'Queen of Dularn' wishes to speak to the Prince of the Wyoming in 'private'," I snapped, La-ra and Kathi nodding back and taking their leave of us. Prince Paul closing the door then.

"I trust you won't run me through for my 'crime'," he said. "I fear I 'do' have a certain 'weakness' for women with light hair," he added, "Especially if they also have feminine figures."

"You know 'how' I feel about slavery," I said to him, trying to be "angry" and not being very successful here. The thought going through my mind that I wouldn't mind being his slave girl! That was assuming of course that I would be his ONLY slave girl!

"I think you object to the 'abuse' of slaves," he smiled.

"Did she perform 'The Act of Submission'?" I challenged!

"Her abilities were not the equal of yours," he grinned!

"I will not strip and 'kneel' before you," I snapped back.

"I think you will be beautiful with your nipples ringed," he said to me. "A leather halter for your breasts, a short leather skirt to gird your loins, to accentuate those lovely full thighs. The 'Golden Needle' in your clitoris that makes the women of my people like no other," he replied, standing there grinning at me!

"I am the Queen of Dularn," I spoke, standing there before him, so sexually aroused just now that it was quite embarrassing! The bit of silk between my thighs soaking wet with my "need" now!

"You are flushed despite the coolness of this room," he said to me, standing there, so masculine in his leather that I knew he was the man that I wanted even if I had to "sell" myself to him!! I wanted him to insert the "Golden Needle" into my clitoris, making me into a wanton slut helpless to control herself with him...

"You had release in Kathi's mouth and then you come here!" I snapped, furious that Kathi had "gotten" what I should have had!! I wanted to whip her, to see the livid welts on her back, to see the blood run down her bare body. That little Trelandarian slut!

"I wished every moment that it was 'you', not her," he said. "That it was Maris Marn of Sana, Queen of Dularn, 'doing it'." I supposed it was true. I recalled "what" he'd said to me before. I'd been tempted to give up my crown, everything to become "his". I'd been so miserable married to Darl Jord, often even seeing my life as a slave girl in Trelandar on Lady Lana's estate as being "better" than what I had to "endure" at the hands of my husband!!

"I will not 'share' our bed with Kathi," I warned him then. He was also aware that unlike many women I could not stand to be "bound" while making love, Darl Jord having "abused" me that way!

"You said 'our bed'," he smiled, standing there before me.

"I won't 'kneel' before you," I said, my emotions in turmoil. I had my "pride", my "title", but yet I was also a woman!

"It would please me to kneel before the Queen of Dularn," he said, now doing so, looking up at me as I stood there before him. "To bestow upon her a kiss as such as she deserves to receive..."

Chapter Fourteen

I went to my bedroom door, slammed the bar home in its keeper, well aware of "what" would be said if this was ever "seen"!!! I had heard about the time that Darlanis had caught the Prince of Talon "pleasuring" my younger sister Gayle in just this way too! Oral sex is more "common" among Dularnians than those of the more southern nations, although I feel this is more "cultural" than anything else here. It is true, however, that the Dularnian woman, as a general rule, does take better "care" of herself than do the women of other nations from what I've heard rumored about it! Even the Dularnian woman of the lower castes usually "shaving"...

"You `move' beautifully," he said, kneeling there on the carpet, watching my every movement. I then picked up the bottle of whiskey there on the table nearby and took a drink, felt it "burn" my throat, my green eyes burning "hot" into his. I didn't feel very much like a "Queen" just then. I felt "desire", a hot burning "lust" that I knew would force me to "submit" to it! The fact that such a MAN might kneel before me leaving no doubts. His leather shirt and breeches well displaying his manly body. I could hear the "snap" and crackle of the fireplace there at the side of the room, the scent of burning pine logs pleasant to me.

"You may `taste' of the Queen of Dularn," I said, struggling to pull my gown up over my wide hips as I stood there before him. Standing there with nothing below my hips but the shoes I wore, a pair of open toed golden strapped affairs with three inch heels. My gown of a regal blue fine silk that "outlined" everything too, the "weight" that I now carry being mostly on my hips and thighs.

"This' we don't need," my Wyoming Prince said, tearing the wisp of colored silk from me, exposing the now "moist" shaved flesh of me as I stood there with my gown lifted up over my hips. I felt his hands clasp my buttocks, those full meaty mounds of mine, and draw me to him! "My `Golden One'," he breathed, pressing his lips to me. Pressing them to the very center of my womanhood! The rich thick oils of my own "desire" now oozing forth!

"Yes'," I breathed out, feeling the touch of his lips, his raspy tongue as he lapped. I knew there was no "hope" for me now to ever turn back now from what laid ahead! I staggered back, my hands now clasping his head to me, Paul in turn "clinging" to me, licking away at my clitoris as I moaned with pleasure. I fell back then across my bed, my tiara flying off behind me, my thighs clasping his head as he now went to "work" on me in a way that none but him had ever "done" to me before! "I'm yours!" I breathed, now twisting helplessly with the "pleasure", the pent up "need" of such as this! "I'm yours forever!" I cried out now!

"There will be a `tell tale' odor," I said, wringing out the washcloth and holding it ready while he took a drink out of the bottle of whiskey. The last contractions of my orgasm now dying away. The leather strap tight against me, put on by his hands... The "symbolism" of that leaving no doubts as to our relationship! When a man puts on a woman's strap, there is no doubt she is his!

"I don't think you'll need a `Golden Needle'," he smiled in reply. My orgasm had been swift, only a matter of a few minutes. It had been a long time since any man had "touched" me like that!

"You would not `cheat' me of what is properly `mine', would you now?" I teased, washing his face for him. I wanted to be as "good" as I could be. As good as Carol Simmons had been for Bob. She had taught me much of what a woman could be for her husband.

"I see Tais," my Prince said to me as we entered the great ballroom. We were a bit "late", but I supposed it didn't matter.

"I will `speak' to her," I said, looking up into his eyes.

"We both have beautiful `companions'," Prince Serak said, my Prince nodding in reply. Darlanis giving me a big "grin" as she stood there, still not completely "sober" after everything we'd been through. Her mouth was a bit "swollen", leaving no doubts that Serak had fully "enjoyed" his Imperial Empress as such a woman at times should be so "enjoyed". I suspected that my hasty make up job wasn't quite "perfect", not what it should have been!

"Maris has `agreed' to marry me," my Prince smiled back, the grin on Darlanis' face something to see just then as she nodded!! I saw no reason to "wait" here, to play around pretending what we both knew was "true" might not actually be. "And hopefully some day our own daughter will be the next Queen of Dularn after her." Paul having agreed to "adopt" Hope Simmons as being our daughter.

"Don't let him have too many slave girls," Darlanis giggled at me. I suspected she wasn't quite as "sober" as she looked...

"You have to keep women like `these' well in hand," Serak said, giving Darlanis a quick slap on her silk covered rear end! The big blonde giggling a bit, her eyes glowing hot into his now!

"Warm their bottoms, warm their hearts," my Prince smiled.

"She'll be `better' after her first spanking," Serak said.

"`Built' for it too," Darlanis observed, giving me a smile!

"I like a woman with `meat' on her bones," my Prince smiled.

"They do `ride' better," the Prince of the Nevadas grinned!

"Everyone got pretty `upset' about a `ghost' in here," Prince Paul Blue Sky said to me as we danced a short time later. I had not told anyone the full story of what we'd "seen" there in the pits below the palace. Neither had Darlanis, while Tais no doubt had her "reasons" here to keep silent about the matter now. I hoped this would be the "end" of it, that there wouldn't be any more nightmares to make me wake up screaming in terror at them...

"There was `more' than just a ghost here," I answered back, recalling "what" we'd found there in the pits beneath the palace.

"I've heard of such things, but I never believed them," he said to me. I had felt the same way before meeting up with Darl Jord's ghost. That such stories were just tales to impress ignorant Peasants and such. I've always known that the Priestesses of Lys had some sort of power, but I never gave it much thought.

"I saw `things', but I didn't `see' them with my eyes," I answered, my mouth close to his ear so I'd not be overheard here.

"There was a thunderstorm like none I've ever seen before," Paul answered. I suppose that there was. It had taken a great amount of psychic force to close the "barrier" that separates our own plane of existence

from that of the astral world. And then to close the astral world's barrier against that of the domain of the EVIL ONE. The plane of existence called "HELL" for dozens of centuries. Man has had many names for the EVIL ONE, but I think our instinctive "hatred" of spiders is proof that what I "saw" there beneath my own palace here in Arsana was indeed the DEVIL!* * Why do we have an instinctive fear of spiders? Why are spiders the favorite "horror monster" of low budget SF type movies? What is it about the "spider" that makes this insect so "feared"? I suggest here that perhaps the true form of the DEVIL appears as a sort of a gigantic spider, not as a being with horns and a tail? And while a few spiders are poisonous, most are not, so why are people so terrified of spiders? I welcome your comments. (J.B.)

"When we are alone, if you hold me tight, I will tell you," I promised. I could trust him not to laugh at my story, as unbelievable as it would sound to one who had not "lived" it then...

"I think, my 'GoldenOne', that you do not lack for courage," he answered, giving me a quick kiss as he held me now.

"It is Darlanis and Tais who did not 'lack' for courage," I answered, remembering all too well how I had felt about it then! The "terror", not of death, but of being "taken" from this world to one of nightmares, one where the EVIL ONE himself now "ruled"! Where Darl Jord himself had been sent after his judgment by LYS!

"The 'essence' of courage is not the lack of fear, but the 'conquering' of it," he smiled back as we danced together in time with the music. The bright lights, the gaily dressed women, the men in their formal attire, all so "different" from what I'd gone through there in the dark pits beneath this great palace of mine!

"There is an announcement I wish to make," Tais spoke as she stood there, her white gown, the golden ankh set with precious jewels leaving no "doubt" as to "who" she was. Lorraine had said to me that she was the true "ruler" of the world, that we Queens and Empresses ruled by her "leave". I supposed that it was true. She did possess "powers", weapons now unknown to mortal Man, such weapons and powers having served today to drive the EVIL ONE and his minions, including the ghost of Darl Jord, back to "HELL"...

"You could have waited, had a 'fancy' wedding," Paul said. I nodded, smiled back. Such things meant "little" to me anymore. We held hands as we stood there, knowing "what" was to come now!

"The Queen of Dularn has informed me that she wishes to marry the Prince of the Wyomings here tonight before all of you," the First Priestess spoke then, her words bringing a swift "buzz" as everyone exclaimed their utter "surprise" at this sudden news!

"What has now been joined together in the eyes of Lys let no man or woman put 'asunder'," Tais said in a clear voice, snapping the lovely golden shackles on us so that Paul's left wrist was joined to my right in the historic marriage customs of Dularn... He then kissed me before everyone, and gave me a slap on the ass! It being the custom among the Wyomings to "spank" the new bride. The "symbolism" of this leaving no "doubts" as to her "status"!!!

Chapter Fifteen

"How long are we supposed to wear these?" my Prince asked as soon as we were alone, lifting his wrist to which I was fastened. I don't think he'd really known about that "part" of our marriage customs, which are quite different from those of other nations... I could see lights on the ships in the harbor from the windows. I had slid the bar into the keeper. We would not be disturbed. Our "girls" had set out a lovely tray of snacks and drink for us. Saw to it that the fireplace was going, and "stocked" with wood.

"Until the same time we were married tomorrow," I "smiled", touching the silver links of the neck chain I wore with a finger. Such "marking" me well as a new bride, a married woman under our own customs. The Wyomings do not "chain" their women, but use instead a sort of anklet which the woman wears on the left ankle for the first three years, then on her right after that to signify that she is now a wife of more than three years and thus able to now become a mother under the laws of the Priestesses of Lys.* * An "exception" was made in the case of Darlanis... (J.B.) The anklet is placed upon the woman in a public ceremony among the Wyomings, its symbolism being that she is now "his" property.

"We are going to get to 'know' each other quite well," he "observed". I supposed that we would in that period of time now.

"That is quite likely," I said, standing there at his side.

"There is going to be a 'problem' with our clothing," he said to me. More so I "thought" with his than with my own here.

"I have scissors in the drawer here," I said, going to it. Our slave girls could stitch things back up later on, I thought. Normally of course a couple wears special clothing when getting married so this is not a problem. There is a deep "symbolism" to this being "shackled" together, a "togetherness" that other nation's marriage customs don't have. In most countries the wife is considered the "property" of the husband, but not in Dularn...

"You are both beautiful , sexy, and 'competent'," he smiled.

"A wife should be 'useful' to her husband," I smiled back. It did not take me very long to remove our clothing completely. I was provocative, sensual, more like a slave girl than a Queen.

"I 'have' something for you," he said, showing it to me. It was very lovely, tiny, and made of pure gold. A tiny "needle".

"You might have to sell Kathi and Emily," I warned him.

"I will try not to 'hurt' you too much," he said to me.

"I am of the Warriresses," I smiled back, looking at it.

"It is barbed so that it does not slip out," he told me.

"Do you have the rings for my nipples?" I smiled in turn.

"I would not have 'neglected' such things," he assured me. I thought them beautiful as he placed them on me, using the tiny hollow rivets that a woman wears in her nipples for her "clips". The "positioning" was wrong due to the fact that my nipples are pierced from top to bottom, not side to side like a Wyoming woman's are, but I supposed I could always have my nipples redone...

"I suppose it is time to `do it'," I said, lying back, my thighs open, moving back on the bed a bit so I looked up at the ceiling over my bed. I knew it would "hurt", but I did not wish him to know. I did not think the pain would be any greater than that of a bee sting, which I experienced once there in Trelandar.

"Do not move even if you must cry out a bit," he said to me.

"Stings...!" I hissed, feeling it piercing me, entering me!

"It is done," he said, reaching down, lifting me back up.

"Like having a sliver in yourself," I said, smiling a bit.

"It increases a woman's sensitivity," my Prince smiled back.

"Ever done it to a woman before?" I asked, curious about it.

"Twice," he said, giving me a smile in reply. I supposed he had done it to Emily, and probably some other slave girl of his.

"You didn't give me the public spanking that a Wyoming husband gives his new bride," I smiled, well "aware" of his customs.

"It would not have been `seemly' to spank the Queen of Dularn in public," he smiled, pulling me down now over his knees.

"But my bottom will be `warmed'," I smiled, aware of what was going to happen now. What I so "wanted" him to do to me now!

"It is a lovely bottom, so full and rounded," he said to me. The first slap across it came as quite a surprise to me just then as it landed. Youstruly letting out a quite surprised "yip"!! "And a spanked woman is so `delightful' afterwards," he said, a second blow following the first, "warming" the other cheek now! A series of ten following the first two warming my bottom nicely!

"You have that `look' of the well spanked wench," my Prince said to me as he put me to my knees before him. I had given some audible "protests" to what had been done, of course, such being expected of me as I knew fully well here. My eyes meeting his as he nodded, there being no "doubt" what was "expected" of me now!!

"Your `talents' have `improved' since last you did that," he said to me. I was using all the "tricks" that Carol had showed me last year. The "use" of the tongue, how to "hum" while doing it. The "heat" in my bottom seeming to trigger off something in me, no doubt the piercing of my clitoris playing its part here...

"Mmm, mmm," I mumbled, my mouth "full" just then. It didn't take me very long to "earn" my "reward" either. That same "reward" that Kathi had gotten earlier this day for her own efforts!

"You are the woman I've always wanted," my Prince said to me as I sat in his lap, Paul Blue Sky at the moment holding a glass of wine to my lips so that I might drink. "Ever since that day I first laid eyes on you sitting there so `regal' on your throne."

"I'd look better without all this `weight'," I said to him.

"I wouldn't want you to look 'like'Lorraine," he smiled.

"I'd look better if I weighed ten pounds less," I said.

"You could make love more, and eat less," he suggested.

"You have a finger 'up' me," I observed. It felt good.

"I'll try not to touch your clitoris," he said, inserting another one up into me as I sat there in his lap, my legs apart.

"You promised me a 'story', my love said, holding me close. The flames from the fireplace making moving shadows on the walls. I hoped I'd seen the last of my nightmares, of Darl Jord's ghost!

"It all started late last fall," I said, recalling when I'd had my first "nightmare" involving Darl Jord. At first I hadn't thought too much of it, my late husband being a person that I'd tried to forget. I'd sold his slave girls, a bunch of "sluts" to some slaver, glad to see the last of them. I'd ordered the rooms completely redone, andLorraineand her husband were there now, Darl and I from the beginning having kept separate "quarters"...

"There are those among my people who are 'sensitive' to such things," he spoke. TheWyomingswere not a "civilized" people. They lived closer to "nature" than we of Dularn orCalifornia. I knew to him such things as "ghosts", haunted places were not new.

"Tais said I am," I answered, continuing with my story now.

"Did your late husband ever practice 'witchcraft'?" Paul asked as I concluded the tale that I have related here earlier.

"He did a number of things I didn't want to know about," I said. "Darl was a very 'secretive' person in many ways," I said. I was for most of my marriage "afraid" of him, of "what" he might "do" to me. Any man who would rape his own teenage sister is not a man that a wife should feel "safe" about! Darl having admitted to me after his mother's death that he had actually raped Darlanis, although he said at the time that he was drunk and he didn't know "who" she actually was! This of course can be taken as you wish, although I don't believe any man could get drunk enough to "rape" his own sister and not "know" who she was, especially as Darlanis herself actually did recognize him as the leader of the gang of ruffians who dragged her into that alley here in Arsana!

"You might want to investigate matters now," Paul suggested. "See if there are any secret rooms or anything like that that he could have used for the practice of the rites of witchcraft..."

"The kitchen master says that food often comes up missing," I smiled. No doubt some serving girl was helping herself a bit! The palace was built in the time of Queen Denise, who built it as a sort of fortress with secret passages and everything else too. This is why there are no windows on any floor below the third, a precaution no doubt taken wisely considering the nature of society at that time. There are also heavy shutters, and the window sills were once fitted with iron bars before being "removed" by Queen Tulis, who said she didn't want to live in a "prison" now!

"Are there any secret passages from this room?" he asked me. Darl had known of them all, a fact that I hadn't appreciated too much either as he could "visit" me when I didn't wish to be seen! He had claimed

that it was even possible to leave the palace by such means and enter the city through the city's sewer system...

"It is 'locked'," I smiled, glancing over to where it was. There was a soft sound then, as if there was "movement" behind the wall! A sort of shuffling noise as if something moved about!

"Hold me!" I whimpered, pressing tight up against him then!

"You have 'rats'," my Prince smiled, holding me. I did not think that the sound I had heard had been made by rats, not unless they moved on two feet and stood upright like a man does...!

Chapter Sixteen

"I'm scared," I said, lifting the lamp as my Prince opened the lock. His long saber propped against the wall ready to hand. The fact that he'd brought the weapon left no doubts in my mind that he himself did not believe that the sound I'd heard was rats or any sort of small animal that might inhabit the Royal Palace !

"It'd be better if we weren't chained together, but you can carry the lamp," he answered, opening the portal, picking up his sword and stepping into the dusty passageway beyond. The stone of the exterior wall of the palace cold and damp, the stones beneath my naked feet uncomfortably cold as I stood alongside him.

"There are 'tracks'," he spoke as I lifted the lamp up.

"I will send my guardswomen to investigate," I said.

"I am of the Warriors," he said to me. I nodded.

"We will need clothing," I pointed out to him.

"The 'tracks' are fresh," he said to me then.

"You look 'different' now," my Prince said to me. I supposed that I did. He'd never seen me before in helmet and armor. La-ra had gotten the "key", freed us from the wedding shackles. I had made the decision not to bring my guardswomen with me now.

"I'm not 'Lorraine', but I think you'll find me adequate," I answered, slipping the blade I now carried back into its sheath. A wife of Dularn stands with her husband in battle. That is a part of our customs that date back to before Queen Denise ruled our land. Back to a time when men and women stood together, back to back, against their foes, both "human" and that which is not.

"We have no idea of 'what' we will find," Paul pointed out.

"I wear your neckchain," I said, keeping secret what "else" he'd "done" to me as La-ra stood there

"listening" to every word.

"It is said among my people that a woman of Dularn learns to fight before she learns to love," he smiled back, seeing me nod.

"We are `measured' by the strength of our enemies," I said. Our history is one of almost constant warfare, both against those who sought to conquer our lovely wooded island, and in the service of Queens who sought to extend our "culture" to other lands.

"It must have survived here by stealing food," my Prince said, lifting his lamp, his saber gleaming now in his right hand. As the Royal Palace covers several acres of land, and has four stories above ground, (the upper floor is used for storage) as well as pits beneath it that few ever "visit", it was quite possible that some sort of "creature" might survive for years inside it by stealing food and using the secret passageways we were in.

"The footprints are not those of a human foot," I replied, well aware that Earth now bore other forms of life than "human". Such creatures are "rare", but they do exist. Lorrainer relates meeting up with one there in the forests of Trelandar at one time when held captive by Princess Tara. A being more "reptile" than man. It is "said" that the ruins of Los Angeles are inhabited by them, the Queen of Trelandar stating that she has seen some sort of "creatures" that walk on two legs living in the ruins of that once great city when she flew over the ruins in her airplane. It being impossible even for her to get any one to enter the ruins except for a few of the caste of Scribes, who have just explored the outlying portions, few being willing to enter yet further in. The Peasants who live near the ruins claim that "creatures" from the ruins steal children and eat them. I tend to doubt this although it is possible judging from the "nature" of these things and the "experiences" of Darlanis there in mountains near Leith.

"It is doubtlessly `mu', not `hu'," my husband answered me in a low whisper as we crept carefully down the passageway now. There was a sense of being "enclosed", a total darkness there beyond the glow of our two lamps. These passageways were, I believe now from what I have learned, something that only Darl and his "pet" ever knew much about since the times of Queens now only "names" in a musty history book. Women whose cold ashes lie in urns there below this very palace where centuries ago they ruled.

"Such can be killed by cold steel," I answered him back, my blade gleaming there in my right hand as I followed close behind. I was using my "sense", trying to detect something, but all right then I could feel was a sort of "unclean" feeling about this now. This was a creature of flesh and blood, something "killable"...

"I am glad my wife is `Dularnian'," he laughed softly back.

"We are `good' for `more' than `warming beds'," I smiled.

"I can smell an odor," he said, halting then, sniffing the air. He was a man who lived close to nature, not in a city like me. His senses were doubtlessly somewhat "keener" than my own.

"We know it is not an `animal'," I "whispered" in reply. I glanced behind myself as I did from time to time, well aware that such creatures as the one we "hunted" were intelligent in a way. THE GLOWING GREEN SPOTS THAT GREETED ME LEAVING NO DOUBTS EITHER!

"It's Here!" I gasped, spinning about, my sword held out in front of me. I could hear the creature shuffling off, fleeing me now as I pursued it, my Wyoming Prince just behind as we dashed through these dusty "passageways" between the walls of my palace! Our lamps lighting only the "stones" of the walls

surrounding us!

"Hold it, Maris!" he snapped, suddenly grabbing me, stopping me as we pursued the "thing" through these hidden passageways no human foot had trod since the death of my late husband Darl Jord!

"We could catch it!" I protested angrily, the thing now once again "gone". That it could see in the dark was obvious now too! There are a number of creatures that can, such as the Lorr, who see in the infrared according to what Lorraine has related now...

"It knows these passageways, we don't, and how do we know that somewhere up ahead there isn't a trap door or something else?" he challenged me. Running after it could well be fatal!! Queen Denise had been a woman who would have thought of "things" like that. Of building a trap door over a bed of sharp spikes!

"We will need dogs, the Royal Guard," I answered back.

"Interesting," Lorraine spoke, looking about the "room" we'd found. The "creature", a mutant of some sort, owl eyed, white of skin like something that had never "seen" the sun, having been killed by my guardswomen when they finally cornered the "thing"!

"Those symbols?" I spoke, my husband's arm around my waist.

"Date back to a time far beyond my own," she answered me.

"That may 'explain' certain matters," Darlanis ventured.

"A 'problem' that we had," the First Priestess spoke then.

"Like something out of a 'horror movie'," Sharon then said.

"I want the entire palace searched, everything, from the roof to the lowest pits," I spoke, the lieutenant of the guardswomen "nodding", her eyes beneath her helmet then meeting my own. "The women in groups of three," I added then, seeing her nodding.

"Do you ever sleep?" my husband smiled, the sun now shining brightly in the sky there to the east over the lands that were a part of the Dularnian Republic, and further to the east those where his own people now ruled the forests and the great plains.

"I fear we didn't get to spend as much 'time' together as we hoped," I smiled, stripping off my clothing, tired, exhausted now from everything that had happened. I didn't think I'd have to worry now about any more things that went "bump" in the night...

"I'd disagree with that," he smiled, taking me in his arms. "I'm glad that my wife's 'Dularnian' instead of another 'race'." * * The term "race" being used in the sense of "nationality". (JB)

"You are a woman of many 'talents'," Prince Paul Blue Sky said to me as the stars twinkled there in the sky visible through the windows. The day once again gone, with night again "ours". We had slept the day through, waking only for a quick snack before once again falling asleep again in each other's arms. La-ra had said that our Imperial "visitors" were gone and that my Royal Guard had found nothing of importance in their search of the palace. Apparently Tais had brought a number of Priestesses with her and they had

transported the contents of the secret "room" we had found to the great Temple of Lyshere in Arsana. I supposed the Priestesses would study what they found, then destroy it all.

"In bed or on the battlefield," I smiled back at him then, the room "lit" only by the flicking flames of the fireplace. He had been tracing little patterns around my breasts, teasing my nipples a bit, making them stiffen and grow hard. I tend to carry my weight mostly below my waist, my upper body much the "same" as it was years ago when I first became the Princess of Dularn by marrying Darl Jord. My father had warned me about him, but I was "ambitious", and the thought of someday being "Queen" drove away any thought of what might be in store for me as Darl Jord's wife!

"I understand that you are a very capable sea officer," he smiled, looking down into my eyes as I laid there beside him now.

"We could take the North Star to Sana," I suggested, lifting my arms to him, half turning so that I might offer him my body...

"Your 'responses' are not those that one would expect of a Queen," he said to me as we laid together both damp and sweaty. He had "ridden" me quite well, my knees well drawn up, and had released his cum deep within the oozing wet tissues of my vagina.

"You believe that a Queen should be 'cool' and 'reserved'?" I smiled, kissing him then, my flirting tongue quick to "tease" his. I had not been "cool" and "reserved" nor had I been very "ladylike" either then. I had arched, clung, and even cried out a bit as the double orgasms had rippled through my quaking loins!

"It is possible that Emily and Kathi will have to seek elsewhere for their 'pleasures'," he said, reaching down, touching...

"I fear there will be nothing 'left' for them," I teased.

"Perhaps you did not 'need' the 'Golden Needle'," he said.

"I trust you plan to 'finish' what you have begun," I said.

"I fear you are not a woman to whom 'once' is 'enough'," he said, inserting his fingers into the "place" I wished them to be.

Chapter Seventeen

"Your slave girls are a 'saucy' lot," I smiled, Emily and Kathi a study in "provocativeness" in their short leather skirts. The crew of the North Star often having a hard time keeping their minds upon their work with such feminine delights prancing about. I had put Emily over my lap this morning, given her the spanking she had coming, then used my fingers to make her "submit" to me. Many Dularnian mistresses "finger" a slave girl, making her come. Impressing upon her that she is totally and completely "theirs"! It serves to keep the wench more "docile" and "submissive" to her mistress, and appears to be almost "unknown" outside of Dularn... La-ra down in the stern cabin, putting things in order for me.

"No more 'saucy' than my wife," he teased, giving me a quick "pat" after glancing to see that no one was looking at us then as we stood side by side on the quarterdeck next to the captain. It was a lovely day, a hint of "spring" in the air, a breeze from the west rippling the water as the North Star swung to her anchor waiting to take us out to sea. I would travel under sail, and reserve the ship's steam engine for times when it was more needed. The Diana lying there at its dock like a beached whale, in need of a new coat of paint judging from the looks of the hull. The Orca looked little better, both armored battleships useless for anything but war. My present sea going attire a royal blue woolen tunic and hose, a leather jacket for warmth. Boots on my feet, a long slim sword there at my hip. That of my husband was the common attire of the Wyoming Warrior, along with a fur lined jacket against the piercing chill of the open ocean this early.

"The crew is still a bit 'green'," I spoke to the captain, a grizzled veteran seaman who was old enough to be my grandfather. A man who had commanded ships back in the time of Queen Kathis! Captain Dan Wood the sort of a "sea-officer" I thought highly of.

"'Aye', your majesty," he answered me, watching them work.

"Midshipman Wells, 'how' is she doing?" I "ventured" then.

"Best of the 'lot', so far as I'm concerned," he answered. "Both boys should take up farming or something else 'suitable'." They were both the sons of Senators here in Arsana, and like Tori had done with her daughter, had doubtlessly been sent aboard in the hope that they might learn a little "discipline" here at sea.

"And the North Star?" I asked, watching the crew run across the deck of my flagship. There was little "trace" now of the battles she'd fought, usually against superior forces, with only my own abilities at command to balance things out. Now she was of an obsolete design, no match for the new Imperial steam frigates with their steam powered weapons, their armor plated hulls. We were building two steam frigates of our own, much like those of the Imperials. The Senate had wanted them, and I was tired of "arguing" the issue. We could never "match" the Empire ship to ship and I still considered commerce raiders such as the North Star a better "choice" for Dularn than more "ships of the line"!

"I think she'd still serve you well if you 'asked' her," he answered. Bob had outfitted her last year with higher masts carrying top gallants, and reinforced her rigging. She was "fast", and could outsail any dammed Imperial with ease in a good wind.

"I'm going to take her out," I said, the captain nodding. I suspect he had "expected" that I would. The North Star is still "mine" in a way that no other ship will ever be. Paul standing there grinning, well aware that he was to get to see Dularn's famous "lady sea-captain" at work. My "name" being famous now from Alaskadown to the southern most reaches of the Mexican Empire.

"Miss Wells," I spoke through the brass speaking trumpet, "Station yourself at the jib." Tori's sixteen year old daughter doing so, and looking up at me standing there on the quarterdeck. "Lieutenant Hanson at the spanker," I ordered, looking around the ship, seeing where the wind would take her as soon as the anchor came free of the bottom. Fortunately there was plenty of "room" as I feared I might be a bit "rusty" myself after all this time!

"Hoist the anchor," I snapped, the men at the capstan now doing so, but with considerable difficulty as they had not yet learned how to work together as a crew instead of as individuals!

"They will `learn'," Captain Wood said to me as I nodded. I was glad that we were at peace. I would have hated to have had to sailed into battle against an Imperial first rate with "them"!

"I certainly hope so," I answered, not all that "pleased"...

"Anchor's free!" I heard someone yell, the North Star now freed from the land that had held her. I felt the movement of the ship, the feel of a "living ship" there beneath my boots now!

"Miss Wells!" I snapped, "Secure that jib!" The girl now doing so, her gang of "landlubbers" under her command slow, unsure yet in their movements. Where did the Navy get these oafs!? "Lieutenant Hanson, draw in your spanker!" I snapped, the North Star coming about, gathering way, although a crew of slave girls could have done as well as these! And this was my own flagship!! "Helm! Can't you steer a straight course?" I cried, angry now! Well aware too that "word" of this would be all over Arsana in a matter of hours! That people would question my own "competence"!

"I'm sure they will `improve' with `time'," my Prince said.

It was rather "chilly" in the stern cabin, although those gathered there no doubt found it as "warm" as the "domain" of the EVIL ONE himself as they listened to the words of their Queen...

"The North Star is a ship whose `record' is unequaled in the history of our country. Yet today I saw her being `handled' in a way that embarrassed both me and the ship! I know that we are `at peace', that there is no `war' between us and the Empire of California, but yet there is absolutely no `JUSTIFICATION' for what I saw today! And so help me LYSI will either see this ship handled as she used to be or I will make you all rue the day that you were born!" The tone of my voice as I spoke rising higher and higher until my last few words were almost an angry scream!!!

"We will have sail drill, battle drill, we will all take turns at command until this ship once again is the pride of the Dularnian Navy!" I snapped, pacing back and forth there before them, the sweat cold on my face as I fought to control my anger! "And you will never again `embarrass' the Queen of Dularn as you have all done with your obvious incompetence!" I snapped in fury! "Now get out there all of you and start putting this crew of oafs to work learning how to sail a ship instead of plowing a furrow!"

"Remind me never to `provoke' you," my husband smiled as the last of them left, Kathi then closing the cabin door behind them.

"I don't understand IT!" I snapped. "We used to have a navy `second to none' in the quality of our seamanship, but `THIS'..."

"We `did' get out of the harbor without hitting anything or running the ship aground, and the crew did `manage' to set sail," he smiled, gripping me by the upper arms as I stood there now.

"With me giving orders every inch of the way!" I said.

"Then we were `lucky' you were here," he smiled back.

"Kathi, answer that door!" I snapped, hearing a knock.

"Yes, Miss Wells?" I snapped, seeing her standing there.

"I'm `sorry' I couldn't `do' better," Diane said to me.

"That's the 'fault' of your officers," I said to her then.

"No one wants to 'join' the Navy now," she spoke softly. I knew the rate of pay was less than that in the merchant service. Also in the merchant marine you didn't have the "discipline", and you didn't have to worry about getting "shot at" by anyone! Pay rates are set by the Senate, and taxpayers "vote" for whoever will give them the most "services" for the least "taxes" in turn. It is one thing to build warships, another to "man" them with trained men and women capable of effectively fighting such ships. I suppose they had that problem back in the past too. As someone once said, you "get" what you're willing to "pay" for, and right now, Dulam wasn't willing to pay for a first class navy anymore!

"Just 'do' the best you can," I said, "That's all anyone can ask of you," I added, Diane nodding, bowing, and then leaving...

"You 'know' that girl, don't you?" Paul said to me then.

"She's the daughter of the captain of my guards," I smiled.

"That 'Tori Wells' who almost gave her life for you?" he smiled back, having heard the tale of my adventures with the assassin. "Who" had hired her to kill we'd never found out as yet.

"Ohh!" Emily breathed as she sat there to one side, the ship now suddenly heeling over as it changed course, Captain Wood now putting my orders into effect, his voice audible through the top of the deck just over my royal head! Kathi, more "wise" in the "ways" of a ship, giving her a grin. The North Star now coming about again, the yells of the captain making me smile just a bit! La-ra there by the stern windows, sitting on the bench beneath.

"We are 'tacking' into the wind," I said, my husband nodding as he stood there, the creak and groan of the fabric of the ship a "familiar" sound to me that brought back memories of the past.

"I don't think I should have 'fed' Emily all those sausages for breakfast," he said. The palace cook having outdone himself in giving us a breakfast fit for royalty. I had wisely eaten little of it, well aware too that it had been some time since I'd been at sea. Emily had knelt at his side like a dog to be fed...

"Kathi, fetch a bucket for your master," I said to the wench as her master then went to Emily and cuddled the seasick slave!

"Didn't think," he said, Emily looking more miserable by the minute as she sat there, her head down, starting to "sweat" now. Kathi bringing the bucket, and setting it down in front of Emily.

"Kathi can take care of her," I said, watching him there with her. He'd owned Emily for years, and no doubt felt considerable affection for the ripe bodied dark haired Wyoming woman.

"I'll stay with her," he answered, looking up at me.

"As you wish," I said, taking my leave of them.

Chapter Eighteen

"There is an `improvement'," I said to Captain Dan Wood, the crew scampering the ship like a flock of monkeys. There was obvious disorder in their movements yet, but they were "learning" what it took to work together as a crew, as sailors, as "seamen".

"I take `responsibility', your majesty" he answered, regarding me. "You put me in command of this ship, and I failed you."

"I will assume that there are `reasons'," I "smiled" back.

"My wife died, the first officer got married," he answered.

"And no one expected me to ask for the North Star," I added.

"Bunch of clod hoppers and the scum of Arsana," he replied. "The first never saw a ship before this and the second is just a gang of `cutthroats' that'd kill you for the gold in your teeth."

"That bad?" I spoke, remembering the crews that I once had.

"When there's war, and prize money to be had...," he smiled.

"Order steam up so we have weapons drill," I smiled back.

"Guess neither no one ever thought of it before, but unless you sail around all the time now with steam up you don't have any more `defenses' than some old merchantman does," he answered me.

"And it takes `time' to raise steam," I breathed, suddenly "aware" of the terrible "flaw" in the design of all "steam" ships including those of the Imperials. The North Star now mounted seven quickfirers, all powered by steam, and three steam catapults, the last being able to hurl their missiles some 550 yards. Awesome, impressive deadly weapons of war as compared to the sort of weapons the ship had carried before, but weapons that were utterly "useless" without any high pressure steam to now operate them!

"Aye, your majesty," he nodded, seeing my eyes meeting his.

"When we return to Arsana...," I breathed, and thinking now.

"I'm an old `trireme man', but maybe some of the `old ways' were better," he smiled, perhaps seeing something not visible to me. Perhaps of fleets of galleys rowing into battle, of sword to sword battles across bloody decks, of death, of glory, of honor!!

"How is she?" I asked, stepping into the cabin. I could tell by the "odor" in the air that Emily had vomited up the food she'd eaten this morning. The girl looking up at me, her dark eyes seeking mine as she sat there beside her master, her short leather skirt up to her hips. It is not usually the practice to give a slave girl anything to "cover" herself beneath her attire. Such is "said" to keep the wench much more "aware" of herself ...

"Better, mistress," Emily answered, aware no doubt that she would no longer be allowed to "do" some of the things she had before. It is seldom that the slave girl views a wife with favor. It is "easier" for the

wench to "control" the master than the mistress, who is of course "immune" to the girl's open sexuality.

"Kathi, come here," I said, the blondish wench doing so, her eyes much like Darlanis' meeting my own. "Bend forward and place your hands on this," I ordered, Kathi doing so. Placing her hands on a book case shelf there about breast high. "Now extend and spread your legs behind yourself." The girl doing so, blushing a bit, as the "pose" well displayed her dressed as she was. La-ra sitting there smiling softly, her dark eyes meeting my own.

"La-ra," I said to my serving maid, "This slave girl needs a 'lesson' in submission," Kathi looking back at me with an expression that left no doubts as to "how" she felt about all this now!

"A pleasure, your majesty," La-ra smiled, stepping forward.

"Please, La-ra," I heard Kathi whisper as I stepped back.

"You will be treated as the slave you are," La-ra said.

"Her fingers are 'deft'," my husband smiled as we watched.

"Kathi squirms well, mistress," Emily observed in reply.

"There are women who belong in collars," my Prince said.

"I know of at least 'one'," I "agreed", watching Kathi.

"Perhaps there are 'others'," my Prince ventured then.

"At least we have one 'gunner' aboard," I said to the captain as "gunnery practice" ended. Diane was an excellent shot. She had been the only who seemed to understand the "use" of weapons. The fact that she was of the Caste of Warrioreses no doubt had its effect here. Doubtless too Tori had taken "pains" with her. The Dularnian mother takes time to teach fighting skills to her children. She takes much pride in a son or daughter's skill. We realize that there is a "difference" in the sexes, but we do not treat women as being inferior to men because they are women.

"As I said, she's the best of the midshipmen," Wood smiled. I noticed the brightness of the sun, the glare off the water, the island there to starboard a bluish haze, the mainland to port. I smiled in reply, "thinking" of Tori, how "pleased" she would be. The clouds in the sky lovely white "puffs" of pure white cotton. Before us now the ocean, and thousands of miles away, was Asia...

"We should reach Sanaby nightfall," I smiled, content now.

"I will continue with sail drill," he answered. I thought that wise. The North Star is a sailing ship, not a steam ship.

"There is 'something' floating out there," the midshipman said, La-ra having opened the door to admit him. I was sure that the officer who had sent him had told him "more" than that, but I supposed one might be in "awe" of a Queen such as me, especially as I had just "blistered" his ears only a few hours before now!

"I do have a 'title'," I reminded him with a broad grin.

"Yes, your majesty!" he stammered, blushing hotly now!

"I will come," I smiled, getting up from my seat.

"Some sort of 'hulk' from the looks of her," captain Wood spoke, handing me the telescope as my husband stood swaying beside me. We were now out into the ocean proper, Dularn to starboard, a mile or so away, a gathering of huts scattered here and there along the wooded coastline. The sun lower now in the sky now that it was well past noon. Still a couple hours away.

"Nothing I've seen before," I answered, holding the telescope up to my eye. It was obviously a vessel, but not like anything I'd ever seen before anywhere along the coast of North America. The remains of the masts, the height of the forecastle and the poop quite unlike any ship of any nation that I knew of! I sensed that this ship was "dead", that it was totally lifeless!

"We can take a closer look, your majesty," he answered me.

"There is no sign of life," I replied, lowering the glass.

"She's low in the water," captain Wood spoke as I nodded.

"There are countries on the other side of the world," my husband smiled as I nodded in reply. Such places were more "legend" than anything else, although I no doubt that they did exist from what was known of life here in the Americas. Lorraine's slave girl, Yvette Senchal, was from France, a country in Europe. Her owner, a Prince Philip, son of the Empress of that nation, having dared the Lorr's wrath by crossing the Atlantic Ocean in 2565, eventually suffering shipwreck there off the Florida Keys.

"Perhaps someone dared...", I ventured thoughtfully. Such a voyage was within the capabilities of ships like the North Star. Whether or not the Priestesses of Lys would "bless" such a voyage was something else entirely, their current attitude towards such voyages having been much like that of the Lorr before "2566" when the Priestesses wrestled control of Earth from those of Mars to "rule" the Earth on their own. I wondered if Lorraine was right?

"It's a big ocean," my husband smiled as the North Star's longboat carried us over the waves towards the drifting derelict. Aboard the North Star, a hundred and twenty feet from stern to bowsprit, the waves had not really "looked" that large. From a twenty two foot long longboat they looked considerably "larger"!

"I once sailed from Trelandar to Dularn in a boat smaller than this one," I smiled back, remembering that "epic" voyage...

"I read your book, your majesty," Diane ventured, giving me a smile. It had been my "voyage" that had made me "famous", gave me the sort of a "name" that Darl Jord had wanted in his "wife". I considered the marriage from the first to be "political", more a marriage in "name" than in anything else. Queen Tulis, aware of her impending death, having told her son to marry or "else"...

"Those men need to be taught how to 'row'," I said, Diane nodding, their efforts lacking the "skill" of the trained seaman!

"They're more used to the handles of a plow, your majesty," she grinned back. I suspected some were more "used" to other things from the looks of them. Arsana like all large cities has a "criminal element" that even my best efforts can't "eradicate". Pretty young Dularnian women fetch a high price in the

Empire, I might mention here, and there were those who would shanghai such girls, getting them across the strait on some "fishing boat", to meet with a slaver on the other side who happens to be "there". I eventually put a "halt" to this by patrolling the strait, but there is of course a "limit" to what can be "done" as long as the Empress of California refuses to do anything about such "things"! There are also enough crooked merchantmen who will transport such "cargoes" for a high enough price that the practice still exists despite my best efforts, although now upon a much reduced scale.

"We will find nothing but death aboard that ship," I spoke, my strange new "power" having told me that as we came closer now. Diane nodding, the boat's crew muttering a bit among themselves, looking at me, then at the North Star a hundred yards away now. The derelict low in the water, as if ready to give up the battle.

Chapter Nineteen

The derelict was "old", the seaweed at its sides and coating its bottom leaving no doubt that it had been drifting perhaps for years now in the Pacific currents. It also appeared now that those who had once lived aboard had attempted at one time to rig some sort of a crude sail, but the remaining few torn tatters of this yet flying from the crudely lashed yard left little doubt in my mind that this too had been done a considerable time before.

"Get into its 'lee'," I told Diane, then having to "explain" just what the "lee" of a ship was as she gave me a puzzled expression. Such would make boarding the derelict much easier...

I leaped up from the bow of the longboat as the sailor in the bow held on with his boathook, grabbing for the railing as my husband put his hand under my boot sole to hoist me up and over. The derelict rolling in the waves, with only a few feet of freeboard, it being obvious that it floated only due to some sort of a cargo it had once carried that had been buoyant enough to float even when waterlogged. A quick look at the deck as I climbed up over the railing leaving no doubt that the ship had been drifting for some time. A sense of "death" filling my mind leaving no doubt however that those who had been aboard still were "here"...

"Anyone aboard?" my Prince asked, taking my hand as I now reached for him. Diane following, the others staying behind, a number of low mutters leaving no doubt what they thought of this! The words "death ship" audible now to me over the sounds of the waves lapping up against the weedy hull of the drifting derelict.

"Not on deck," I answered, aware of my "feeling" that those who had sailed on this strange ship were still "here" somewhere! Diane now joining us, looking about, her hand on the hilt of her sword. Her pert young breasts pushing out against her uniform. I recalled what Bob had said once about sending girls off to war. On the other hand I think men sometimes fight better for a woman.

"Any idea who built this?" my husband asked, looking about. The derelict rolling slowly in the waves, drifting towards land. The North Star holding off, smoke drifting up from her funnel. Captain Wood holding position on us by use of the screw and jib.

"No one in North America builds ships like this," I said, trying to remember what "sort" of people built ships like this. My knowledge of naval history better than that of most Scribes.

"Looks like they got caught in a storm," he ventured then. The snapped off masts, the attempt to rig some sort of sail only additional proof. It appeared to have once been square rigged.

"I think it's a Chinese 'junk'," I said, remembering now!

"All the 'way' from over there," Diane breathed softly.

"That would be five, six thousand miles, wouldn't it," Paul said, looking out at the western horizon from which this ship had come. I suspected that it had not come simply drifting across. The forces of wind, wave, and ocean currents could have kept it drifting for years before it finally reached the coast of Dularn.

"Further, I think," I answered, trying to remember it now.

"There is a boat," Diane observed, standing before it.

"They 'stayed' with the ship until the 'end'," I answered.

"I don't think I want to 'look'," she said, looking at me.

"'They' cannot harm you," I spoke, seeing her nodding back.

I pushed the door to the stern cabin open, the wood sticking a bit from the damp. They had been dead for many months, perhaps even years. The bodies were considerably decayed, semi-skeletons from which the clothing still clung. There had been one woman, a slave girl judging from what remained of her attire, I observed.

"I feel..., oh!" Diane gasped, suddenly vomiting on the carpet that covered the deck! The remains were not pleasant to look upon. They had been dead for a long time in a small enclosed cabin. The effects of sea air, the hot summer sun, had done the rest. I suspected that they had probably died from thirst, although there was of course no way of telling at this point now...

"The ship's officers," I said, looking about the cabin for a log book or anything else that would tell where they came from.

"I'll check the forecabin," my husband smiled, nodding to Diane, who still looked pretty "green" just then as she stood there looking at the decayed bodies of the two ship's officers and the slave girl who no doubt had once belonged to its captain.

"She's 'neck chained'," Diane breathed, "looking" at her.

"A free woman would not be so clad," I told the midshipman. In life she had been dressed in a sort of halter and short skirt. The bodies of the two officers were lying there on the deck, while that of the captain and the slave girl were side by side in a bunk fixed to one side of the cabin. There was what appeared to be dried blood around the bodies, but it was hard to tell now.

"They must have died together," Diane observed thoughtfully as she stood there watching me search through the contents of the various storage compartments for anything like a log book. It was I thought to myself possible, given the appearance of things.

"Help me look for a log book," I said, looking up at her.

"They must have killed themselves," Diane said to me.

"Slit their wrists," I guessed, taking a quick look.

"A different 'culture' than ours," she breathed back.

"Midshipman, help me look!" I "snapped", annoyed now!

"You won't be able to read it, your majesty," she said.

"Let your Queen do the 'thinking' here," I snapped back!

"There is a kind of 'book' here," she said, opening a desk.

"Yes, I think this is it!" I breathed, the language totally "alien" to anything I'd ever seen before. More like the writing of the ant-like Lorr of Mars than anything wrote by human hands!

"Perhaps there are Scribes....," Diane said to me then. I nodded thoughtfully. I might even ask the help of the Imperials.

"Find anything?" my husband asked, stepping into the cabin.

"A log book of some sort," I answered, Paul telling me that he'd found more bodies in the forecastle, in pretty much the same condition as these here. The bodies in their bunks, now rotted and semi-skeletal much as these were here. The crew having numbered six judging from the bodies that he'd found there forward.

"There could have been 'more' lost overboard," I answered.

"You want to take 'that' in tow?" Captain Dan Wood spoke. The tone of his voice leaving no doubts how he felt about it... The boat's crew having wasted no time in telling everyone what we had found aboard the derelict, the tale no doubt growing even more fantastic as it passed through the ship. Given the natural superstitious nature of sailors, the results were as "expected"!

"It's not that far to Sana," I answered. We could beach the derelict there inside the harbor. I would send people from Arsana, those of the "learned" castes to study the ship, to learn of "where" it had come from, what "sort" of people had sailed on it.

"We have a spare anchor rope, we can run it out a port astern and fix it to the junk's foremast," I answered. Back in the days when I sailed with a prime crew and good officers, I wouldn't have thought anything of doing something like this now!

"She isn't going to sail very good towing 'that'," he said.

"I plan to use the steam engine and the jib," I answered. The engine would do the "pulling", and the jib would help keep the ship from being pulled up into the wind while we did the towing. While the derelict would be a "slow" tow, we really didn't have to tow it that far, and I was sure that we could get it to Sana, although probably not by sundown now as I had first hoped.

"I've heard there's dead people aboard it," he said to me.

"They've been dead a long time now," I smiled back at him.

"Whatever your majesty wishes," he answered with a shrug.

"I'll take command," I snapped, rather "annoyed" just now.

I watched the rope slowly "tighten" between the North Star and the derelict, Diane waving as she stood there on the wreck. The crew of the North Star muttering amongst themselves, obviously terrified of towing a ship full of dead men like we were doing... The steady beat of the engine comforting as I started taking up the strain, aware that any sudden jerk could snap the rope or more "likely" pull the derelict apart and send it to the bottom!

"You're good," my Prince smiled, standing there at my side.

"Experience," I smiled, moving the repeater ahead a notch.

"The crew's pretty 'scared' of that thing," he added now.

"Bunch of 'bumpkins' afraid of their own shadows," I said.

"Life with you is one adventure after another," he smiled.

"I usually lead a pretty boring life," I smiled back at him.

Chapter Twenty

"Getting dark," my husband smiled, the sun now gone, the last glow of the sunset fading away there in the west over the ocean. I thought I could see the harbor light of Sanaa ahead, but I wasn't sure. The derelict was slower towing than I'd planned. Without the steam engine it would have been far more difficult with this crew of clod hoppers and "never do wells" from Arsana. Even the "ship's girls" looked like "rejects" from some brothel!

"I don't envy Diane," I smiled, thinking of the midshipman. I'd assigned her the task of watching over the tow rope where it was tied to the stub of the derelict's foremast. It was a simple enough task, but on a ship filled with the dead, no doubt nerve racking a bit. Especially now to a young girl new at her "work"!

"I'm sure she'll keep a good eye on the tow rope," my husband smiled. The rope being her only "link" with the North Star. I could see the lantern she had there on the deck beside her, it being apparent too that she was rather "nervous" about all this!!

"Give her something to tell her children some day," I said.

"I keep thinking of what it must have been 'like' for them," he said, standing there, looking astern at the tow there behind.

"Death by thirst isn't 'pleasant'," I answered him back. I would much rather die of starvation than of thirst judging from people who have been "rescued" after drifting about in boats...

"The officers committed suicide, the crew didn't," he said.

"Cultural differences, I suppose," I nodded, glancing back.

"Stars are coming out now," Prince Paul Blue Sky observed.

"Looks like Diane is having a bit of a 'problem'," I said.

"Scared shitless," he grinned, the girl now doing just that judging from her position as she propped herself there on a rail. Obviously she had no intentions of using the junk's own "heads"! She was also carrying her sword drawn there in her hand, I'd saw.

"Fear can 'do' that to you," I smiled back, remembering the first time I saw combat ten years ago in the war between Dularn and the Empire of California when Darlanis started making trouble over the "northern territories" which she claimed were hers now.

"She's a nice girl," he smiled. That was my opinion too.

"You know, some of those bodies looked 'gnawed'," he said.

"Rats," I smiled. "They would have survived the longest".

"There wasn't any sign of cannibalism," he observed now.

"They didn't have water to drink," I pointed out to him.

"You could spread sails, catch rainwater," he pointed out.

"No doubt they tried," I answered, wondering if the ship's log would tell us anything once it was translated if it could be. The ship had remained afloat, I had determined, due to the cargo of some sort of a very light wood, now held only by the fabric of the vessel, the seams no doubt having opened up during a storm.

"I can think of more 'pleasant' ways of dying," he smiled.

"No doubt Diane over there wishes she'd stayed in Arsana," I grinned, recalling what her mother had "said" about her then. On the other hand I thought it would probably be good for her now. Many young girls, especially if they are beautiful, get rather swelled opinions about themselves. I speak here from experience.

"How did it go?" I asked, pouring the whiskey into the glass and giving it to Diane, who drank it down like a veteran sailor as we now laid there at anchor there in Sana 'ssmall bay. It is not my policy as a rule to give "spirits" to teenage girls, but in her case I didn't think it would really do any "harm" now! My husband sitting under the stern windows, an arm around Kathi and another around Emily, the slave girls in their attire "delights".

"I've learned what being 'scared' means," she smiled back. My father, the mayor of Sana, giving me a smile and a knowing nod as he sat there smiling to himself, "sipping" at my royal brandy. Most of the crew of the ship now ashore, no doubt glad to be so.

"Those 'Chinese' have been dead for a long time," I said. I suspected several years, judging from the looks of the remains.

"Maybe their 'spirits' are still around," she volunteered.

"Your Queen assures you that they are not," I smiled back, my father quietly sitting to one side, leering a bit at Kathi. "And Miss Wells, I have a little task for you in the morning," I smiled, the brownette girl nodding, her dark eyes meeting my own. "There is a ballistae stored in one of the holds. I want you to locate it, get in touch with the ship's carpenter, and place it on a swivel mount of some sort there on the foredeck between the fore mast and the bowsprit and ahead of the quickfirer there."

"Aye, your majesty," Diane smiled, setting down the glass. "There is also another such weapon that could be mounted on the quarterdeck so that it could be fired astern," she "suggested". Such weapons, like gigantic crossbows, could hurl a bolt about a quarter mile or so. They were thought "obsolete" compared to the steam powered quickfirers we carried, but those required steam to operate, whereas the ballistae could still be wound up and fired if so necessary by only one person using the windlass provided.

"She is of the Warriresses," my father, Tarl Marn said as Diane now took her leave of us. I nodded, thinking now of Tori. Being a Warriress is "more" than just having skill with weapons. I also thought how much Diane reminded me of myself at that age. We had both been "cocky", too "proud" of our own looks, resentful of those who loved us, who saw the pitfalls that laid ahead then.

"I trust you do not object to having a ship full of very dead men here in your harbor," I smiled, the derelict having come to its final resting place here on the shores of Dularn where it would doubtlessly remain until broken up after we had learned all we could of it. Those aboard the North Star had not been very delighted at the idea of towing it here and then anchoring alongside it. The fishermen of Sanahaving dragged it as far towards shore as they could, where it would be safe until those of the "learned castes" could come from Arsana to study this strange "visitor" of ours from a land many people considered only "myth".

"'They' are not likely to be going anywhere," my father the mayor smiled. "And in any case I will post a guard to be sure." My father then continued on, saying, "I am sure that Marta would like to see you now," his eyes holding mine as I nodded back. My stepmother and I have never been "close", but I supposed that the Queen of Dularn could be "polite" and say a few words to a woman who no doubt tried her best to raise me despite my "hostility"... Who painfully taught me things that have made me what I am today. A woman whom I had hurt terribly by my cocky, arrogant attitude! I thought then of Diane, of Tori, and how I had treated the woman who had tried to raise me into a proper young woman. I didn't feel so good then, knowing how I had caused pain to those who had loved me. Who had done their "best" to give me a "loving" home.

"I am very 'proud' of what you have become," she spoke, her reddish hair still much as I remembered it as she stood there before me holding on to the cane that she always used because of her wooden right leg there below the knee. I still had to look up a little at her, my stepmother being as "tall" as is Darlanis. Her clothing an attractive leather tunic and green woolen hose. "And perhaps in a few years there will be a grandchild to sit on my knee," Marta smiled hopefully at me, regarding my Wyoming Prince as he stood

there now beside me in his leather. "A son or daughter to teach the `ways' of the sea as I once so taught you." There was Hope, but she wasn't really "mine" so far as I saw it. * * She is with Carol now, where I think she always "belonged". I think someday I will see her again, but she will be a grown woman then, and not the little baby girl that I knew her as here. Tais told me that it was for the "best", and I do agree with her here.

"I'm sorry I was such a `bitch' back then'," I said, seeing her nod, well aware of the "pain" I'd caused her in the past. I was, I suppose, one of those girls who is too "beautiful" for her own good. I resented my father's remarriage, felt a sense of betrayal that he would marry this woman, take her into the bed my own mother had given birth to me in. Unlike Gayle, I still could remember my true mother, slim and golden, much unlike this woman!

"Steel must be `tempered'," she answered, a Warriress yet. Once she had been Dularn's most famous sea captain, the first of her sex to stand on the quarterdeck of a ship of war in battle. I knew she was older than my father by a dozen years, a "fact" I had also resented, wondering "why" he had married this "old" sea officer. This "legend" that I cared little about then in my pain at the loss of a woman who I had loved like no other. Now I was a "legend", Dularn's finest sea officer, much as she once had so many years ago when triremes and biremes were the ships of war...

"I wish now it could have been `different'," I said to her. "I wish I had understood then what I do now about what you tried to do for me." It had been her teachings that had allowed me to steal a small sailboat from Lorraine's estate in Trelandar and sail it all the way north to Dularn, to this very village of Sana where I'd once been born thirty years ago! Her teachings of wind and wave, of the knowledge of currents that had stood me in such good stead later when I had been the captain of the North Star. I had drawn then upon the knowledge she, once Commodore Marta Dan had given me in my ship to ship battles against the Imperials...

"It is `good' that we are among `friends'," she spoke, hobbling forward, brushing away the tears that now filled my eyes at the thought of how I had "hurt" her by my words and actions here in Sana as a teenage girl. I had been a "bitch" in the full sense of the term, another like Diane, too impressed with herself to understand the realities of life. I held her then to me, and wept on her shoulder, caring little then too that I was a Queen.

Chapter Twenty One

"You are not the `same' as you were only a few years ago," my step mother said to me as we spoke together in private, Paul having taken his leave of us and returned to the North Star, my father having gone with him, leaving us with a smile that left no doubt what he had felt too about my hostility towards Marta Marn.

"When I came here with Lorraine," I said, remembering that time as if it was yet only a few weeks ago instead of years now. I wondered if some of the "dislike" I felt towards Lorraine was due to the fact that she reminded me in a way of my step mother? The living room was different now, the old house having been burned by Lorraine's forces back in 519. The wood plank walls, the beamed ceiling all typical of a Dularnian country home. The lamps, the paintings on the walls, all a part of its "hominess". Sana is a

coastal village, the manufacture of furniture the major industry, although hunting and fishing play a part in life here.

"It is not that far from Arsana to here," she said to me. I nodded, well aware of that fact. No doubt my father would have liked to have had me visit, but something had always kept me from doing so. There had always been something "necessary" to keep me from making the day's sail from Arsana to here. The "duties" of a Queen of Dularn can fill one's day if you allow them to do so. I had no doubt of course that she knew "why" I hadn't "visited".

"I wrote," I answered, knowing that it wasn't the same here.

"I have not always made the 'right' decisions," she said, "And I fear I still yet often thought I stood on a quarterdeck." She was a Warriress, and different from what my mother had been. I had hated her, hated her for what she'd become to my father... My own mother had been a Physician, kind and gentle, not a hard bitten old Warriress who had been "beached" for her disability.

"You were Dularn's 'best'," I said to her, knowing that now. I had later read of her exploits, of the things she'd done when many men still yet believed that women didn't "belong" at sea save as slave girls. That had come as a surprise to me then too.

"I taught you well," she smiled back. "You have 'fulfilled' an old woman's dreams, and proved once again as I once did that a woman can command a ship of war just as good as any man can." I thought of her on the quarterdeck of the North Star. Unlike old captain Wood, there was no doubts about her abilities to command!

"I am in 'need' of a 'Sealady'," I said, "Someone who can whip the Navy back into shape." I saw her nod, her eyes meet my own as she sat there across the black oak coffee table from me.

"I am an 'old woman', hobbling about on one leg and a 'peg' for the other, living out her 'dreams' through another now," she said to me. "I sailed under 'mad Kathis', under Tulis before the catapult shot took my leg, and left me only a useless cripple."

"You were once Dularn's greatest sea officer," I spoke then.

"Your father 'needs' me," Marta answered softly. "You are the Queen of Dularn, your sister now a Princess of Talon, a part of a 'New Order' that someday will once again rule the world..."

"Your Queen, your country needs you," I spoke in reply.

"There was a time when you hated me," she spoke then.

"You 'asked' too much of me," I said to her in reply.

"You are a 'legend' in your own time," she smiled back.

"There was once one 'greater'," I said, weeping a bit now.

"I know 'little' about the sort of ships we have now," Marta answered. "I commanded triremes, not steam ships like your own."

"You taught me how to sail, to understand the winds, waves," I said to her. "You told me that once

brave men sailed ships inferior to ours around this entire world knowing less than we do."

"And then you ran away, and joined the cavalry," she smiled.

"But I never forgot what you taught me," I said to her then.

"I am over a hundred now," she said. I knew that. True, the anti-aging serums would preserve her life for decades yet, but she was no longer a "young" woman. No longer in the prime of life. There were here and there strands of gray in her hair now.

"There is a young midshipman on the North Star, a young woman, the daughter of a Warriress, whose mother had me place her on the ship so that she could learn 'discipline'," I said then. "She was furious that her mother would do such a 'thing' to her. But yet, when her mother was seriously wounded by the dagger of an assassin sent to kill me, this young girl suddenly realized just how much her mother meant to her after all," I said to her.

"I am not your mother," Marta Marn said to me in reply.

"Neither is Darlanis Sharon's mother," I said to her.

"I assume there is a 'story' here," she "smiled" back.

"I understand what I did not understand before," I said.

"Perhaps you will be a 'good' Queen after all," she smiled.

"And what about my father?" I asked, seeing her smile back.

"I am sure that he will enjoy Arsana," Marta Marn smiled...

"Half your crew belongs growing food, and the other half I wouldn't want to turn my back on," Marta Marn smiled as she hobbled up on to the quarterdeck of the North Star the next morning. Captain Dan Wood didn't look too "delighted" either at seeing her "clump" up on to the deck, the tall red haired woman giving him a "grin" that left no doubt that they both "knew" the other well! The yet magnificent if a bit wrinkled uniform she wore belonging to another age, that of a full commodore under Queen Tulis. My father busy talking to my husband, the two smiling in a way I suspected indicated that Tarl was telling Paul about some of the "mischief" I'd managed to get myself into as a young woman now... "It's probably just as 'good' that we're at peace with California as I don't think you'd get much of a 'fight' out of this bunch," she added to me, giving me a smile as I now nodded back in reply.

"With training they'll do better, your majesty," Dan Wood said, glancing nervously at Marta as she stood there before us. She had been his superior officer back then too, I understood. I suspected that she didn't really think that highly of him either.

"They have to be able to 'do' more than 'pull' an oar now, 'captain'," my step mother retorted, giving me a big grin then! I knew she'd been one of the first to see the "value" of fore and aft rigged schooners before losing her lower right leg there in a battle against a squadron of the Imperial Navy. I knew too that only "palace politics" had prevented her from rising even further in the Navy afterwards, as Princess Janis had much resented her. The Princess of Dularn having apparently seen Marta as being a serious danger to her own ambitions of being Dularn's "Warlady".

"It's a nice day," I said, "And I'd like to return to Arsana as soon as convenient," I spoke, standing there as Wood nodded, the sun warm on my back as it gleamed down upon us from the east. The hulk of the derelict there just to starboard as welaid at anchor. With the wind the way it was we'd need to steam out now.

"I will order the boiler lit," he answered, seeing me nod.

"This does have sails, doesn't it?" my step mother spoke!

"The wind is almost 'foul' for us," I pointed out to her.

"And if you didn't have that 'steam engine'?" she asked.

"This is a 'warship', not a fishing boat," Wood protested.

"Are there any who are 'competent' among the crew," Marta asked, standing there. It was "possible" to sail the North Star out of Sana's harbor with the wind as it was, but just barely so!

"I have no desire to 'risk' the ship," I answered her then.

"Or is it that you lack confidence in me?" she challenged.

"Marta,its been years," my father protested in my support.

"One who understands the 'vector of forces' does not forget," she answered, the tone of her voice leaving no doubts...

"Use midshipman Wells for the jib, Lt. Hanson for the spanker," I answered. I sawcaptain Wood shaking his head and shrugging, his "opinion" of the matter rather obvious from his words.

"I wish to have the mainsail set, locked fore and aft," she spoke, obviously studying the "vector of forces" in play here. I was aware that setting the main would make the shipmore snappy , but on the other hand would also leave Marta less room for error!

"Miss Wells, you are a lovely girl, and no doubt one who is well 'aware' too of that fact, but right now I want you to think of only one thing, and that is your duty to this ship," my step mother spoke using the speaking trumpet. I could see Diane standing there, looking up at her from the other end of the ship, the blue green of the ocean there beyond us. "And those men of yours must pull that jib into the wind without the least hesitation when I give the order," she then spoke as I saw the group under Diane's command looking up at us there standing on the quarterdeck. "Otherwise I will be very 'angry' with all of you."

"And Lt. Hanson, when you stop thinking about how Miss Wells might 'look' without any clothing on, I suggest that you start to think about what you are going to 'do' when the anchor is raised and that spanker must be pulled up into the wind before we turn too far and end up sailing into the rocks of the breakwater..."

"If you 'value' this ship, take command now,"captain Wood hissed to me, obviously not having any "confidence" in Marta! I did, but I still was pretty "nervous" about letting her do this!

"You have a 'decision' to make, Maris," Marta said to me.

"Go ahead `mom', take her out!" I smiled, seeing her nod!

Chapter Twenty Two

I felt as if I was dreaming, that I could only stand there and watch as my step mother gave the orders to draw the North Star up to its anchor under conditions where any sensible person would have used the steam engine to take us out of Sana's harbor!

I watched her standing there leaning against the quarterdeck railing, the brass speaking trumpet in her hand, one leg ending in a booted foot, the other in a wooden peg, the wind blowing her hair a bit there beneath her hat. The gold trim of her uniform of another "age" now, of a Royal Navy commodore of the "era" of Queen Tulis. Her very "stance", her abilities reminding me much of another, of a tall black haired woman who before I had once knelt as a slave girl years ago. A woman whose piercing dark brown eyes had burned down into mine. One who I had been told I had been selected to "pleasure" as a slave girl does a mistress.

I wondered why Marta still yet carried a sword when she was hardly able to walk without the assistance of the cane she used. She was, I knew, a "proud" woman, one who never allowed "favors" to be done her because she was "disabled". An old Warriress who had been pensioned off to live the rest of her life as she might.

"She is still the `best'," my father said in a low voice.

"There's not much `room'," I whispered, well aware of that. The North Star was no fishing boat, but a three masted schooner a hundred and twenty feet in length, a "second rate" by modern naval standards. Not quite a "ship of the line", but close to it...

"Give her your `trust'," my father said, touching my arm. I thankLYS that I did. That we had these few last hours together.

"Miss Wells, ready with that jib," I heard Marta snap, the North Star suddenly swinging in the wind, the bow coming around! "Mr. Hanson, get that spanker into the wind!" she "snapped" then, the ship suddenly moving forward, heading for the rocks of the breakwater just ahead! "Helm hard to port, let fly the jib!" she cried, the bow now swinging through the eye of the wind, heading for the opening in the breakwater just ahead! "Center helm!, pull in that jib, Miss Wells!" she cried out, Diane doing so now. The North Star now passing through the opening, a bit "close" to the rocks there to port, but safe enough, I saw for myself then!

"I would like to have the top gallants set," Marta said to me as she stood there at the quarterdeck railing. The North Star tearing through the water at close to ten knots or more now back towards Arsana. I suspected that a lot of the crew had never been higher up than the branches of some tree before joining the ship. No doubt from the top gallant yard there on top the main topmast the deck looked hundreds of feet distant, instead of the eighty five I knew it actually was. I am somewhat "bothered" by heights, which is I think perhaps one reason why I picked the cavalry over the navy as a unicorn's back is a whole lot "closer" to the ground! On the other hand a ship won't buck you off it or

gore you as once happened to a close friend of Tori's long ago...

"As you wish," I said, glad I didn't have to climb up there!

"An excellent design," she smiled, standing there before me.

"I've always thought so," I smiled, feeling the roll of the ship as it cut through the waves, Dularn there just to port now. The trees yetbare of leaves but for the evergreens, a patch of snow here and there as a memory of the wintertime just past now. There are here and there "ruins" from a time now myth and legend. Reminders of the time when men flew through the air like birds.

"A bit `chill' yet," Marta said to me as Emily filled a glass and handed it to her, the wake visible there through the stern windows. The creak and groan of the hull familiar sounds. My father had his arm around her, a look of "pride" in his eyes.

"You would have done well againstLorraine," I said then.

"'You' did well up againstLorraine," Marta smiled back.

"You were the best that Dularn had," I said to her then.

"You have made an old woman very happy," she said to me.

"I think I do have a `mother' again," I said to her then. My words now bringing tears to the eyes of the old naval officer. It had taken fifteen years, but finally I had learned to "love". I am glad that we were together when the "end" came for her then. Fighting a foe who used weapons from an era that is mostly myth. My husband then turning my head to his to kiss me on the lips.

"It is an Imperial," captain Dan Wood said to me, lowering the telescope. "And he's carrying every sail that he can too..." The rig was not that of an ordinary merchantman, but of a ship built for speed. The type of ship that carries slave girls. Was this the ship that I knew had been transporting captured women from Dularn to points south in the Empire? And what was it fleeing now? I thought of the patterns of our patrols, and nodded!

"Beat to quarters, battle stations," I snapped in reply.

"We won't be able to get steam up in time," he replied.

"Masthead, what do you make there behind him?" I yelled.

"Schooner, three masts," he yelled back down at me then. "A steam ship from the looks of her, the `smoke' that she's making."

"We have a `problem'," my step mother spoke, seeing me nod.

"Can you identify the pursuing schooner?" I yelled to the lookout, knowing what the answer would be. The Imperial was fast, what would have been considered a "third rate" in the navies of either Dularn or Californianow. The other ship could only be our own North Light, a close "sister" to the North Star.

"One of `ours'!" she yelled down at me. That left no doubt!

"If `that' is what I think it is...", I breathed, seeing my step mother nod. An `incident' of this nature could lead to more "serious" problems if there was loss of life. On the other hand I had no doubt what "sort" of ship this was. The cargoes carried by such ships is considered "perishable", one of "high value"...

"Boiler's lit," captain Wood said, standing there beside me.

"It will be necessary to stop that vessel without a loss of life," Marta said, having come to the same conclusion that I had.

"Be `tough' if they're `determined'," my Prince said to me.

"They will be," my father ventured, regarding the Imperial.

"I can `do' it for you," Marta said, standing there at the rail. "Cost you a little `paint', but it shouldn't be too hard."

"Ship is flying both Imperial and Trelandarian flags!" the lookout called down. At least she was "competent" at her tasks!

"We will stop her and board," I said, making my decision.

"LYSis with us'," Marta said, her eyes meeting mine as I nodded back. I'm not a regular "temple goer", and the only dealings I have with the Priestesses of Lys as a rule are related to my duties as the Queen of Dularn. I'm no "atheist", but after all that happened last year I tend to have my "doubts" at times. On the other hand I don't think Marta ever had any "doubts" about such things. I am sure too that LYS welcomed her into her arms.

"I'm glad you're with us," I answered back, seeing her nod.

"Imperial slaver all right," captain Wood said to me then as we watched the ship change tacks so as to swung clear of us now. Cutting close to a small island just off the main island of ours.

"North Light's signaling!" Diane cried out, the telescope to her eye. I could read the flashes easily without the aid of it. "Hundred and three and seventeen," she spoke, making me smile, as she obviously didn't know the naval code as yet by heart. "Illegal slaver" being what 103 and 17 meant, I suspected, a bit rusty myself on some of the lesser used code numbers. One can also use standard MorseCode , but such of course can be read by anyone and is much "slower" than just sending "103" and "17". I glanced up at the top of the stack where it was fastened to the aft mast, a black plume of smoke staining the sky now just downwind of us...

"Take in the top gallants!" I snapped, "Engine ahead full!" I added, suspecting there was enough steam now to do something. We might not get the full four knots that the engine was capable of giving us, but there would doubtlessly be some gain we could make. The helmsman pushing ahead the repeater, the engine starting up, although quite obviously not yet close to its full power.

"Imperial's not manning his armament," captain Wood spoke.

"I didn't expect him to," I spoke, Marta giving me a smile. The crew of the vessel seemed oddly "small" for such a vessel...

"Let fly the jib, helm hard to port!" she ordered, the North Star coming around, men dashing across the

deck to reset the sails as the ship came around up into the wind. The officers at least "competent" enough to do that much, I thought to myself.

"'Boxed' between us and the land," captain Wood commented, a grin on his grizzled face. "Old bitch still's got a few tricks'," he added in a low mutter, Marta quietly standing there.

"Look at that!" I heard someone cry, the Imperial now coming up into the wind, his sails all a shiver, falling back, it being obvious too that the vessel was commanded by a very capable and competent captain. Perhaps even one who had once a couple years ago sailed under Lorraine! Captain Berson had been one of their best, although I doubted that he would in command of any slaver as he was now married to the Princess of Talon, the last I knew.* * This is of course lovely Sela Dai, who we've met before. (J.B.)

"Helm to port, bring us up into the wind, engine full reverse!" Marta snapped, "familiar" with "tactics" like this! The Imperial would try to cross our stern, although there was no escape for him with the North Light rapidly closing the gap between us! She would have been a great naval commander, I thought then!

"He's wearing ship," Marta spoke, the Imperial turning now!

"Let fly the jib, helm hard to port, full ahead!" I cried, the North Star now crossing the eye of the wind to come around.

"A `game of wits'," my step mother smiled as we came about.

"Looks like a woman in command of that ship," I said, lowering the telescope. A woman with black hair, a slim figure. Not Lorraine, but another. A woman in the black of the Warriress...

"Let me see that," my step mother said, taking the telescope from me and lifting it to her eye. The ship swinging rapidly about now, and closing the distance between us and the Imperial. The North Light perhaps a mile off, closing the distance rapidly.

"What is she doing!?" I gasped, a row of "ports" opening now in the side of the ship as we closed to a distance of less than a hundred yards! Some sort of black things now sticking out, a cold icy chill of **TERROR** going over me as I saw they were **CANNON** !

Chapter Twenty Three

"Diane! The Flamethrower!" I screamed, vaulting from the quarterdeck to the deck, the crew of the North Star now staring in awe as Princess Tara's ship closed the distance between us! I saw a man point up into the sky, yell something about a `flying arrowhead"! THEN AT THAT MOMENT THERE WAS A THUNDEROUS "CRASHING" LIKE THE SOUND OF THUNDER ALL ABOUT ME!!! MEN, EQUIPMENT, BLOOD, SPLINTERS, FLYING ABOUT, THE HORRID "CRACK" OF A MAST AS IT NOW TOPPLED!!! FIRE AND FLAME, "HORROR" ALL AROUND ME AS I DASHED FOR THE BOW! For the only weapon we possessed that might destroy Tara's ship now! The missiles that Tara had fired having been "explosive" to boot! The Bajan's ship wreathed in smoke as she drew

ahead, perhaps to come about and deliver the "finisher"!

"Lys!" I gasped, Diane lying there on the deck, her right foot severed from her leg like a great cleaver had cut it off! I saw the blood, the look of "horror" in her eyes at the knowledge she would be crippled for life assuming any of us survived now! The North Star out of control, her main mast fallen, still swinging now towards Tara's ship as I reached the flamethrower mounted there on the forecastle. I felt a stinging pain in my side, a patch of blood now staining my tunic as I swung the flamethrower about, praying that it would reach, that I could AVENGE my ship!!

"Too far!" I wept, the flaming oil falling short, the cries of wounded men and women filling my ears as the enemy started towards the North Light, the horror filling my mind as I thought of what such a vessel could do! Only the Diana might stand a chance against something like this, and I wasn't even sure it could now!

THEN SUDDENLY THERE WAS A TERRIFIC FLASH, TARA'S SHIP SEEMING TO EXPLODE AS AN INTENSE BLUE WHITE BEAM OF LIGHT STRUCK IT! The heat, even from this distance searing as the beam played over the now blazing ship, a few survivors throwing themselves into the water to escape! The triangular shaped silver craft the same that Tais had brought with her when we had faced the EVIL ONE...

"She saw her last battle," my father said, weeping as he held Marta's body in his arms, closing her staring eyes, the red blood everywhere, the "remains" of captain Dan Woods like nothing I'd ever seen before. I had "done" what I could for Diane, the rest up to the ship's Physician, that of North Light as that ship came up and launched her boats to send us what "help" they could now. The craft of the Priestesses floating overhead, several small craft having been released from it to search for survivors. I was numb with shock, with the horror of what I had just seen... The North Star could be repaired, she would sail again, but the memories were something that I would never forget as I knelt on a blood soaked quarterdeck, aware of horrors unknown for centuries!

"I am sorry we were not in time," First Priestess Tais said standing there, looking about at the ruin. I had not seen the craft land, but just then there was "much" I no longer saw then!! Even when Bob had taken the North Star up against the Athena the destruction had been nothing like this, the North Star now listing as water poured in through a great hole blasted in her side!

"She's 'dead'," I said, looking up at the Priestess, now kneeling there in the blood. Marta had died a Warriress' death. The tears running down my cheeks, blood everywhere like "paint"! Tara's dozen deadly shells, filled with black powder, had exploded on contact, killing or wounded nearly half my crew! Crippling my ship, leaving it almost only a listing nearly helpless ruin!

"Many 'innocents' died today," Tais then said to me. Few of the slave girls aboard Tara's ship had survived the energy beam.

"The North Star 'will' make it back to Arsana," I said, the captain of the North Light nodding. I still had steam, and two good masts. I would bury my step mother at sea as she would have wished. She had died on a quarterdeck in battle, the way she would have wanted it to be. The tears were uncontrollable now... My husband holding me, the dead body of Emily there before us.

"You are alive," I said, taking Diane's hand in mine, the tears filling her eyes. The Physician had done what she could. I wondered what Tori would have to say. There had been nothing that I could have done. No one had believed that Princess Tara would be able to manufacture cannon firing explosive shells. The Priestesses believed her dead, although her body had not been yet found among those floating

there in the strait behind us now. I looked up at Tais standing there, the First Priestess herself almost having a "haunted" look about herself at the sight of this! I knew she had given the order to fire on Tara's ship despite the hundred innocent lives it would cost, few of the women surviving.

"A midshipman with one foot isn't much good to anyone," Diane wept, well aware that she would be a cripple for life now... That all her life she would hobble about with a cane like Marta! And few of the young men she had known would want a cripple girl!

"A good officer commands with her mind, not her feet," I said to her. She had been brave, her courage without doubt. I was proud of what she had "become" in only these few short days. I thought of Marta, what Queen Tulis had "done" to her. I would not be such a Queen as that! "And you have the makings of a captain," I said to her, holding her hand in mine as Tais watched. My body bandaged where the splinter had cut it without my feeling it then. Some of the most badly wounded had been taken aboard the Priestess' ship for transportation to Shalimar for treatment.

"She was once a 'legend' in her own time," I said, standing there, the tears blurring my vision, the body wrapped in the flag there before us. "A woman who served Queens now dead, who fought against the enemies of her country with all her strength, all her skill." Sniffing back my tears, I continued on, saying, "A woman who stood on the quarterdeck of a ship of war, who saw battle, and did not flinch from death." My husband standing with my father, the slave girl Kathi between them. We had tried to find all the remains of the captain, but they had been badly scattered by the explosive shell. The North Star was down by the bow, only the watertight compartments keeping us still afloat now as we steamed slowly towards Arsana, the sun hiding its face behind drifting clouds as if to hide from the sights it had seen... I opened the BOOK OF LYS that La-ra held, and read from it as the surviving members of the crew listened, the single officer, the last midshipman beside him, standing a bit apart from the seamen.

The North Star's masts were bare of sails as I brought her into Arsana's harbor, the ship's flag at half hoist. The stub of the main mast, the visible damage, the blood staining the hull, all leaving no doubt that this ship had been badly "mauled". We had twenty seven dead to be taken ashore for cremation, an even larger number who would be taken to hospitals, and several who in one way or another would never be the same as they were before...

"You kept your 'wits' about you when no one else could," my Prince had said to me as we tried to put things to order a bit. I had tried to fight back, although perhaps futilely, as Tara's ship was beyond the reach of the flamethrower when I'd used it.

"Now we know what warfare would be "like" if the Priestesses didn't control our technology," I had answered. Princess Tara had been a "student" of the weaponry of the past, "fascinated" no doubt by the "ways" that Man has invented over the many centuries to kill others of his kind. And Lorraine had been little better. A woman who well deserved the "title" of Warlady, I thought now!

"Maybe we should go back to throwing rocks," he'd "smiled".

"You shouldn't be out of bed yet!" I said to Tori as she sat there in a wheel chair, my own disheveled appearance leaving no doubts that the North Star had suffered some sort of a disaster!! The boats now gathering about the listing crippled ship almost like sharks feasting on a wounded whale or so it appeared to me. At Tori's side was her husband, dark haired, a bit heavy set now.

"My daughter?" she asked, the expression on her face leaving no doubts as to her feelings. That on mine no doubt at the sight of her telling her that something awful had happened to her girl!

"She lost her right foot when Tara's ship shelled us," I answered in level tones, the look of horror in Tori's dark eyes almost like a dagger into my heart then. Diane was sixteen, an age when most young girls are looking forward to life. Now she was a cripple, someone who would be "stared at", even pitied a bit now.

"She is alive," Tori's husband said, taking his wife's hand in his. "And that's what's important," he added, the tears now filling Tori's eyes as she nodded, aware no doubt of the "price" she'd paid for getting Diane away from the young men of Arsana...

"She is probably dead," the woman spoke, standing there on the beach, her daughter in her early teens wading out into the icy water of the strait to see if the woman clinging to the spar was still alive after everything that had happened to her. The burns she bore leaving no doubts as to the agonies she had suffered before being flung into the freezing cold water of the sea!

"She is 'alive!'" the girl cried with delight, feeling a weak faint pulse beneath the burned skin, surprised that anyone could survive this long after immersion in these icy cold waters!

"She may not live," the mother answered, now wading into the bone chilling water herself to assist in dragging the woman to shore. "And if she does she will be 'scarred' for life," she pointed out, her daughter nodding, seeing the burned features of one who had once been beautiful. Who once had been a Queen long ago in a land to the south. A land called "Sarn", who those of another time would have thought of as being northern California.

Chapter Twenty Four

"There is no chance that Princess Tara could have survived?" Tori asked as she sat there by her daughter's bed, Diane recovering well from the injury done her, although it would be time before her stump would heal and she could be fitted with a wooden peg in place of the foot that she'd once had. Diane's father glancing at me as I nodded, well aware of chances against it now! Hopefully we'd seen the last of the evil former Bajan Princess!

"The water temperatures in the strait at this time of the year are so cold that no one could last more than perhaps fifteen minutes at the most in it before losing consciousness and drowning," her father pointed out, my nod of affirmation here leaving no doubts that Mankind was finally "free" of the evil Princess!!!

"And the Priestesses of Lys are keeping an eye out for her body, which I'm sure will turn up sooner or later," I added then.

"Is the North Star repairable?" Diane asked, lying there in between us. Her bedroom that of a young Dularnian woman of high caste. I recalled her there on the North Star, on the derelict.

"As long as the brave men and women of our country sail the seas, there will always be a North Star," I smiled back at her. I had told Diane too that she would be its second lieutenant when my flagship was returned into commission by early summer. I had sent those of the "learned" castes to Sanato learn what

they could from the derelict we'd towed in. Tais had found "this" of "interest", although she had not answered the questions I asked.

"Your father returned to Sana, didn't he?" Tori said to me.

"I fear there is little 'left' for him now," I answered.

"Both his wives died violent deaths, didn't they?" Tori's husband said then, regarding his daughter as she laid between us. I saw Tori glance at me, thought of the "stress" that Diane's injury had placed on her marriage. It is often "hard" for a Warriress. Tori had made a "decision". Diane had paid the "price".

"We all die, it is 'how' we live that counts," Tori spoke. Such is a saying of Warriresses. One of many that we have...

"I'm very proud of my Dularnian Queen," my Prince said to me as we laid together, the stars peeking down upon us from our bedroom windows. "Of the woman who shares my bed, and will bear me children when the time comes," Prince Paul Blue Sky said to me.

"I hope I'm 'loved' for 'more' than 'that'," I smiled back.

"You do have a beautiful face and nice hair," he observed.

"Just that?" I teased him, feeling the "touch" of his hand.

"Your breasts are rather nice," he noted, stroking one then. "And you do seem rather 'competent' at doing certain 'tasks'..."

"I'm glad to have you back," I said to Tori as she stood before me in her golden helmet and gleaming chain mail, the doctor having said that she was well enough now to resume her duties.

"Glad to be back, your majesty," Tori smiled in reply.

"You may resume your duties," I said, Tori now leaving.

"Good looking woman, and walks nice too," my Prince smiled.

"I suppose she does," I grinned back, Prince Paul being the sort of a man who notices such things. "And do you like mine?" I asked, getting up and walking about before him here in my private chambers that I use for my own day to day activities as Queen...

"You do have a delightful rear end," my husband smiled back. "Although you'd show more of it if your tunic was a bit shorter." My current attire being the usual tunic and hose worn by both men and women here in Dularn. What Bob had called "unisex" clothing.

"I'll look a lot better when I get another five pounds off," I replied, having gotten the first five off over the past couple of weeks since our marriage. I look my best at about 138, which is about "right" for a woman of my height (5'8") and build. In my younger years I was more slender, and went around one thirty.* * See the first book of this series for further details. (J.B.)

"The season is far enough advanced now that we could visit my father," he said to me, looking into my eyes as I stood there. "Try to resolve this 'problem' that we are having between your people and mine

over Dularnian settlements in Wyoming territory." There were "hot bloods" on either side who wanted to "resolve" this by the use of the lance and arrow on the Wyoming side, with the arrow and the crossbow bolt on the Dularnian side. While all the "hot bloods" on the Wyoming side were "male", the "same" was not true on the Dularnian side, as a number of Dularn's Warriresses were now getting "bored" with drill and camp life, and itched for a chance to see some "excitement", to test their steel against a foeman. This last having come as a surprise to Bob and Carol last year, as I don't think either of them really "understood" what a Dularnian woman is really like due to her culture.

"There is also Queen Freydis and her conflicts with Valeris to the north," I answered. Dularn already had a third rate and "military advisors" in the area fighting on Freydis' side, while the Imperials no doubt had a "finger" in things on Queen Valeris' side in return in the form of Imperial Warriresses as advisors. * * One is reminded here of the "Cold War" between the USA and the USSR in earlier years. As this is a book by Maris Marn, the Queen of Dularn, the Imperials are the "bad guys" here. On the other hand no doubt Darlanis and Lorraine would have "seen" the matter in a different light, as is evident in their books. (J.B.)

"And the Nevadas who are a 'tool' of Darlanis and Lorraine," my husband pointed out. I was now tending to doubt that it was really Darlanis who was always at "fault" here, as I had no doubt that Lorraine's own political ambitions had their role to play...

"I believe Princess Tara hoped to start another war between the Dularnian Federation and the Empire," I replied thoughtfully. The "destruction" of a Dularnian warship by an Imperial would doubtlessly have greatly "strained" relations between our two societies. Especially if it seemed as if only someone like Lorraine herself could be behind such a thing. The use of cannon with explosive shells being something one might expect of the famous Warlady, whose knowledge of such matters was well known now. My own death in such a "battle" would have of course given the "hot heads" in the Senate due cause to declare war upon California, which is no doubt just what Princess Tara had planned here! Her "use" of a Trelandarian flag being the final "proof" here...

"At least we'll never have to worry about 'her' again," Paul smiled, everyone believing her dead, although no trace had ever been found of her body despite our searching for it. It being believed by most people that the current in the strait had probably now carried it out to the sea where it would never be found. *****

"We could get a Physician for her," the girl said, looking down at the woman lying there, the soft warm grease they had used to soothe her burns the only thing that they had to use. A low moan escaping from the woman's lips although she had not yet regained consciousness. The words she'd muttered had meant little to either of them, the language not being English, but Spanish. She had been very near death, and was still not out of danger as the woman standing there beside her daughter knew very well now.

"No," the woman answered. Such would doubtlessly be reported to Arsana, and no doubt people would come from the capital to investigate. Such people might also wish to "know" things she had no wish to let known, such as her former "status" as a runaway slave girl. One who had lived for many years with a kindly old fisherman before he had drowned in a storm a few years back. The girl was his, born here in this hut without either a Physician or Priestess in attendance, an "illegal" under the laws of the 26th Century. Her contraceptive implant having worn off as was the anti-aging serums that kept her from showing her age now.

"She may die without medical attention," her daughter protested in reply, standing there in their little two room hut, the woman there before them one who many would have gladly killed...

"What LYS' wills', will be," the former slave girl answered, her hair now starting to turn gray with age, her face now "old", making her appear well over a hundred by the "standards" of 2569.

"She must have been a beautiful woman once," the girl said, much of the woman's hair having been burned away by the horrible heat of the energy beams that the Priestesses of Lys had used...

"Her clothing, weapons leave no doubt she was wealthy," the mother said, looking down at her. At the woman she now knew was no other than the Princess Tara Bisan, once the Queen of Sarn before Darlanis, tall and golden, won her husband's heart and the throne on which she had once sat by methods no means "innocent"!

"She needs what we cannot give her," her daughter answered.

"I will take our boat to Sana," the woman spoke, the girl nodding. There had been considerable money in Tara's wallet... "Buy the medicines, the things that 'she' will need to survive."

Chapter Twenty Five

"What is that!?" Paul breathed, standing by the window, the "buzz" of the airplane's engine something that I'd heard before!

"Perhaps 'someone' who can help us with that derelict," I smiled back. I didn't really "like" Lorraine that much, but I did respect that awesome mind of hers. And bringing her into the picture here would also help "politically", as well I knew here!

"The 'thing's coming down there in the harbor," he said as I came to watch Lorraine come in for a landing, Black Lady throwing up a cloud of spray as the black Beechcraft Bonanza settled down. The sun bright in a clear blue sky making the spray "flash" like diamonds as the airplane now taxied across the harbor towards us.

"Like something out of the 'legends'," he breathed, making me smile a bit. I knew "what" airplanes were, even if it was impossible to build one. There was nothing supernatural or magical about them, only a technology that it was doubtful would ever exist again if the Priestesses of Lys continued to have their way. On the other I don't think I'd like to live in a world with no restrictions on technology. Where weapons existed that could kill at great distances, where something flying above the clouds could destroy an entire city. I do not think those of the "past" were that "happy" with their lives. Why else did they write so many books glorifying simpler, less "complex" social orders then?

"I see your captain is back on her feet," Lorraine smiled to me as she stepped up on to the quay, Tori giving her a smile as the two guardswomen holding the ropes to the airplane secured it now to the dock. "And I trust that your daughter is doing well," the Imperial Warlady smiled at Tori, who merely shook her head.

"Her daughter was crippled in the assault on the North Star by Princess Tara," I informed her, Tori nodding as Lorraine stood there. The Queen of Trelandar no doubt knew about the "assault".

"The `evil' of Tarahas touched many `innocents'," Lorraine spoke. "It is unfortunate that `your daughter' was one of them."

"The world is a better place now that Tarais dead," Tori answered, the Imperial Warlady nodding, her eyes meeting my own. "One perhaps where a mother may raise her children without fear."

"Let us hope `that' she is," Lorraine smiled back at Tori.

"I should return in a couple days if the wind favors," the mother said to her daughter as she loaded a few things into the small sailboat, the craft what another era would have called a "day sailer" about seventeen or eighteen feet in length. Such in an era without good roads often being more "practical" a form of "transportation" than anything else if you lived along a coast...

"And if the woman dies while you are gone?" her daughter now asked, standing there on their little crude dock. The boat itself was badly in need of paint and minor repairs to its rigging.

"Then we will bury her when I return," the woman answered.

"Like a visitor?" Lorraine smiled, standing there with Tori. I assumed that Diane was properly "impressed", their slave girl, a blonde haired wench, quickly going to her knees and putting her head down at the sight of the two Queens and a Prince there before her. I noted that she kept her knees well together, as is "proper" in the presence of free women such as ourselves here...

"You're the Imperial Warlady...!" Diane Wells breathed out.

"I'm a woman `good' with a sword," Lorraine smiled back. I had seen her in "action" once. There is no greater swordswoman.

"I read your `book'," Diane said, referring to the book the Queen of Trelandar had written in which I played a minor "role". The book itself is "fascinating", as it shows that Lorraine was, even in the 20th Century, truly what one might call a Warriorress.

"It all actually happened to me, `fantastic' as it sounds," Lorraine smiled back, "Including my `experiences' there on Mars." This "last" is commonly believed by most people to be just a dream produced by the effects of Lorr venom upon the human mind. On the other hand the description of "LYS" that Lorraine gives is quite similar to that of the paintings of LYS that I have seen...

"It's hard to believe that even a swordswoman like you could take on the crew of a slaver and actually `beat' them all," Diane smiled back. I suspect here the "element of surprise" and the fact that the men were not all that skilled with their swords. I will note, however, that Lorraine's skill with a sword exceeds that of any woman living in this era, including that of Darlanis.

"Sharon was a big help and I was `lucky'," Lorraine smiled.

"My daughter was not `implying' anything," Tori added here, perhaps believing that Diane didn't believe that the book was "true" in this regard. I suspect that Lorraine wrote the "truth" as she saw it, as she lived it according to her own standards... There are intensely "emotional" places in the book, such as when Sanda Talen's organization made her the Queen of Trelandar in the "hope" perhaps that she would kill

Darlanis in a sword duel, the Imperial Empress having killed Queen Paula of Trelandar in such.

"Many of the things I've done, experienced, are hard to believe," Lorraine smiled back. "Yet sometimes I think 'this' is just a dream, that I will wake up someday to find myself back in the 20th Century still married to Jack Duval." This being her late husband in the 20th Century who once threatened to kill her.

"You are 'responsible' for much of our present society," I said to her, well aware of the influence she had on Janet Rogers. Upon our own culture here in Dularn, upon so many other things!

"We all 'dream' of remaking the world as we would like it," she answered, looking at some of the items there in Diane's room. "Of 'correcting' all the 'mistakes' that others have made," she smiled. "All in all, I rather think that I did fairly well now."

"You are a 'legend' everywhere in the world," Paul smiled. I suspected that he was rather "fascinated" by her as many are.

"A 'myth', a 'legend' who now 'is'," Lorraine smiled back.

"She was so 'vital', so full of life," Tori said, the Imperial Warlady nodding as we got into the carriage to go back to the palace. Diane had enjoyed "seeing" Lorraine, but I knew from Tori that she often wept softly to herself at the thought of hobbling through life now on a wooden peg instead of two good sound feet. She was only a girl of sixteen, suddenly now a "cripple".

"A 'boot' can be constructed so as to fit her stump, giving her what will appear to be two sound legs, although she will no doubt walk with a limp due to the lack of a foot," Lorraine said. Since Diane's foot was severed just above her ankle by Tara's explosive shot, a normal woman's boot would be high enough to support the leg, especially if the boot was constructed to fit her! "Assuming the boot is carefully constructed, she should be able to lead a fairly normal life although she will naturally limp."

"Could you tell her that!" Tori begged, clasping Lorraine's hand in hers. "Could you tell that she can walk again, climb the rigging of a ship, and live a life like a normal woman!" I could see the tears now in Tori's eyes as the Warlady nodded in reply.

"I know this isn't healed yet, but I think you can see how such a boot would fit you," Lorraine said, holding Diane's right leg in her hand, and slipping one of Tori's boots on over it now. "There would be padding to cushion the stump, and some of your weight would be carried by the calf of your leg inside the boot. It should also be simple enough I feel to construct some sort of a carved wooden foot that would fasten to this 'ring' you have." The surgeon here in Arsana having fitted Diane with a stainless steel pin ending in a ring so that she might later be fitted with something so that she might stand on both legs. The types of artificial limbs that were used in the past are almost unknown now, I should mention here as a note although there is no good reason why this is so as such things do not fall under the restrictions of technology imposed upon us now here by the Priestesses of Lys.

"I would look 'normal' then," Diane said, looking up into the dark eyes of the Queen of Trelandar. "And no one would know that I don't have a right foot," she added, looking at Tori now.

"You will limp, perhaps quite noticeably," Lorraine said.

"It's a lot better than a damn wooden peg," Diane smiled.

"I am aware that these sort of accidents are 'rare' in this era, but this seems to be something that we as

Queen should discuss with those of the caste of Physicians," Lorraine said to me.

"You seem to be getting a little better," the girl said to the semi-unconscious woman as she now carefully spooned some warm soup in between the burned lips. So far the woman had not yet opened her eyes, although her mother said that the woman would be able to see, that the terrible burns she'd suffered hadn't blinded her. Most of her hair was gone, charred by the heat of a beam of energy "hotter" than the surface of the sun. At 10,000 C the beam had destroyed everything it touched, vaporizing wood and metal, human bodies, fatally burning anyone exposed to it in a brief fraction of a second. The weapon being much the same as the Lorr's own "Light That Burns" that was well known to Mankind.

"Ooh," the woman suddenly spoke, her eyes opening, consciousness now returning to the Princess, the agony of her burns something that assured her that she was still yet alive! The girl looking down at her light haired, undoubtedly a Dularnian.

"My mother went to get medicine for you," the girl said, fearing to touch the burned hand that reached out for her then. "She wouldn't bring a Physician for you because she is afraid." Tara nodding, her mind, as good as Lorraine's still functioning.

"She knows 'who' I am then?" the Princess breathed back, an "edge" to her voice due to the agony of her burns. Burned into her memory were those last few seconds when she realized that the Priestesses of Lys had "acted" against her, that they too were now her enemy. She remembered the terrible searing burning, the agony as she flung herself into the water, her clothing aflame, to escape if only for seconds that terrible death from the sky!

"She said like her you are an 'outlaw'," the girl spoke.

"I feel 'empty'," Tara breathed out, the girl nodding.

"Perhaps from all that has happened to you," she smiled.

"I think I have been 'abandoned'," the Princess spoke then, "aware" that she no longer "shared" her own soul with "another". With that "Being" from another plane of existence called "HELL"! The "QUEEN OF DARKNESS" having abandoned her now for "another"...

Chapter Twenty Six

"We'll take the Diana up to Sana," I said to Lorraine as we got back in the carriage to go back to my palace. While I knew that Tara was dead, still I'd feel better with armor plate around me, the power of the battleship's triple stream engines, its awesome armament only matched by its own Imperial counterparts. The Orca had not been as "successful", perhaps because Bob had left us with his lovely Carol to return back to their own time last year.

"Black Lady will take us there in less than an hour," the Imperial Warlady "smiled", "Assuming you aren't afraid to fly..."

"People used to `do' this all the time back in the 20th Century," I said, turning in the seat beside Lorraine to talk to my husband and Tori, neither of whom looked too delighted at the idea of flying up into the air like this. I wasn't either, but as the Queen of Dularn I could hardly admit it, especially to one like Lorraine! As I am rather "bothered" by climbing up the mast of a ship, I wasn't looking forward too much to flying to Sana...

"I haven't `lost' anyone yet," Lorraine "assured" me then.

"A Warriress may know fear, but she does not submit to it," Tori answered, her opinion of flying in an airplane rather clear as Lorraine started the engine with a roar of power! Only Tori's iron discipline keeping the guardswomen holding the plane to the dock from letting go of it as the prop blast blew at their hair.

"I am a Warrior of the Wyomings," my Prince then said to me.

"Then we should have no problems," Lorraine smiled in reply, telling the guardswomen there on the dock to let go of the wing.

"It's not like sitting in a crow's nest," I said to Lorraine as I looked down at the trees passing by there beneath us, seeing the world as only birds saw it. Lorraine was following the coast line, the huts of fishermen and others visible here and there beneath us through the trees. With something like this one could travel almost anywhere, I thought to myself, wishing I had "one"!

"You of the past had great `magic'," Prince Paul Blue Sky said as he looked about. Tori sitting there looking straight ahead, obviously "uncomfortable" by this, but not wishing to show it before us. I expected that Diane would have enjoyed it more.

"We are coming up to where the North Star was attacked,," I said to Lorraine, the Warlady nodding, bringing the plane down to close off the water, glancing about, and then coming about in a great circle only a hundred feet over the trees below us. A tiny hut there hidden among the trees spoke of some poor family or more likely a recluse making a living as best he could out here.

Princess Tara felt a wave of terror go through her at the sound of the airplane's engine, the girl jerking up, the look on her face leaving the Princess no doubts that the girl "suspected" the "truth" as to "who" had caused her terrible burns. "Flee," she croaked at the girl, aware of what her fate would be if it became known that she had helped save the life of a woman who was now "hunted" by all the forces of an entire Galactic civilization. Tara having "known" before that the Priestesses of Lys were "more" than what most people believed of them. The "ease" at which they had vanquished the Lorr back to Mars left no doubt.

"What is it?" the girl asked. She knew what "Tarls" were, but this was nothing like anything her mother had ever told her about. This "buzzing" black thing that didn't flap its wings, but yet still flew through the air like some great bird. A thing of "legend", from a time now mostly "myth" and "legend" to most.

"Is it black, with things hanging down beneath it?" Tara croaked, familiar with the appearance of Lorraine's Black Lady.

"It is," the girl answered, moving away now from the window.

"She is Lorraine, the Imperial Warlady," Tara answered her.

"Hard to tell what way the currents flow around here," the Imperial Warlady said to me as we flew low over the area in question. "It's possible that Tara's body washed up around here and someone buried it without ever knowing 'who' she was," she added.

"At least she's 'gone'," I replied, remembering how she had attacked the North Star almost without warning. I suspected that she had desired my own death, perhaps for killing Darl Jord, who had been a valued "lieutenant" of hers here in the North from the papers that I'd found after his death that left no doubts of it.

"No doubt to sit at the side of the EVIL ONE as his consort," Lorraine smiled back. I didn't think even Princess Tara would find the EVIL ONE a very delightful "companion" after what I'd "seen" of the Master of Hell in the pits beneath my palace... "Too many rocks around to make a landing here either," she added. The trees growing right down to the water here left no shore to land on either, I noted, the Queen of Trelandar then pushing the throttle forward as she headed once again towards Sana, our destination. I wondered if Tara's last remains perhaps now laid buried somewhere underneath some tree, in some unmarked grave. I thought it might be "fitting" for one so evil as she had been...

"I remember seeing what appeared to be a woman, her clothing in flames, leap from the ship just before it exploded," my Prince said as he sat there in the rear seat of the airplane with Tori.

"Then she would have drowned in the cold water," Tori said.

"In any case I think we can say she won't be giving any of us any more trouble now, at least not in this life," I commented.

"Sana," Lorraine smiled, flying over the village. We had seen a couple fishing boats, and a quite small craft sailing along the coastline in this direction. This last shortly after Lorraine had circled the little hut there on that rocky point jutting out into the strait a half mile or a bit less from where Tara's ship had been destroyed by the Priestesses of Lys' craft.

"You may not be exactly 'welcome' here," I pointed out. It had been Lorraine's "squadron" back in 519 that had burned Sana. True, she had not been the one to give the order, but the ships had been hers, and it had been her second in command, Princess Sela Dai, who had been the one actually responsible for the deed!

"Compared to 'what' others would have done, I think Sana got off quite 'easy'," Lorraine smiled back, now circling the harbor. "The attacks you led on my estate took far more lives," she said.

"I welcome you to Sana," my father the mayor said to Lorraine as the Imperial Warlady stepped out of her airplane after me. I was struck then as I had before how much that Lorraine resembled my late step mother in her build, and her own mannerisms. Paul now helping Tori, the captain of my guardswomen now exiting the airplane to stand on the dock behind me. Like Lorraine Marta had been an extremely "competent" woman, one who had been a great military commander, who had seen battle, had seen decks run with blood, seen death there all about her. Now she was gone, her life suddenly snuffed out by the weaponry of an evil genius who hopefully would kill no more now. I was glad that for a few hours we had been "close". That I had given her my "trust" in a situation where I would have been justified in refusing to do so!

"You have my sympathy in the loss of your wife," she smiled. "I am only sorry that it took so long to rid

our world of Tara." It was a nice day, the breeze off the ocean however rather chill.

"She was of the Warriories, and she died as one," he said. I recalled his words when he had held her dead body in his arms. I think Marta would have preferred it that way rather than dying in bed of old age, crippled up with arthritis, unable to take care of herself. She was a proud woman, one who took pride in the fact that she could still "manage" despite the fact that her right leg had been severed many years before just below the knee.

"We have lived lives that others could only envy," she said.

"We have removed the bodies," the Scribe said, the derelict having been "searched" from stem to stern for anything of value, these items having been gathered together for shipment to Arsana. At the moment the interior of the stern cabin was being carefully gone over for any clues that might be helpful later on in things.

"The vessel is similar in some aspects to Chinese junks, although there may be differences," Lorraine spoke, standing there. "What we need is maps, some hint as to how they viewed their world. We know that they would be worshipers of LYS, but also it is possible that they would have had other gods too than Her. Also what was the average size of men who crewed this?" Lorraine then asked, her awesome mind now hard at work as she stood there.

"There is evidence that they were smaller than we are," he said, looking up at the Warlady as he sat there in the stern cabin of the derelict. A woman nearby carefully studying a lamp...

"They could be Korean, Chinese, or Japanese," Lorraine said. "These are all parts of the continent of Asia itself," she mused. "There are also other nations, or at least there were in my time who would fit the racial stereotypes that you found aboard here. The cargo of the vessel indicates that this was a trading ship of some sort, and that they were returning to their homeland when the storm struck and drove them out into the Pacific to their deaths." The man there staring at Lorraine with a bit of awe...

"Is there any chance that we will be able to read their own writing?" my husband then ventured, looking about the stern cabin that we'd seen only once before, and then inhabited by the dead.

"The Priestesses of Lys certainly can, but I'm doubtful that they will prove cooperative in a matter like this," she answered. "The easiest way to resolve this would be to send a ship to their own lands, assuming that the Priestesses will allow us to do so."

"And I assume that you would like to do so?" Tori ventured.

"I have no doubt that it could be done," Lorraine smiled.

"What type of ship would you use?" I asked the Warlady.

"One such as your North Star would be ideal," she smiled.

Chapter Twenty Seven

"You aren't planning to make such a voyage?" I smiled as we ate dinner with my father, Lorraine having said earlier that she felt it was possible now to cross the Pacific in a ship like the North Star. What the Priestesses of Lys would "think" of such a voyage was another matter entirely. The Lorr had centuries before imposed upon Mankind "THE EDICT", which had strictly prohibited such voyages, although I knew of one that had been successful, the power of the Lorr to observe all that Mankind did being somewhat overrated. It being likely that their reliance upon the Women of Mars (their slaves and servants) for everything had resulted in a certain "slackness" and lack of control over things. Tori had done well fixing the meal, although she had joked with me that she had never thought she'd have to "cook" for her Queen as a part of her "duties" as the captain of my personal guard...

"I'm nearly six months pregnant," Lorraine smiled back, patting her swollen belly as she sat there at the table. She had also put on a bit of weight as pregnant women do, her face being a bit "fuller" than what it had been when I'd seen her last year. I had also noticed that she had muchly enjoyed Tori's good Dularnian cooking, Tori being the sort of a woman who took "pride" in such things even if she had a slave girl at home to do the work.

"Would you try to sail straight across, or skirt the coast?" Tori asked, it being possible to reach Asia by either method. If one skirted the coasts, it would be possible to stay in sight of land the entire time, and the gathering of firewood would be possible until one reached the Bering Strait. I assumed that there would be little actual "change" in things once one passed the International Date Line and actually crossed the "barrier" the Lorr established centuries ago as the "dividing line" between North America and Asia on the other side of the Pacific. While such a voyage would be "longer", it would also be "safer" than just sailing out into the "unknown" with only maps over five centuries old to guide one as to what laid ahead. Lorraine had once ventured out into the Pacific in pursuit of Princess Tara a considerable distance with the Corsica back in 519, much to the terror of her crew at sailing so far out, as she notes in her own book.

"In skirting the coast you would have the 'problem' of Queen Valeris once you reached that far north," Lorraine smiled, "A 'problem' I might note that could have been 'resolved' by a bit more 'reasonableness' on the part of your Queen and my Empress."

"Imperial 'aggression' is a more 'proper' term," I snapped.

"Maris!" my father snapped, looking at me across the table.

"'Deny' the fact that the Empire has been supplying Valeris with arms and 'advisors!'" I snapped right back at Lorraine then. Such "things" were common knowledge in Dularn, as Lorraine knew!

"Or the fact that the Nevadas have been given arms," my husband smiled back at the discomfited Imperial Warlady just then... The Trelandarian compound bow now was "common" among the Nevadas.

"Shall we mention the Swiftstar supplied by Dularn to Queen Freydis, the several companies of Dularnian Warriresses, the ten thousand crossbows, the supplies, 'advisors' that Maris has given to a Queen whose people made their living by raiding coastal villages all the way up and down the coast line of North America? I am also well aware of the numbers of Dularnian weapons now found among the Wyomings, the fact that your father is now married to a high born Dularnian noblewoman, your marriage to Maris," Lorraine "smiled" back, her dark eyes burning straight right into his own!

"My father married Pharis because he loved her, just as I married Maris because I love her!" Prince Paul Blue Sky snapped!! I suspected that the "same" was true of Darlanis and Prince Serak of the

Nevadas, only such a "barbarian" being "man" enough for a woman like her. I recalled his "comments" he'd made to my Prince about "spanking" one's wife, the "grin" I'd seen on Darlanis' own face then. Like me Darlanis did have a nicely "full" rear end...

"Enough of this!" my father snapped. "We are repeating the history of the past, interlocking alliances, small 'limited wars' just as those of your era fought, woman from the time of legend!" I rather thought that he had "hit the nail on the head" here too.

"Historically we are 'repeating the past', such as Mankind has done throughout His entire history," Lorrainesmiled back. I suspected that she was right here too. The "war" last year between Mexico and California was triggered off by Nevada raids into Mexican territory. And if Valeris "pushed" too hard on the territory of Queen Freydis, I could see the same thing happening all over again. Dularn would "intervene" on the side of Freydis, the Californians on the behalf of Queen Valeris, and we'd all be right back where we were before. What we "needed" was a common enemy, someone who would "unite" us, Dularnian, Californian, Nevada and Wyoming, Northman and Free Woman, into one "society"!

"Is there a 'solution'?" Tori asked then, sitting there listening to all this between us, keeping her own thoughts to herself as she sipped at a glass of my father's home brewed brandy.

"I once 'believed' the problem was 'technology', the use of military conscription to produce 'mass armies', but as you've seen right here in your history, people will make 'war' even if they have nothing better than rocks to throw at each other," Lorraine answered. "Historically Man has only known 'peace' when He was forced to live under the 'thumb' of some absolute ruler such as Janet Rogers appears to have been in her later years now..."

"Perhaps we were never 'meant' to live in peace," my Prince smiled. "Among my people 'war' is accepted as a part of life..."

"There appears to be a 'relationship' between 'aggression' and the development and 'advancement' of civilizations," Lorrainesmiled as she sat there. "The Lorr are one of the most 'stagnant' societies that I know of," the Imperial Warlady explained.

"Perhaps it is due to the fact that Mars is inhabited only by 'females'," my husband smiled back at the Queen of Trelandar.

"There is a 'truth' to what you say," Lorrainesmiled back. "We know from history that men are more 'inventive' than women, perhaps because of 'differences' in their 'outlook' upon things. Whether or not these 'differences' are cultural or innate is something that has never been determined," Lorrainethen added...

"I think a woman has a different 'outlook' on life than does a man," Tori volunteered here. "Even when raised in a society where much the 'same' is expected of both sexes, there is still a difference between the outlooks between boys and girls even now."

"The 'productive' women throughout history have been for the most part women who were not highly attractive," Lorrainespoke. "I know of no extremely beautiful woman who ever invented anything of value, and while Darlanis seems to be the 'exception' to the rule in a way, she does have 'problems' of her own which to me indicate a certain inner conflict which she has never resolved. Maris here had an unhappy life as a teenager, due to the death of her own mother, while I was made fun of by my peers as a teenage girl due to my own appearance. Janet Rogers was an orphan, and spent an extremely unhappy childhood almost up to the time that she met me. We could also consider the lives of Sanda Talen, who certainly

had enough 'troubles' of her own, Princess Sela Dai and the loss of the man she loved to another. Even the late Princess Tara seems to have been 'driven' by her own fate."

"You are saying then that only women who lead unhappy lives ever amount to much?" Tori answered, glancing at me, and then again at Lorraine, the Imperial Warlady giving her a smile back.

"There is also the case of Aurora of Mars, who gave up the child she loved," the Warlady answered, this being of course Darlanis' own true mother. "As a matter of fact, I believe that if we study history close enough, we will see that there is a very good 'match' between a woman's own 'problems' and what she later amounts to in life. Even Carol Simmons, who both Maris and I knew quite well, was a woman who led an unhappy life in her early years." I nodded, well aware that such had been the case here.

"Then my daughter should have a 'brilliant future'," Tori said. Diane certainly had enough "problems", I mused to myself. The "tone" of Tori's voice, however, implied more than just what her words might imply here. Something I thought Lorraine noted.

"My 'impression' of your daughter was that she is a bright young woman, one who from what your Queen told me appears to have an excellent future ahead of her as a naval officer," the Imperial Warlady smiled back, no doubt aware of what Tori had "said".

"And I am quite proud of 'mine'," my father added then.

Chapter Twenty Eight

"It was 'interesting' talking to you," my father said the next morning as Lorraine paused briefly before climbing into her airplane, my husband, Tori, and myself already having gotten in.

"People often do 'see' me differently than what I am," she smiled back. I wondered what Tori thought of her after spending the night with the Queen of Trelandar in my father's little home. Paul and I in the back of the plane with Tori sitting up front.

"I hope we can continue to live in peace," he replied.

"I also share such 'hopes'," Lorraine assured him then.

"That sailboat there was the one we passed yesterday," Tori suddenly "commented", turning about in the front seat to face me.

"She looks 'old' enough to greet LYS," my Prince smiled, the old woman walking out to the end of the dock and getting aboard.

"I'll probably 'look' that way if I live long enough," I teased him, the woman obviously well over a century I judged now!

"That should be many years yet," my husband laughed back.

"Let me have a mirror," Princess Tara said to the girl, her dark eyes blazing up into those of the young teenager's. The girl shaking her head in the negative, well aware of what this woman would see if she did. The hair mostly burned off, the skin that would never again be soft and smooth, but only scarred now!

"Your face is badly burned," the girl "whimpered" in reply.

"I'm `aware' of that," Tarasnaped, the pain making her temper even shorter than it would have been otherwise right now. The Princess "aware" too of what the future "held" for them all!

"Here!" the girl cried, holding the mirror in front of her. The visage in the mirror was like something out of a nightmare.

"You can take it away," Taraspoke, her voice level now.

"Perhaps Physicians can do `something' for you," she said.

"You saved my life," the Princess said, looking up at her.

"My mother wouldn't tell me `who' you are," the girl spoke.

"I am Princess Tara Bisan, of whom you no doubt have heard," Taraanswered, well aware that there was a "price" on her head...

"You don't have `horns' and a `tail' like they said," the girl smiled, having heard of the infamous former Bajan Princess. Tarasmiling to herself at her words, well aware of what the true appearance of the "demoness" who had shared her soul looked like.

"I was an `enemy' of those like Darlanis and Lorraine," Taraanswered, naming those considered her worst enemies now. She felt it wise not to mention the name of the Queen of Dularn then.

"This is Dularn, not the Empire of California," the girl answered, standing there, looking down at her horribly burned face.

"That ship shouldn't be here now!" I spoke to Tori as Lorrainebrought her airplane down for a landing in Arsana's harbor. The Swiftstar no doubt familiar to Lorraine too as she had once chased it far beyond the sight of land with the Corsicain 2566. There was also to my surprise a "sister" ship much like it also!

"There's a `reception committee' there on the quay," Tori answered, one "larger" than I thought should be just for me now!

"That's my father and step mother!" my husband breathed, staring out through the windshield of the Breechcraft Bonanza.

"And Queen Freydis is with them," I observed in reply now. There was also a young Nevadawith them, much to my surprise too. A young man more boy yet than man standing beside Queen Freydis.

"I understand that you have taken a wife, my son," King John Blue Sky said with a smile as he embraced my husband, his Queen, Pharis, once a high born noblewoman of Dularn, there at his side. The

golden tiara of a Queen contrasting with the brilliant "red" of her hair, those of the Wyoming often calling her "FIRE HAIR"!

"I am Othis, the brother of Serak," the Nevada said to me, Queen Freydis there at his side like a protecting battleship, the "Queen of the North" being five ten and about one sixty five. A big "Viking" of a woman in the full sense of the term. A barbarian in leather and furs, a heavy long sword there at her hip, a horned helmet over her long golden hair adding to the "effect"...

"I am pleased," I answered, well aware of "what" was going on here. The "hand" of Darlanis in all this was rather obvious!!

"He has asked for my hand in marriage and I have accepted," Queen Freydis said to me. She was old enough to be his mother, I knew, although I supposed it didn't matter that much here anyway. Lorraine giving me a "smile" as I turned, obviously having known of this as doubtlessly had Darlanis when she'd been here earlier!

"You 'knew' about 'this', didn't you?" I said to Lorraine as soon as I was able to be "alone" with her. The Warlady nodding as she now stood there at the window looking out over the harbor.

"One way to insure 'peace' among you 'barbarians'," Lorraine smiled back. "Often a 'relationship' between an 'older' woman and a young man 'works out' quite well," she added with a smile. "In any case it's one way of keeping everyone at 'peace' here."

"What about the Empire's 'relationship' with Valeris?" I snapped back. Valeris was a "loose cannon" in every way too...

"A 'mistake' I hope Darlanis can eventually get out of," the Imperial Warlady answered. "I warned her at the time that it was not in the best 'interests' of the Empire of California to support someone like that, especially as Darlanis' own political opponents can 'use' Valeris against her as they already have now." I was well aware too of the sort of "comments" that had been made here as Valeris was generally seen as a "baby killer" and "castrator" of any men unfortunate enough to fall into her hands now. "I supported supplying the 'Free Women' with medicines and items to extend and improve their lives, I did not wish to supply them with military 'advisors' or the sort of things we're doing now."

"Getting 'morals' in your old age?" I "smiled" at Lorraine.

"A social order like Valeris' is of 'interest' to me, but I do not think we should be 'encouraging' her as we are now," Lorraine answered. "Eventually she is going to think that whatever she does, the Empire will support her in it, and 'that', my dear Dularnian Queen, is the 'road to ruin' as you very well know." I nodded as I stood there, well aware of the "truth" she spoke now. Darlanis' support of Valeris was costing her a lot "politically". I did not think the Imperial Senate would support it much longer.

"There are 'legends' of 'societies' like Valeris'," I said.

"Amazons and such," the Warlady smiled back. "None of them have ever survived for long, not because they aren't 'viable', but because men will not 'allow' them to continue for very long." The tone of her voice leaving no doubts as to the truth here too!

"Men have always viewed women as 'threats'," I smiled back. I was well aware of that fact from the years I'd spent as Queen.

"We `possess' sex, and they are `obsessed' by it," she said. "It wasn't until women won the right to vote in the early part of the Twentieth Century that `prostitution', their greatest `defense' against our becoming too `uppity', was `outlawed'," she grinned. "This is why your attempts to outlaw female slavery are doomed unless the men of Dularn have surrendered their manhood."

"Such `things' were `possible' in your time," I pointed out. The men of the 20th Century had allowed women to "rule" them, to pass laws against their own interests such as "alimony" and such much as the white race of that time had "done" with the blacks. Carol had once voiced such ideas before the Dularnian Senate. I recalled the "uproar" she had caused. Only her awesome reputation with a sword perhaps saved her from being "challenged" then!

"The `men' of my time were not `men'," Lorraine smiled back. "They voted against their own best interests, something that the men of today are not `stupid' enough to do. We Queens, you, I, all of us including Darlanis, rule because MEN allow us to do so. If we go `too far', then we die by the dagger of an assassin, or by poison, or a number of other means which are used to `keep' us in `line'. The men of this time understand that no woman can be ever completely `trusted', even if they allow her to be a Queen." I nodded, remembering how "mad Kathis" had died here in Arsana...

"Yet we enjoy an `equality' unknown in your time," I smiled.

"But we are no longer the `privileged sex' we were," she answered, standing there, looking down at the harbor there below. "We no longer have the `power' to write laws in our favor anymore as we once did. We have `freedom', `more' than women ever did in my own time, but on the other hand we also have `lost' much too."

"Perhaps what women `had' then wasn't worth having," I said. I am a Warriress of Dularn, proud of "what" I am as a woman too!

"I am glad I flew through that `GATEWAY'," she smiled back.

"You must have had quite a `talk' with Lorraine," my husband said as we dressed for dinner. Kathi now brushing out my hair.

"She is a woman I admire for her intelligence," I smiled.

"The `next war' will be fought between us and Valeris," he said to me, watching Kathi work on me as La-ra got my gown ready. "I do not believe that men will allow a woman like that to live." The tone of his voice as he spoke making a chill go over me then. "This is not the Twentieth Century when men were not `true men'." I thought then of what Lorraine had said, the "warning" she gave.

Chapter Twenty Nine

"We now have a `common' enemy," King John said, "One that we can unite against, all of us, as `Men' against a common foe." I saw Othis nod, Freydis sitting there at his side like a mother. I had no doubt that such a "war" would be popular here in Dularn. Valeris had "aroused" even more "hatred" than had

the Imperials. With Princess Tara dead, Queen Valeris was now the Queen of Evil! I had seen the cartoons in the newspapers, heard speeches made in the Senate. There had been Warriors who had left Dularn for the land of the Northmen just so that they might fight against her! A nod by the head of the Senate here with us leaving no doubts as his wife, a woman with bleached blonde hair, "smiled" over at me. We had ample serving maids, guardswomen on guard at the door, and everything that the palace cook could give us in the way of food. The Mayor of Arsana, a "hard" looking woman, sitting there quiet. Her husband was Chief Engineer on the Diana, our first battleship, the Orca being unreliable without Bob to help "fix" it. A group of musicians in the corner playing a soft sweet tune now. Fireplaces snapping and crackling as they drove away the chill...

"The `ultimate war', "Lorrainesmiled, "Against the ultimate `foe'. What Janet and I used to call `World War Four', the final battle between men and women we knew would be fought someday..." There was something in the tone of her voice that hinted as to her true "feelings" about all this. About this "crusade" against Queen Valeris and her "Free Women" who lived there to the north. "A unifying of all `Mankind' against the common `sexual enemy'."

"Against a castrating bitch, a baby killer," Pharis snapped, echoing the commonly known "stories" about Valeris' "activities".

"You `castrate' male slaves, and `infanticide' is not unknown,"Lorrainesmiled. "In the past it was once the `practice' to kill female babies so as to preserve `resources' for males who could when they grew up serve in the military and thus extend the power of the nation," the Imperial Warlady smiled back at Pharis, my "mother in law" obviously far "outclassed" by this amazing woman who has so altered the history of Mankind by her actions... "We are no more `civilized' today than were `those' of that era. Little more than those who burned witches at the stake inSalem."

"No doubt you `think' what Valeris does is `right'," Queen Freydis "growled", sitting there across the table fromLorraine. I recalled Bob's comment. She was "built like a battleship" too!

"She has lived up to the treaty agreements,"Lorrainesaid. It was common knowledge that Freydis' people had not done so now. This "alliance" of Freydis with theWyomingsand now with theNevadasleft no "doubts" in my mind that a "CRUSADE" was being planned against Valeris. One that the Dularnian Senate would no doubt be happy to involve Dularn in if I "allowed" it to happen!! With my absolute "veto" power I might prevent Dularn from entering such a "war", although I was naturally "aware" of the limits of my power. Of "what" had happened to "mad Kathis". I didn't have an "ambitious" Warlady like she had in Tulis, but any Queen of Dularn is well aware that there are "realities of power" even she must bow to. And I had already been "branded" a "feminist" for my stands on a number of issues, including that of "slavery".

"We will allow the Empire to `withdraw' its forces," Othis said then. I had no doubts that in this the Nevadaswould act as they saw fit regardless of whatever Darlanis "thought" of it now. I did not think that Darlanis would be foolish enough to resist.

"One must `keep' women in their `place',"Lorraine"smiled". "We all know `what' happened back in the Twentieth Century when men foolishly allowed women to have meaningful political power."

"`This' has nothing to do with `relationships' between the sexes!" Pharis "snapped" back, sitting there beside her husband. "And we need no more of your Twentieth Century `feminist' ideas!"

"`You', like everyone living in this era, are a `barbarian'," the Imperial Warlady smiled. "You have little knowledge of the past, of what happened several thousand years ago, or even that of six centuries ago

before the 'time' of Janet Rogers..."

"'Enlighten' us then," King John spoke, touching his wife's hand as she looked over at him. My husband giving me a grin as I looked over at him, no doubt enjoying this "interplay" between the Imperial Warlady, one of the most "intelligent" women of all time, and those gathered around the table with us. Queen Freydis with her arm around Othis, their "relationship" now plain to see.

"Far back in history, in the time when the Lorr first came to this world many thousands of years ago, before 'Man' as we now know him even existed, it was doubtlessly women who were considered the more 'important' of the two sexes as only they could give birth. During the Twentieth Century it was discovered that early primitive Man worshiped a female God, perhaps even ourLYS, although there is no way of knowing this now. In any case the 'status' of women was higher than that of men until quite recent times when the female 'God' was then replaced with a male 'God'." The Mayor and I, both "educated" women, nodding in affirmation. "There is considerable historical evidence, including that gathered by the Lorr in their observations of our world that up to about four thousand years ago women were considered 'worth' more than men, since it is a biological fact of life that we only require about three percent of the present male population to keep the race going, given the fact that Queen Valeris' 'Free Women' are 'increasing' their population despite the fact that they outnumber men by a factor of about thirty to one. And I might note here in passing that there is no evidence that they 'mistreat' their males despite whatever you may have heard to the contrary."

"No doubt you consider such a 'society' desirable," Pharis "snapped", her husband sitting there "smiling" to himself. I was well aware that he usually let his wife do most of the "talking". She had been a bit of a "trouble-maker" here in Dularn, which is one of the reasons that I sent her to theWyomingsas ambassador. I had no way of knowing of course that she was an agent ofTara.

"It is 'viable',"Lorraineanswered. "And left to themselves, I think the 'Free Women' would be a success," she smiled. "They are a threat to no one but your own egos,"Lorraineadded.

"In a few months they will be only 'history'," Pharis said, the "implications" of her words leaving no doubts as Freydis now nodded. "And we will see no more like Valeris," she now added...

"May I be excused?"Lorrainespoke, rising from her seat. I nodded, well aware of the emotions this argument had aroused now. The Imperial Warlady then taking her leave of us, pausing only to speak briefly to one of the guardswomen before then disappearing from sight. I did not think that we had heard the last of this!!

"You didn't get into 'this'," I said to my Prince as we shared a drink later on in our own chambers, my husband smiling.

"Lorrainespoke the 'truth', unpleasant as it might be," he said, swirling the brandy there in his glass. "We are going to fight a 'war' not because of any 'threat', but because Valeris is in the eyes of many men a 'symbol' of something 'terrifying'..."

"Like a 'demon' out of the past," I spoke, remembering what I knew of the history of "Western society" before Janet Rogers. Janet herself as ruler of the Earth had "ended" many of the special "privileges" that women had enjoyed, such as "alimony" and the infamous "double standard" that had "favored" women in so many ways. Women were no longer members of the "Privileged Sex". Prostitution and pornography once again became "legal", much against the wishes of many women, who of course were well "aware" of the "implications" of such things. Of the reduction in their "power" over men in a society where such things were now "legal". At one time just before the election of Janet Rogers it was said that being born a man

was as much as a handicap as being born of the Black race, the politicians having pandered so to women then!

"I've a hunch that Lorraine may have something up her sleeve here," he grinned back. "That woman is not one that you ever want to underestimate," he added, regarding me sitting there beside him. "And I think she can be more 'dangerous' than anyone realizes if you 'push' too hard," he spoke, seeing me nod back...

"I'm considered a 'feminist'," I said, giving him a "smile". Those of the past would not have considered me so, I suppose now, but by the standards of the 26th Century I was thought to be one.

"You're a Dularnian Queen, and a good one," he said, setting down his glass, turning my face to his, and kissing me then. My mouth now almost instantly opening under his. I took his hands, guided them to my breasts beneath my gown, my raspy tongue flirting with his as my arms then tightened even more around his neck.

"I hope Kathi didn't forget to 'warm' the bed," I said then.

"I don't think it will require 'warming'," he smiled back.

Chapter Thirty

"I keep 'thinking' of Lorraine," my husband said to me as we laid together in each other's arms. I was tempted to say something like "I hope it's with her clothes on", but thought "better" of it just then. "I think she was 'serious' about Valeris too."

"What are your 'feelings' on Valeris?" I asked, kissing the side of his neck. "Do you consider her a 'threat' to 'Mankind'?"

"Lorraine's airplane is still here," he answered me back. I knew that she hadn't suddenly flown off right back to the Empire.

"The guardswoman said that she asked for a carriage," I replied, both of us having drifted off the original subject here.

"Must have had some destination in mind," he said to me, running a fingertip over one of my bare nipples, "stiffening" it.

"She was pretty upset about Valeris for some reason," I replied, well aware that I didn't feel too happy about it either! I didn't "like" the woman, or anything she stood for, but I didn't like the "response" that she'd triggered off among most men!! It reminded me of religious crusades, of a great battle against an unspeakably "evil" enemy that must be "destroyed" at all cost! There have been "wars" like that back in Man's history, even "crusades" of one sort or another against some "unspeakable" foe.

"Darlanis 'used' Valeris like she once 'used' Tara," he answered, running a hand down my naked body

there beneath the bed covers. It was true that Darlanis had supplied Valeris with the means to destroy the last of the barbarian strongholds there far in the north. She now had a navy, an army mounted on gigantic wolves at home in the evergreen forests of the north. Military "advisors" from California, Imperial Warriresses, the compound bows as manufactured in Trelandar from Lorraine's own "design"...

"Darlanis doesn't 'share' Valeris' beliefs," I pointed out.

"Darlanis is a person who 'uses' people," he answered back. I knew "that" was true. She'd somehow managed to convince Tara, who had once been Thar Marden's wife before she took her place, to "serve" her as Warlady. Then when Tara had turned on her over her son's "relationship" with a famous prostitute, Lara Warsan, Darlanis had then turned to Lorraine, "using" her much the same. "And now that Lorraine is starting to show some 'independence', I think Darlanis has found herself 'another' to carry out her wishes," my husband spoke, his hand slipping down between my thighs.

"You've already 'had' me," I pointed out to him then, feeling the "touch" of his fingers. My shaved love lips opening, welcoming his fingers as they slipped up into my wet love sheath.

"The Queen of Dularn is a woman who 'delights' in love making," he said to me, slipping his fingers in deeper now. The "fact" that I was "sensitized" no doubt had something to do with it here. I knew that there was no way I could control myself...

"Where 'is' Lorraine?" I asked Tori as we joined the others for breakfast the next morning. The Warlady's airplane still yet was tied to the palace dock where she'd left it the day before. A good roaring fire in the fireplace, a guardswoman at the door.

"She hasn't returned yet from wherever she went," Tori said.

"I would like to 'know' where she went," I spoke, Tori nodding, well aware that this was a "command" that could lead to an entire search of the city for the now "missing" Imperial Warlady.

"As your majesty wishes," Tori answered, then striding off.

"That woman is 'up' to something," Queen Freydis muttered.

"She does not 'approve' of 'what' you wish to do," I said.

"It hardly 'matters' what she thinks," Queen Pharis snapped. "And if I 'owned' this wench of yours, I'd welt her big ass for her lazy ways," she added then, regarding a now terrified Kathi.

"You don't," I snapped back, irritated by the woman's tone.

"Pharis, remember we are 'guests' here," her husband spoke. I suspected that Pharis was the "dominant" in this relationship from what I'd seen here and what my own husband had told me now.

"You, 'summon' our own girl," Pharis snapped then at Kathi.

"Do so," I said to Kathi, my eyes holding those of Pharis'.

"Now this is a proper slave girl!" Pharis snapped at me. The wench kneeling before us, head deeply down, her hands clasped behind herself. I sensed the girl's terror too of her mistress! A "terror", I suspected here, that might be fully justified too!!

"May I command her?" I said in a soft voice, Pharis nodding, well aware that as a guest here in my palace she could hardly do otherwise. Her husband sitting there regarding me, and the girl.

"Girl, stand, remove your dress," I said to the wench, who glanced at her mistress, and then at me, well aware that she would have to do. Most slave girls have little "modesty" as such after having worn the collar for a month or so. I speak here from my own experience at such "things" back when I was a slave girl in Trelandar. One quickly gets "used" to the fact that one's body is no longer "theirs", that others now "own" you and that you have no more "rights" at the best than does some dog...

"Do so, slut!" Pharis snapped, and most unpleasantly here. She was not the sort of a woman I really wanted for a "mother in law", but I didn't know what I could do about it here either now!

"Oh, oh," I heard Freydis breathe, Lorraine now stepping into the room. She looked something like a thunderstorm about to strike. Obviously whatever she'd attempted to "do" had failed. She looked tired, exhausted, and at her wits end just then too...

"Carry on," the Imperial Warlady snapped, standing there. I suspected that she was suffering from "morning sickness" judging from the way that she stood, the glow of sweat there on her brow. In any case she wasn't in a good mood, I could tell easily here.

"Remove your clothing," I said to the luckless slave girl.

"Yes, mistress," the girl answered, undoing her clothing.

"Who is your mistress?" Lorraine spoke in level tones. The girl's body covered with half healed welts from shoulder to knee. "And what did you 'do' to 'earn' this," the Warlady asked her.

"She spilled wine," Pharis snapped, angry at all this.

"Stand", Queen of the Wyomings, Lorraine said then to her.

"What do you mean?" Pharis snapped unpleasantly. I don't think she expected the "slap" that sent her stumbling back, the strength of the Imperial Warlady greater than one might expect...

"You have been 'challenged' under the caste codes," Lorraine said in level tones, drawing the long slim sword she carried, a blade of stainless steel forged centuries ago in a time of myth.

"You're 'pregnant'," Pharis gasped, no doubt terrified now as any might be by being "challenged" by the greatest swordswoman of all time! A woman who was a legend all over the known world!

"A pregnant woman can still issue a 'challenge'," Lorraine said. She cannot be "challenged", but she can issue one, I knew. All of us sitting there, the whipped slave girl going to her knees, no doubt well aware as were all of us that there was no way that Pharis could escape with her "honor" intact right now.

"Why?" Pharis pleaded, well aware now too that her life was Lorraine's to "take" if the Imperial Warlady wished to take it.

"Draw," Lorraine spoke, standing there, her voice like ice. I saw Pharis draw, saw the terror in her eyes as she stood there. I dared not interfere in such a thing as this despite my power as Queen of Dularn. Under the caste codes I had no choice in this! I remembered seeing Lorraine "play" with Carol, whose

own swordsmanship I had so greatly admired, a woman who I had once thought might even be a "match" for the Imperial Warlady. It is said by many that Lorraine is the greatest swordswoman of all time, from the age when swords were first invented until now. I believe it!

"She is a good swordswoman," my husband whispered to me. I supposed that she was. But against LORRAINE? A woman whose own skill with a blade is such that no man or woman can stand against her? Granted, Lorraine was six months pregnant, but I didn't think it would make that much of a difference. I didn't even think that Pharis would be a match for me, and I'm not really all that good, even after everything I learned from Carol last year.

"Make your move," Lorraine spoke in level tones. I saw the swift interchange of blades, saw Pharis leap back, reach up, touch her face, saw the blood start to run. I did not think that Lorraine "wished" to kill or she would have done so now. I knew, however, that whatever Lorraine wished to "do" to Pharis, she could do so without anyone being able to stop her from doing so!

"She didn't even 'move'," my Prince breathed in open awe! I nodded, having noticed that Lorraine had merely just stood there!

"You have drawn blood," Pharis breathed, holding her hand up to her face. Under the caste codes Lorraine had "satisfaction".

"You will give me this girl," Lorraine spoke then to her.

"She is yours," Pharis breathed, her face cut, marked...

"You will 'own' no more slave girls, nor will you ever 'discipline' another," Lorraine spoke, her eyes holding those of the luckless Queen of the Wyomings. "If you disobey my orders, next time I will kill you," she added, Pharis nodding back in terror.

"You need rest," I said Lorraine, who obviously didn't look her best by any means. "I will send my Physician to attend you," I added, motioning to Kathi to assist the Warlady if so needed.

"Maris," Lorraine said to me, "Don't go along with 'this'."

"We will speak later," I smiled at her, getting to my feet, taking the Imperial woman's arm, Kathi now taking her other arm. Wondering what I could say now to Lorraine, knowing what was being planned. As she had said, this might well be World War Four!

Chapter Thirty One

"Allow me to sleep a few hours now," Lorraine spoke to me as her "new" slave girl now undressed her, a guardswoman bringing my Physician, "And if you would be so kind, see that pure alcohol is brought for the airplane so that I may have fuel enough to reach Sarn," she said. Kathi standing there watching us all, waiting to be of "service" if so needed, having built up the fire a bit so that the bedroom would be pleasantly warmed for sleeping now.

"You are in no condition to travel," my Physician ventured, standing there, her medical bag in her hand, her black hair, slanted eyes, and skin coloring speaking of lands now "legend"... She was a citizen of Dularn, but her ancestors had not been from North America, but from "Japan", a "land" far across the Pacific. A small woman, pretty, attired in the tunic and hose now common.

"Damn Priestesses wouldn't 'help', and neither would Aurora," Lorraine "growled", looking at me as I nodded back in reply, aware that she had attempted no doubt to enlist their help here. "Even had myself 'teleported' to Mars to talk to Raspa," she muttered as the girl finished stripping her of her clothing now, the Physician glancing at me, seeing me nod in reply. Lorraine had taken considerable "risk" considering her "condition" in doing this. I hoped that she had not harmed the baby or herself here.

"Let me examine you," my Physician smiled, her eyes meeting the darkness of Lorraine's. I knew what Lorraine thought of the medical practices of our time, although I don't think we are all that "backward" even if we don't have the "technologies" of her time such as "X-ray" machines and everything else they had back then. On the other hand we do have the Priestesses of Lys, who can "do" things that no one back in the 20th Century could do back then...

"I'm just 'exhausted', that's all," Lorraine answered, my Physician smiling, now "checking" Lorraine as the Warlady submitted to her attentions. She was competent, capable, and the same Physician who had three years ago saved Lorraine's life back when my late husband had attempted to kill the Imperial Warlady with a flintlock pistol manufactured by Princess Tara. I was "worried" about what Lorraine had done, the differences in air pressure between Earth and Mars being so that no pregnant woman should ever expose herself to them, that of Mars being a tenth that of Earth.

"No contractions, no pain here?" I heard the Physician ask, her fingers sure as she felt of the Warlady's swollen abdomen. There are various "groups" within the Physicians, ranging from those who "nurse" the sick to true masters of the art like mine.

"I am a doctor, you know," I heard Lorraine smile back then. She was a member of the caste of Physicians there in Trelandar. She was also a Warriress, and a member of the Scribes too, the Imperial Warlady being a rather awesome woman in many ways here!

"I find they usually make the worst patients," Salmona Tora smiled back, her own ancestry making me think of the bodies we'd found aboard that mysterious derelict off the western coastline. The thought occurring to me that she might have been helpful here in deciphering the mysterious writing we'd found aboard the ship. She had once mentioned to me that she knew of "things" not commonly known now, of a history of lands that were now just legend.

"You do have a good bedside manner," Lorraine now observed. I motioned to Kathi, and took my leave of them then, feeling that Lorraine was in good hands. I was a bit nervous about having her fly back "home" this afternoon, especially by herself, but I didn't really know "what" I could do about just then as she was the only person who knew how to fly the airplane but for Sharon and Darlanis. I wondered if it might be best if I went along too...

"She should rest at least a full day," Salmona Tora said to me when she closed the door behind herself. I did not think that Lorraine would, and there was little that I could do about it...

"There are 'drugs', mistresses," Kathi now ventured to us.

"You're the Physician," I said to the almond eyed Physician.

"She won't like it when she awakes," Salmona pointed out to me. I was well aware of that, but I was also well aware that I didn't want anything to "happen" to Lorraine. While she wasn't a "friend" of Dularn, she was also more level headed than Darlanis.

"Do it, but don't `over do' it," I warned her in reply then. Adding then, "And when you have a moment, there is something I'd like to have you do," I added, thinking of the documents we'd found there aboard the derelict we'd brought back with us here to Arsana. I'd planned to send them south with Lorraine, but perhaps it might be "possible" to translate them here in Dularn now...

"`These' were found aboard the vessel we found drifting off the coast," I said, handing the documents to my Physician, who due to her own ancestry, reminded me in a way those who had died aboard the ship perhaps a year ago if not more. My husband giving me a smile as he stood there by the window, while the others sat together, quietly talking among themselves. Pharis' cut on her cheek having been quite minor, easily "closed" by the application of that "compound" that most Warriresses carry with them.

"I have seen writing like this before," she said, looking up at me. "My grandmother had some sort of a `book'," she added, her dark slanted eyes looking up into mine as I nodded back then.

"Does she yet live?" my Prince asked, his curiosity aroused.

"She is a very `old' woman, close to death," Salmona spoke.

"There are people like `her' among those of Valeris'," Queen Freydis commented, getting up, looking "closely" at my Physician. "It is said that they speak another language than our own too..."

"All the more reason not to carry out your `plans'," I replied.

"Lorraine said that she knew `some' in Trella," Salmona said to me. I wondered if such "people" would still recall the "old ways" of the past. Of an age now only memory for five centuries!

"Have a carriage summoned," I spoke then to the guardswoman on duty. The woman nodding, and then taking her leave of us now.

"She is a very `old' woman," my husband smiled. She was. I guessed her age at far over a hundred, perhaps even a hundred and thirty or so, which is pretty much the limit for life now. I saw that the woman was nearly blind from the glasses that she wore, glasses that made her look somewhat like a wizened wrinkled owl.

"Grandmama," I have brought `friends'," she said to the old woman, who peered at us standing there before her. The room was hot, a stove at the side almost glowing with the heat of the fire in it. She was clad in blankets, an old, dried up woman, soon now to pass from this material life to one beyond the ken of Man. The decorations about the room "different" from those of most of my people. Decorations that spoke of another culture, of history still yet remembered by a far of another time now only "legends"!

"Pour them some tea," the old woman spoke in a watery voice.

"Her mind sometimes `drifts'," Salmona Tora warned me then.

"This is a log book off a ship we found drifting off the coast," I spoke, sliding the log book across the table to her... I wondered if she could even "see" well enough now to read it?

"It is Japanese, but not Japanese," she spoke, her hand shaking a bit as she held the log book there in her wizened hand. "It is not like the writing I know, but some of the characters I can read for you if you'd like," she spoke, looking up into my face as I sat across the table from her, sweating from the heat!

"There was a great storm, the masts, sails torn off," the woman spoke. "They tried to rig or make repair, but no good." I saw her finger tracing the symbols, saw her shaking her head as she read further on. "Water barrels in hold no good, no water."

"About what we figured happened," Prince Paul Blue Sky said, nodding to me. The old woman pushing the log book back, then sipping at her tea, studying me, so much like some wizened owl.

"They all die, didn't they?" she then said to me. I told her that we'd found the bodies, very much decayed by the time that had passed. "And now you want to sail there," she ventured.

"We have ships that could make the trip," I said to her now.

"I would like to 'go' with you," the old woman said to me.

"But grandma ma, you're too 'old!'" Salmona Tora protested.

"I would like to 'return' to the land of my ancestors," the old woman said, "If golden hair here will allow it to be done."

"'She' is the Queen of Dularn!" Salmona Tora breathed back.

"And a 'good Queen' too, from what I hear of her," the old woman answered, not at all "awed" by being in my royal presence!

"Where 'is' Japan?" my husband ventured as we left the old woman's tiny apartment, the room having been as "hot" as a Trelandarian midsummer. "I know it's supposed to be on the other side of the Pacific from us, but how far away is the place now?"

"Forty five hundred miles from Dularn," Salmona answered.

"A month's sailing on the North Star if the wind favors," I added, figuring what the ship had done in the time I had commanded her. A hundred and fifty miles being a good day's sailing...

"Make a nice honeymoon for us," my husband then smiled back.

"If the Priestesses 'allow' us to make the voyage," I said.

"We could be 'sneaky' about it," Salmona then ventured now. "Sail to the north, and then come across at the Bering Strait." I was well aware that the Priestesses did not maintain the sort of "patrols" that the Lorr had done with their own space craft...

"Keeping 'something' like that a secret from everyone might be a bit difficult," my husband pointed out then with a smile as I nodded. I wasn't too sure either what the crew of a ship would "think" of such a voyage, recalling Lorraine's own "troubles" earlier on when she'd pursued Princess Tara straight out into the Pacific. Even the "iron discipline" of the Imperials hardly adequate against the "terror" the men had felt about sailing so far!

"I have the medicines," the old woman said, giving Princess Tara a smile, the Princess' face, hair, her burns leaving no doubt that she would be scarred now from what she'd gone through.

"You have my `gratitude'," the former Bajan Princess said.

"You `need' a Physician for your burns," the old woman said.

"I need to get a letter to the Priestesses," Tarasaid then, wondering if even they would heed the warning she had to give...

Chapter Thirty Two

"Have a good night's sleep?" I smiled up at Lorraine as she entered the room, her slave girl following close behind, the girl no doubt delighted to be "freed" from the "domination" of Pharis. Her name was Nancy, a rather common enough name for a slave girl.

"I appreciate `what' you did," Lorraine said to me, giving me a smile while Pharis sat there careful not to meet her eyes. Queen Freydis and her young Nevada Prince grinning at each other. I suspected that Prince Othis of the Nevadas had learned much in her arms. She was "blonde", which is considered highly attractive by the Nevadas, who are a race of dark haired people with a considerable intermixture of Native American bloodlines, mostly Navaho, I understand from what I've been told by others here...

"I would like to go with you," I said, seeing her nod back.

"Your husband isn't coming?" Lorraine asked as we stood there on the dock, the black Breechcraft Bonanza waiting there for us to board. The Imperial Warlady having supervised the refueling operation herself, trusting no one in doing such a task.

"I don't `expect' to be gone that long," I smiled back. I hoped to see Darlanis, and see what could be done about Valeris. As Queen of Dularn I might "stall" things for a while, although I was well aware that there was considerably popular "demand" now to have Dularn "act" against Valeris in alliance with the others. Lorraine having said to me that if Darlanis attempted to "defend" Valeris that it would most likely mean her throne and her life...

"How are `you' doing?" Lorraine asked, the slave girl cowering in terror in the back of the airplane, no doubt terrified of flying up into the air over the strait there below as the plane then lifted from the calm waters of the harbor into the sky now.

"Mistress is a very powerful `witch'," Nancy breathed back, watching Lorraine adjust the controls as we climbed higher yet.

"Science, not `witchcraft', although I'm `that' too," the Imperial Warlady smiled, seeing me nod. I still remembered the time that Lorraine had me try to hypnotize her. Whether or not it was of any "value" to

her is something I really don't know...

"Where are you from?" I asked the girl, her own appearance indicating that she was not either Wyoming or Nevada, but perhaps from another "group" even further to the east such as the Colorados, although judging from her complexion she had little if any Native American blood. She was dark haired, rather "pretty", but not a woman that you'd really "look at" twice if you were a man. She wore a red woolen dress, fitting for the Dularian climate.

"My people live far to the east," she answered me softly.

"Middle of the country," Lorraine replied, giving me a grin.

"We know 'little' of such lands," I answered Lorraine back.

"All 'advanced civilization' appears to be on the west coast of America now," she answered. "I've done considerable research, and the rest of the good old USA is now just a land of 'barbaric savages' like those we see just to the east of us, nearly 'Neolithic' societies like the one that Darlanis and Aurora discovered there among the ruins of Muskegon back three years ago now."

"Why did we develop civilization then?" I asked her back. I saw the slave girl cowering down in her seat, the airplane now a good thousand feet up in the air, and flying almost due south.

"Access to the ocean meant ships, trade, and I suspect too that the Priestesses of Lys were the strongest in numbers here," she answered. I thought then of what perhaps might still lie on the Atlantic side of the continent. While it was true that the French Prince who made the trip across in 518 didn't find anything but savage tribes, I was well aware that he had not thoroughly explored the east coast before his death. There was also the entire coastline of South America, of which we knew "little". There was the Peruvian Empire there far to the south, a land of myth and legend that few from California had ever visited due to the hostility of the Mexicans towards those of the northern land.

"How you do 'fly' this?" I asked, having watched her take off. I was well aware of the principles of its operation, that the airplane "worked" by the movement of air beneath its wings. The Imperial Warlady giving me a grin, having no doubt expected that I might ask. Nancy there in back no doubt wishing with all her young heart that she was safely back down on the ground now.

"Landing it is a bit more 'difficult', but flying is easy enough," Lorraine smiled as I sat there holding the airplane's wheel in a tight grip, well aware that Darlanis had "learned to fly" while Lorraine herself had laid poisoned there beside her!

"And the people in your time all had these?" I asked her.

"Not many due to the 'cost'," Lorraine pointed out to me.

"You can take control back now," I said to her, nervous.

"It's not that hard to 'recover' from a spin," she smiled, suddenly stalling out the airplane and putting it into a "spin". The terrified whimpering of the slave girl still remains in my memory from that brief minute before Lorraine pulled it back out!

"Please don't 'do' that again," I suggested to the Warlady.

"The Warrioress may know fear...", "Lorraine" smiled back.

"But may not submit to it...", I grinned back at her then.

"You know 'where' we are?" I asked Lorraine, eying the woods as her slave girl stood there nervously at my side. The Warlady returning, smoothing down her dress, her booted feet muddy now as she squatted there at the edge of the water and washed her hands.

"Nope," Lorraine smiled, climbing into the airplane then as a fish jumped a hundred yards off there in the little lake we'd just landed on. The slave girl and I then following her aboard. "Going to have to remember to boil my drinking water," she added, giving me a grin. "I'm not a rough tough 'barbarian' like you."

"I don't like the 'looks' of that," Lorraine spoke, looking at the thunderstorm that "filled" the sky there ahead of us now.

"How close are we to Sarn?" I asked, aware that we had been flying for several hours after taking off from that little lake there in Orgon. Lorraine's new slave girl keeping her thoughts to herself as was "proper" considering her status in relation to our own. The Queen of Trelandar glancing at the instruments before answering me. I knew how long it would have taken the North Star to sail this distance, but the airplane flew as far in an hour as would take my beloved ship now twenty four hours to sail.

"Half an hour, maybe a bit more," Lorraine answered, looking down at the coastline below and now swinging the airplane inland. "I'm not flying through 'that'," she added, the tone of her voice leaving no doubts as to her feelings about "thunderstorms", it being well known that she had arrived in our era by such a storm!

"Couldn't we fly under it?" I asked, knowing little of such.

"Back when I was 'younger', maybe I would have," she spoke, circling what appeared to be another small lake beneath us now. I saw the slave girl nod at me, no doubt hoping Lorraine would land instead of trying to fly underneath the thunderstorm ahead!!

"Is it safe to sit in this during a storm?" I asked, aware that metal drew lightning. The slave girl no doubt thinking the same thoughts. Nancy was still a bit "scared" of her new mistress, no doubt due to Lorraine's appearances, her "mannerisms".

"Safe as back in your own bed next to your husband," the Imperial Warlady smiled back. "I'll have Darlanis fly me back home to Trella, then she can come back for you and the two of you can see what you can work out with Valeris," the Trelandarian Queen added, staring out into the downpour that rattled off the metal of the airplane like hail. The wind blowing the airplane back and forth at the end of the rope I'd tied there to a sturdy tree.

"There are a whole lot of people in Dularn who want Valeris' blood," I answered, well aware of the "political realities" here.

"Darlanis' having the same 'trouble' here," Lorraine said, a sudden bolt of lightning making us all "jump" just a bit then... "There's a big bunch in the Imperial Senate who says that killing Valeris and eliminating her women should be the duty of all Warriors, regardless of their nationality," Lorraine then added now. "I've got a 'gang' down in Trelandar that feels the same here..."

"A 'war' between the sexes," I smiled, my smile a bit forced here as I thought of what could happen.

Most men I talked to had the opinion that Queen Valeris and her "Free Women" were a threat to all "Mankind", and should be exterminated without hesitation!! All the old "hatreds" men once felt against women were once again rising after some five centuries. I had heard "talk" that spoke of a "holy war" against Valeris, even references to her as being the "Queen of Darkness" who is supposed to now be the "ANTI-LYS"!

"I thought 'more' of Tais and Aurora," Lorraine muttered...

"I don't think the Priestesses wished to take a 'stand'," I answered. No doubt they were well aware of "what" might happen if they did. And Aurora would not like having a bunch of "uncivilized" barbarians living on Mars among her own women either now!

"Maybe that's 'why' so many of 'us' end up 'collared'," the Queen of Trelandar answered, staring out into the downpour then.

Chapter Thirty Three

"Storm's over," Lorraine spoke some time later, the rain now just rain, the sky still yet overcast, the air chill and "damp", but no longer a threat to this almost "magic" metal "bird" of the Queen of Trelandar. I thought of what we had spoke of, of "what" even Nancy had "offered" once Lorraine had drawn her out a bit... This "ultimate war" against the "ultimate enemy" of all Mankind!! What Lorraine had called a "jihad", a "holy war" of men against women where one side saw the other as being the ultimate "evil"!

"Can we make it to Sarn now?" I asked, the afternoon late.

"Shouldn't be any trouble," the Warlady smiled back then.

"I was thinking of something," Lorraine said to me then as we saw the lovely city of Sarn there in the distance, the sun now low in the west. "There was a 'prediction' made one time that we'd eventually have to 'fight' the 'Queen of Darkness', and we all thought that would be Princess Tara," the Warlady explained.

"And she's dead now," I answered, believing that she was...

"Queen Valeris' people practice 'hypnosis'." Lorraine said. They were utter enemies of the Priestesses of Lys, I knew too... The only "society" that I knew of who had managed to "stand up" against the all powerful Priestesses, although the "truth" was here that the Priestesses had no desire to "impose" their own teachings upon the "Free Women" by force of arms as would have been necessary, the Priestesses themselves having little military power in the sense of having armies or navies at their "command". While the Priestesses had shown their "power" in the destruction of Tara's ship, such did not indicate that they would have been too effective against scattered peoples hiding inside deep woods. Lorraine had said that their "ship" was probably little different from the "Starfire" which was possessed by the Women of Mars... That it might even have been a craft constructed from parts left over when the Lorr and the Women had abandoned Leith in 2566 A.D.

"And she could 'seek' allies from the 'other side'," I said, recalling what had "happened" there in my own palace thanks to Darl Jord's arcane "experiments" which had eventually required the "help" of First Priestess Tais to rid my palace of the EVIL!!

"The Priestesses of Lys use an advanced form of 'hypnosis', and if Valeris can 'do' the same...," Lorraine added, seeing me nod in reply. This could be indeed a "war between good and evil" in the full sense of the term. Tais had believed from what Lorraine had told me once that Princess Tara was the "Queen of Darkness", but Tara was only a "Princess", whereas Valeris was a "Queen"... Could it be that Valeris was the one we should fear?

"Valeris will 'fight' if attacked," I nodded, thinking now.

"And 'time' is not as 'fixed' as we used to believe," she answered back. Judging from what Tais had "admitted", apparently one could not accurately predict the future, even with the power of the Priestesses to travel through time. "There could be alternative 'futures', and we have no idea which will be 'ours'..."

"There is much 'talk' of war with the 'Free Women'," the old woman said to the badly burned former Bajan Princess as Tara nodded in reply, most of the discomfort from her burns now eased by the medicines that the old woman had brought from Sana. "Men now speak of a 'final war' that will 'settle' things," she added too. Such had been overheard when she'd bought the medicines in Sana.

"Queen Valeris is an 'enemy' of the Priestesses of Lys," the badly burned former Princess answered, her eyes meeting those of the old woman and her teenage daughter. "One who stands against those who are the true 'rulers' of our world, not these kings and queens that parade around thinking they really 'rule' things..."

"You mentioned a letter you wanted to send to the Priestesses," the old woman answered, looking into the dark eyes of Tara.

"You would not 'understand', but perhaps they would," Tara answered, wondering why it "mattered" any more WHO ruled Earth...

"Let's just hope Darlanis is 'home'," Lorraine smiled at me as she circled the Imperial Palace in preparation for a landing. The last rays of a setting sun turning everything a bloody red.

"Seems 'odd' being 'on the same side' this time," I smiled. Dularn and the Empire of California were bitter enemies, and had been ever since Darlanis had ascended the throne as Queen of Sarn even before I was born. I did not "hate" the Empress, but I didn't "trust" her, nor did I "trust" Lorraine completely either...

"It may end up 'women' against 'men'," Lorraine answered, bringing the airplane down for a landing there in front of the Imperial palace. "The 'ultimate battle of the sexes'," she grinned, her dark eyes, a rich dark brown, then meeting my green.

"You shouldn't be flying about as 'pregnant' as you are," the Imperial Empress smiled, embracing her Imperial Warlady as I and Nancy stood back. The Warrioresses of Darlanis' Imperial Guard regarding me with the attitude they might have towards one like Queen Freydis, who is in most respects a true "barbarian"... On the other hand I've seen prostitutes in Arsana who wore "more" than Darlanis did, although right now she wore a heavy cloak over her brief golden mesh against the "chill" of the early

evening.

"I hope I won't have to anymore," Lorraine answered back. Darlanis' husband, Prince Serak of the Nevadas, giving me a grin.

"Have there ever been any 'societies' like Valeris' before?" I asked as we shared a pleasant dinner and drinks, Lorraine careful not to drink heavily due to the harm it might do to her baby.

"There are 'myths' and 'legends' of 'Amazons' living in the time of the early Greeks," Lorraine answered as she sat across the table from me, Darlanis' slave girls quick to be of service. "It is likely that their social order was much like Valeris' is." Prince Serak having noted the "pleasures" of dining with three women as "lovely" as us. His own slave girl, the exotic Pussycat, dark haired, dusky skinned, one of the those now serving us.

"There is no historical evidence that they ever existed," I heard Darlanis say, giving Lorraine a smile as the Warlady nodded back. "On the other hand we know 'less' of the past than you do," she added, Lorraine having been quite helpful in this issue.

"They 'existed', but 'men' rewrote the history books so to make it appear that they were only a 'legend'," Lorraine smiled. "One thing that we must also realize here is that any truly 'feminist' society must be militarily 'superior' to its surrounding male dominated societies or it will be quickly destroyed." Serak nodding, giving me a smile as I sat there. I was well aware of the "decision" that the Nevadas had made about Valeris. The warriors were being called to ride in their thousands now...

"Valeris is not 'superior' in her weaponry," I smiled then.

"She has her wolves, which give her an advantage," Lorraine answered. "There is also Talon, which is completely 'controlled' by women, who are in possession of a 'superior weapon' against which no one has a defense," the Imperial Warlady observed then.

"Talon is not a 'feminist' society," I pointed out to her. I thought Lorraine's reasoning here was a bit "faulty" in this.

"It is 'run' by women to a far greater extent than is California, Trelandar, or Dularn," Lorraine retorted right back then. "And it has a 'weapon' which only women may use," she added now. "The Tarls of Talon can only carry a woman due to weight limits".

"Why do you 'care' what happens to Valeris?" Darlanis asked. "She is merely a 'barbarian' with 'radical' ideas," she added... I'd met the woman "once". I hadn't been very "impressed" either! Dularn would be better off without this "threat" from the north, a Queen who hated men much as Nazis of the past had "hated" Jews.

"If 'men' can crush Valeris, then how long will it be before they will start to 'question' whether or not any of us can be 'trusted'?" Lorraine answered. "Don't forget that there was a time, and not that long ago in human history, that women were for all practical purposes the 'property' of men to 'use' as they so wished." The Warlady's eyes meeting mine as I nodded in reply. "The 'concept' of 'sexual equality' that we so take for 'granted' now was a 'product' of the Twentieth Century, and women did not obtain full 'equality' with men until the time of Janet Rogers."

"Who you were 'responsible' for," Darlanis answered back, sipping thoughtfully at her wine as she sat there now listening, her eyes meeting those of her husband as he nodded back in reply.

"Just as Maris is 'responsible' for Queen Pharis, the 'source' of our problems right now," the Imperial Warlady spoke. Lorraine having said before that if I hadn't sent Pharis, at the time a high born Dularnian noblewoman, to the Wyomings, we wouldn't be in the "trouble" that we were now about Queen Valeris... It was "true" that I'd sent Pharis to the Wyomings as my own personal representative, but you must remember at the time that a state of war existed between Dularn and Imperial California, and I was merely carrying out my "duties" as the Queen of Dularn to see to the "safety" and protection of my country from the Empire! Pharis had also done much to see to the increased military power of the Wyomings, which in turn had kept the Nevadas from making trouble for Dularn as they would have done without the Wyomings!!

"If we are going to passing 'blame' around, let me suggest here," I spoke up, "That had the Empire of California not sought a 'military alliance' with Queen Valeris that she would not have become a military threat to those 'south' of her." It had been Bob Simmons and the Diana which had put a halt to Darlanis' own activities there in the north, which I was sure they both knew!!!

"Shall we 'bury the sword' here?" Darlanis smiled at us two. "Accusing each other of past mistakes is not going to 'solve' the problem we now face, nor do we wish to see what will 'happen' if there is a 'war' between men and women as is quite likely here."

"Withdraw Imperial 'support' from Valeris and I will do what I can to see that the Federation leaves her 'alone'," I spoke up. Just "what" I'd do about my mother in law I didn't know as yet... The thought going through my mind that it would have saved me and everyone else a lot of "trouble" if Lorraine had killed her then!

"You're going to have your 'hands full' with Pharis," Lorraine smiled at me. "Why" Pharis had taken the "tack" she had was something that puzzled me, as the woman had been something of a "political radical" in Arsana, which is one of the reasons why I had sent her as ambassador to the Wyomings in the first place!

"I wonder if Princess Tara is really dead," Darlanis spoke.

"I assure you that she is," I smiled back at the Empress.

"Her 'organization' is still functioning," Darlanis said.

"Like a fish out of water, it won't 'die' immediately," I smiled back. With Darl Jord gone, and Tara dead, I didn't think we really had anything to "worry" about from her "underground"...

"Was Darl Jord 'acquainted' with Pharis?" Lorraine asked me.

"She probably 'knew' him," I smiled, wondering why the Warlady had spoken as she had. Pharis had been a "troublemaker" for me, heading up a "faction" that did nothing but constantly criticize me for everything that I did. She hadn't seemed to have any political agenda of her own, except to constantly "hound" me! What my late husband thought of her I hadn't noted, as Darl and I were never "close", and I tried to avoid him as much as I could.

"Consider the 'possibility' that this is all an attempt to 'discredit' you, to cause the Senate to replace you with another Queen more willing to be 'reasonable'," Darlanis ventured then...

"No doubt Californiawould be happy to see someone else than me on the throne of Dularn," I "smiled"

back at the Imperial ruler. Lorraine there taking this all in, and "smiling" to herself. Prince Serak keeping his thoughts to himself, Pussycat kneeling at his side, allowing him to feed her while she held her hands behind herself as is common among slave girls with the Nevadas...

"You are a 'good Queen' for Dularn, one of the best that Dularn has ever had," Darlanis answered. "A bit of a 'hot head' at times, but you've taken 'moral stands' that I respect you for..."

Chapter Thirty Four

"You are 'serious'?" I "breathed", sitting there "stunned". Prince Serak inserting a bit of food into Pussycat's open mouth.

"Lorraine and I both respect you for what you are," the Empress smiled back. "Dularn is in good hands with you as Queen."

"The 'hour' is late, and I'm a bit tired," Lorraine said. I supposed that she was. In the last few days she'd had little chance to get enough rest, and she was six months pregnant too...

I stood at the window and looked out over the bay, the Moon low in the west now, the city of Sarn peaceful and quiet. The soft wan light of the Moon making just visible there towards the mouth of the bay the ruins of an era now mostly legend and myths. The ruins of a great bridge far beyond our ability to reproduce. Once Man had thought himself like a "god", able to do anything... Now we were but "barbarians" with swords at our hips, living in a civilization built on "memories" of "what once had been", guided by a woman who had altered all of human history by her existence. I "admired" Lorraine, even if I didn't like her "arrogance", the "condescending" way that she looked "down" upon all of us as mere "barbarians" hardly fit to polish her boots. She had been the woman who had "instructed" Janet Rogers, the "Lorraine" Janet herself had written of in her own books. Darlanis like many now "worshiped" the woman, and "thought" of her as being "the second Janet Rogers" which would lead Mankind to a second "Golden Age".

"Having a hard time sleeping?" a voice suddenly spoke as I turned to see Lorraine now standing there, the Imperial Warlady's swollen body so "different" from what I'd remembered it before... I remembered too kneeling there before her, looking up into those eyes, feeling her "dominance", the "power" she possessed over me!

"What was it like back then?" I said, standing there by the window, the moonlight shining in. The stars gleaming brightly. Jupiter was a bright point of light there up above the "teapot".

"You confuse 'technology' with 'civilization'," Lorraine smiled back, joining me then, her dark eyes glowing into my own. "We were a people with 'power', the ability to 'do' almost anything we wished to do, to be, but without any 'direction'," she spoke, seeing perhaps a much different "world" than what laid out there now. "Our political system pandered to human selfishness, to 'those' who lived off the taxpayers and 'bred' like a pack of dogs without any thought for tomorrow. I did what I 'could', perhaps because I am not 'truly' of the Twentieth Century, but yet another, one took 'concern' for such things, who had her 'dreams', a woman who dreamed she could 'change' the world for the better. A woman who found one

who `listened',understood..."

"Janet did `try'," I said, touching her arm. Janet had not been completely "successful", but she had for a few decades altered the entire course of human history in a way no other ever has done. "And the world is better because you `tried'," I said.

"It never would have worked,"Lorraineanswered. "Janet was `one of a kind', like me, and the flow of history is something no one can ever permanently alter," the Imperial Warlady said then. "There is only `one' like us in a generation, and that isn't `enough' to keep things going," the Imperial Warlady said to me.

"You `altered' history here," I pointed out, aware now thatLorrainewas "old", a woman living with dreams she'd never see...

"Sanda Talen `altered' history, not me,"Lorrainesaid. "A woman who saw the `chance' to push the Empire out of Trelandar. She `used' me, caused me to `hurt' Darlanis like no other could."

"She was a woman with a `dream'," I said, remembering her.

"She hated you with a passion,"Lorrainesmiled back at me.

"Blonde, beautiful, `intelligent'," I smiled. I had been...

"There was a `time' I thought she tried to kill me," the Warlady spoke, staring out the window at the moon lit bay beyond. "I even `suspected' Darlanis wanted me dead one time," she said, giving me a smile as she stood there, her face half lit by the moon. She is not a beautiful woman, although not unattractive.

"I read your book," I said. I had found it "interesting". There was much that I had learned there about this amazing woman.

"Why are you `concerned' about Valeris?"Lorraineasked me.

"I fear `what' will happen afterwards," I said to her then.

"I could understand `why' men hated us in the Twentieth Century, but why `now'?"Lorrainespoke, standing there beside me. "We have legal prostitution, no alimony, none of the `laws' that the women of my time managed to get passed in their own favor..."

"I do not think such things can be `understood'," I smiled.

"In a society like Valeris' men are `unnecessary',"Lorrainesaid, looking at the bay there before us. "Both the Women and the Lorr have lived without men or male members of their species for thousands of years. And I am sure that Valeris is well aware by now that we possess that drug that allows women to `fertilize' their ovums without the aid of a man," she spoke, seeing me nod. "That is `why' men feel that the Free Women must be destroyed..."

"I would not care to live on a world without men," I said.

"Men fear that most women `would',"Lorrainesmiled back.

"We are `not' the Lorr," I pointed out toLorrainethen.

"In this issue `reason' does not apply," she answered.

"The Priestesses would not help?" I said to her then.

"They feared the `consequences'," Lorraine answered.

"The `ultimate war'," I breathed, looking at her.

"If you and Darlanis `fail'," Lorraine answered.

I watched the airplane takeoff, lift off from the bay, heading to the south, towards Trelandar and Trela, its capital. Darlanis would probably not return until late this afternoon now. Then tomorrow we'd fly back to Arsana, then on to Freydis' lands. From there it would be a long flight to Valeris' capital there in the frigid lands just south of Alaska. I prayed to Lys that the Queen of the Free Women would be "reasonable". That she would "understand" why Darlanis had to withdraw her military support...

"You have a good ass," Serak said to me, giving me a smile. I supposed that I did. I was rather "full" in the rump, which of course has led to certain little "ditties" back there in Arsana.

"Your wife is more beautiful than me," I smiled back at him, reaching up, touching the silver chain that circled my throat, a lovely symbol that marked me as a wife of less than three years.

"It would have `better' for all of us if Darlanis had never tried to `do' what she did with Valeris," he said to me then too.

"Your wife is no doubt `aware' of that," I smiled back now.

"There are those in the Imperial Senate who agree," he said.

"Your brother is `involved' with Queen Freydis," I "smiled". A number of Darlanis' guardswomen were standing there listening.

"There is but one `Darlanis'," Prince Serak said to me then.

"The `tensions' are building," I spoke, Darlanis nodding. I had been reading the newspapers. Darlanis' actions in supporting Queen Valeris were not "popular" with many. "Sexual hatred" was building up right here in the Empire just as it was now in Dularn. The sexes were being "polarized", with men now speaking of a "holy war" against "The Queen of Darkness" as Valeris was seen. Darlanis looked "tired", as if she was under considerable strain. She did little more than "pick" at her food as we ate our dinner. I suspected that she did not rest easy, given the situation now.

"The Priestesses of Lys refuse to get `involved'," she said.

"Nor will Aurora `welcome' the Free Women to Mars," I spoke.

"There will be battles, blood will be shed, and the issue of `feminism' will be resolved for all time," Prince Serak spoke. "Good will `win' over Evil, and Valeris will pay for her crimes."

"And Man will maintain his `dominance' over Woman," Darlanis snapped rather unpleasantly here, "As he has through all time..."

"Here' on the Earth," I spoke, seeing the Empress nodding.

"Men are not `fools' like they were in Lorraine's time," he answered. "We all know what `happened' back then," he added now.

"And you've learned `nothing' from it either," Darlanis retorted, her azure blue burning into his like blue hot lasers now! I saw Pussycat creep forward, kneel at his side, her head down...

"We have learned that `democracy' is not always the answer," he smiled back, tousling Pussycat's hair as she knelt there now. "That there are `things', `issues' not properly subject to being `voted' on. We understand now that the majority must not be allowed to make certain `decisions' as to the survival of a `sex'."

"There are few women who wish to live like Valeris' does," I interjected here. I found the idea of "lesbianism" disgusting. It is, contrary to common belief, no more "common" or "tolerated" among the women of Dularn than the women of any other nation...

"It is," Darlanis spoke, "An `issue' of whether anyone, male or female, has the `right' to control another's life," she said. Such a question had been proposed and "answered" by Janet Rogers.

"And if Valeris is not a `military threat' to anyone, then do `men' have the `right' to make `war' upon her?" I challenged him in reply. "I think you know the answer to that `question'."

"She is `not' a `dumb blonde'," Darlanis laughed in reply.

"Nor is the woman that I am married to," he laughed back.

Chapter Thirty Five

"I'm getting `used' to this now," I said to Darlanis as she taxied the airplane out into the bay the next morning for our flight to Dularn. There in Dularn we would refuel, take Queen Freydis with us to her own land, and operating from Freydis' own capital, try to seek out and find where Queen Valeris was now...

"There's something `funny' about all of this," Darlanis said as she turned the airplane up into the wind for its take off run. "Something about this entire `affair' that seems `odd' to me..."

"What do you `mean' by that?" I asked her, curious about it.

"Someone's `stirring up trouble', and I wonder `who'," she answered. "I'd `swear' that Tara's behind all of this, but if she's dead like you say, then someone else must have taken her place. `Someone' who is carrying out her final orders to cause a war between men and women that will destroy our entire society."

"Queen Pharis of the Wyomings seems to be the driving force behind all of this," I answered thoughtfully as the airplane now began its takeoff run across the calm waters of the bay of Sarn. It was obvious too as I

thought about it that without Pharis none of this would be happening now. She was the "driving force" in organizing this "crusade" of men in a "jihad" against Valeris...

"How much 'do' you 'know' of her?" Darlanis asked, drawing the wheel back, Black Lady now lifting up into the cloudy sky as she started the turn that would take us now north towards Dularn.

"She was a 'troublemaker' in Arsana for me," I answered. I had sent Pharis to theWyomingsmostly just to get "rid" of her! The memories flooding back of how "annoyed" I'd been at her too!

"Any 'relationship' between her and Darl Jord?" she asked.

"Lorraineasked the same 'question'," I told the Empress.

"Tarawas an extremely 'competent' woman," Darlanis smiled.

"And one who knew 'how' to 'use' others for her own purposes," I answered, recalling what I'd found after Darl's death. Could it be that Pharis had also been one ofTara's own agents??

"You 'understand' the 'importance' of this?" Princess Tara spoke, the old woman nodding back as she took the letter that the former Bajan Princess had written, the former slave girl looking into the darkness of the woman's eyes, thinking of how much they reminded her just now of those of some venomous reptile. "It is 'vital' to all of us that this letter be delivered to the proper person concerned... To the High Priestess of Dularn herself..."

"You know 'what' I am," the old woman answered, although she was well aware that it was unlikely she would be recognized now after all these years, especially after the "aging" of her body. She cared little for herself, but her daughter deserved a chance to make something of herself, and Princess Tara could provide it.

"At the time of the next eclipse of the Moon it will be possible to open a 'GATEWAY' between our plane of existence and that known to us 'mortals' as 'HELL'," Tara answered, well aware of the plans of the QUEEN OF DARKNESS to bring the EVIL ONE here... "And only the Priestesses of Lys have the power to prevent it," she explained, wondering if the old woman actually believed her?

"I don't 'envy' you with a 'mother in law' like that," Darlanis said to me as she flew the airplane with a confident hand. "Especially if she was an 'enemy' of yours before," she added...

"She seems to have some 'source' of power that puzzles me," I said. I wondered what "hold" she had over herWyominghusband? He seemed quite "passive", almost as if she had "drugged" him! I wondered if there was any sort of drug that might do just that... I'd noted too that he didn't even seem to "notice" Kathi either!!

"Is there any sort of a drug that could used to make a man 'passive', and willing to 'do' whatever you wanted?" I asked her. Darlanis being a woman who knew quite a bit about such "things" from her quite close relationship withLorraineover the years.

"Tarawas in possession of the 'secrets' of the past," the Empress answered, turning, looking at me, her eyes holding mine. "And we know that such things did exist in Janet Rogers' time..." The airplane now flying just beneath the dark clouds just above.

"I'll speak to my Physician when we reach Arsana," I said.

"Captain Wells?" my husband spoke, Tori walking over to him. Her chain mail, ornate helmet leaving no doubt as to her position here as captain of my personal guardswomen. Her lovely hair and deep liquid eyes making her a woman that few men might not note. The golden chain about her throat however made her "off limits" to any who valued his "honor", although such did not mean that adultery was "unknown" even in a society that considered it such.

"What is your wish, my Prince?" Tori asked, standing there.

"I wish to speak to you in private," Prince Paul smiled now.

"As you wish, my Prince," Tori smiled, walking off with him.

"This will do," Prince Paul Blue Sky said, opening the door and then closing it behind himself as Tori turned and stood there looking at him. The light from the bedroom windows highlighting the side of her attractive face, her helmet and armor glistening.

"What is it you 'wish' of me?" Tori smiled back, well aware of "where" she was, and the "implications" of being here in the bedroom of the Queen of Dularn alone with the Queen's husband...

"You are a woman, I think," he spoke, "Who misses 'little' of what goes on around her." Tori nodding, her eyes meeting his. "And if Maris' trust in you is as strong as I think it is, I'm sure that you will be aware that what I am going to say to you is something that must remain a 'secret' between us and the Queen."

"Just as long as you don't 'ask me' to go to bed with you," Tori grinned back, well aware that such a thought had passed her mind ever since this strikingly handsome Wyoming Prince had come here to marry her beloved Queen. Her own husband, of the Physicians, was not anywhere the "man" that Prince Paul Blue Sky was!!

"You are a woman who is well aware that men find you attractive, aren't you?" my husband smiled back, seeing Tori nod back.

"Your father doesn't seem to 'notice' me," Tori answered.

"Nor does he 'notice' Kathi," my husband "volunteered".

"Only a eunuch wouldn't 'notice' Kathi," Tori smiled.

"There are certain 'legends' among my people," he mused.

"Such things might have existed at one time," she offered.

"My father is not 'himself'," Prince Paul Blue Sky spoke.

"Perhaps he is much in love with Pharis," Tori suggested.

"The woman is a 'bitch', and I don't 'trust' her," my husband snapped back. "Somehow she's 'bewitched' my father into giving her everything she's wanted, and I want to know 'how' she did it!" The

brownette nodding, her eyes meeting his as he stood there by the door. "And if she carries out this 'plan' of hers, it could mean my wife's life if the people rise up against her!"

"I will find out what you wish to know," Tori "smiled" back.

"Consider the possibility that Princess Tara could have been behind all this, that although she is dead, her orders may still be being carried out by whoever was her 'second in command' ," my husband spoke, wondering if perhaps Pharis herself had been that! He'd done enough "asking around" since I'd left with Lorraineto know that Pharis had been a "troublemaker" here in Arsana, and it was possible that she'd once been Prince Darl Jord's subordinate. Darl Jord having once been Princess Tara's own accomplice here!

"She is your step mother," Tori pointed out to him then.

"And Maris is my wife, the woman I love," he answered her.

"I will speak to Kathi, 'arrange' something," Tori smiled.

"I trust she can keep her 'mouth shut'," my husband smiled.

"I will 'impress' upon her the need to do so," Tori grinned.

"Your husband is lucky to have you," my Prince smiled back.

"What he 'values' in me is not my intelligence," she smiled.

"You were born in the 'wrong century'," my husband laughed.

"I was told that by 'another' once too," Tori Wells smiled. "A man by the name of Bob Simmons used to call me 'Torrid Tori'. He said that I hadan 'Hefnerian' figure, whatever 'that' is..."

"They did like women with large breasts," my husband smiled.

"They 'weaned' their children too early," Tori smiled back. "That's what his wife told me one time anyway," Tori volunteered.

"Too bad she's dead," my husband smiled, recalling what I had told him of Carol Simmons, who had my Warlady only last year.

"Yes," Tori answered, recalling how she'd felt about Carol.

"Do your best," my husband spoke, dismissing the officer.

Chapter Thirty Six

"I wonder if Tara is dead?" Darlanis said to me as we flew along. "You never found her body, or any evidence that she is."

"The water in the strait is too cold for swimming," I said. "She would have lost consciousness after immersion in it for any period of time," I answered, wondering myself if Tara was yet alive? Was it possible that she could have survived to reach the shore. I thought it "possible", although she would have quickly died of "exposure" given the night time temperatures that "early" in the year. I recalled the "vision" I'd had seeing a woman, her hair in flames, leap from the blazing deck of Tara's ship into the strait. Could "that" have been the infamous Bajan princess?

"Even if she is, we still have to deal with her organization, and with whoever she left as her second in command now," Darlanis retorted, now making a minor adjustment to the controls.

"The Wyomings have the Priestesses," I said to Darlanis, who nodded back, giving me a "puzzled" smile. I recalled "what" Lorraine had once attempted, wondered if such a thing was possible?

"Everyone does but for Valeris' people," Darlanis said.

"It will not be possible to win a war against her," I said then. "Valeris will flee to the north, to the east, scatter her women over an area we know little about," I mused thoughtfully. There was little known about the polar regions but legends now.

"She has ships, the ability to cross the Bering Strait," the Empress replied. "And we don't know if she has allies or not."

The white gowned High Priestess of Dularn smiled at the old woman standing there half terrified holding a letter in her hand, the other Priestess then closing the door quietly behind herself. The High Priestess could sense the woman's fear, although "why" the old woman was so terrified she didn't know, since the Priestesses of Lys often "helped" those in various sorts of "trouble" as long as such "matters" were not actually "crimes" as such in their own eyes. Such actions often much to the "annoyance" of the myriad "Kings" and "Queens" that now "ruled" the Earth. The Priestesses of Lys even back in the "time" of Janet Rogers having clearly understood the "difference" between "real" crime and "political" crime, something here surprisingly enough that few Americans of our time understand, our "gun laws" being an "example".

"I was sent here to give you this," the old woman said, now handing over the letter she had been given by Princess Tara. The High Priestess' eyes meeting hers as she took the envelope... "It is from a woman whom I now believe is Princess Tara Bisan." The High Priestess' quick intake of breath left no doubt of her own surprise at this, it being believed that Tara had been killed in the attack made by the Priestesses upon her ship for violation of the "weapons laws" that forbade any weapon using explosives.

"Sometimes I think we're like a couple of schoolgirls, doing things to spite the other," I ventured to Darlanis as the black V-tailed Beechcraft Bonanza now flew towards my own land...

"I think we behave the way we do because both of us feel the need to constantly prove ourselves in the eyes of others," Darlanis answered back. "Neither of us really feel that we deserve being what we are either, so we constantly seem to act like a pair of children with chips on our shoulders." I nodded, my eyes meeting those of the Imperial Empress. My childhood was not a "happy" one, and the "same" is true of Darlanis'. There are those in Dularn who consider me just a "gold digger", and those in the Empire who "note" that Darlanis is half-Martian!

"Sometimes I wonder 'how' I ever ended up Queen of Dularn," I smiled back. I was in my younger years much the "gold digger". I was "blonde", beautiful, and well aware too of it. Such is, I feel, judging from my own experience, why so many young girls "go wrong" despite the best efforts of their parents to prevent it...

"I know how I 'got' to 'where' I am," Darlanis smiled. "I have problems at times trying to 'justify' what I did back then." Darlanis having "slept" her way to the "crown" as has been noted.

"Sharon," I smiled, remembering what I'd read about the "relationship" between Lorraine's step daughter and the Empress. I was well aware that Darlanis was a woman who had "done" things that it might be hard to "justify" later on to one like Sharon.

"She 'worships' you," I said, watching the clouds above.

"It is 'hard' being 'what' I am," Darlanis said to me.

"No doubt Janet Rogers felt the 'same'," I smiled.

"I'm not a 'Janet Rogers'," Darlanis smiled back.

"But we both know a woman who 'is'," I smiled.

"She 'is' what she 'is'," Darlanis smiled then.

"You are 'aware' of the 'contents' of this?" the High Priestess asked the old woman as she sat there on a sofa beneath a painting of Lys, the painting reminding one somewhat of Tais... The "implications" of the letter in its contents were terrifying!

"I was told that it was in a nature of a 'warning'," she answered back, well aware of "what" Princess Tara had told of it... Whether or not such things were "true" were another matter, she felt, feeling that Princess Tara was no doubt dangerously insane!

"It is a matter that in any case I feel 'another' should 'handle'," the High Priestess answered, then leaving the room, speaking softly to the Priestess waiting outside to keep an "eye" on the old woman and see that she did not leave the Temple now...

"How much longer until we reach Arsana?" I asked Darlanis.

"Another hour, I think," the Empress smiled back at me.

"'This' is going to be 'hard' to 'stop' now," I spoke.

"Sexual hatred is," Darlanis answered, looking over at me.

"Like some 'nightmare' out of the past we thought would never return," I spoke, looking down at the ocean there far below... "'Something' from a time that is six centuries in our past now."

"Women got 'greedy', thought they could 'have' it all," Darlanis smiled. "One of the major failures of

democratic society." I was well enough educated in our history to know of such things.

"'Vote' yourself whatever you wanted," I smiled back at her. I was well aware of the history of the United States before the time of Janet Rogers. The country had come close to "collapse" due to everyone trying to vote themselves more and more "goodies" like children "squabbling" over who got the biggest piece of pie. The United States had gone "bankrupt" at the end of the century, which had in turn resulted in the "election" of Janet Rogers... I wondered if perhaps we weren't better off the way that we were? There is little evidence that we wouldn't repeat the same "mistakes" all over again if we ever had the "chance" to do so now...

"There are those who believe in the same idea now," Darlanis said to me. "And some of them can sound pretty convincing too." The golden haired Empress thinking of one certain woman she knew! Fortunately Lorraine was wise enough to veto some of Sanda's more "radical" ideas. Ideas that would have delighted any "Democrat"!

"We have 'those' in Dularn," I smiled back at the Empress. Pharis had been one of 'them' too, I recalled thoughtfully then.

"I have plenty in my own Senate," Darlanis grinned back.

"You don't have the absolute veto power I do," I smiled.

"Queen Denise 'knew' what she was doing," Darlanis smiled.

"I am Tais, the First Priestess," Tais spoke as she stepped into the room, her own telepathic powers such that she had no doubts now that Princess Tara actually was still yet alive despite everything! And the contents of the letter left no doubts in her mind at least that Tara had indeed been the "abode" of the "QUEEN OF DARKNESS". That evil "Demoness" who was said to be the consort of the EVIL ONE, master of Hell itself, the "Being" from another plane of existence who even dared oppose LYSherself for the souls of intelligent beings throughout the entire Universe! The same supernatural "Being" that Man had once called the Devil!

"My daughter is with her now," the old woman said, well aware that Tais was head of the Priestesses, and effectively the "Queen of the Solar System" at least from what Tara had told her!

"What Tara has 'done' is a matter for the civil authorities, not for us," Tais smiled back, laying her hand on the old woman's shoulder. "But her letter, if true, is a very serious matter..."

"You 'believe' in such things?" the old woman breathed out.

"From 'personal experience'," the First Priestess smiled.

Chapter Thirty Seven

"You are still too `ill' to travel," the girl protested, watching the Princess struggle out of the bed, the expression on the woman's burned face leaving no doubts of the agony she felt.

"Help Me!" Taras snapped, the pain making her voice sharp!

"`Proving' anything against Pharis would be `difficult'," I said. I was also concerned what my husband might think of it too as she was, after all, his own step mother, and my mother in law!

"If she is the one `responsible'..." Darlanis answered back.

"There will be `those' who will consider anything we `do' to be a `trick'," I answered, well aware of what many Dularnians now felt about the Imperial Empress. "It is something we are going to have been extremely `careful' about," I now continued on then.

"Lorrainewarned me about getting `involved' with Valeris," the Empress admitted, giving me a grin. "I should have followed her `advice' instead of doing what I did." I nodded and smiled.

"Perhaps you and I can learn to live in peace," I laughed.

"You've got more `guts' than what I thought," she said.

"Why's that?" I asked, watching the land going by below.

"You `knew' what we faced there in your palace," she said.

"At least it's `gone' now," I answered, giving her a smile.

"Another twenty minutes should see us over Arsana," Darlanis "smiled", the Dularnian Strait now visible ahead of the airplane.

"You are the woman that I saw there on the dock at Sana," my husband spoke as Tais escorted the old woman into the royal chambers. Tais swiftly explaining then to them that Tarayet lived!

"My daughter is `there' with `her'," the old woman answered. Tais nodding, her eyes like beautiful gems meeting theirs then... The spaceship the Priestesses had used earlier was under repair. She had considered having herself teleported to where Taralaid, but wondered if it would be "wise" considering everything here...

"That would be about fifty miles from here," Tori now spoke as she stood there beside my husband, the light of the lamps making her chain mail glisten with every movement she now made. "With the `roads' as they are now, it will be nightfall before we can get there by land," the captain of my guardswoman explained.

"A ship will be `faster'," my husband smiled back in reply. Unicorns for a short period of time could travel faster than a ship, but a ship sailed on hour after hour at the same speed too!

"What about Pharis?" Tori asked as she stood there, her back up against the door so that none could enter. The heavy planking and steel armor plate in the door enough to conceal their speech, although the guardswomen outside could be trusted completely as far as Tori knew. On the other hand if Taracould

corrupt someone like Pharis, how was she to know if even her women were safe?

"If we can get our hands on Tara..., " my husband answered. The Princess was a criminal "wanted" by half a dozen nations now! A judge and jury could decide whether or not "demonic possession" was really an "excuse" for all the "crimes" that she'd committed!

"I've sent some more of my women to keep an eye on Pharis," Tori replied with a smile, the Queen of the Wyomings having gone to address a session of the Dularnian Senate a while before. "I pray that we aren't making a 'mistake' here..." she added then... Well aware of "what" could happen if this all proved a "mistake"! *****

"This will 'do'," Tarahissed, her teeth gritted against the agony of movement. Much of the Princess' lovely long thick black hair now burned away, her scalp half covered with water blisters. Much of her burns had been second degree, not third degree, but she had no doubt that she would be scarred, her face now "marked" where the flames had seared it in those awful seconds before she'd thrown herself into the sea to escape that terrible agony!! The "demoness" having "abandoned" her then too for Queen Valeris. The QUEEN OF DARKNESS being well aware that Tarawas now useless!

"We are not 'far'," the girl protested, aware of that fact.

"It will 'do'," Taragasped, easing herself down to the cold ground. "If 'they' come, we will 'know'," the Princess spoke... Tara "wondering" to herself if it really "mattered" anymore now.

"Arsana," I smiled, Darlanis nodding, the clouds just over us as we flew at a height of perhaps almost a mile up in the sky.

"Your's is the more difficult," Darlanis smiled back at me.

"I keep thinking of what happened to 'Kathis'," I replied.

"I always 'believed' Tulis was my mother," Darlanis said.

"I think she 'loved' you even so," I told her in reply.

"At the 'end' there was no doubt," Darlanis answered.

"You would have made Dularn a good Queen," I said.

"You made Dularn a 'better' one," she laughed back.

"You should know," Tori suddenly said to my husband as he nodded, dismissing the rapidly breathing young guardswoman, "That Pharis has made a speech before the Senate practically denouncing your wife as now being 'incompetent' to be the Queen of Dularn." Tori going on to explain that Pharis was stirring up the people, a large crowd of the citizens of Arsana having gathered to hear.

"It's 'hard' to 'believe'," Prince Paul Blue Sky answered.

"In Maris' absence it is your decision," Tori answered him.

"What about my father, Queen Freydis, the Nevada?" he asked.

"They went with Pharis to the Senate building," she replied.

"The Dularnian Constitution protects free speech," he said. Paul had often "wondered" about that, but it was part of the laws of Dularn. What "separated" us from societies like the Empire...

"I am skilled with the crossbow," Tori said softly in reply. Paul looked at her in horror, well aware of what she had "meant"!

"Killing Pharis won't 'solve' our problems," he "snapped"!!

"What 'do' you wish me to 'do' then!" she quickly retorted!

"Arsana," I smiled at Darlanis, the city visible before us. Droplets of a cold rain now splattering there on the windshield. The airplane's heater making the interior like a warm summer day. Darlanis' golden mesh setting off her perfection in a way that nothing else could have done. No doubt a good part of her power is due to the fact that she is the most beautiful woman of all time. A "legend" in her way just as Lorraine is with a sword...

"We made good time," the Empress smiled back in reply then.

"You are more 'reasonable' about things than I thought," I said to her then, Darlanis and I having discussed much during our flight from Sarn to Arsana. "Perhaps it is possible that 'peace' can exist between the Dularnian Federation and your 'Empire'..."

"Darl Jord was responsible for much of our 'troubles'," she answered. "The 'rest' was probably just 'bad advice' on both our parts," she added, reaching over and clasping my hand in hers...

A soft knock on the door interrupted their conversation just then, Tori going to the door, opening it, admitting my Physician. The guardswomen on duty no doubt well aware by now of "what" was going on now in the city, of the mob gathering outside the Senate building. Men and women who "called" for a new queen for Dularn!

"I'm 'guessing' here, but I think your father is 'drugged'," she spoke softly to my husband, having been observing him secretly for some time now. Captain Tori Wells standing there in her gleaming armor, her helmet, her weapons leaving no doubts as to her caste. In her mind no "doubts" as what she might have to do.

"And..." my husband breathed, looking into her dark eyes. The old woman and the First Priestess now sitting there watching.

"I will 'do' what I can," Tori spoke then, taking her leave, well aware that her guardswomen would be powerless against a mob, many of the citizens of Arsana being as well armed as they were. Dularn's policies of universal armament perhaps dooming them all.

"If only Maris was 'here'," Paul breathed, looking out the window at the gray sky to the south. A soft "buzzing" sound now coming to his ears! COULD IT BE!? IT WAS BLACK LADY RETURNING!

"I'm going to take a swing over the city," Darlanis smiled.

"Give the people below a bit of a `thrill'?" I teased her. It was still spoken of the time that Sela Dai, the Crown Princess of Talon, had flown her tarl low over the city even to in between the buildings in spots to avoid the fire of our own crossbowmen.

"I think I can understand `how'Lorrainesometimes feels," she answered. "The possession of `powers' no other has now..."

"If `things' had been `different', you could have been the Queen of Dularn," I smiled back. I wondered how the people would have "accepted" her. She was "popular" with many of them, people who saw her as being a sort of "She-Ra", not as what she "is". "Queen Tulis could have `ordered' it," I said, seeing her "nod".

"I think it is `better' this way," she said, giving me a smile in reply. "Otherwise I fear what I might have `become'..."

"The airplane is flying over the city," my husband said, the black metal "bird" now coming down lower over theRoyalPalace. Salmona Tora there at his side, her dark eyes then meeting his.

Chapter Thirty Eight

"Big crowd down there," Darlanis said to me. "Some sort of `political demonstration' or something," she ventured to me then. The airplane's windshield wipers going back and forth, a cold fine rain of some sort falling, such being common here in Dularn.

"Can you come lower?" I asked, wondering how "good" a pilot she was. It wasLorraine's airplane, not Darlanis', and while the Californian Empress knew "how" to "fly" it, I didn't know how "skillful" she might be at such things. I was well enough educated to know that the airplane was a device of "science", not of "magic" as many people might think, still it represented to me a "technology" far beyond anything that we could ever manage today.

"Give them a bit of a `thrill'?" the Empress "smiled" back.

"Not at the risk of our lives," I suggested with a "grin".

"The Queen's `back', captain," the woman said to Tori as she nodded. The members of the Royal Guard drawn up in ranks now as they confronted the demonstrators lead by Queen Pharis herself! The cold wet drizzle seemingly "fitting" for an event like this!

"Just' in time too," Tori breathed, her sword in her hand.

"Some of the people have missile weapons," the guardswoman pointed out. The guardswomen in their helmets and armor a symbol of the "established" power, a hundred women against perhaps ten times that number of chanting armed civilians now led by Pharis. Tori had them armed with their swords and shields, the best weapons for any close quarters "work" like this promised to be now. The steam

powered "quickfirer" there on the roof top of the palace might be "decisive", although Tori "wondered" about that now. The airplane coming back, low this time, barely clearing the tops of the buildings. The people cringing down, moving to cover now!

"Stand steady!" Tori snapped, her heart beating rapidly too!

"You've got `troubles'," Darlanis announced unnecessarily.

"Land," I snapped, wondering if I could "stop" this now!

"Be a good fight," Darlanis smiled back, giving me a grin!

"You will taxi out into the harbor and stay there until I give you the `all clear'," I snapped back. "And if anyone tries to approach you, take off and circle the city," I continued then.

"I `avenge' my friends," Darlanis snapped back, coming down. The water spraying up as the plane hit the water rather "hard"...

"Pharis?" I guessed, leaping up on to the dock, aware of the whirling propeller as Darlanis now taxied off, my husband nodding as the roar of the engine made conversation almost impossible now. The "blast" of wind in our faces speaking of a technology from an era now mostly myth and legend to the people of today... I had seen the crowds, the Royal Guard drawn up. I had no doubt either that Pharis was behind all of this, but why? What had she to "gain" from a "coupe de tat" like this? From overthrowing me?

"She is an `agent' of Princess Tara, who still lives," Paul said, holding me close just for a brief second, the guardswomen with him looking nervous, even a bit "terrified" I thought then! "There is `evidence' that she has drugged my father somehow, and Tais has a letter from Princess Tara herself," he then "added"... A bit of "news" that didn't delight me at all just then either!

"Too badLorrainedidn't kill her!" I snapped, dashing for the palace to pass through it to the street beyond where the Royal Guard for the moment still held Pharis' forces yet at bay now! There being no doubt in my mind that I would have to do so now...

"Thank Lys You're Here!" captain Tori Wells cried with gratitude as she embraced me, the metal of her chain mail cold, her eyes moist with emotion as she looked upon her beloved Queen!

"There could be a crossbowman," my husband warned, standing so that I might be "shielded" from such a missile, his leather no protection at all of course against such weapons. I could see no evidence of one on any of the buildings surrounding us, but that meant little as such weapons can be fired from a distance as great as a hundred and fifty yards with assurance of hitting the target. I speak here of the heavy "siege" crossbow, which is drawn up with a winding device, not the much more common military weapon which is drawn up by means of a belt hook and stirrup. I did not think that Pharis had yet managed to work the people up into a state of frenzy where they might actually attack me yet...

"The Queen of Dularn must never show `fear'," I answered, stepping out into the open between my own forces and those now of Queen Pharis, the Queen of theWyomingsnow mounted on a unicorn. I threw back the heavy cloak that I had worn, my tiara glistening in the cold drizzle that was now falling, my rich attire leaving no doubt of course that I was actually the Queen of Dularn here!

I saw Pharis slide down from the saddle, and step towards me, throwing back her cloak, and drawing her sword as she did... She wore a leather tunic, along with woolen hose, attire that was a mixture of two

cultures, her hair like mine beaded with rain, her own tiara as Queen of theWyomingslistening in its redness.

"The people of Dularn `know' who `represents' them," she spoke, standing there before me. "And it is not a woman who has betrayed everything her country stands for pandering to the Imperials and that `tool' of theirs that threatens all Mankind now."

"I am the Queen of Dularn, not a `traitor' who serves Princess Tara," I "snapped" back, drawing my own slim gleaming blade. I felt the coldness of the rain on my cheek, felt a chill breeze blow against my body, saw the buildings there about me, memories flooding back, of my entire life, of Carol, who had taught me to use a sword as few others ever could. Now she was just a dried husk in a casket hidden in a cave a few miles from the city, but yet I thought then that she stood at my side, that she was there!

I met Pharis' swift attack blade to blade, the redheaded Queen of theWyomingsdriving me back with the very fury of her attack. She was a good swordswoman, skillful, competent, despite what I'd seen Lorraine"do" to her only a couple days now before. I was also "aware" that the stones of the street were slippery, that in such a "duel" as this one only one of us would survive...

"Die, Damn You!" Pharis snapped, driving in at me, forcing me back, our blades ringing together. I suppose everyone was rather "disappointed" in me just then, as they had no doubt "expected" their Queen to "do a bit better" than this, but I knew my "strengths", and my "weaknesses", and I had no wish to die now just to "prove" some meaningless point for this worthless mob...

"It is `you' who will `die'," I retorted, meeting her attack as I stepped back, careful not to "slip" on the wet cobblestones. Pharis' blade swift, almost a "blur" as she drove in on the attack at me, the Queen of theWyomingsobviously quite "skillful"!

"You're `fat', out of shape," Pharis laughed back at me now. I am "heavy", wide through the hips, but I'm more "fit" than I do look, I should mention here. Pharis was slimmer, a bit "taller". She was using one of the long sabers that are common among theWyomings. It is a good weapon for use off the back of a unicorn, but in a hand to hand fight a shorter weapon is superior, I find.

"You haven't killed me yet," I now pointed out to her then. There were a number of "taunts" from those around directed at me. I had no doubt that those on "my side" were disappointed in me as so far I had only fought solely on the "defensive" in this duel. On the other hand I am an excellent "tactician", one who is skilled in the "arts of war". For years I fought a superior naval military force with just a few "commerce raiders", none of which were ever a "match" for the heavier vessels of the enemy. Dularn never "won" a war against the Californians "face to face", but we did do pretty well against them when we used our "wits". I don't think Pharis was aware that I was "more" than just a good looking "blonde". That I was "more" than just another lovely face, a rather "provocative" figure in a tight royal blue gown...

Pharis "thrust" at me in reply, my blade "meeting" hers in turn as we circled about. I think she was starting to be "aware" of the fact that I was just a bit "better" a swordswoman than she'd given me credit for at first here. That while I hadn't made any attempt as yet to go on the "attack", I had "met" her own attacks with more "skill" than I think she believed I'd possess. She was a more "showy" swordswoman than me, but it was obvious to everyone watching that I was not lacking in skill. I am noLorraineor Darlanis, but I am not "unskilled" with the blade.

"Enough of `this play'!" Pharis suddenly snarled, driving in at me then and forcing me back. I saw my "chance", and took it! My blade parrying hers just up and to the side a bit, the edge just cutting the skin on the side of my neck, while my own drove straight right into her unprotected throat! The keen tip

piercing her arteries, driving deeper to pass through her throat, to "bump" right against the vertebra there in the back of her neck!!

"Dularn is still `mine'," I hissed, stepping back, the look of "horror" in her eyes something that I will never ever forget as she dropped her sword and clutched at her throat, slumping to the wet cobblestones while over a thousand people watched this!! "And I `will' settle things too with Princess Tara," I snapped...

Chapter Thirty Nine

"You're Hurt!" Paul said, running up to me as I stood there in the drizzle, the body of my late foe there at my booted feet. I could feel the "sting" of the cut, and was well "aware" of how "close" I'd come to dying myself in this duel between Pharis and myself. She had been "good", if a bit too "overconfident" here.

"Tori," I said, my captain standing there at his side, the people now "dispersing" somewhat, aware that Maris Marn was still the Queen of Dularn (I prefer being called "Maris Marn" to "Maris Blue Sky", I might note here). "Go to Darlanis, tell her what you `know', and see if anything can be `done' about Tara now." I saw her nod, dash off in a run, my husband still standing there.* * Neither Darlanis or I knew anything about Tara's "demoness". I suppose that Tais felt it was none of our "business" here. The Priestesses of Lys often keep such matters to themselves. (M.M.)

"I never `doubted' that you'd win," he said to me, Salmona Tora there "wiping" at the cut and applying wound compound to it. The people drawing back, well aware that their Queen might not be too "delighted" at what they'd done in supporting her "enemy"...

"You're not going to get `rid' of me that easy," I smiled. Some of my guardswomen now gathering up the body of Queen Pharis. Salmona had suggested certain drugs that perhaps she had used on Paul's father. Drugs that are usually "forbidden" to Physicians. I would have her effects searched, see what we could find. I saw Paul's father standing there now with Queen Freydis, with the young Nevada Prince. Several of my guardswomen now surrounding them. Trying to "overthrow" a Queen in her own country is a serious crime. On the other hand the "political realities" of the issue were such that there was little that I could do about it...

"We `thought'," Queen Freydis spoke, coming up to me, one of my guardswomen following, a drawn sword in her right hand, her round metal shield there on her left, "That you had `betrayed' us to Darlanis." I supposed Pharis had told them "that" about me...

"She `lied'," I snapped, standing there, regarding her then.

"I will not `kneel' to you," Queen Freydis said to me then.

"I doubt that I'd want another `slave girl'," I smiled now.

"You could...!" Freydis breathed, aware of the situation...

"You are something of a 'dumb blonde'..." I smiled back.

"My sword is yours to 'command'," she answered me back.

"Keep it in its sheath for now," I smiled back at her.

"We didn't find her," Tori said, Darlanis standing there behind her furious at how Tarahad once again escaped "justice"... The old woman sitting there weeping, well aware of what might "happen" to both her and her daughter considering the "law" here although I had assured her that I wouldn't do anything about it. It was dinner time, the sun having just set there in the west. I was enjoying a fine meal of roast turkey and dressing along with an ample supply of my finest own wines to help "settle" the meal.

"I will offer a 'bounty' of three hundred gold crowns for that Lys-damned bitch!" Darlanis snapped, pacing back and forth. I thought of "suggesting" that she sit down and have something to eat, but thought the better of it in the "mood" she was in now. To "search" the entire country for Tarawas out of the question. I rather doubted that we'd ever catch up with Princess Tara now.

"My daughter?" the old woman ventured. I told her that I would not hold it against her either for her own "actions" here, it being obvious that she'd helped Princess Tara escape us. Darlanis listening, shrugging, the look on her face leaving no doubt as to "how" she felt about all this. Tori looked relieved. No doubt thankful to be standing on something solid against after having flown off in the airplane with Darlanis, who is a somewhat "reckless" pilot from what my captain told me later on about her.

"We didn't find a trail we could follow far," Tori spoke up.

"Let's just hope she doesn't 'harm' her daughter," I spoke. I didn't think Tarawould, but one could never "tell" with her. The old woman had told me about the "letter", but it didn't mean anything to me as I'd considered the Bajan Princess a "loony" for some time anyway who had finally "gone off the deep end". I suppose I should have "believed" it, but "talk" of the "QUEEN OF DARKNESS" and such sounded more like the ravings of a lunatic...

"She is badly burned, in considerable pain," the old woman said. Her name was "Clara San", she had told us. Her daughter's was "Mara", a not "uncommon" name in some parts of Dularn now.

"Did she ever say anything about 'where' she might go?" my husband asked, sitting there across the table from me sipping his brandy. "Any 'hint' as to where she might find 'safety' now...?"

"She once 'spoke' of Queen Valeris, of the fact that there were no Priestesses in the territory of the 'Free Women'," Clara answered. "She is a very 'intelligent' woman, very smart too..."

"I think I'll have some of that turkey of yours," Darlanis said to me then, walking over to the table, and helping herself. *****

"We cannot 'continue' like this," the girl said, squatting there by the fire, wrapped in a blanket, watching Princess Tara.

"We'll need a boat, and 'supplies' enough to sail a thousand miles," the Princess answered. The sudden arrival of Darlanis to the Princess ample "proof" that the Priestesses had the letter.

"I know a fisherman," the girl "ventured", regarding Tara.

"I trust he likes `gold',"Taraforced a smile in reply.

"They must have `caught' my mother," Mara spoke softly.

"I am `sorry' for that," the Princess replied back quietly.

"You don't seem to `be' what people say you are," Mara said.

"I'm not a `good' person,"Taraanswered, looking into the flames. "I guess I've `hurt' far too many people now to be anyone that you'd admire," the former Bajan Princess mused in turn. "I've done a lot of `things' that no honorable person should ever do. Let my soul be taken over by an evil `spirit' from Hell..."

"It's never too late to decide to `change'," the girl said.

"I was a beautiful woman `once',"Tarasaidthere, sitting there.

"Lysforgives those who ask for forgiveness," Mara smiled.

"I don't even `She' will forgive me now,"Taraanswered.

"Yes, Tori?" I said, getting ready for bed and wondering why Tori hadn't already now gone home after this "adventuresome"day?

"I have a `list' of those who voted against you," she said.

"A `list' of `friends' and `enemies'?" I smiled back then.

"I think you should `know'," my faithful officer replied.

"Thank you," I smiled, taking the list of names from Tori.

"Why are you doing that?" Tori breathed in shock as I walked over to the fireplace and tossed the paper on to the flames then!

"This is Dularn, not the Empire," I now smiled back at Tori. "And Pharis `was' an excellent public speaker," I grinned at her.

"You're an amazing woman," my husband said to me after Tori left for the night. "Anyone else would have kept that `list'..."

"We are a `democracy', not a `dictatorship'," I smiled back. In any case votes in the Senate are a matter of public record and the citizens in the next election could make their own decisions.

"I believe I can `make' Valeris' capital without refueling," Darlanis said to me as she watched men pouring alcohol into Black Lady. "It's probably `best' that you stay here," she added then. The Empress having changed her attire to something more "fitting" the climate here in Arsana than her "provocative" golden mesh... We knew that Valeris had her "capital" somewhere "inland" from the naval base that the Imperials used during the warmer months of the year, but just "where"was something even she didn't

know ! There being little "trust" between Valeris and us of the "south".

"I'm going with you," I said, meeting her eyes with my own. I couldn't say just "why", but it was something I "had" to do...

"You need to stay here and `deal' with your political enemies," she answered, well aware of how "close" I'd come to losing my throne to Pharis. "Keep a `tight rein' on things for now..."

"You don't understand our political system, do you?" I said.

"I was born here, raised here most of my childhood," Darlanis replied. "I'm familiar with the Dularnian political system."

"Pharis raised a `mob', not a `revolution'," I pointed out. While she'd gotten some "support" in the Senate, she had been far from having the necessary three quarters necessary to legally depose me as Queen of Dularn, only about a half of the Senate having actually voted against me and in favor of Pharis' policies...

"It's `your decision'," Darlanis answered, regarding me.

"Looks like as `good' a spot for the night as any," Darlanis said, circling the frozen lake there surrounded by towering evergreens. We were a thousand miles north of Dularn, well past the territory claimed by the Northmen themselves. Somewhere ahead of us now was the capital of the "Free Women", as those who were Valeris' "subjects" called themselves. Women who lived under a social order found no where else on the Earth that I knew of. A society much in some ways like that of the Women of Mars, except that the Free Women did keep a few men for reproductive purposes instead of using the drug that is used on Mars for this purpose.

"I wouldn't care to try to `walk' back home from here," I "smiled" back, well aware of how "deserted" this area looked now. We had seen few signs of life, despite the fact that Valeris now claimed this entire "territory" as being hers and hers alone too!

"No," Darlanis answered thoughtfully, coming about for a landing on the glistening surface of the lake after checking for frozen logs that might damage the floats and "maroon" us here.

"Spooky," Darlanis mused, sitting there by the fire we'd built, the flames "highlighting" her face, her rich golden hair.

"I suggest we avoid telling `ghost stories'," I smiled back, recalling the contents of the letter that Tarahad sent to Tais.

"We could always sleep aboard the airplane," she "grinned".

Chapter Forty

"We have `company'," Darlanis said in a low voice as she poked me awake, the woman squatting beside me now putting the point of her sword to my throat. She was clad in heavy furs, her dark eyes meeting mine as she "grinned" back, showing a gap toothed smile there in the flickering light of our dying fire.

"The `Free Women'," I breathed. Obviously they had kept a better "watch" on things than what we'd given them credit for...

"I am Darlanis, Empress of California," Darlanis spoke, "And my companion is Maris, the Queen of Dularn. We have come to speak with your Queen, Valeris, who is an ally of the Empire..." Darlanis and I having agreed not to mention none of Tara's insane "nonsense" to Valeris, as we had no wish to "irritate" her now!

"You have the `metal bird' of legend," one spoke then, there being three such women, two holding swords on us, while the third held an arrow notched on her bow string, the weapons themselves, I "noted" with interest here, being quite obviously "Imperial".

"We need a guide to take us to Valeris," Darlanis answered. I felt it wise to let her do all the "talking" right now as while the Free Women and California were "allies", the Dularnian Federation was well known to be an "enemy" of everything Valeris stood for. Our own military activities the year before ample "proof"!

"It is several days' ride from here," another ventured then.

"In the airplane only an hour's flight," Darlanis answered.

"In the morning," the leader answered, easing her bow then.

"Down there," the woman said, pointing. In the close confines of the airplane's cabin it was obvious she didn't have much acquaintance with soap and water, or with bathing in general... They lived for the most part in small villages, hard to see from the air unless you looked carefully due to their living beneath large spreading trees which partly concealed them from above. I might note here that many of these are built nearly underground.

"Looks `roomy' enough," Darlanis answered, circling around.

"The field is free from logs or anything, isn't it?" I said.

"I've never been here," the woman answered, grinning at me. The snow covered terrain such that one could not really tell now.

"Lorraine will be `pissed' if we crash," Darlanis "grinned", coming about for the landing, the ground coming up to meet us...

"Valeris is not here right now, but she will return tonight when the `coven' is formed," the woman said, a sudden "chill" going through me at her words. Was Tara's "warning" TRUE? I felt a sort of "evil" that seemed to be everywhere here, but was such a feeling just a "reaction" to the words I just heard? The woman was tall, dark haired, in a way much like Lorrainesave for the differences in attire and not being pregnant. The smoky interior of Valeris' "palace" like something out of an old legend. The attire of the "Free Women" leaving no doubts as to their primitive life. They were a savage people, living close to nature, people to whom life I suspected would mean "little" now. The rough hewn logs of this big wooden

structure reminded me of descriptions I've read of long houses of the old time "Vikings". A couple of male slaves, castrated men, were doing menial labors, a woman with a whip, clad in furs, seeing that they did their work.

"I will require distilled pure alcohol, a hundred gallons of it, and 'strained' through silk," the Empress answered back, her hand on the hilt of her sword, her eyes like some azure blaze... Like me she "understood" the "implications" of the word "coven"!!

"I will 'inform' the Queen," the woman answered, smiling. "There will be a 'great wonder' tonight," she added. The tone of her voice also implying something then that terrified me. There was a "hint" of something, a "feeling" in this place that we might be in great danger, but not from these people, but from what? My strange "astral" sense was picking up something EVIL! And Tara's letter had said that the EVIL ONE would "come" when the Moon was eclipsed, leaving no doubts as to the "TRUTH" as the eclipse of the Moon was due tonight shortly before midnight now!!

"Tara was 'right'," I said as soon as we were alone, Darlanis nodding, a look in her eyes as if she had looked into the pits of Hell itself and saw the ruler of that place face to face!

"I wish I'd taught you to fly," Darlanis answered, looking out through one of those strange "windows" the Free Women used. The tone of her voice leaving no doubts as to her "feelings" now!

"We don't have enough fuel to reach Arsana," I pointed out. I knew that much about the airplane, about its "requirements"...

"And we know 'who' the 'QUEEN OF DARKNESS' is," she spoke, drawing her sword, the stainless steel thirty inch blade gleaming in the light that came through the semi-transparent "window". I sensed the thoughts in her mind, understood much just then of how she felt. I recalled what Lorraine had "said" of her one time... "Guess Lorraine was 'right' after all about 'things'," she added.

"They'll kill you!" I breathed, knowing "what" she planned.

"Better than having 'Old Ugly' taking over," she answered.

"I'm going with you," I said, taking her hands in mine.

"We'll stand together before Lys," Darlanis answered.

"Quiet," Darlanis breathed, her sword gleaming in her hand. The sun had set hours ago, the full Moon now up high there in the sky, a bit of it already in the Earth's shadow. I could hear the howling of the gigantic wolves, the sound making a cold chill go down my back as the fur clad Empress then beckoned me forward. I recalled what Tara had written, of the "Gateway" that would be opened between our own plane of existence and that called "HELL"! I recalled the "spider thing" I'd seen there in the pits beneath my palace, the other evil creatures that had been there with it! I could feel "something" with my astral sense, a sense of "evil" somewhere nearby, the village seemingly strangely deserted now...

"Valeris' palace would be the most 'logical' place," I said. The Empress nodding, giving me a smile more a forced grin then...

"Guards," Darlanis breathed, pushing me back into the shadows. She was, I mused to myself, a rather competent Warriress. Not a Lorraine or a Carol, but I had confidence in Darlanis here. That it was unlikely that either one of us would survive this was something I "accepted". As Darlanis had said earlier

when we had cut each other's hands to taste of each other's blood, the action perhaps "one" only those of our own caste might "understand", we would at least die as Warrioreses with our swords in our hands.

"Daggers would be best," I breathed, seeing Darlanis nod. I then stepped out into the moonlit clearing before Valeris' rough hewn log palace, the two fur clad women regarding us curiously, a howl from a wolf somewhere seemingly fitting just then as I walked up to the pair, Darlanis to my side and just behind a bit. The two fur clad women armed with swords and those long lances much favored by the Free Women which they used off of wolfback.

"You are not allowed admission," the woman spoke, then gasping in shock as I drove my long slim dagger deep, my hand over her mouth to stifle her outcry, Darlanis doing the same with her woman, the two of us easing the two twitching bodies to the dirt, a sense of "numbness" going over me much like I'd felt before...

"So far, so good," Darlanis breathed, drawing her sword, her eyes gleaming into mine as I drew my own, well aware that the die was thrown here and that we would either succeed or fail in our task, our lives no doubt already "forfeit" given the situation...

"Tais said that they 'fear' cold steel," I smiled back, pushing the doorway open and then stepping inside, my sword held at the ready, the awful sense of "EVIL" now almost overpowering. A trio of fur clad women getting up, reaching for their swords!

"What are you...!" the woman cried out, my blade driving deep into her chest, Darlanis parrying another's thrust, and then dealing with her two women before I could yank my blade free and turn to help her. The interior of the palace now deserted, the fire low in the center, the glowing embers shedding little light.

"Last 'bitch' got by my guard," the Empress growled, pulling aside her fur jacket, the blood already starting to stain the woolen blouse she'd worn underneath. "Shouldn't slow me down any," she grinned, her teeth white in the glow of the firelight, her eyes gleaming into mine as I nodded back, well aware of the fact that we would doubtlessly die together in this damn place...

"Facing 'what' Valeris 'is' will be something else," I said, wishing as I spoke that I hadn't said it to her just then. The Empress "nodding", the firelight reflecting off her sword blade.

"If we 'fail'...", the Empress spoke then, seeing me "nod".

"This way," I said, using my astral sense as a "guide".

A dozen women sat around a large table, a lit candle before each of them, the "operational principle" here obvious to me as Valeris turned to face us, "CHANGING" AS SHE DID TO A HORRIBLE SCALY REPTILIAN CREATURE WITH GLOWING RED EYES, GREAT FANGS! A THING WITH CLAWS, A FORKED TAIL, LIFTING UP A GLEAMING LONGSWORD!

"Ugly Bitch!" Darlanis grinned, stepping forward, a sort of glowing "aura" forming around her much to my own amazement here! I knew then that she was truly THE QUEEN OF LIGHT, the "Champion of Good", even if she'd been so much "trouble" to me in the past!

I knew without thinking that the women seated around the table were the "power source" necessary to open the "Gateway" between our own plane of existence and that called "HELL"! And as Darlanis now engaged the "HORROR" from Hell itself, I leaped forward, my keen blade slashing at their throats, the

enraged snarls of that "THING" behind me a sound that shall always remain in my memory even if I live to be a hundred and fifty! I heard the ring of steel as Darlanis met its blade with her own, the Empress no doubt well aware that I had to "break" this strange "circuit" that THE QUEEN OF DARKNESS had set up "using" these women. This "circuit" that would allow Her to open a "Gateway" between Earth and Hell, allow her Master to "ENTER"! To "CONQUER" the Earth!!!

I slashed my keen point across the throat of a third woman, the deeply hypnotized women perhaps totally unaware of anything now!! The "HORROR" breaking free from Darlanis, bounding up on to the table itself, its horrid glowing hellfire eyes burning straight into mine as it swung its heavy longsword down at me! I saw suddenly a glowing figure beside me, that of a once well known brownette, her blade "catching" that of "THE QUEEN OF EVIL" as I thrust up, my blade entering the "body" of this HORROR from HELL! I felt a terrible SHOCK as my steel blade "shorted" it...

Chapter Forty One

"We've got to get out of here!" Darlanis gasped, dragging me to my feet, the look in her eyes one that I will never forget! I saw nothing of THE QUEEN OF DARKNESS but my sword lying there on the table, the rest of the women still in deep hypnosis sitting there like statues despite all we'd done! I grabbed for my weapon, the hilt strangely "hot" as if I'd put the blade in a fire!

"Carol was 'here'," I said, Darlanis nodding, perhaps not believing. I believe a "POWER" greater than even the Priestesses of Lys had taken a "hand" in things here, seen to it that I had "help" when I needed it. I have no other explanation of this...

"Guards!" Darlanis hissed, dashing to meet the pair, her blade flashing in the light from the candles as she "met" theirs! I took the few seconds necessary to kill the other women, to "close" this horrid "circuit" that would allow the master of HELL entry. Killing them in cold blood, well aware that I had no other "choice" if I valued my world and those who lived upon it now!

"We were 'TOO LATE'!" Darlanis cried, the HORROR forming now in the sky overhead leaving no DOUBTS as to "WHO" was "COMING"!!! I could hear the howling of the wolves, the terrified outcries of the women as they dashed about, the gigantic "SPIDER" forming there in the sky the EVIL ONE himself! The Moon now a strange GREEN color, utterly unlike anything that I'd ever seen before...

"The 'airplane'," I said, wondering if there was any escape! A woman dashing by us, clinging to a baby she held in her arms. Others riding bareback on their wolves, fleeing the village now! The snow a ghastly greenish tint as it reflected the moonlight...

"Going to be hard to start," Darlanis muttered, the interior of the airplane now even "colder" as that "thing" up in the sky seemed to draw every last bit of "heat" from everything, the air itself "misty" as we saw the EVIL ONE growing more and more "solid" there above us! The engine slow to turn over in this cold!!!

"LYS, have mercy on our souls!" I "breathed", seeing that "SPIDER" forming there in the sky, the airplane's engine cranking over with a "rrr", "rrr" sound while the Empress cursed to herself. Then the

engine suddenly caught with a roar of power, the three bladed propeller whirling there before us like a shield as Darlanis quickly flicked on the landing lights for our takeoff!! I saw women fleeing from the village, looking back into the sky!

"Here we go!" Darlanis cried, the black Beechcraft bouncing over the rough ground there in the darkness, the snow blowing out behind it, while in the sky to our left there over the big fortified village of Valeris' now grew an eerie HORROR from another plane of existence! The Free Women having called upon the MASTER of HELL himself! The ENEMY of GOOD, the arch-enemy of LYS herself! Not even the atomic weapons, the great armies of the past could have stood against the HORROR now forming there in sky there above us now! The Empress and I gasping as a woman dashed across our path just ahead of us, clutching a baby in her arms, fleeing in terror from something that even an airplane probably couldn't escape, I knew! The EVIL ONE doubtlessly all powerful!!

"Fly south," I said, Darlanis nodding as the plane lifted over the trees, the engine running rough, but thankfully running! I could "feel" the terrors now building up in my mind as we lived this nightmare from which we knew that there was no awaking from! There was no where on Earth itself that we could flee from this!!

"We can't outrun 'that'," she answered, seeing me nod back, making adjustments, the engine smoothing out, a "roar" of power. The airplane picking up speed as we flew low over the trees now! We were far faster than any living thing, but yet I could see the animals there ahead of us fleeing, all running away from THAT...

"There is the radio," I said, seeing her nod back at me. I thought of Tais, of the Priestesses of Lys, of the Lorr of Mars!

"It could 'attract' that 'thing' to us," she pointed out. The trees like dark sentinels moving by there below us now against the greenish glow of the snow reflecting the sky above... Terror "whimpering" at the corners of my mind, the prayers I'd learned as a child racing through my thoughts as I prayed to LYS!

"Have 'faith' in LYS," I answered, remembering my childhood prayers, Darlanis muttering something underneath her breath too!

"Never was 'afraid' of anything," the Empress muttered now.

"'That' can kill more than just your body," I said to her.

"No chance of fighting it either," Darlanis breathed back.

"How fast are we going?" I asked, turning on the radio now.

"Hundred and sixty knots, all she'll do," Darlanis answered. I was well aware too that we didn't have enough fuel to reach to the land of the Northmen even. That in two hours we would be forced to land here in this snowy wilderness, assuming that the EVIL ONE himself didn't simply reach out now and grab us from the sky like plucking a bird on the wing! "I guess you might as well try the radio even if it does bring 'that' down upon us now..."

"This is Maris Marn aboard Black Lady calling the Priestesses," I spoke into the mike, the horror behind us in the sky now blotting out the Moon and everything else. I wondered if the Free Women had really "understood" the nature of what they tried to enlist as their "ally" against us of the "south". I could see the "glow" there on the snow beneath us between the evergreens... There were no "doubts" either

now that this was "what" I'd seen there before down in the pits beneath my palace there in Arsana! That same sense of EVIL filling my mind as we fled to the south!!

"I don't think even 'they' can deal with 'this'," Darlanis said to me, her hands steady on the controls. Ahead of us laid a star sprinkled sky, but behind us grew a HORROR from HELL itself!

"LOOK!" I gasped, the silvery triangle suddenly there before us! A glowing beam of light suddenly washing over the airplane! The engine sputtering, dying out as we were drawn up beneath it!

"The ship of the Priestesses," Darlanis cried out with joy!

"It is 'what' we have always 'feared'," Tais said to me as she stood there. The EVIL ONE a great glowing "mass" in the sky! I felt no fear, although even this craft was no "match" for what laid ahead of us. No energy beam would kill something like that!

"Can you destroy it?" Darlanis asked, her voice "odd" now as she stood at my side watching the other Priestesses at the various control panels. The view on the viewscreen showed the EVIL ONE too "clearly" for our own comfort, the HORROR just ahead now!

"I require the assistance of your 'talent'," Tais said then. I looked into her eyes, the color of Darlanis', and suddenly I was "merged" with her mind, with the spaceship's own sensors too! "We must close the 'GATEWAY' through which it has come," her mind spoke into mine! I knew too the nature of the "weapon" that would have to be "used" here. The six missiles already readied!! If we "failed" here then it would take even greater force later!! Forces so "great" that the Earth would be rendered uninhabitable!

"Fire!" I heard or rather "sensed" Tais say, the six sparks of "light" racing away as the spaceship wheeled about and "fled"! Racing towards the south at tens of thousands of miles per hour like a blazing white hot brilliant meteor across the sky, only its own "deflection shields" keeping us from burning up now! Then behind us came the LIGHT! LIGHT LIKE A SUPERNOVA RISING UP! Sixty gigatons of explosive force as antimatter warheads now exploded! A great "dome" of blue-white LIGHT that would have instantly blinded anyone who saw it. For an instant there blossomed over the lands once of the Free Women a new "SUN", far hotter than the one that shown down upon us from the daytime sky...

"It is 'gone'," I said to Tais, seeing her nod in reply.

"Many lives were lost," she answered, standing there.

"The 'Inferno'," Tais spoke in level tones, the ship of the Priestesses floating over the boiling "sea" of molten lava below. Due to the smoke, the steam as the boiling ocean poured into the great crater one could see little of what remained there below... "There will be 'climatic effects', some 'fall out' too," she added, a Priestess speaking into a mike there before her. I supposed the Priestesses would "do" what they "could" about things. We had sent the EVIL ONE back to HELL where He belonged. Made the world once again "safe" for Mankind despite the "foolishness" of some of its members in summoning this HORROR from elsewhere! I thought of what I'd seen there, of that glowing figure that had stood beside me. That figure of a woman I'd once known so well!!

"I think Mars might be willing to render assistance," Darlanis spoke, standing there, looking at the scene there before us. The molten lava leaping up in great gouts of flame, the smoky air surrounding the ship making seeing much of anything difficult...

"You might also mention to Lorraine if you see her that she does not 'know' quite as 'much' about things

as she thinks," Tais said then, giving the Empress a "smile" as Darlanis nodded back. Lorraine having complained about the Priestesses' opposition to the private practice of hypnosis, of certain related activities!

"There was a strange sense of `EVIL' for a short period of time that terrified everyone, then a great flash of light there in the north. A sound like a great thunderclap shortly after the earth itself shook beneath our feet," my husband said to me as the ship of the Priestesses lifted back up into the star sprinkled sky, the Moon glowing brightly down now. Arsana itself was brightly lit up, the people yet milling in the streets, suffering from the after effects of the EVIL ONE's "visit" to our world...

"Is my hair still `blonde'?" Darlanis asked, standing there. The spaceship having "beamed" the airplane back down at the dock.

"A bit `silvery'," my husband grinned, holding me close now.

"The `moonlight'," I assured Darlanis, seeing her nod back.

"It must have been quite an `adventure'," Paul said to us.

"Not one I ever want to `repeat'," Darlanis assured him. She wasn't too "sober", but neither "was" I now for that matter.

"I'm glad there wasn't much damage here," I ventured then, refilling my glass, Darlanis grabbing the bottle, refilling hers.

"We now know what `witchcraft' can do," Darlanis commented, Kathi standing there looking her in awe. I suspected it would take more than my brandy to make her "forget" what we'd seen now!

"Let us hope that the EVIL ONE has been sent back to HELL," Paul said to me. I had detected nothing, but I still recalled that Lorraine had written about an "ultimate battle" between GOOD and EVIL. I wondered if this had been "it". I didn't think so!!

"I wonder what that great `flash' of light was?" Mara said as Tara regarded her. The old fisherman's cabin chill and damp.

"I think it would not be wise to sail north," she answered, the old fisherman watching her as she sat there by the fireplace. "I believe instead we shall now sail south, where I still have friends," the Princess smiled, her dark eyes now meeting Mara's. There was no doubt in her mind that Tais had gotten her letter...

Chapter Forty Two

"Sleep well?" I asked, Darlanis supervising the airplane's refueling. I had spent the night in my husband's arms, so drunk that I couldn't even make love before falling into a deep sleep. The Empress herself had the "look" commonly called "the morning after" about her. Kathi had managed to get the Empress to bed,

although I understood that Darlanis had cried out in a nightmare later on. No doubt there in the north she had learned the true meaning of FEAR in a way that few Warriresses have known it now! On the other hand she had been "braver" than anyone I'd known...

"You've got more `guts' than I gave you credit for," Darlanis suddenly smiled back, watching the last of the alcohol being poured into Black Lady's three fuel tanks. A few people glancing at me then, well aware of Darlanis' own "fearless" reputation...

"The `Free Women' are `gone'," I said. There probably were a few "survivors" on the outskirts of Valeris' territory, but the major part of the population had been killed by the sixty gigaton blast from the half dozen antimatter missiles that Tais fired.

"I don't think they ever `understood' what they were doing," the Empress answered, screwing on the filling caps as I watched. "Hopefully we'll never see anything `more' of `Old Ugly' now." I wondered about Princess Tara, if we'd ever see any more of her...

"Look!" Mara breathed, Princess Tara looking up, the buzz of the airplane's engine unmistakable as the craft flew to the south towards Sarn. The old fishing boat unnoticed by its royal pilot. The former Bajan Princess' head now concealed by the hood of her robe, such serving to hide from public view her scarred features.

"I wonder `what' did happen there in thenorth?" Tarasaid.

"How's the North Star doing?" I asked, the ship's major damage from its clash with Princess Tara's seemingly so long ago now almost all repaired now. I still hoped that it might be possible to sail to Japan, although it would no longer be possible to skirt the coastline too far north of the territory of the Northmen without running into the damage caused by the antimatter missiles used by the Priestesses of Lys to rid us of the EVIL ONE... The sun shining brightly in the sky, spring most definitely here. The sunsets had been brilliant, beautiful the last few days too.

"Another three weeks and she'll be ready for sea," the chief of the workers now smiled, her strikingly blue eyes meeting mine.

"Maris, Queen of Dularn is a most `amazing' woman," Paul said to me, tracing a line down my naked body as I laid there before him. I was freshly "used", and quite content to lie there.

"I've had `adventures' few Queens ever have had," I smiled.

"You had another `nightmare' last night," Paul said to me.

"When one looks into the `face' of the EVIL ONE you don't forget," I replied, remembering how we'd fled from that HORROR. His "consort", "THE QUEEN OF DARKNESS" hadn't been any "beauty".

"I don't think my father will remain `single' for long," he spoke, his father having been "seen" with a high ranking "Lady". Freydis had married the young Nevada Prince Orthis at the temple. I had also spoken to the High Priestess about a voyage to Japan.

"Darlanis and I have `shared' something few women have," I said, remembering our terrified flight from the EVIL ONE with the airplane. Had it not been for the radio I have no doubt that we would have been

killed by the "blast" of the antimatter missiles. I recalled the "look" on Darlanis' face back then. I think for the first time in her life she had learned the meaning of TERROR! Oddly enough I had not been as "terrified" as she had been then, although earlier on she had been the "braver" of the two of us... Facing that "Horror" from Hell while I broke that evil "circuit"!

"I see you're on your `feet' now," I said to Diane, her mother standing there protectively at her side, Tori now nodding. A pair of birds chirping there just outside one of the windows, a few puffy white clouds drifting across the azure sky, a mild warm spring breeze now gently rippling the waters of the harbor below. In another couple weeks the North Star would be ready to sail... Apparently the Priestesses would "tolerate" the voyage, but they would not "bless" it from what I'd heard from the High Priestess.

"I want to sail with you on the North Star to Japan," Miss Wells smiled back, her eyes glowing into mine as Tori smiled back at me. No doubt her mother knew all about this proposed voyage!!

"We will be at sea a `long' time," I warned, Diane nodding. I would carry supplies for a hundred and twenty days, the maximum that could be carried aboard the ship. I would sail north, skirting the coastline of North America until I reached the place there to the north of the land of the Northmen where molten lava yet "glowed", where volcanoes poured thick smoke up into the sky. Then I would sail towards the sunset, across the Pacific itself!

"`Odd' that Princess Tara `did' what she did...," Tori said to me. I nodded in reply, aware that Pharis, Valeris too were now only memories. There were surviving Free Women, but not enough now to be of "bother" to anyone. The Priestesses had now moved up into the area, treating the survivors, and seeing to it that the practice of "witchcraft" came to an end. We needed no more "visits" from the EVIL ONE or another such from HELL itself!

"And the Empire no longer seems to be a `threat'," I smiled.

"Perhaps the `day' will come when we won't need to `learn war' any more," Tori smiled back. I rather doubted "that". Man, throughout his entire history, has always made "war" upon his own kind except when under the "thumb" of some all powerful ruler... On the other hand Darlanis and I had shared an "adventure" that I feel had brought us much "closer" than we'd ever been before now!

"I didn't know such a `city' like this could exist," Mara breathed in "awe" as she clung tightly to the scarred hand of the former Princess of Baja, Tara keeping her hood drawn close to hide her scarred features from any who might now look upon her.

"Sarn `is' one of the largest cities in the known world," Tarathen smiled back, looking down at the girl who had grown to mean so much to her. "And it is the `home' of a woman who many have said is the most beautiful woman of all time," she added...

"I wish I could `write' my mother," Mara "ventured" then.

"I will see that `word' is gotten to her," Tara answered.

"We have, in the past few weeks now, learned `much'," I said as I stood there addressing the Senate, a number of the Senators well aware that they had supported Pharis against me back then... I suspected they "worried" what their Queen's vengeance might be. "Throughout the entire history of Mankind, from the time we first `developed' civilization, there has a `distrust' of `women'," I said, standing there before

them, a fly buzzing about the room. The sound of birds chirping away coming in through the windows. "Yet in all of human history only in 'one' century did women ever 'behave' in any way that might lead to any justified fear of us." My husband sitting there to one side, while Tori stood watching, the other guardswomen of my escort enjoying the sunshine outside. "And 'that' was under a political system 'doomed' to failure," I spoke, looking straight into their faces as they sat before me.

"Yet even today we still see women as 'property', as 'belonging' to someone as if my entire sex were only collared slave girls..." I continued. "Our own children are considered legally under our laws to be the 'property' of the father. Our surnames are taken away from us much as they might from some slave girl upon our marriage." I thought too of the fact that married women are "neck chained", the "implications" of "that" right here now!!

"I ask," I spoke, "Only that we be allowed the same 'rights' under the laws of this nation that men now enjoy. Nothing more, nothing less. Just as we once enjoyed this under Janet Rogers."

"I am wondering," my husband said to me as we returned to the Royal Palace, Tori sitting there in the carriage facing us, "Just 'who' will our children 'belong' to?" He was already aware that I wished to keep the name "Marn". I knew that he loved me, but I also knew that he was having "trouble" accepting all this.

"They will 'belong' to both of us," I smiled, kissing him.

"And whose 'name' will they bear?" he asked then in reply.

"The girl mine, the boy yours?" I suggested, seeing him nod. One could of course make the point here that if I continued having the "sort" of "adventures" I'd been having lately, it wasn't too likely that I'd be living long enough to ever have children!!

"We have a very 'good' Queen," Tori smiled, seeing him nod.

"The 'champion of women' everywhere," Prince Paul "smiled". I also sensed that he was "uncomfortable" with my own "feminism". The fact that I was not a woman who accepted things as they were.

"It 'bothers' you, doesn't it?" I said, the two of us standing there looking out over the harbor, the sun shining down, the birds making their nests now in the eaves over our heads. It was almost warm enough now that I might lie out on the roof top in no more than my clips and strap and sun myself as others have done.

"I always knew you were a 'feminist'," he answered, holding me in his arms. "I think one of the things that first attracted me to you was the fact that you weren't quite like other women."

"But now you're starting to have 'doubts' about me?" I asked. I supposed he was justified in such feelings. I had not yet "taken" his name, nor had I "done" the things that many new wives do. As the Queen of Dularn of course the throne would be my daughter's, not my son's as in most other countries, only Trelandar and Talon having a similar system of feminine inheritance.

"I never 'liked' Pharis," he said to me, seeing me nod back.

"I didn't either," I smiled. The woman had been "pushy"...

"You don't 'behave' like a wife," Paul "said" to me then.

"I'm the Queen of Dularn," I smiled, "Not just some girl."

"You go about without me," he spoke, looking into my eyes.

"If you hadn't been `here' when Pharis tried to take over, I would have `lost' my throne for sure," I pointed out to him then. "And I don't think your `presence' would have been `helpful' when we went to meet with Queen Valeris," I added, kissing him. "Nor would you have `enjoyed' our `meeting' with the EVIL ONE either."

"It's hard to `argue' with a woman like you," he said to me.

"Just don't forget that I am a woman," I purred, moving up against him, caressing him in reply. "One who loves her Prince. "

Chapter Forty Three

"There's more `depth' to you than I realized when I first married you," my husband smiled, cuddling me close to him. It was still in the afternoon, not usually the time we had sex now. I had bared the door too, not wishing to be "surprised" by Kathi, who normally didn't require any "permission" from us to come in.

"We tend to have `idealized' pictures of each other," I smiled back, wondering if he really found me all that `attractive' as a wife? Being married to a woman like me can be a strain on any husband. I recalled Lorraine's marriage, the fact that her husband seldom seemed to accompany her anywhere anymore? The "same" was true of Darlanis, although not to the same degree. It was also "true", of course, that Serak and Jon had their own "duties" to attend to, Serak a Prince of the Nevadas, while Jon Richards was California's "Sealord", commander of her navy now...

"Marriage destroys `romance'," he smiled, holding me close. I supposed it is true. Maris Marn, Queen of Dularn, in a long silken gown, all perfumed and "fixed up" is a much "different" woman than the "same" he was now holding in his arms just "used". No woman is as "beautiful" after sex as she is "all fixed up"...

"We will be `together' on the voyage to Japan," I told him.

"My father "believes" that we will sail off the edge of the world," he laughed. There were people who believed such things.

"The woman your father has been going with is a woman who has a `reputation'," I answered, seeing Paul nod back in "reply".

"She will have little `opportunity' back on the plains," he answered. The women of the Wyomings live much like squaws did... Pharis had been an "exception", but Pharis had been "unique" too!

"She is not going to find `life' as she expects it," I said.

"Happens' to `all' of us," he answered, caressing me a bit.

"Would you `marry' me knowing what you do now?" I asked him.

"I'd be a fool not to," Paul laughed back, kissing me then.

"I am sort of a `fun wench', aren't I?" I then smiled back.

"You're `better' than Kathi in bed..." Paul admitted to me.

"But you don't have to `ask' Kathi," I pointed out to him.

"Haven't had to `ask' you either," Paul grinned back at me.

"It's `warmer' here," Mara said, looking about at things.

"This is Trella," Princess Tara answered, glancing about.

"Where does QueenLorraine live?" the teenage girl asked.

"Up there," Tara answered, pointing with a scarred hand. Those who had seen her face had often now drawn away, horrified. The Princess was well aware that none would recognize her either. Medicine had done what it could for her, but she was now only a thing of horror, with her face burned the way that it was now... *****

"You have a `visitor', your majesty," the guardswoman said.

"Admit' him," I spoke, busy studying the legislation before me. The Senate had "passed" a number of bills, and it was now up to me if they were to become "law" or not. The Senators were quite well aware too that they got all the "credit" for legislation that I finally "O.K.'d", and I got the "blame" for "things" when a "law" that the people now "wanted" didn't get "passed"... In another week I'd be sailing to Japan, LYSwilling, and I had to get my "affairs" in order before I left or there'd be "hell" to pay when I got back. The life of a Queen of Dularn is often best described as being "'damned' if you do, and `damned' if you don't". No doubt Janet Rogers had the same problems in her time.

"I am sorry to intrude..," a soft feminine voice said to me.

"You're that old woman who took care of Tara!" I breathed!

"I have a letter from my daughter," she answered me back.

"I'll `do' what I can for Mara if they catch Tara," I smiled back. Tais hadn't been too "delighted" by Tara's escaping her... If Darlanis or Lorraine got their hands on Tara she wouldn't live long either, I suspected, as neither had any love for the woman!!

"You are a `good Queen'," she answered, giving me the letter. I had given her injections of the anti-aging serums, but it was too late I suspected to do any good. Such drugs reduce the rate one ages, and do nothing to "reverse" what has already been. There is a reoccurring "rumor" that both the Priestesses of Lys and the Women of Mars have a superior version of the serums. It being claimed that Priestesses have lived past two hundred years as have large numbers of the Women. In the case of those

living on Mars it is likely that their "environment" has something to do with a longer life span,Lorraine claiming here that Mars' lesser gravity than that of the Earth would naturally increase the span of one's life considerably there. Additionally, those of Mars no doubt enjoy a "diet" that extends the span of life somewhat too according to what I am "told" by my Physician, Dr. Salmona Tora.

"Doesn't `tell' us that much," I said, reading the letter.

"At leastTarahasn't `harmed' her," the old woman said.

"PerhapsTara isn't as `evil' as people thought," I said.

"Or perhaps she has repented her ways," the woman answered.

"I `fear' for you," Mara said,Tarasitting there across from her. The girl had seenTara's scarred face enough now that the sight of it no longer bothered her as it might have another.

"I am not a woman who any one should `concern'themselves about," the Princess answered. "I have lived a life of evil, and now I am paying the `price' for my sins," she continued on then.

"Where will we `go' when we leave Trella?" Mara asked her.

"I have `friends' inMexico," the former Princess said.

"Why did you `become' what you became?" Mara askedTara.

"You saw Darlanis when she came looking for me, didn't you?"Taraanswered. "That damn blonde slut destroyed everything I had to live for. She took my husband, my marriage, even my child..."

"But you `served' her later as a Warlady," Mara pointed out.

"Thought maybe I could get her killed, get my throne back, but it never `happened', damn the `bitch's luck'!" the Princess now grinned, her smile something to give one nightmares. "Backed that `Talen' woman for several years, but she never `did' anything untilLorrainecame on the scene," the scarred Princess explained. "Thought I could push Darlanis into enough wars that the people wouldrise up against her too, but it never occurred. Played around with hypnosis, learned `why' it's `forbidden' too!" The Princess having for several years "shared" her soul with the demoness from Hell known to Mankind as "THE QUEEN OF DARKNESS"...

"Why did you `attack' Queen Maris?" Mara then askedTara.

"Got `trapped', didn't see any other way `out',"Taraspoke. "Damn Priestesses decided to get into the `act', and here I am. Just a scarred `horror' now that only frightens anyone who sees."

"I always thought the Priestesses only did `good'," Mara answered back. "I never thought that they ever killed people..."

"They `run' things, and don't ever forget it,"Tarasmiled. "Anyone who `crosses their path' doesn't live very long either!" The Princess reaching up, touching her scarred face in a way that left no doubts then as to the thoughts passing through her mind.

"I raised my daughter to be a 'good girl'," Clara San said.

"She took 'mercy' upon one who has lived a life of evil," I answered. "And whatever we feel about it, I think she did what I would hope any daughter of mine would do," I then concluded now.

"Perhaps in a previous 'incarnation' you were a Priestess," the old woman smiled back, sipping at the glass of wine that I had given her. That we passed through numerous incarnations was a proven fact in our society, although Lorrainer relates that the concept of reincarnation was known if not "accepted" in her time. The Priestesses will only say that you have lived before, but as a rule they will not tell you "who" you were, or "what" you did. Perhaps it is just as well, if you stop and think about it now...

"I've always 'wondered' how Tara 'justified' what she did," I answered. "She always seemed to me to be 'driven' by 'hate'."

"She did say that Darlanis 'ruined' her life," Clara said.

"Darlanis was years ago almost another like Tara," I spoke. "Her 'attacks' on us, her use of a 'mad dog' like Tara as her own Warlady leave no doubts as to the sort of a woman she was then."

"Yet now you are 'friends'," the old woman pointed out now.

"Perhaps we all can 'change'," I said, giving her a smile.

"Tara's face is badly scarred," the old woman said to me.

"I'm sure she won't appreciate that," I mused in reply.

Chapter Forty Four

"I trust you said 'good bye' to your mother before coming aboard," I spoke, Diane Wells nodding as she hobbled across the North Star's deck, the "boot" fitted to the girl's right leg gently thumping on the planking with every step that she took now. A gentle warm breeze from the south a delight as we stood there. The sun shining down brightly from a partly clouded azure sky. I noticed that Sarnian Queen had steam up, its anchor hove up short now. I could see the "glitter" of gold on its quarterdeck as the Empress tossed back her cloak, the golden mesh gleaming brightly. I wondered how well a heavy steam frigate would do in the middle of the Pacific. I considered its square rig a bit of a handicap. Prince Serak of the Nevada had decided to come with his wife... We would stop and visit a day too with Queen Freydis, who Serak's own younger brother had just married a few weeks before here.

"I expect we'll have a new Queen of the Wyomings before we get back," my husband smiled, waving to his father on the dock, a blonde haired woman beside him raising her own arm in reply then.

"Just as long as we don't have a 'new' Queen of Dularn," I smiled back, lifting my own arm in farewell as the men at the capstan drew the North Star up to her anchor. The people of Arsanacrowded on the

docks, well aware that they might never see their Queen or her flagship again should things go "wrong" now... A steady stream of smoke rising up from the funnel left no doubt that I had a full head of steam up. The ship was "heavy" due to its carrying reserve supplies of food and water and spare canvas.

"Got a lot of women aboard," my husband grinned at me then.

"Most of them have sailed with me before," I smiled back.

"Wind's almost dead 'foul' for us," my husband observed.

"I'm going to leave under steam," I smiled back at him.

"We do have a good looking captain," he laughed back then.

"And a 'long' voyage ahead of us," I answered, going to the rail, giving my orders then that got us under way on this epic voyage to where no North American had been since the middle of the Twenty First Century over five centuries ago. I wondered too what we would "find", what life would be "like" in such a "land"?

"'We' are 'making history'," my husband said to me, his dark eyes looking into mine as I nodded back. The North Star now under full sail as the strait opened up before us into the ocean. I had a first rate crew, perhaps the "best" I'd had since the end of the war with the Empire back in the fall of 2567, or 520 as I usually thought of it, the "old system" being used now only by the Scribes and those who studied the legends and myths of a time now only words in a few musty old books that had survived so far. I was now ahead of Darlanis, the North Star obviously the faster of the two ships under sail as I had suspected that she would be.

"We plan to sail as far 'north' as we can before cutting across," I answered. Such would allow us to replenish our supply of water, food, and wood as necessary before venturing out into the Pacific towards distant Asia. Once I could have actually sailed in "sight of land" all the way to Asia, but now after what had happened there in the north it was best to avoid the "land of fire" where sixty gigatons of explosive power had driven the EVIL ONE back to the plane of existence that we commonly called HELL. While the HORROR was safely gone, still I had little wish to sail too close to that area of the world, and since there would be no supplies to be obtained there, I felt it just as well to avoid it now. In any case we would make our last "stop" south of there...

"Sana," I smiled, the ships having made good time. I had been "exercising" the crew in saildrill, and with the wind as it was I had put aloft every bit of canvas that we could hoist now. My first officer regarded me, her eyes as blue as mine are green. I suspected, however, looking at her eyebrows, that she was not a true "blonde", such women always being thought more "desirable". Sarnian Queen had done well, Darlanis no doubt having taken the precaution of seeing to the quality of her own officers and crew.

"You are still the 'legend' we all speak of," she said. I had given "orders" that I was to be addressed as any sea officer might, not as the Queen of Dularn. Such I thought might be helpful in maintaining "morale" on a voyage of this type with people who would be for weeks at least out of any sight of land now...

"The 'old girl' still does sail pretty well," I smiled.

"And this is your 'first'," my father said, regarding her. In the glow of the lamps the stern cabin was homey, comfortable. Kathi had put out my wines, and a number too of various tidbits. Darlanis sitting there like an exotic vision in her golden mesh, her captain, a woman surprising enough, there quiet beside

her. Serak with my husband, the two of them talking quietly together.

"Lieutenant Karis Valdis," my first officer smiled back.

"One of the 'old aristocracy'," my father nodded in reply.

"Lieutenant Diane Wells," my new second officer smiled then.

"My daughters have done 'well' for themselves," Tarl said. My sister is a Princess of Talon, and I am the Queen of Dularn. "It gives an old man pride to know how well his girls have done."

"You're not that 'old', Dad," I smiled, giving him a nod.

"I have outlived two wives, seen much of life," he said.

"You could always come along," I "suggested" with a smile.

"You are the 'sailor' in the family now," he replied. I nodded, saw him look away for a brief moment, remembering one who had died upon the deck above not all that long ago. She had died as I think she wished, standing in command on a warship's deck...

"This is a great chance to draw our societies together," the Imperial officer smiled, her dark hair reminding me of another's. I had no doubt that her words reflected the opinion of Darlanis. I hoped that Darlanis had picked well, considering what laid ahead for us now when we turned out to sea to cross the Pacific.

"My people are doing what they can to help," Queen Freydis said. I supposed some of Valeris' women had survived the blasts. Groups here and there might continue on for generations yet too.

"Some will no doubt be 'collared'," my husband whispered. The men of the "north" greatly enjoyed having a "collared wench".

"A great 'threat' to my people is gone now," Freydis said, Serak's own younger brother Orthos like a boy sitting beside her.

"I feel 'sorry' for them," Darlanis spoke up then, her eyes perhaps seeing something that none of the rest of us could see...

"Colder," my husband said, drawing up his jacket. I had noticed that. We were far to the north now, past the territory of the Northmen, which we'd left now several days before. The sails of Sarnian Queen gleaming against the darkness of the early dawn.

"Clouds to the north," Karis, the "first" said to me then.

"I don't think those are the sort of clouds we usually see," I answered, focusing the heavy night glass on them then. "Signal Sarnian Queen that we will close the shore to take on supplies." I suspected that this might be the last time we could do so now.

"We're in the southern parts of what was Valeris'," Darlanis said to me. Here she wore more "fitting" attire for the climate. The tunic and woolen hose, a heavy fur lined leather jacket too. I could hear the sound of axes, of men yelling. We had sent out hunting parties, others to find water to "replenish" our

supply.

"And `that' ahead is the smoke from the volcanoes," I said. The explosion of the six anti-matter missiles having set off a number of volcanoes in the area due to the terrific blast effect.

"It appears that my `scouts' have found someone," the Empress smiled, her eyes glowing into mine as I then nodded back. I knew the Priestesses were doing what they "could", but that was likely to be quite inadequate given the nature of things here...

"Only a `memory' now of what once was," Darlanis said, the woman wolfing down the food almost like some starving animal now. I supposed here and there some of the Free Women might survive if Queen Freydis didn't try to take over all their "territory" now.

"They did `prove' something," I answered, seeing her nod.

"I think it is `best' if we do not venture into the smoke," I said, my husband nodding, the smoke like a great cloud it drifted slowly up into the sky there ahead of us. I then told Diane to signal Sarnian Queen that we were turning due west now.

"I wonder what they will find there on the other side of the world," Mara mused as she stared out to sea, Tarabeside her now.

"People like us, but in a way `different'," Tara answered.

"Not creatures with hooves, horns, or fur?" Mara asked her.

"Not unless they `allowed' that which is `mu' to live," the Princess replied, giving her a smile from inside her robe's hood.

"Why do people kill that which is `mu'?" Mara ventured then.

"To preserve that which is `hu'," the Princess smiled back. "We are not the fools of the past who would allowed such too..."

"Was there ever a man called `Hitler'?" Mara now asked Tara.

"He was a `madman' who ruled long, long ago," Tara answered.

"Queen Lorraine spoke of him while we were in Trella," Mara replied. "She said that he `existed' because people `trusted' too much in `governments' and let themselves become `enslaved'."

"She is a very `smart' woman, but one who has been deluded by `another'," Tara answered, putting her arm then around Mara...

Chapter Forty Five

"How far 'out' are we now?" my husband asked as I studied the chart. There was no way of accurately telling one's longitude as those of the past used to be able to do with their accurate time keeping equipment, but I could make rough estimates of distance by "calculating" the distance the ship sailed in a day.

"About five hundred miles," I smiled, adding, "I think..." Here at sea my own attire wasn't anything very "fancy" either, I might add for those curious as to the sort of clothing I had on.

"We've been 'lucky' so far, no bad weather or anything," he said, standing there, gently swaying with the roll of the ship. The "spirits" of the crew were high, and so far there had been no problems even worth noting in the ship's log. Nor had Darlanis, so far as I knew, had any "problems" aboard her own ship as yet.

"At this rate we will reach Japan in about thirty days," I spoke, standing up, rolling up the chart and now putting it away.

"How 'long' did it take them in the time of sailing ships?" my Wyoming husband asked, his attire leaving little doubt as to his own ancestry here. His coal black hair, piercing dark eyes common among his own people. His broad shoulders, muscles much different from that of Darl Jord, who had been a big fat "pig"...

"The 'clipper' ships were faster than we are," I answered thoughtfully. Sarnian Queen with the wind at her heels was fast enough, Darlanis having hoisted top gallants over her top sails. The Imperial flagship seemed well handled from what I'd seen now.

"It's not likely these 'Japanese' will speak the same language we do, is it?" Paul asked me then, looking about the cabin.

"I'm hoping that Salmona can speak it well enough," I said. There was a certain amount of "risk" here as we could be sailing into a culture that would see us only in terms of enslavement... Judging from the junk, from what we'd been able to determine, it did not seem likely that these people possessed any "advanced" weapons like our own "quickfirers" or our "steam catapults", both of which made Sarnian Queen almost a "dreadnought" in this era.

"If the Priestesses of Lys had 'cooperated'..." he said.

"I don't think they approve of 'this'," I smiled back.

"Trade could be 'possible'," my husband mused then.

"If 'permitted'," I smiled back, taking his arm then.

"Too bad about the old woman," he said, seeing me nod. She had died before we had sailed, without a chance to ever "see" Japan now... Perhaps her grand daughter would be more lucky here.

"Weather's getting up a bit," Darlanis said, a dark row of clouds there to the west of us as we stood on Sarnian Queen's deck, her crew already gathering in and furling the upper sails. Heavy rollers left no doubts as to the storm now approaching us.

"Hoist the storm stay sails!" I heard her captain order.

"Was getting a bit `boring'," I said to Karis as the spray came over the bow and splashed down the length of the ship now. A heavy clap of thunder adding a bit of emphasis to my words...

"Just as long as you're here with us," she answered back, her hair blowing, her face wet with spray as she turned a bit to face me. I thought of the likeness of our names, the fact that we both loved the sea more than anything else. Over the days since we'd left the sight of land we'd all grown closer together.

"Sarnian Queen seems to be falling back a bit," I observed, giving orders that brought the North Star more up into the wind. Out here of course there was no worry about the usual things I've always had to worry about sailing off a coastline as there was nothing but ocean for hundreds of miles in every direction now! I watched Miss Wells dash across the deck, stumble and fetch up hard against a mast as the ship rolled in the heavy seas. She was a good officer, although not as "experienced" as Karis was.

"Long ways `down' here," she smiled back at me. I supposed the depth was several thousand feet at least out this far now. I had the day before attempted in vain to measure such depths, but even our two thousand feet of line had not reached "bottom" now.

"This'll blow over soon," I said, the storm having been just "enough" to give everyone some good "practice" in seamanship now.

"I know `what' I saw," the lookout said, her eyes burning down into mine as I sat there in the stern cabin behind my desk hastily dressed in my robe. And not in the best of humors right now either after having heard this fantastic tale of "sea monsters" at three a.m. the morning! I had no wish to allow such "tales" to spread through the ship either, to add superstitious terror to whatever we faced in the weeks ahead. The glow of the lamps a contrast to the "darkness" of the ocean behind us. I had a vision then of some great head rising up behind the ship. It took all my will power now to keep from turning and looking back.

"You saw porpoises, the fin of perhaps a squala," I spoke. There could be unusual forms of sea life out this far at sea too. There had been a last quarter Moon, just enough light to see by. We were now over a thousand miles from land now, sailing an ocean by hand drawn charts that were at the very best still based on old maps and drawing five centuries old at the very least here. I thought too of the "mu" things that were the result of The War. Perhaps there were "sea monsters", things never seen before now.

"It had a `head', a `body' of some sort," she answered back.

"Here's a sheet of paper, a pencil, `draw it'," Diane spoke. "Show us just what sort of a `monster' that you actually saw..." The lieutenant giving me a smile as I nodded quietly back then.

"Typical `sea monster'," I smiled, looking at the drawing. It had a long neck, a silly little head, and a great big body. I recalled that creatures of such a type had once lived millions of years ago. On the other hand sailors have always seen sea monsters ever since the first ship ventured out of sight of land...

"There were `tales' of such things in the 20th Century," Darlanis answered, regarding it. "And my lookout too reported seeing `something' there ahead of your ship," she now added then.

"I'm sure it's nothing `supernatural'," I smiled back, the Empress nodding, her eyes like beautiful azure gems meeting mine. Her husband standing there regarding me, smiling at my husband...

"It's an awful `big' ocean," my husband said to me later as we climbed back aboard the North Star from

"visiting" Darlanis'.

"And the North Star isn't that 'big'," I answered him back.

"That look out did see 'something'," he smiled back then.

"Every day the sun 'rises', the wind 'blows', and we sail on further to 'where'?" my Prince smiled as we ate breakfast together some days later. So far there had been no incidents of note. The ships were doing well, with both crews being kept "busy" with sail drill and weapons drill so that they didn't have too much time to brood over sailing across a now seemingly endless ocean.

"We're ten days out, sixteen hundred miles," I smiled back.

"I think I 'know' the North Star as well now as I know your body," he smiled back, yours truly having been well "explored"...

"Kathi has sought 'solace' in the arms of our sailors," I grinned, the slave girl being a wench who never let the male members of the crew forget that she was a desirable female either! Her attire usually brief and daring enough to leave no doubts, although with the number of married women aboard she didn't "do" so well as she might have done with a more "normal" sexual ratio.

"Our fishing hasn't been totally fruitless," he pointed out. We were trolling baits behind the North Star on strong lines if the wind wasn't too strong. Our "catches" had been few, but it did help dispel the "boredom" that seemed to be settling over us.

"See that none of that rainwater is lost!" I snapped, a soft gentle rain falling from an iron gray sky as the crew looked up at me. By spreading extra sails we could collect the rainwater, add it to our fresh water supplies. All too vivid in my mind had been the fate of those on the junk who had died of thirst. While such was very unlikely in our case, still I felt it "wise" here to gather what water we were able to just in case we might need it later on. Karis and Diane supervising, seeing that it was done correctly and the least fresh water "lost" in the process.

"I wonder if we should 'suggest' it to Darlanis," Paul said.

"I'm sure she's doing the 'same'," I "smiled" back at him. I had no doubts either that such a "signal" from us would not be appreciated, the Empress having her "pride" here to consider too.

"The wind's died," my "first" said to me, seeing me nod as I looked up at her. For the last day or so we'd hardly been making any headway even with every sail we had set. Much to my surprise under such conditions Sarnian Queen seemed to "do" a bit better!!

"Have the ship's girls whistle as they walk about the deck," I smiled back, such being believed to always bring up a wind... It was growing "hot" out here, almost as if summer had arrived.

"That might bring us too much 'wind'," Karis smiled back.

"The barometer's lower," my husband spoke, looking at it.

"Let's not have the 'girls' whistle," I told Karis then.

"I'll 'check', see that we're 'shipshape' too," she said.

"I think that might be `wise'," I replied, seeing her nod.

"You think we might be facing more `bad weather'," Paul said to me as soon as the North Star's first officer left the cabin.

"There is a sort of storm possible out here unknown to us," I answered him. "Winds of a hundred miles an hour or more too."

"Maybe you'd better talk to Darlanis," he replied, going to the stern windows, looking out over the sea at the Imperial ship. I felt the North Star roll, as if a great wave had passed by...

Chapter Forty Six

"In the old tales there is something called a `typhoon'," I said to Darlanis, seeing the Empress nod back thoughtfully then. "A storm more powerful than anything we've experienced before..."

"I think I'd better return to Sarnian Lady," Darlanis said. On the horizon now before us were great dark clouds, a heavy growing swell like nothing I'd ever experienced before, the North Star itself now being lifted and dropped like a little fishing boat as it rose over the crests and now slipped into the troughs!

"Karis, ready two sea anchors, and reinforce them, strip all sails from the yards and bring down the top masts if possible," I spoke then, the Empress standing there and regarding us quietly. I knew that she depended upon me out here, that what had made this "voyage" possible in the first was my legendary seamanship!

"Going to be `bad'," I spoke, seeing the lightning flashing in the clouds, the ship pitching heavily as she rode to her twin sea anchors, Sarnian Queen doing the same half a mile behind us. The swells were, I calculated, at least now thirty feet in height judging from the way that they rose up before us as the North Star pitched and bucked like an untamed unicorn being "broken"...

"A few prayers toLYSmight be `proper'," Karis smiled back.

"We have `Maris Marn'," my husband smiled, now hugging me.

"And we are aboard the `North Star'," I pointed out then.

The WIND was like nothing I'd ever experienced in all my years of sailing. The waves great angry monsters that raced down upon us in white cappedrows , one after another, the spray now leaping from the bow of the ship actually passing over the stern! The rain and spray striking my face driven was like hail stones! Lightning flashing in the sky, the boom of thunder like cannons as nature now attacked with all its fury our two helpless ships!

"Can't see Sarnian Queen anymore!" my husband yelled, the whistle of the wind in the rigging like the screams of tormented women. The creak and groan of the hull leaving no doubts as to the strain that the

ship was taking as she leaped and danced in this typhoon! If the sea anchors didn't "hold" we'd be in serious trouble, as if the ship was to ever swing broadside to the wind it was quite likely now that she'd be driven right over on her side to become a dismantled wreck just like the junk had been! The thought of "that" filling my mind with terror just then too!

"Raining too hard!" I yelled back, hoping Darlanis was safe. Of the two ships I considered the North Star the more seaworthy. "Karis, I want to show a bit of sail astern here to keep her bows on to the wind," I turned and ordered, my first officer nodding, well aware of the need to keep the ship facing up into the wind.

"Hope Darlanis makes it," she replied, then carrying out my orders as I stood there clinging to the rail, the crew who then followed my orders almost blown from the rigging as they set a tiny bit of staysail, the North Star now meeting the waves better as she rode bows on to the wind perfectly lined up now with it.

I stepped down into the hold, careful not to fall as the ship leaped in the waves, glad to see that there were no leaks as I checked the hull. The supplies carefully fastened down indicating that my officers were "competent" at their tasks here. On the other hand a number of the crew were now suffering from sea sickness, the close confined quarters below decks being damp and smelly, a few slow "drips" here and there from so much water being poured on the deck there above. While there was a lot of groans and creaking, I had no doubts that the hull would hold up. Dularnian ships are built of overlapping layers of planking, with a layer of pitch between them. Such makes for a "dry" ship too.

"How's it going?" I asked Danny, the "senior" of the midshipmen as he now sat propped against the hull there behind him in the dark and dank midshipman's and warrant officer's quarters. Such quarters are in the back of the ship, below the stern cabin. Those of the first and second officer are above, ahead of my own.

"I'm just glad 'this' is the North Star and 'you' are in command of her," Danny Oaks smiled back, the other two midshipmen nodding, the two boys no doubt well terrified of this "typhoon".

"At least we don't have to 'worry' about Princess Tara here," I smiled back, then taking my leave of the three of them. He had been the one surviving midshipman after Tara's "attack"...

"Storm's letting up a bit, I think," Paul said to me as I stood there in the darkness. It had been impossible to feed the crew, or to "do" much of anything, the ship's pitching having been so great. I doubted too in any case that any were "hungry".

"We've 'survived' the 'worst' that nature could throw at us," I answered, dripping wet despite my oilskins from the spray. I could see no light from Sarnian Queen, but the steam frigate was likely to have made more "leeway" than the North Star would. We would look for Darlanis' vessel as soon as it was light now.

"There is a 'smudge' of smoke on the horizon," Karis said, lowering the telescope. Darlanis had gotten up steam, knowing that the smoke would be visible further than her mastheads would.

"She 'survived' at least," my husband smiled back at me now.

"I have hull and mast damage," Darlanis said to me, greeting me there on the deck. I could see men "reinforcing" her mainmast, others on ropes attempting to make repairs to the armored hull. The foremast was nothing but a broken off stub, I saw too.

"Can you make it back?" I asked. Otherwise I'd have to take her and her people aboard the North Star and turn back to Dularn.

"We'll `make it'," Prince Serak spoke for her in reply then. I suspected that Darlanis' bravery and courage had inspired them. She is an incredibly "brave" woman, as others have noted here...

"I have some spare spars," I ventured, Darlanis smiling.

"We came `prepared'," the Imperial Empress smiled back.

"Hate to leave them like that out here," Paul said to me.

"She'll `make it'," I smiled, knowing that Darlanis would. The Empress' ship already hoisting sail, turning about to sail to the east, back "home" to Californiatwo thousand miles away now.

"It's a big ocean," my husband said to me as I stood there a few days later. The sun shining down, the crew now busy at work. While much of the "work" was not really "necessary", I felt it best to keep the men and women of the crew as busy as possible...

"We're over half way `there'," I smiled back, hoping that my calculations here were "right". I had no way of allowing for how much "ground" we'd lost due to the storm, but I guessed perhaps a reasonable "guess" might be about seventy miles or so now. In any case we had come through the storm undamaged, and we still had ample supplies of food and water to sail on for months yet...

"I have a woman here for punishment," Diane Wells, the "second" spoke as I glanced at her standing there with the luckless member of the crew beside her. "I found her drunk on watch," she explained now, the woman's dark eyes quite avoiding my own then.

"I'm disappointed in you, Sally," I said to the woman now.

"Don't know `what' got into me, your majesty," she said.

"Out here we cannot `afford' any mistakes," I spoke.

"Won't happen again," Sally "ventured" in reply.

"I intend to `see' that it doesn't!" I snapped.

"Hands to witness punishment!" the bosuns called, the crew pouring forth up on to the deck. Three days ago we had seen the topsails of Sarnian Queen disappear below the horizon to the east. We were "alone" like few ships ever have been, and no doubt that "fact" was on everyone's mind now. If something "happened" out here, it would be the "end" for all of us, and no one would ever know mostly likely what had occurred twenty five hundred miles fromNorth America. How much "further" it was toJapannow I didn't quite know, but I suspected at least another two weeks of sailing before we sighted land. And tolerating drunkenness on duty could be the destruction of us all out here too now!

"Miss Stevenson was found drunk on duty," I spoke, the faces looking up at mine nodding, everyone well aware of the nature of the situation here. This was no "voyage" up and down a coastline where the land was almost always in sight. There was perhaps a couple miles of ocean beneath us, with onlyLys knows what sort of strange aquatic life now swimming there far below us in the dark cold depths no human eye has seen for over five centuries. "Out here all our lives, yours, mine, depend upon all of us

doing our `duty' to the best of our abilities," I continued on then... "That is `why' I am awarding a dozen lashes, which I will lay on myself as your captain and as your `Queen', so that there is no `doubt' in anyone's mind as to the seriousness of this offense."

I saw Sally put her face to the mast as she stood there now bound to it. She had been stripped, as is commonly done in such matters as this. The bosun handed me the "cat", the whip that is used on aboard ships of war for punishment of miscreants and those careless in the performance of their duties. I had no doubts either that the crew was well aware of "why" their own captain and Queen was doing this instead of the bosun as usual. I needed to impress upon every man and every woman aboard that in this voyage we could tolerate not the least infraction of discipline aboard. That here, twenty five hundred miles out to sea from North America, Japan perhaps another two thousand ahead of us yet, there could not be the slightest relaxing of discipline!!

Chapter Forty Seven

"There is more `depth' to you than I realized," my husband said as we ate lunch together there in the stern cabin, the windows open to catch the breeze as we sailed over a blue green sea.

"I whipped that woman as I did for a good reason," I smiled. "Any `slack' now in discipline could lead to disaster later on."

"You're the Queen of Dularn," he said, chewing on his food.

"I'm also the `captain' of this ship," I pointed out to him.

"And the `best' one that I think it's ever had," he grinned.

"Except for the storm and that `sea monster' the look out claimed to have seen, this has been an uneventful voyage," Karis said to me as we ate dinner together there, Diane Wells nodding in affirmation. The last rays of the sunset glowing there in the sky ahead of us. According to the charts we were now somewhat south of the Aleutians where they arch out westerly towards Asia.

"And the `superior' design of our ships over those of the Imperials is no longer in doubt," Diane added with a grin for me.

"A more `competent' officer would have done `better'," I smiled back. Lorraine would not have made the mistakes that Darlanis had apparently "allowed" to have made aboard Sarnian Queen. I didn't like Lorraine that much in some ways, but she was at least extremely "competent" at almost everything that she did do.

"We're freshly refitted out of the `yard'," Karis smiled back. "No doubt Darlanis didn't have anything done to her ship."

"Before you two get too `delighted' over all this," my husband then pointed out to them as he sat beside me, "Just remember that we are now all alone out here thousands of miles of land."

"We are on course," I said, lowering the telescope. The great "rock" that rose out of the sea there just to the north of us was one of the Aleutians. I saw no reason to try to make a landing at this time, as we were still well furnished with water and food. My husband nodding, the crew at the rail or up in the rigging watching the great "rock" there on the horizon going by.

"That strange 'sense' of yours, has it detected anything out here?" Paul asked as he held me there in his arms, my naked body pressed up to his. So far I'd been able to hold my weight down, there being a "tendency" on long voyages for me to gain weight.

"Just faint 'brushings' at the edge of my mind," I said.

"We can be all be thankful that the Priestesses of Lys were able to prevent the EVIL ONE from entering our plane of existence," Paul pointed out, kissing me. THAT was an "adventure" I'd never forget, as neither would Darlanis, I strongly suspected. I suspected however that had Darlanis and I not "done" what we did things might have turned out far "differently" than they did. I suspected too that perhaps Lys Herself had a hand in things here!

"Shows that the Priestesses were 'right' in their teachings against 'witchcraft'," I pointed out, kissing back him in return. Lorraine had opposed them on this, but they were obviously right.

"You're 'good' in bed," he observed, caressing me a bit now.

"I was a slave girl in Trelandar," I "smiled" back in reply. When a woman is a slave girl she has no choice but to be "good".

"You're 'better' than Kathi," he grinned, his fingertip now finding my clitoris. I supposed that it was true. Kathi wasn't "done" like I was. Her "responses" were those of any slave girl. She "did" as she was told, but that didn't mean that she was really all that "good" in bed. When Bob and Carol had owned her I recalled Bob once saying that his wife was noticeably "better".

"You 'miss' Emily?" I asked, recalling his first slave girl.

"More of a 'woman' than Kathi is," Paul answered me. A gentle knock at the door then putting a quick "halt" to things now.

"Yes?" I spoke, holding the robe about myself. Karis standing there with a look on her attractive face that left no doubts as to her own thoughts just then at seeing me so clad just then!

"There is a rainstorm coming towards us," she answered now.

"Prepare the spare sails to catch the rainwater," I replied.

"Be sure we catch every drop!" I snapped, the rainstorm sweeping down upon us from the north. The spare sails now spread to catch the precious fresh water. While I still had nearly ninety days supply of fresh water aboard, I preferred if possible to keep my barrels full, just in case the unforeseen might occur. I could see the rain like a dark mist as it fell from the clouds into the sea. The North Star's crew now ready to catch the rain.

"Nothing like fresh water," my husband smiled, the first few drops now falling on the deck. The rainwater cold, the sun now hidden by the clouds. We had been at sea for three weeks now. I suspected

also that we'd seen the last of the Aleutians now, the last one having been passed only the day before, a barren "rock" just to the north of us inhabited by nothing more than seabirds. It was "cold" out here, colder than it normally is in spring now.

(Two Weeks Later)

"Is it land?" the look out said to me as I stood beside her, the roll of the ship some eighty feet beneath me disconcerting, not something that I found enjoyable. I am not too "bothered" by heights as such, but I don't like being carried from side to side by the roll of a ship while standing eighty feet from the deck!

"Could be," I answered, peering through the telescope at it. It could also be a line of clouds on the horizon, but I didn't think so. Clouds are "soft", and this was "hard" in a way that only land is! Could it be possible that we'd reached Asia now?

"We have arrived?" my husband asked as I stepped down on to the deck. According to the charts we were well to the "north" of Japan, and could now sail to the south, keeping the land there to starboard. First, however, I wished to make a "landing" here...

"That's Asia," I said, the crew standing there listening. People nodding, looking at each other, staring out beyond the bow to where only a dim "line" still could be seen now from the deck.

"No telling what the 'bottom's' like here," I said, listening to the man in the bow with the lead line making soundings. I could see the trees, the shoreline, clouds in the sky, the sun as back home in Dularn shining down upon us. I saw no sign of life. Human life that is, although animal life was plain enough here...

"There's someone!" Karis breathed, looking through a telescope as she swept the shoreline. "Some sort of 'barbarian' dressed in skins and furs....," she added, turning to tell me so.

"No one here now," I spoke, looking about, my husband holding his bow at the ready, an arrow now nocked on the bow string.

"There are footprints," Karis said, squatting down then.

"We're 'sitting ducks' here," Paul pointed out to me.

"Back to the boat," I said, eying the thick forest.

"We can make a landing in force," Diane said to me as we sat there in the stern cabin, the wind having now pushed the ship around so that she faced out to sea with the stern towards shore.

"We are probably dealing with people similar in 'culture' to those who live to the east of us," my husband ventured, seeing me nod. Such peoples, as "savage" as any who had ever lived, would have no difficulty at all in destroying any landing party we put ashore now. Granted, our weapons were probably "superior", but I had no doubt as to the consequences of any fight between us and whoever lived here. Karis having said that the man she'd seen had been dressed in animal skins and carried some sort of a bow. Much like the sort of the savage tribes that lived in the interior of North America, most of them much like the savages that had once inhabited that land many centuries before. Such people I suspected would not be "friendly" judging from the fact that we'd seen no other sign of human life here, the implications of "that" something that "implied" that human slavery was "known" here too.

"We could lie here at anchor for a few days and see what happens," Karis suggested, Diane "nodding" in agreement with her. I suspected that these mysterious people feared ships with good reason. Human slavery is no doubt commonplace everywhere now...

"We are well 'north' of Japan," I answered. I was guessing at the Kuril Islands, one of the more "northern" ones here now. We had sailed almost directly "west" from North America, with a few "glimpses" of the Aleutians as I have narrated earlier here.

"Isn't that 'warm' here either," my husband smiled back. I had already noted that fact, although we were well to the north.

"We will sail due 'south', keeping the land to starboard," I ordered, having come to a decision here. Saloma Tora standing by the stern windows, looking out at a land even to her now legend. "And due to the fact that we have no idea as to the conditions of things here, we will keep a closer look out than we have before."

"Another one of these islands?" Karis said to me, lowering the telescope. We had passed a number, with no sign of any ships or anything else yet. I wondered if the derelict we'd found had come from Japan or China, or perhaps even somewhere else now...

"Sail Ho!" the look out cried, pointing with his telescope!

"I think we have just made 'contact'," I smiled back then!

"Let's just hope they're 'friendly'," Karis answered me.

"Three masts, square rigged, but funny looking," I spoke, lowering my telescope, the ship obviously much like the "junk" we'd found. I suspected now that it might be a warship. There were flags flying from the three mastheads, the painted eyes now reminding me of old Imperials, which used to be of that design. "Kathi, get out my formal uniform, the attire of a Queen." The slave girl nodding, her eyes gleaming as they met mine in reply.

"We know 'nothing' of them," my husband warned me then.

"And they the 'same' of us," I smiled back in reply.

Chapter Forty Eight

"Let's just hope you can speak their 'lingo'," I said to Salmona Tora. The Physician quietly nodding as she sat there at my side watching the Japanese warship coming closer with every stroke of the oars, the North Star hove to there astern of us. The six men pulling at the long boat's oars constantly glancing ahead of us at the strange "alien" ship now hove to ahead. I wondered what their reaction would be in finding out that it was "possible" for ships like the North Star to cross the Pacific.

"I fear I can read it better than speak it, and there may be great changes in language over the centuries,"

she pointed out.

"Just `do' the best that you can," I answered, Salmona nodding, watching the men there at the oars drawing up closer to the other ship, which was obviously a warship from its own design... Our best telescopes had shown its deck fitted out with weapons, although there had been no evidence of steam powered weapons like our own. This last no surprise to me as such were the work of a woman who rightfully should have died five centuries before now.

"I think the North Star could `lick' them in a fight," Danny Oaks ventured then with the tiller under his arm, glancing back and forth between the two ships gently rolling in the restless sea. The midshipman giving me a grin as I nodded, hoping that we might be able to live in peace now without a new war between two societies thousands of miles apart. The thought suddenly now going through my mind that Imperial California would also be "left out" of any "trade deal" that I might be able to make here now...

"He is `of' the Warriors," Salmona then smiled back at me.

"Ease your oars!" Danny snapped, his voice a bit "squeaky", a seaman in the bow reaching out and grabbing the line thrown. I saw dozens of faces, strange, "alien" yellowish faces now looking down at us, their own chattering speech like nothing I'd heard!

"I think `he' is the `captain'," Salmona said to me as a man in a uniform stood there at the top of the Japanese ship's gangway. The flags flying from its mastheads leaving no "doubts"...

"Just `pray' I don't fall in," I answered, leaping for the gangway, aware of my ornate sword, my crown, everything else that left no doubts that I was indeed the Queen of Dularn. That I was a woman of "royalty", and not just another "ship's officer" here! I grabbed hold of the ropes, and scrambled up, aware of dark eyes in yellowish faces, of strange odors, of their "odd" attire that left no doubts that they were indeed from the same land that had once been the "home" of the mysterious derelict that we'd found!

"I am Maris Marn, Queen of Dularn," I spoke, extending my hand, my attire, ornaments, crown no doubt visible "proof" here. The captain of the Japanese warship standing there regarding me. He then giving me a deep bow, and speaking in his own language.

"He gives you greetings, `I think'," Salmona spoke then from beside me, having scrambled up the gangway unnoticed behind me. I could figure "that" out for myself, but that wasn't much help!

"You have that `map'?" I snapped back, Salmona giving it to me. I "opened" it, held it before me, the sun shining down upon the warship's polished deck, the weapons "familiar" in their way. It appearing that these people had pretty much the same level of "technology" that we had before Lorraine came on to the scene. I had no doubts that these weapons, this ship, would be "effective" against a foe. The fact that this ship was "here" told much too. The vessel was slightly larger and heavier than the North Star, but "lighter" than an Imperial steam frigate would be, I noted...

I pointed to myself, then to Dularn, the captain nodding. I then pointed to him, and indicated the island of Japan. He then nodded, spoke the word "Nippon", and pointed to the south then...

"Here is the `log book'," Saloma now said, giving it to me. I handed it to the captain, hoping he could understand it now. I knew from the maps we'd found aboard the junk that it had come from what appeared to be Japan, but I couldn't be really sure now as it was also possible that its origins had been somewhere else.

The captain of the warship looked up at me, then at the North Star, the design of my ship leaving no doubts that I had come from a place that he at least knew little or nothing about. Acting on impulse, I made the familiar sign of the Priestesses of Lys, seeing him smile and nod, it being obvious that he too knew of the Priestesses, who were in any case now rulers of the world.

"All male crew, the 'women' obviously slave girls," Salmona observed in a whisper. Such had been commonplace some years ago. The crew, the officers themselves all short, yellowish featured. The captain himself no taller than I was, I had noticed here...

"A 'culture' muchlike ours a century ago," I ventured.

"I understand a little of what they say," she "added".

"Friendly, hostile?" I asked, wondering if they understood us at all. Such was possible in theory, given the fact that English had been the "world language" in the time of Janet Rogers.

"Curious, but aware of our 'femaleness'," she whispered.

"They don't have 'equality of sexes' like us," I spoke.

The captain then speaking to me, breaking into this now. His words meant nothing, but his motions left no doubt as to what he wanted us to do. The man stepping back, motioning again to me to go with me. I felt it wise here to do so, Salmona following.

"Thank you," I smiled, the slave girl dipping her head, her attire brief, much displaying her. I did not think she found it all that "comfortable" given the chill here in the stern cabin. The captain standing there watching me, stroking his mustache. I gave him a smile, raised the glass, sipped at the drink I'd been given. It was like a wine, but not quite the same as those I'd known back in Dularn. I recalled the term "sake", suspected that this might be it here. The ship's stern cabin was little different in design from those of ships I'd seen back in North America.

"Meiji Maru," he said, indicating his ship. His name was Tojo Osaki, which is the best I can do with such a spelling here. Captain Osaki was at the moment trying to explain to me that he wished me to accompany his ship back to the main island of Japan. Salmona explaining to me that Japan had once been governed by an Emperor, and that it was likely that it was now here in this era.

"Tell him we'll 'follow'," I said, Salmona trying to do so.

"We'll follow them," I said, Karis nodding as she stood there. The crew gathered up at the rail, looking at the other ship as it now came about, the Japanese swarming over the yards.

"They seem to be 'friendly' enough," I said to Paul then.

"I think we could outrun or outfight them," Karis added.

"And they know nothing about our steam engine," Paul said.

"Perhaps we have too many of the military castes aboard," I smiled back, seeing them nod back in understanding as my words now sank in. The last thing we needed was a hostile confrontation now. Finally I'd gotten Darlanis to understand the need for "peace" between the Dularnian Federation and Imperial California. I certainly didn't need to start "trouble" now with Japan either!

"We `made it'," my husband said to me as darkness fell and we followed the stern lights of the Meiji Maru towards Tokyo, a "name" that had been mentioned many times in the old books, written on the old maps that I had used to draw up my ship's charts.

"We have done what no others have done for five centuries," I answered, standing there at the quarterdeck railing, watching the mild breeze fill the sails. Much of the crew there on deck. I think we all felt a sense that "history" was being made now...

"There is `much' we could learn," he said to me, the light from the running lights we'd set up making his face a pale shadow as I nodded thoughtfully. It was not just a matter of "military technology" or such like Lorraine or the Simmons had given us. I felt in a way we had gained "little" from them by learning to kill each other more "efficiently". We needed to "learn" enough about each other that we no longer felt the need to go to war...

"Their `culture' is `different' from ours, but we still worship the same Goddess, and know the `sign of the ankh'," I said. *****

"It is a `long ways' to Dularn now," Mara said as she stood there at the ship's rail alongside Princess Tara. The Princess, once beautiful, but now scarred, turning her head to smile back.

"Perhaps `you' have given me more than life itself," Taraspoke, looking out over the rolling Pacific towards distant Asia. "I have learned much from you in the time we've been together..."

"We will be docking in a few hours," the captain spoke then, Mexico like a bank of low hanging clouds on the horizon to port.

"Thank you, captain," the former Bajan Princess answered.

"Why did the North Star `take' such winds better?" the captain of Sarnian Lady mused quietly to herself as she stood on the flagship's quarterdeck. There had been no evidence of "sabotage" as Darlanis had first suspected when the foremast had snapped off there in the storm, the Empress' awesome courage an "inspiration" to them all as they fought to save their lives and their ship. It was true that Dularnian ships were built a bit "stronger" than their Imperial counterparts due to the storms they often encountered, but she didn't think that was really the "answer" here... The Empress had not blamed her for what had happened out there in the typhoon, but yet she felt as if she had "failed" her beloved Imperial ruler in this! She wondered too if the almost mindless discipline of the Imperial Navy was superior to that of Dularn? That the "social division" between officers and crew, much like that of the British Navy of old, really was all that wise when it was well known that Dularnian crews were often more "loyal" to their own officers than those of the Empire. Could it be that the supposed "superiority" of Dularnian ships was not due to their "design", but due to the men and women who sailed them...? On the other hand it was now known that their Warlady herself had followed a "disciplinary policy" quite similar to that of Dularn where the social division between officers and men was far less!!

"A copper for your thoughts," a lovely voice suddenly spoke!

"Just `thinking', your majesty," she quickly answered back, Darlanis' beautiful azure eyes glowing into hers as she nodded...

Chapter Forty Nine

"Consider the `fact' that Maris Marn is said to be the best naval commander of this time," the Empress spoke, her eyes holding those of her captain. "And that the Dularnians have a naval tradition that goes back hundreds of years," Darlanis added then.

"Perhaps we should `study' the way they do things," the captain of the Empress' flagship replied, her mistress nodding, well aware that her flagship had not been in as good a shape as they thought. The crew was "competent", but content to do their "duties" and little more. Such might have been satisfactory back in the days of triremes, but now, such "standards" no longer served!

"We'll make what `repairs' we can when we reach land," Darlanis answered. She was somewhat "annoyed" at the woman, who had not proven to be as "competent" as she had hoped. Unfortunately, the "best" captains the Empire had all sailed for Lorraine, and none of them had been "available" when she'd decided to accompany me to Japan. In her eyes there was still no sea officer like Lorraine herself, the Imperial Warlady being another as "good" as I was, she felt. "Find a `means' to replace that foremast too."

"I am sorry we `failed' you as we did," the woman answered.

"I probably should have taken Sharon's `ASTARTE'," Darlanis smiled back. That ship was a near perfect duplicate of the North Star, it being obvious to Darlanis that I had known something of ship design when I'd designed the "class" for Queen Tulis then.

"I wonder `what' we will find," my husband mused as I stood there on the quarterdeck, the sun long ago having set to the west over mysterious Asia there beyond the gleaming horizon. Just now ahead of us I saw the gleam of fires, of land as we approached the main northern island of Japan. A land of mystery that no one from the "Americas" had visited now for the last five centuries save perhaps for those of the Priestesses of Lys, who can hardly be considered in the same light as the rest of us here anyway. I supposed that both the Lorr and the Women could be considered in the same category too. The Japanese junk just ahead of us now. The thought going through my mind as it had before that it would have been wise on our part to renew our supplies of food and water as much as we could have back when we'd first sighted land...

"I don't think their `technology' quite matches ours," I mused thoughtfully, remembering what I'd seen aboard the warship. It was obvious that Lorraine Richards and Bob Simmons had altered things considerably, both by their actions here in our own time and the fact that they had both looked upon things "differently". I thought too of Carol, that fantastic "Warlady" I'd once known. A woman who when "push came to shove" could be just as "mean" and as "vicious" as Lorraine herself. A woman whose "tactics" had in a way been "superior" to even those of the Imperial Warlady too! I wondered if she had truly once more stood at my side there for that brief second when I faced the attack of "THE QUEEN OF EVIL"?*****

"The ship is sailing to Porlan, your majesty," the captain spoke, her Imperial Empress nodding thoughtfully, a pair of beautiful azure eyes for a brief moment holding hers as Darlanis stood there on the

quarterdeck tall and golden, like a Grecian goddess. The vessel was Dularnian, from Arsana, a merchantman. They were just in sight of land, Orgon still like a bluish haze.

"I will go aboard," Darlanis spoke, her eyes meeting hers.

"I will be staying aboard," Prince Serak then explained.

"We just could be a valuable 'prize' to anyone who wants to 'advance' their military technology," I spoke as my husband and I relaxed for a moment before retiring for the night. Our steam engine, steam powered weapons gave us a considerable "edge" over any warship not equipped with such things, and I had seen no evidence there aboard the Japanese junk that they possessed such...

"You said they didn't have our compound bows either," he answered, sipping thoughtfully at his wine there beside me, his eyes meeting the azure of mine as I nodded back. We could be a real "prize" for anyone who was ruthless enough to "risk" a war with Dularn, assuming that Dularn ever learned of it, which was rather "doubtful" once you thought of it, it being more "likely" that we'd be considered "lost at sea" and that would be that now. I had no doubt either that back in Arsana there would be those who would be glad to see the "last" of me as the Queen of Dularn.

"Remember Lorraine's first book?" I asked, seeing him nod.

"Princess Janis considered her a 'real prize'," he said.

"One that Darlanis 'got' instead of us," I answered back.

"And Darlanis would have fought a war to keep her," I said.

"We're not quite exactly that 'valuable' to these people," he pointed out, putting a strong muscular arm over my shoulders.

"I am 'familiar' with the 'technology' we have," I pointed out. I'd known enough about the Diana for example to build one, and the North Star carried operating manuals for its own stuff...

"And anyone with a 'fleet' of 'North Stars' would be a serious 'threat' anywhere on this side of the Earth," he answered me. In battle the Japanese junk would have been no "match" for us, something that I suspected that the Japanese themselves would soon find out regardless of how we tried to conceal our own "advanced technology" from them. Historically they were great "copy cats", and all the world needed now was a new Japanese "Empire"!

"Perhaps the Priestesses were 'right' when they refused to give their whole hearted blessing to this voyage," I replied now.

"They could have known 'more' that we thought of," he said.

"And look how Lorraine has 'changed' things," I added now.

"There is a 'fog', your majesty," Diane said to me, the mist gleaming in her hair. I could barely see the junk's running lights now, and I suspected the same would be "true" of us now.

"Take the wind out of the sails," I spoke, my decision made. I saw the puzzled look on Diane's face, the

same "look" on the helmsman, those others within earshot of me. "It is your Queen's order," I added, seeing her nod, Dularnian naval discipline such that there was no way that she could question such an order now!

"Aye, aye, your majesty," she spoke, passing on the order.

"We are going back home," I spoke, seeing the awe she felt. "It is best for all of us if our two cultures do not meet now," I explained, seeing her nod half in understanding, in puzzlement... "When we can no longer see their lights, extinguish ours, set course due east and hoist all sail, including the top gallants. It will be 'short rations' for all of us, but we can make it," I added, well aware too of the status of the supplies that we had.

"I could stand to lose five pounds," she smiled back at me.

"There is a ship, your majesty," Queen Sharon was informed.

"I will assume that there is 'more'," the young Queen said, her hair the color of light gold, her beauty well known to many.

"It carries Darlanis, the Empress," the woman answered...

"You doubtlessly wonder 'why' we are now returning to Dularn after having nearly completed our 'mission'," I spoke to the crew of the North Star, their upturned faces leaving no doubt that they were listening to every word. The day was clear, sunny, and warm, the breeze brisk, filling our sails as it drove the North Star due east, a bit of spray from time to time leaping up over the bow to moisten the deck. Over my head flew the flag of Dularn, and under it also flew my own flag as the Queen of Dularn. "Why after everything we've been through that we are returning to Dularn without partaking of the hospitality of the Japanese..." *****

"I was getting worried that I would never see you again," Sharon spoke softly, taking the hands of the Empress in hers as Darlanis' beautiful azure blue eyes glowed into hers in reply.

"I feared that my temper might have 'cost' me you," Darlanis answered softly, drawing the young Queen with her away from those listening. "And I fear too that we may never see Maris again..."

"What do you mean by that?" Sharon, asked, "concerned" now.

"Remember how Janis and I 'fought' over Lorraine?" the Empress answered, the warm sun glowing down from a cloud sprinkled sky warming them both. Their tiaras sparkling in the sunlight. "I wonder if the Japanese might 'see' Maris in the same 'light'."

"And you fear that the Japanese might 'keep' Maris?" Sharon answered, well aware of what had happened back then in 2565 A.D.

"She may represent a 'technology' beyond their own," Darlanis answered, "And the North Star would be a valuable prize too."

"She is a brave woman, and intelligent too," Sharon smiled, the smile forced to her painted lips as the thought went through her mind of what a barbarian culture might do to someone like me!

"We will let the Japanese come to us, let them learn how we live, and now that they know we `exist', I am sure that they will send a ship of their own to North America," I concluded, standing there before them, my hands on the railing of the quarterdeck. I had no doubts now that I had done the "right thing" in this case. Had Darlanis been able to stay with me, perhaps I would have been more willing to take the chance, but without her "support", I had felt it "best" that the Japanese came to us, not vice versa here.

Chapter Fifty

"I am a woman `driven' by `ambition'," Darlanis spoke to Sharon as the two shared lunch together. "One I fear who will have much to `answer' for when she faces Lys," the Empress smiled as Sharon nodded back, well aware too that Darlanis "believed" in such things with an unshakable "faith" that allowed for no "doubts". Whether or not such things were "true" Sharon didn't know, but she did know that Darlanis believed them to be TRUE...

"The world is better because you have lived," Sharon spoke. There would never be another Empress like this fantastic beauty.

"I am thankful that I have the friends that I do," Darlanis smiled back. "Without you, Lorraine, I would have `little' now."

"You `have' your husband," Sharon pointed out, Prince Serak having stayed with the ship so that he might return to the Nevada lands, where he now assisted his father the King, in ruling them. Both Darlanis and Serak had found such "separations" helpful too.

"Serak and I have our `problems'," Darlanis smiled back, the smile on Sharon's lips leaving no doubt that she "knew" of them. Darlanis was not the sort of a woman who made a "good wife", although she was loving and "good in bed", and extremely beautiful. On the other hand she was also a woman who had her own ideas on things, things that had caused "rocky spots" in their marriage.

"Men and women had those problems in my time," Sharon said.

"The centuries have changed us little," Darlanis smiled.

"Is there `anything' we can `do' for Maris?" Sharon asked.

"Her fate is in the hands of LYS, I fear," Darlanis replied.

"There are `those' in Dularn who do not wish her back," the Queen of Orgon replied thoughtfully, her eyes meeting Darlanis'.

"I prefer Maris Marn as Queen of Dularn to any other," the Empress answered in level tones, the "implications" not "missed"!

"Good sailing weather," I said to Diane as she stood there.

"I think you made the `right' decision," she answered me, adding "your majesty" as an afterthought as I stood there then.

"There will be `those' who will accuse of me of", I answered thoughtfully, well aware of "what" would be said in Arsana when word of our adventures reached the ears of my political enemies. On the other hand did we want to give the Japanese our own technology without knowing to what "use" they might put it now? There had been those too who had spoken against Lorraine for just that. I recalled too the "opposition" Bob Simmons had met in the construction of the Diana, especially from the High Priestess... There was much to be said for not building the weapons of the past once again. We needed to learn to live in peace, not reinvent the weapons of the past in order to kill more quickly...

"You are not `Lorraine', and we don't `need' another," Diane answered, looking out over the bow at the blue green ocean ahead. "Life I think was better before we learned how to build these new sorts of weapons that can kill more swiftly at more distance..." Her words reminding me of how she'd lost her foot to Tara's cannon, another "example" of the "military technology" of the past.

"I think you are `wise' beyond your years," I smiled back.

"Perhaps I have had a good teacher," she now smiled back.

"I think you fail to give yourself `credit' for the kind of person that you are," Sharon said to Darlanis as they finished up their lunch there in Porlan. "And I think in a lot of ways you are truly the `Queen of Light' that the Priestesses have referred to," she added, meeting Darlanis' beautiful eyes with her own. Sharon's palace, while "small", was quite tastefully laid out. A slave girl knelt waiting to be of service and to clear the table after they were done, her dark eyes missing little of things.

"Perhaps of your `love' for me," Darlanis replied back.

"Another Empress would have killed," Sharon answered her.

"It is not a thing I am `proud' of doing," Darlanis replied.

"You taught me the `meaning' of being a ruler," Sharon said.

"I seriously considered giving up the Empire," Darlanis replied. "Allowing it to slip from my grasp instead," she added...

"You would not have been Darlanis had you done so," Sharon smiled, well aware too that her back was scarred from the whip. That this woman before her, this "Empress" had done the deed too!

"I may `answer' some day to Lorraine too," Darlanis said. The Imperial Warlady was due to have her baby quite soon now too, Sharon knew, Darlanis nodding to the slave girl as she knelt to one side, the wench now getting to her feet, approaching them then, aware that they spoke of things she dared never to "repeat" if she valued her life. Queen Sharon being "strict", but "fair".

"I am very fortunate to have known you both," Sharon smiled.

"I think the `same' of both you and Lorraine," Darlanis grinned back, pushing back her chair and getting up from the table, the slave girl swift to clear things away for her mistress. The Empress' glittering golden attire seemingly "fitting" on her.

"I sometimes `wonder' about Princess Tara," Sharon said as she now joined Darlanis at a window that overlooked the city, looking up into the azure eyes of this woman she thought of much as a daughter thinks of her own mother. A woman from a time five centuries from her own era of the 20th Century, a woman conceived upon the body of a woman of another world, the ruddy planet Mars!

"Perhaps she was but the `tool' of another," Darlanis mused.

"What was it `like' when you saw the `EVIL ONE'?" Sharon asked, aware from what she'd heard now that Darlanis had done so!

"I learned the `meaning of fear'," Darlanis smiled back. "I think for the first time in my life I saw something that I could only flee in terror from, a `horror' like no other," she added... Still vivid in the Empress' memory was the vision of that great spider like thing forming in the sky overhead while she and Queen Maris of Dularn fled for their lives aboard Lorraine's airplane knowing as they fled that even the airplane couldn't fly fast enough to allow them to escape that awful horror from another plane of existence that the witches had "invited" into this one!

"The Warriress may know fear, but she will not allow herself to submit to it," Sharon smiled back, seeing Darlanis nod...

"I fear neither man or beast, but `that' ...," she replied, leaving Sharon to fill in the rest of her sentence as she might.

"Let it be hoped then that it never enters our universe again," the young Queen of Orgon now smiled back at her Imperial Empress.

"There is the `prediction'," Darlanis spoke, Sharon nodding.

"It `came', and the Priestesses drove it back," she replied. It had taken a "weapon" unknown since the time of the great War!

"Perhaps it was not `prepared' for what it faced," Darlanis spoke softly, looking out over the city of Porlan, the great river that the city used as a harbor that led to the ocean beyond.

"In the `prediction', it was said that Tara was `responsible'," Darlanis answered, turning, looking about the room then.

"Perhaps the `prediction' was for a `future' we no longer face," Sharon ventured, wondering if what Lorraine had "seen" there on Mars had been REALITY or just some sort of an illusion?

"LYS is infallible," the tall golden beauty replied then, but your step mother might have been a bit `confused' at times."

"You do have a `daughter'," Sharon pointed out in reply.

"The girl that Pussycat `bore' for me?" Darlanis spoke.

"The one who will become 'Domino Tremaine'," Sharon said.

"The woman was brain damaged," Darlanis hotly retorted then.

"But you buried her remains as 'your' daughter," the young Queen smiled back. Darlanis nodding, her eyes not meeting hers. The Empress had attempted to avoid letting it be widely known, it being feared by Darlanis that "more" might be made of it than the Imperial ruler of Californiawished. Sharon also suspected that it was possible that Darlanis feared becoming too emotionally attached to the little blonde girl, who had been cloned from one of her own ovums several years before. The girl now being raised in the Imperial Palace by the former slave girl Lynn, who Darlanis trusted to raise the girl properly, although the girl herself was well aware of course that Darlanis was her own true mother here.

"I am perhaps fighting against 'what will be'," the Empress answered thoughtfully. "Trying to 'prevent' a future that I know will be regardless of what I do," Darlanis continued on then to Sharon as the young Queen of Orgon nodded in reply back at her... Sharon well aware of Darlanis' own secret true feelings on this.

"Only the Priestesses can travel through time," Sharon said.

"Perhaps that is what they 'believe' too," Darlanis smiled, the "implications" of her words not missed by the young golden haired Queen there at her side. "I fear we know little of things to be regardless of what Tais may think," Darlanis now concluded.

Chapter Fifty One

"Good sailing weather," my husband grinned to me as I stood on the North Star's quarterdeck, the off duty watch skylarking on deck, many of them no doubt thinking of their families in Dulam.

"We have 'proved' that this ocean can be 'crossed'," I said.

"Hope Darlanis made it back O.K.," he then answered in turn.

"She seems to lead a 'charmed life'," I smiled as he nodded.

"I am also quite 'impressed' by my wife," Paul then "added".

"'This' is what I 'do' best," I smiled back in reply to him, believing that he was referring to my abilities at "seamanship". I am not the "beauty" that Darlanis is, nor the "swordswoman" like Lorraine, but on a quarterdeck I have few equals. My stepmother did teach me well, even if I "resented" her doing so back then... The fact that she died a "Warrioress' Death" in battle right there on the North Star's quarterdeck pleases me. I know she would have preferred it that way to dying in bed of old age. We of the "caste" prefer to die with cold steel in our hands. It is common to bury a Warrioress with her weapons, so that she may greet LYS properly outfitted. It is noteworthy here too that the Simmons both were buried with swords at their hips, as "fitting".

"You `do' many things well," he smiled back at me as I stood there, the sun shining down from a clear blue sky, its warmth just then "comforting" as the gentle sea breeze filled our sails.

"We have made `history'," I grinned, well aware that we had. There would be those in Arsana who would say that I should have gone on, met with the Japanese government, and opened trade relations. Yet, I did not doubt that I had done the "right thing"...

"Others will `follow'," he smiled, putting his arm over my shoulders, "But the history books will say that you were first." *****

"If I ever decide to cross the ocean again, I think I will `borrow' this," Darlanis smiled as she stepped up on to the quarterdeck of the Astarte, the trim swift vessel a true "sister" to the famous North Star. The craft being Sharon's own "flagship", and one as Darlanis knew well from previous "experience" that could easily outrun any Imperial steam frigate in a good breeze.

"What you are to `beauty', and my stepmother is to `swordsmanship', so is Maris Marn to `ship design'," Sharon smiled back.

"The Queen of Dularn is a `crafty wench' many have `underestimated'," Darlanis smiled back. Both she and Lorraine had done so in the past years, Maris' abilities at command at sea being something that any naval commander of any past era in Mankind's long history could honestly respect. Not even the awesome Lorraine herself, the greatest fighting woman of all time, could surpass the lovely blonde haired Queen of Dularn at seamanship...

"She is also a quite delightful person too," Sharon added.

"One `wonders' what `history' would have been like if she'd never escaped Lorraine," Darlanis grinned back at the young Queen as Sharon nodded, well aware of the "truth" the Empress spoke.

"I don't think there would be an independent Dularn now," the young Queen answered, well aware of the "realities" in this matter, of the fact that only Maris' leadership had "saved" Dularn from the Empire, from Darlanis' own "ambition" and Lorraine's too, she felt, "knowing" the Imperial Warlady as she did. It being Sharon's opinion that her stepmother was a woman who saw the world in dire need of "overhaul", and herself best fitted to see to it. Her efforts in the 20th Century in "teaching" Janet Rogers had resulted in the World Federation of the 21st Century. In a social order that hardly could have been considered to be "democratic". Much like the Empire of California was yet still. A social order many still yet "worshipped", not "understanding".

"Assuming that Lorraine and I didn't have a `falling out'," Darlanis smiled back, her azure eyes meeting those of Sharon's...

"I think Lorraine is one person that you can `trust'," the young golden haired Queen of Orgon grinned back, the two standing there on the quarterdeck of the Astarte, ignoring both its officers and crew as they awaited their orders to put the ship under sail, it being well known now that their destination was Trella.

"In some ways she is the `mother' I never had," Darlanis answered in a low voice that others might not overhear this now.

"We'd better get going here," Sharon smiled, Darlanis nodding as the young Queen gave her orders then to her own captain.

"Lorraineshould have had her baby by the time we get back," Diane said to me as I walked the deck for exercise, the lack of such being a reason why the Queen of Dularn weighs what she does. The voyage back home had been so far quite "uneventful", which was just the way that I preferred it! The sky was a clear blue, and the sun shone down brightly upon us just as if we wereback home right now sailing off the coast ofDularn. There was a cool pleasant breeze, one that filled out our sails nicely, and this voyage, one that so many had feared would end in our deaths, had been little more difficult than sailing down the coast line of North America. We had seen no other sign of life save for sea life from time to time, and a gentle rain the night before had allowedto replenish now to a certain extent our water reserves.

"Maybe it'll give her something to `do'," I smiled back.

"I keep thinking of Bob and Carol," she suddenly said.

"The `mysteries of time'?" I ventured, smiling back.

"And the `power' of the Priestesses," she nodded.

"I'm glad they're `here'," I said, "remembering".

"Did you actually see the `Evil One'," she asked.

"As `much' of Him as I ever want to see," I smiled.

"I'd like to stop at Sarn ifits satisfactory with you," the tall regal golden haired Empress of California said to her "daughter", Sharon being her "heir" to the throne of the Empire.

"Perhaps there is `hope' for you yet,"Sharonsmiled back, the wind gently mussing her rich golden hair in the bright sunlight. The ship's officers careful to give them both "space".

"What do you `mean' by that?" Darlanis immediately asked.

"The girl is your true daughter,"Sharon"grinned" back.

"If the `prediction' is `right'...", Darlanis mused then.

"Live for `today', not for a `tomorrow' you may never see," the young golden haired Queen answered as she stood there on the ship's quarterdeck. "Take her in your arms, love her as yours."

"I fear her, knowing the `truth'," Darlanis answered back.

"Or is it that you fear for `yourself'?"Sharonchallenged, aware that perhaps the "prediction" called for Darlanis' death...

"I am of the Warrioreesses," Darlanis answered, holding her eyes with her own. "I will not let my fears `rule' my life," she then added, standing there, so tall and golden in the sunlight.

"Janet Rogers `trusted' her,"Sharonadded softly then.

"Weather's getting up," the "first" said, seeing me nod.

"The barometer's dropping too," Paul added just then too.

"I think we may be in for another 'typhoon'," I mused back.

"I'll get the crew organized," my husband grinned in reply.

"Going to be 'bad'," I said, lowering the telescope, the wind already ruffling my hair as the North Star laid hove to now. The top masts down, even the yards now taken down. I had the sea anchors out, the men and women of the crew mostly below now finishing up fastening everything down. It was a big ocean, and we were all alone, a couple of thousand miles at least from land...

"We have 'Maris Marn'," my husband smiled, seeing me grin.

"I want to show just a wisp of sail astern," I spoke then, seeing the first officer nod. Such would help keep the ship bows on into the wind along with the twin sea anchors I had out now...

"Sure can blow hard out here," Paul yelled at me as I stood there swaying with the ship clinging to the quarterdeck railing, the raindrops striking my face like hail while the North Star fought the waves like the well designed ship she is. The "North" class of vessel is perhaps the most "seaworthy" design ever built here in this era, the Dularnian practice of a double layer hull with a layer of pitch between the hulls making for a water tight ship, a ship that can withstand almost "anything" that nature can produce. I was also aware, however, of the fact that should we ever swing about broadside to such a wind and sea as this one that doubtlessly we'd be thrown right on our side, with a good chance of losing our masts in such a case, leaving us somewhat in the same "situation" as the junk... While I did have spare spars and sails, it would be make our trip back home far longer than usual, and drinking water was always a concern out here where one could not put into shore when they wished for a fresh supply. I had little concern now, as we still had ample supplies of water, although our supply of food was only adequate for another couple months, the few fish we'd caught having served only to give us a little "variety" in our otherwise monotonous diet of ship's fare.

"You're a woman who's 'more' than a wife," he suddenly said to me over the noise of the wind and waves, the crash of thunder. His eyes looking into mine as I nodded, understanding his words!! I recalled how Bob had always "felt" about Carol, that fantastically provocative brownette, and how I had always "envied" such a "love" as that, a "love" that had transcended even time and space. I reached out to him, my eyes moist with emotion, caring nothing for the storm that raged about us, the ship leaping and heaving beneath us as he held me and our lips met in a hot kiss!

Chapter Fifty Two

"The 'Queen of Dularn' is 'good' in bed," Paul said, holding me. "She is also as 'talented' as any slave girl," he added too!

"There is a 'knock' at the door," I interrupted him then. I barked an order to "enter", Karis stepping in,

her eyes missing little, I supposed. Her opinion just then mattered little to me! During the voyage her hair had grown out a bit, leaving little doubt either as to what her true hair color actually was now too!

"The storm seems to be letting up a bit, your majesty," she spoke, her eyes, almost the color of mine, now meeting my own.

"I will come up shortly," I answered, dismissing her.

"I plan to `use' the last of this wind to our advantage," I spoke, Karis Valdis nodding along with Diane Wells, who I think had also "found" herself out here on this voyage. I would need a bit of jib showing to bring the ship hard about, I told them.

"Waves are still pretty big," Paul muttered softly then.

"Have `confidence' in your wife," I grinned back at him.

Part of my "reputation" as a captain is due to the fact that I insist upon a level of "seamanship" from my officers and crew that is generally unknown on most vessels. I do not "tolerate" the least bit of "slackness", or hesitation in obeying "orders". It is noteworthy here that Lorraine maintains the same standards on her own flagship, which is perhaps "why" she is what she is... On the other hand I don't insist on the "division" between officers and "crew" that the Imperials do. I didn't envy Karis up there at the bow, or those with her, nor those now at the capstans drawing up the twin sea anchors under Diane's eye as the bow of the ship was still disappearing from time to time in the waves, the wind still driving the spray the length of the ship!

"I will take the wheel," I spoke to the helmsman, who stepped back from the wheel, his eyes meeting mine for a moment. My hands taking the spokes, the ship like a living thing beneath my feet. "Don't let me down, old girl," I whispered to her then.

"I still feel `guilty' for having `left' Maris out there," Darlanis ventured as she and Sharon shared their evening meal together in the nicely furnished stern cabin of the lovely Astarte.

"The Astarte could make it to Japan," Sharon smiled back.

"With Lorraine as `captain'," the Empress grinned back.

"My stepmother does have certain `talents'," Sharon agreed.

"Was a bit `hairy' there for a moment," Paul said to me. A great wave had struck the North Star as she came about, tilting the ship over almost past "the point of no return", the starboard railing having been driven right under the surface of the sea... I remembered the terrified looks on the faces of the crew and that of Danny's as they clung to stays and anything else to keep from being thrown into the sea! I wondered how my own face had looked then? For an instant I had feared we would go completely over, only our lack of top masts having lightened the "top hamper" of the ship enough that she came back up to an even keel!!!

"`Maris Marn' got a bit `reckless'," I smiled, seeing him nod back. Now we were racing along, our sails hard with the wind as we headed towards the southeast, the wind and waves still being a bit too hard for us to sail directly towards the east yet. It had been my own "over confidence" in my "abilities" at

seamanship that had nearly gotten us all killed, I mused to myself...

"My wife is 'human'," my husband smiled back at me.

"And sometimes 'overconfident'," I added in a smile.

"Come to due east," I snapped, the first officer barking out her commands as the crew dashed to reset the sails. We were, I calculated, almost parallel now to Dularn in latitude, although just how "far" to the west in longitude I had no way of knowing. "And just remember that not even your Queen is 'infallible'," I then added, seeing her nod. I had been "careless" yesterday, in a way that could have resulted in the deaths of all of us. Too confident in my own abilities, in what I could do with the ship!

"OnlyLYSis 'infallible'," Karis smiled back at me then.

"That jib needs to be 'let out' a bit," I smiled back.

"Do you 'miss' Dularn?" Princess Tara asked, Mara nodding. Life was pleasant here in Mexicowith the Princess, but she missed her northern homeland, that island off the coast ofNorthAmericawhere she had been born, lived out her childhood years...

"This is not my 'land'," the Dularnian girl answered softly.

"I am a 'wanted criminal'...", "Tarabreathed out, her horribly scarred face "proof" of the weapon used by the Priestesses.

"You said you have a 'machine'," Mara answered, meeting the darkness of the former Bajan Princess' eyes as she stood there...

"The one surviving electronic hypnosis machine," Taraspoke. Centuries old, but those of the 21st Century had built well too. Hidden away now where not even the Priestesses could find it in a cave off the sea, a few miles fromLa Paz, the capital of Baja. "I suppose it is 'time' that I put it to use," she said to Mara.

"Does it 'hurt'?" Mara asked nervously, looking atTara.

"No," Taraanswered, giving her a smile in reply then.

"Everything looks 'good'," I said, completing my inspection of the ship. While I had a good crew, officers, it is often wise for the captain upon occasion to make "inspections" of her own... We still had ample supplies of water, and our food was holding up well against the damp, the mold, and everything else that bothers the sailor at sea. I had not seen many rats, our two cats having done a good job of keeping them in check. The North Star still seemed as "sound" as the day she was first launched in 2565 there in the late fall, with Darl Jord standing there at my side when I broke the bottle of wine there against her bow so long ago now... Although there had been and are other "Norths", there has been, at least in my own eyes, only one ship that I have ever "loved".

"The old girl's still pretty 'ship shape'," Karis smiled.

"And she shall be 'kept' that way," I smiled back at her.

"Sarn!" the lookout called down from the main topmast, his dizzy perch allowing him to see nine miles ahead of the Astarte.

"A brief overnight stop and we shall be on our way," Darlanis "smiled", Sharon nodding as she stood there against the rail. The Empress would take with her to Trella the child who someday would be known as "Domino Tremaine", the last Leaderess of 21st Century Earth. Darlanis wondered to herself about such things. The "mysteries" of time travel were beyond "understanding" in her eyes. The "fact" that she had held a child whose adult "remains" she would bury before the baby's birth were only another mystery. And if "people" like Bob and Carol could travel back and forth through time, why not others, the Empress mused to herself then?

"The 'world' is no longer the 'same' now," Sharon smiled.

"Once I thought I 'knew' it 'all'," Darlanis smiled back. "Now I doubt that any of us, including even Tais, really 'know'."

"You must have been a beautiful little girl," Sharon said, "admiring" the little blonde haired blue eyed girl sitting in her "mother's" lap, Darlanis being her "biological mother" if not her actual "physical" mother. Here in the 26th Century such things were not unknown, although they were not generally very "common".

"She 'is'," Darlanis spoke, giving Sharon a smile in reply. Darlanis had named the little girl "Artemis" shortly after her birth there in Nevada territory, her mother as noted having been the slave girl "Pussycat", who we've "met" in an earlier story... "Artemis" being one of the "names" by which LYS was known by.*
* Primitive man worshiped a "Goddess", as is now known. (J.B.)

"How 'old' was Domino Tremaine when she died?" Sharon asked.

"No one 'knows'," Darlanis answered, recalling that Bob had once claimed that he and Carol met the woman in the 20th Century. As they had done so in 1990, and their description was that of an adult woman appearing to be in her thirties at least, there was no way of really telling just "old" Domino Tremaine had been! "And if Bob Simmons was 'right', then nothing makes 'sense' as she could not have lived as long as she did without 'aging'," the Empress explained, it being known that the anti-aging serums were an invention of the 21st Century some years before its own "end".

"We don't 'know' that much about Martian technology, or that of the Priestesses of Lys," Sharon "pointed out" to the Empress, Darlanis "aware" from her own experience that the Priestesses of Lys possessed a "technology" far in advance of the rest of Mankind, one even superior in many ways to that of the Lorr too... It was quite possible then that they might possess a more "advanced" version of the anti-aging serums than did Mankind in general. It being often "rumored" that the Priestesses themselves had a much "longer" life span than did ordinary humans commonly.

"I fear these are 'questions' for which we will never know the 'answer'," Darlanis smiled back, cuddling the little blonde haired girl who had been formed from one of her own royal ova.

Chapter Fifty Three

"Beautiful night," my husband said, standing there beside me as the North Star plowed her way through a restless moonlit sea.

"We are 'fortunate' to have lived when we have," I smiled.

"You do not 'envy' those of the 'past'?" Paul smiled back.

"They never could 'live' as we have done," I said, seeing him nod in reply. I thought that was "why" they had written all the books they had about life in a more "simple" sort of society. While Janet Rogers was not an "oppressive" ruler, she was a woman who demanded that Mankind follow her "orders" to the "letter"... On the other hand she was "tolerant" of things few Dularnians of today are. She did have her own "prejudices", but they were not the "same" as those we find today so "commonplace" among peoples. One wonders at times whether or not we have really learned much.

"The price one pays for 'unlimited' reproduction," he said.

"Odd that they 'allowed' such things," I smiled in reply.

"Or that it took Janet Rogers to tell them," he "mused".

"They did not 'value' their world," I said, smiling back.

"You are 'wise'...", he smiled, giving me a kiss just then.

"I am not a 'dumb blonde'," I pointed out, "kissing back".

"That 'couple', I wonder 'why' they 'went back'," Paul said.

"I think they 'missed' the life they'd once had," I said. I did not think that they found it again to be the "same" anymore. I had no doubts from the bodies, from the coffins themselves that Bob and Carol had sought to "return", to come back "home" even if only their last remains would survive the centuries between us... I believe, however, that they understood that our "present" could not exist unless they were careful to keep the future a "secret"! "They carried to the grave with them a 'secret' greater than that known by anyone in the entire history of humanity," I mused then.

"If Janet Rogers had 'known'...", he mused, seeing me nod.

"None of 'this' would exist now," I answered, Paul nodding.

"I wonder if anyone would have 'believed'," he smiled then.

"I doubt it," I smiled, walking to the rail with him then. * *And if these stories were true, would you believe them? (J.B.)

"A lovely little girl, isn't she?" Darlanis smiled as Sharon nodded, little Artemis peeking over the rail at the passing waves as the Astarte now cut her way through them towards distant Trella, the capital of

Trelandar and the "home" of Lorraine Richards.

"A woman who will 'make history'," Sharon answered, wondering if Artemis and "Domino Tremaine" were actually the "same"... Only the last diary of the long dead Leaderess implied this now, a point that both she and Lorraine had tried to make to Darlanis. On the other hand the physical description of Domino Tremaine, the size of her own bone structure implied that in life she had been a woman much the same size as Darlanis. She was known to have been extremely beautiful, such having been written up in the histories of that era and in the few remaining books of that era. There was also a badly damaged photograph of the Leaderess, who did apparently look like a "twin" to Darlanis, although "older".

"Bob said that he met 'her' in the 20th Century," Darlanis mused, her azure eyes, that awesome jewel-like blue, meeting her own as Sharon nodded in reply, wondering if Darlanis had perhaps brooded too much for her own good upon this very subject now...

"My own mother looked 'somewhat' like you," Sharon replied. The Empress nodding, and then strolling off to inspect the ship, and leaving the Queen of Orgon standing there on the quarterdeck. The young Queen wondering if perhaps she'd been too hard on her? Darlanis was a woman of the 26th Century, with the "beliefs" of a person of her time, and she did not "see" things as Sharon might. On the other hand she recalled the "stories" that I had told her, stories that indicated that "time" was not what we thought of it! The little girl standing there watching her was another mystery.

Mara gave her a puzzled look when Tara released her from the electronic hypnosis headset there in the hidden cave not far from Baja's capital of La Paz. The girl's look one of horror when she saw the horribly scarred facial features of the former Princess.

"I am a friend," Tara said softly, taking her by the hand.

"Where is this?" Mara asked, looking about now at things.

"A secret place you will never remember again," Tara said, aware that Mara would never remember what she saw in this cave.

"There are things of the 'Ancients' here," Mara answered.

"Those who knew 'more' than we 'do'," the Princess smiled.

"I feel 'confused'," the young Dularnian maid admitted then.

"It will 'pass'," Tara smiled, giving the girl a hug and now leading her out of the cave, back out into the sunlight where on the beach several sailors and a small boat now awaited them both.

Captain Tori Wells, head of my Royal Guard, looked out to sea as she had so many times before, wondering if any of those she had seen sail off aboard the North Star would ever return... Would she ever again see the daughter she'd sent to see to learn discipline? There had been no word of the North Star or of the Imperial first rate that had escorted the flagship on its voyage. Some people even now claimed that the Queen of Dularn and Empress Darlanis had sailed off the edge of the world never to return. An educated woman, Tori knew "better", but even so this "waiting" was getting on her nerves, even though she knew that even the North Star could not sail a distance of over ten thousand miles as a round trip in less than a couple months at the very best...

"Every day it's the same," Karis Valdis said to me as we had dinner together there in the North Star's stern cabin. Diane Wells nodding thoughtfully. She had done well on this voyage, I thought to myself. Her mother would be proud of her, I mused...

"It's a big ocean," I smiled back, seeing her nod in reply.

"It's even hard to get the lookouts to stay awake," she smiled back. There was nothing to see but just ocean everywhere. Day after day we sailed to the east, towards a distant Dularn.

"We should sight land within the week," I smiled back.

"Calculations indicate a thousand miles yet," she said.

"Four days sailing at our present rate," Paul mused then.

"I'd like to sail her around the world someday," Diane offered. "She's really a great ship, a 'credit' to you, my Queen." I nodded, meeting her eyes, seeing the "gleam" there in hers. I supposed such a voyage was "possible" with the North Star, although it would probably take the better of a year to do it now.

"Perhaps someday you'll be her captain," I smiled at her.

"I'll take good care of her," Diane quickly promised me.

"Wind's dying out," Karis said to me that afternoon a couple days later. We were now perhaps six hundred miles from home now.

"Order the engineer to raise steam," I smiled back at her.

"Aye, aye, your majesty," she smiled back at me in reply.

"Not much wind," my husband "commented", looking about, the black smoke pouring from the funnel up into the azure sky above. The steady "thud-thud" of the engine leaving no doubts either...

"We have coal enough for three days," I smiled in reply.

"Barometer's starting to fall," Karis said to me then.

"Get those top sails in and those masts down," I spoke.

"The lookout reports a dark line of clouds on the horizon to the north," Diane said to me, the last of the top masts now down.

"Jib, spanker and main stay sail," I smiled back at her then. This time I would not take any "chances" with the ship. I saw Diane nod, watched Karis supervising the stowing of the masts below. Miss Wells clumping down to the main deck, speaking to the first officer. Karis glancing up at me, and then the sky up above, a hot mid summer sun blazing down upon us from azure blue. We were still under steam, although I had ordered no more coal to be fed into the boiler as I preferred to sail in a storm instead of relying upon the steam engine, which I didn't trust that much.

"One of those `northwester's' like back home," Karis said as the line of clouds came racing down towards us, the waves now again leaping up against the side of the ship as she heeled over.

"We're doing about six knots, I'd say," I smiled back at her as Karis nodded, her black rooted blonde hair leaving no doubts. The North Star could do "better", but there was no cause to push the old girl at this point in the "game", I thought to myself...

"Drifting to `leewards' too," Karis grinned back at me. We were drifting somewhat to the south, but that was something that I could "allow" for and make corrections for in our course now.

"Wind's pretty strong," I replied, my hair now blowing out, while Karis' half covered her face as she stood with her back to it, the leaping waves like rows of attacking warriors racing on towards us. The whistle of the wind in the rigging a sound that I've heard many a time before standing here on the quarterdeck.

"We're going to be drifting south of Dularn," she said.

"Feeling homesick?" I grinned, suspecting the "truth".

"Too long at sea for my liking!" she grinned back.

"It won't be too long now," I then promised her.

Chapter Fifty Four

"Storm's blowing itself out," Danny said to me, having been sent down from the quarterdeck by the first officer. The roll of the ship was becoming slightly less, and I could tell from the sound of the wind in the rigging that Karis spoke the truth here.

"Inform Karis to hoist the main sails as soon as she considers it `safe'," I answered, giving him a smile as he nodded back. We'd use the last of this "wind" to get another hundred miles under the keel back towards home, although I suspected from my own calculations that we were somewhat now to the south of Dularn...

"Be good to get back home again, your majesty," he spoke.

"No doubt your mother will be glad to see you," I smiled.

"A guy's `lucky' to serve under you," he answered me.

"I'm `lucky' too," my husband grinned as he left us.

"I see you've raised steam," Darlanis said, the wind having died out, leaving the hot mid summer sun burning down upon them. The black smoke from the Astarte's funnel drifting up into the sky overhead

and spreading out like an ominous black pall now. A steady "thud-thud" of the steam engine causing the ship's fabric to vibrate slightly as the bronze propeller churned at the stern. Artemis clinging to her mother's hand, the three year old girl like a lovely doll, the very image of what Darlanis herself had once been long ago when Queen Tulis of Dularn had raised Aurora's daughter as her own, while at the same time yet suspecting the "truth" here that her husband had "cheated" on her with Aurora!

"Better than sitting waiting for a wind," Sharon smiled.

"We'll have one," the Empress "promised" with a smile.

"My captain seems to `agree' with you," Sharon noted.

"I wish you'd tell me `who' you are," Mara said, there being "something" about this horribly scarred woman she felt that she should remember. That the woman was wealthy she had no doubts... One could tell that from her own mannerisms, the way she acted.

"I am a `friend'," the former Princess of Baja smiled back, taking Mara's hand for a moment before then leaving there on the deck of the ship that would take her back home to distant Dularn.

"I think she `smells land'," Karis said to me as the North Star now raced through the growing light of a false dawn. I didn't want to dash her hopes, but I didn't think we were that close yet. On the other hand trying to calculate our position by "dead reckoning" after being this long at sea wasn't accurate either... The upper sails now pale ghosts against the blackness of the sky.

"When it is light we will heave to and make some deep sea soundings," I answered. That would at least give us a "hint" of just how far we were from land as the continental shelves themselves went out several hundred miles from the coast line of North America. If the "depth" was less than a thousand feet, then we were no doubt now sailing over the continental shelves. On the other hand my own calculations placed us three days sail yet from land, and that was at averaging 200 miles a day too...

"She's a good ship, `better' than any Imperial," Karis said.

"They build good ships, and Lorraine is my equal," I smiled.

"Let's just hope their `Warlady' decides to practice motherhood instead of `war'," my first officer smiled right back at me! "Without Bob and Carol we don't `have' anyone the `equal' of Lorraine now." I nodded thoughtfully, thinking of the dried remains we'd found. Of the "implications" here, considering the coffins.

"I've `proved' that I can `match' Lorraine at sea," I answered, perhaps a bit "shortly" upon reviewing my own words here. "And the knowledge they possessed is also ours to use," I added.

"I didn't mean to `imply'..., your majesty," she breathed!

"Sometimes we all say things we wish we didn't," I smiled.

"Seas are getting up, your majesty," Sharon's captain said, her eyes glowing down into the azure of her young Queen's, while those of Darlanis and her daughter gleamed there in the glow from the lamp. The roll and heave of the Astarte now growing heavier.

"Shorten our sail to mains and full reefs in those," Sharon spoke, the woman nodding while Darlanis and Artemis watched them. "We'll `use' this wind to shorten the distance to Trella a bit."

"Aye, aye your majesty," the woman replied, leaving them.

"Lower away," I ordered, the North Star rolling in the swell as she rode hove to. The weight at the end of its long slim cord quickly disappearing beneath the restless surface of the Pacific. I wondered if it would touch bottom before the full thousand feet of cord was run out. The watch on deck standing there quietly as the sun rose there in the east, a golden orb upon the moving sea.

"Hundred feet out," the man muttered, watching the cord play out from the spool. We were at least five hundred miles yet from land according to my own calculations, but how "accurate" these were now was a question that even I couldn't answer anymore now!

"Two hundred feet," I breathed, watching the cord play out. I thought of the darkness of the depths, the cold, of the forms of life that inhabited these depths. Strange creatures rarely seen by anyone except by fishermen who ventured far out past the sight of land. Creatures perhaps more "legend" than "reality"...

"Three hundred feet, your majesty," the sailor breathed out.

"Three times the length of the North Star," I muttered back, the length of the rope out now sixty fathoms, or 360 feet for you landlubbers, although the "length" at the waterline is shorter. A vision going through my mind of the North Star sinking into these depths, a ghostly shadow in the shifting deep violet deep.

"Four hundred feet," the man spoke, the cord still running.

"We probably won't be able to touch bottom yet," I spoke.

"Nine hundred," the man spoke, looking up at me, the line still running out. Then suddenly, the line stopped running out!!

"Nine hundred and twenty feet!" I breathed, the man nodding! The crew muttering among themselves, aware that we had indeed managed to "touch" bottom here with our deep sea sounding line!!!

"Home," I breathed, looking to the east, into the rising sun as it stood gleaming above the restless moving azure green water. The crew breaking out into a cheer for the ship and its captain!

"A beautiful day," Diane said to me, Karis grinning as she stood there swaying on the quarterdeck beside me. "And in a couple days now we'll be in sight of land!" she now added hopefully.

"If the wind holds as it does," I answered, giving her a smile. The North Star was being driven hard right now, being well heeled over. Bob's reinforcement of her masts and rigging had made her even "better" than she had been back in the days when we'd fought the Imperials under Lorraine's best we could against their superior numbers and heavier more powerful ships.

"I never doubted we could `do' it, your majesty" she smiled right back. I nodded, wondering if she'd always felt that way...

"We proved that this ocean can be `crossed'," I smiled back.

"And it was the Queen of Dularn who `did it'," she smiled.

"The `depth' is now only six hundred and seventy feet," I announced to the listening ears of the crew the next morning as I stood there at the bow next to the sailor with the deep sea line. There was no doubt now that we were over the continental shelf. Doubtlessly we still had hundreds of miles to sail, but we were for all practical purposes now once again sailing in North American waters. Just "where" we were in relation to the land now was something I didn't know, although my "sight" of the sun yesterday indicated that we were somewhat to the south of Dularn proper. I had thus ordered a course change that would take us to the north more, hopefully such that our first sighting of land would be Dularn itself, and not part of the territory claimed by the Empire.

"Another couple days will see us to Trella," Sharon spoke, Darlanis nodding as she stood so radiantly beautiful in her golden attire on the quarterdeck, little Artemis there at her side. The wind off the sea blowing the hair of this lovely golden pair.

"It will be `good' to see Lorraine again," Darlanis smiled.

"She is a woman quite like no `other'," Sharon laughed back.

"The greatest Warriress of all time," the Empress grinned.

"I'm glad we flew through the `Gateway'," Sharon smiled.

"So am I," the Empress of Imperial California answered.

"I think `history' has been `made'," Sharon agreed.

Chapter Fifty Five

"Who was that woman?" Mara mused, watching the restless sea as the ship plowed its way through the waves towards far Dularn. There was "something" about her that seemed to be so "familiar", but for the life of her she couldn't figure out what it was now! And the idea of going to the Priestesses seemed to be out of the question for some reason, although she didn't know quite why now! There was a sort of "blur" in her memories, as if something was "missing", Tara's use of electronic hypnosis having been rather unskilled, leaving poor Mara with a certain amount of confusion.

"We are now approaching Lorraine's estates," the captain of the Astarte announced to her golden haired Queen, Darlanis nodding as she sat there watching little blonde Artemis at play. A smile from her seated Queen there in the stern cabin her reward.

"It is possible that Lorraine is `here', instead of in Trella," Darlanis ventured then in her lovely rich voice to

Sharon.

"Approach the shore, and make signals," Sharon ordered...

"We are perhaps 'here'," I spoke, my husband nodding back.

"We could sight land tomorrow then," Prince Paul Blue Sky of the Wyoming smiled back, studying the chart laid out there on my oaken desk. Dularn lying just ahead of the ship's course now. I didn't think we would, but it was likely now the day afterwards. How accurate my calculations were after all was another question.

"I am trying to make the strait," I "grinned" back at him.

"And add to your 'legendary reputation'," he smiled back.

"There is, as you have said so many times now, only one 'Maris Marn'," I laughed, aware of the "truth" there in his words.

"And she is 'mine'," he answered with a joyous laugh, seizing me then by my silver neck chain and drawing me to his lips.

"Thought it'd be 'better' here," Lorraine smiled, greeting her golden haired guests there on her estate, there being no sign of the damage done back two years before by the Warlady of Dularn, the fantastic amazing and provocative Carol Lynn Simmons.

"Should be 'any day' now," Darlanis smiled, looking at her.

"'Looks' like I swallowed a watermelon!" Lorraine laughed.

"The Priestess says our son is healthy," Jon Richards added.

"You 'left' Maris 'out there'," Lorraine suddenly spoke in an accusing voice, her dark eyes blazing into those of Darlanis. It was not "something" that the Empress thought highly of doing and she had feared what others might say upon hearing about it...

"Sarnian Queen was damaged...", Darlanis protested, wondering to herself how Lorraine had learned of the matter this soon. She thought it likely that Sarnian Queen had also come this way, perhaps even stopping here before continuing on south to Baja. It being necessary to sail completely around Baja to reach Nevada territory, the only other way being to travel overland, over the mountains that separated California from the desert to the east.

"The Japanese may 'keep' her and the North Star," Lorraine spoke, a film of sweat on her brow, the living room hot, stuffy. "If she does not 'return' in the next few months I am taking a fleet of steam frigates across the Pacific," the Warlady spoke. "Along with Black Lady and enough fuel so that I can overfly the Japanese islands," the Imperial Warlady spoke in a strange tone! The look on her face leaving no doubts then what was happening!

"You are having labor pains!" Jon Richards breathed then!

"I fear my concerns over Maris Marn will have to wait," the Imperial Warlady, the elected Queen of Trelandar now smiled back! A slave girl, more "attentive" than the others, now bringing in a woman in the attire of the Physicians along with a Priestess too.

"I will sail with you," the Empress of California replied.

"Let's hope they don't harm Maris," Lorraine spoke then.

"When's Lorraine due to have her baby?" Paul asked me as we ate dinner. The North Star plowing her way through the waves. I wondered if the Japanese government would send a ship to Dularn?

"Any time now," I now grinned back, recalling the Warlady.

"She's an 'enemy' any Warrior might 'respect'," he said.

"I think in a way she is a 'friend' too," I answered him.

"One is known by the swords of one's enemies," he smiled.

"A 'saying' of the Wyomings?" I smiled back, seeing him nod.

"I've often wondered if she is as 'good' as the tales say," he mused, regarding me over the rim of the goblet in his hand. I informed him that Lorraine was indeed as "good" as the tales say! I saw her 'take on' Carol, and best her like some girl new to the sword, and Carol was a swordswoman nearly of "gold medal" rating! When it comes to swordsmanship, the woman has yet to live who could best Lorraine Richards, Queen of Trelandar in open battle!

"Hurts," Lorraine hissed, wet with sweat as she gave birth. The Priestess standing there watching quietly while the woman of the Physicians did her work. Then suddenly the woman stood up, and slapped the little squirming bloody red figure on its rump! A cry of protest informing all that Trelandar now had a Prince!!!

"The baby is fit to live," the Priestess spoke, examining it with glowing eyes, it being the task of the Priestesses to verify that all newborns were fit to live and not mutants or defectives of one sort or another to be destroyed in the "water bucket"...

"Was worried about that a bit," Lorraine breathed, her dark brown eyes glowing up into those of the lighter eyed Priestess. * * It was the policy in the 26th Century to destroy all "defective children" at birth. Such is perhaps a policy we should follow considering the social costs we have allowing such life. (JB)

"I have a son," Jon Richards spoke, looking down at his wife, meeting the darkness of her eyes with his own as he took the baby from the Physician and placed it then in Lorraine's arms. The Imperial Warlady holding the baby to herself, smiling.

"'We' have a son," Lorraine gently "corrected" him softly.

"Sometimes I speak without thinking," Lorraine said to Darlanis, the Warlady resting, a tired look on her stern features. Her young son sleeping peacefully in his crib next to the bed.

"I think you spoke as a Warriress must," Darlanis said.

"I let Tarago when I could have had her," Lorraine smiled.

"That time when you chased her half way to Hawaii?" the Empress replied, recalling that Lorraine had finally damaged her ship the Corsica in the mad pursuit after Tara to the point that she was forced to break off the chase due to severe storm damage.

"Too eager to fight," the famous Warlady smiled back then.

"We all make `mistakes'," Darlanis smiled at the Warlady.

"We are `human', not `computers'," Lorraine grinned back.

"Maris is a `crafty wench'," Darlanis mused thoughtfully.

"As we both well know," Lorraine readily agreed with her.

"I think a ship like the North Star or the Astarte would be `better' for such a voyage than any of our steam frigates," Darlanis suggested. "When it comes to ship design, those designed by Maris herself seem to be `superior' to anything we can build."

"She's not a `dumb blonde'," Lorraine agreed, smiling a bit.

"We're `lucky' that the Simmons did go back to their own time," Darlanis ventured, recalling now what I had once told her. I had not however told her about what I'd found with the bodies.

"Carol wasn't really a `fighting woman'," Lorraine commented. "On the other hand she managed to make `fools' of us both," the Warlady grinned, seeing the beautiful Empress nod in return.

"She understood how to `use' our weaknesses against us," Darlanis commented, the provocative brownette having been a very "crafty" woman in many ways, one who understood "tactics" in a way that left no doubts that she was truly "of" the Warriresses.

"And a woman that any red blooded man might lust after," the Queen of Trelandar grinned, the Empress nodding, "smiling" a bit.

"She fought well in the arena too," Darlanis recalled, having seen the brownette fighting there alongside her beloved Bob.

"Theirs was a love like none I've ever seen," Lorraine spoke softly, her dark brown eyes staring on past Darlanis to see what only she could see. Memories of a time over five centuries past.

"Can't sleep?" my husband asked, sitting up now in bed, seeing me sitting there on the cushioned seat there beneath the stern windows clad in my robe against the chill of the night air. It was very late too, perhaps three or four am in the morning...

"Just remembering `another'," I answered, recalling Carol.

"Share you thoughts," he suggested, encouraging me to speak.

"There was once a woman I knew, who was loved like no other woman was ever 'loved'," I spoke, "A woman who has been dead now for nearly five centuries, but a woman that I once 'knew' well." I had never mentioned that she had stood at my side there in the north when I faced that evil demoness from Hell blade to blade...

"You speak in 'riddles'," Prince Paul Blue Sky said to me.

"I speak of Carol Simmons, who was my Warlady," I spoke. He knew of course of her, of the remains that had been found hidden in a cave outside Arsana. I had no doubts now of "how" they had felt towards a society to which they could never return in life. "She was 'loved' so much by her husband that their marriage was 'more' than just a marriage, more than just a 'joining'," I said.

"Your eyes are wet with tears," my husband observed then.

"Sometimes I am just an 'emotional woman'," I smiled.

Chapter Fifty Six

"I'd like to talk to her," Darlanis said to Lorraine's slave girl, the wench nodding, going to her knees in submission then. The Imperial Warlady sitting there with her new born son smiling there on the dock that overlooked the blue green Pacific beyond. A trio of burly men having carried her lounge chair to the dock. The slave then moving back, seating herself there on the grass. Artemis sat down nearby on the dock, watching the moving waves, the tall golden haired Empress keeping an eye on her little girl.

"I am sometimes not the 'friend' that I should be," Lorrainesaid, looking into the beautiful sapphire orbs of the Empress' as she leaned back against a piling. The golden ruler nodding back, an "eye" upon three year old Artemis, who seemed to have little fear of the water. The Princess of California was a lovely girl.

"You were 'right' to speak as you did," Darlanis spoke.

"I once 'hated' Maris, but no more," Lorrainesaid.

"Our ships are 'inferior' to hers," Darlanis said.

"I would disagree with you on that," Lorrainesaid. "I do believe, however, that there is only one 'Maris Marn of Dularn'."

"You are the only naval commander equal to her," the Empress answered. Such had been "proved" in battle two years before now.

"Maris believes that I am 'better'," Lorrainesmiled back.

"Are you?" Darlanis challenged, giving her a smile then.

"At war, perhaps, but not `otherwise',"Lorrainesaid.

"You are like her now a `legend'," Darlanis admitted.

"This is a `time of adventure',"Lorrainegrinned.

"I am glad to have lived now," Darlanis spoke.

"I share the same feelings too,"Lorrainesaid.

"We have made history, you and I," Darlanis smiled.

"Couple hundred miles, if my figures are right," I said, coming up from below where I had consulting the charts again now.

"And only Maris Marn could have done it," Paul grinned, standing there on the deck, the sun now brilliant off the waves. The crew skylarking on deck, everyone looking forward to "home"!

"I do think the North Star deserves some of the `credit'," I smiled back. I was proud of the ship, of what it had survived. There were "newer" ships, the armored battleships that spoke of another era, of an age now only myth and legend here in our time. But yet I was "proud" of the North Star, of its men and women who made up the crew, the officers. Of those who called me captain.

"We have `proved' that this ocean can be crossed," he said.

"I never had any doubts of `that'," I smiled back at him.

"I am glad you wear my neck chain," he grinned back at me.

"I'm not a `beauty' like Darlanis, but I do have my `talents'," I smiled back, standing there provocatively before him in the common tunic and hose attire of the Dularnian warrior woman.

"I hope there are no more `Pharis" to greet us," he said, referring to that woman who in the pay of others had sought to take from me the throne of Dularn. The woman whom I had slew...

"Or anything `else' waiting for us," I grinned back in reply, recalling the "difficulties" I'd had with Darl Jord's ghost. Especially with his "friends" that had come to "haunt" my home. Hopefully too the Priestesses of Lys would not "tolerate" another like Queen Valeris and her "witchcraft" that had caused us so much trouble! I still remembered that "spider" forming in the sky! The ghastly glowing greenish light that had shown then...

"I expect `that' was an `experience' you'll never forget," he smiled, having heard my "tale" of my adventures several times.

"Nor Darlanis, I expect," I smiled, remembering her bravery.

"You did have an `adventure' few others have had,"Lorrainesaid as Darlanis leaned back against the piling while the Queen of Trelandar relaxed there in the bright sunlight with her baby. Artemis having left them to go to the beach, to play in the sand. The Warlady's slave girl going to her, squatting down beside

her.

"Taught me 'something' about Maris too," Darlanis "smiled".

"More 'guts' than you figured on?" Lorraine "grinned" back.

"She didn't seem to 'stand up' too much against you back two years ago, but there in the north she had 'balls' enough." the Empress commented, recalling when I had been Lorraine's "captive" along with Bob Simmons before our own "rescue" by Carol Simmons. "I don't think I could have 'made it' without her beside me..."

"We all have our 'terrors'," the Warlady smiled back. "I have mine, and you have yours," Lorrainespoke, Darlanis nodding.

"I keep thinking too of that 'prediction'," Darlanis said.

"And the philosophical concept of 'free will'?" the black haired woman from the Twentieth Century smiled back at Darlanis. "That is of course if you believe I actually metLYSon Mars..." There were many who believed thatLorrainehad merely suffered from an illusion caused by the lack of oxygen and Raspa's venom.

"I believe that you believe that you did," Darlanis smiled.

"You would make an excellent politician," Lorrainegrinned.

"I have 'learned' a few things over the years," the Empress smiled back. "And I think there are 'mysteries' beyond our own understanding too," Darlanis added, the sun glinting on her gold.

"The 'mysteries' of 'time' itself?" Lorrainesmiled back, undoing her dress and pressing her son's face to her nipple now. Darlanis smiling, aware thatLorrainehad come came from a culture where women often felt ashamed to "expose" themselves so... The "sexual mores" of the 20th Century being "mysteriously odd".

"And the 'knowledge' that only the Priestesses possess," the Empress added, aware that the Priestesses were not what she herself had once thought them to be only half a dozen years before.

"We are also fortunate that they 'do'," the Warlady grinned.

"I 'believe' what I was told there on Mars," Lorrainesaid.

"You yourself admitted that it was more 'likely' just the result of lack of oxygen and Raspa's venom effecting your mind," Darlanis retorted. Yet, she herself "worried" about all of this! The child who would someday be "Domino Tremaine" was playing right there in the tan sand, happily digging away as children do. The child who as an adult woman would be Janet Roger's vice Leaderess, the woman who would be Earth's last ruler, the woman whose last mortal remains Princess Tara had found beneath Triskelion!!!

"Raspa traveled a distance beyond even the endurance of the Lorr to save my life there on Mars, and she too sawLYSjust as I did," Lorraineanswered in level tones. The Empress nodding now.

"Post a good lookout tonight," I said to Karis. We were getting close to land now, the seagulls we saw

"proof" of that... Such birds do not travel that far from land as the "pickings" out in the middle of the ocean are very poor, I might mention here.

"I'm sure there will be many eyes `watching' tonight," she smiled back, Diane Wells standing there watching us both from the deck where she was supervising a group of sailors checking the rigging for flaws. I planned to sail back into Arsana with the ship in as good if not better "condition" than when we'd left it!

"There are also fishermen who venture out this far," I said.

"Perhaps it would be wise to take in the top gallants when it gets dark," my first officer smiled back, seeing me nod then.

"That way there won't be any `surprises'," I smiled back.

"We wouldn't want `that', your majesty," she grinned.

"The world has certainly `changed' in the last five years," Jon Richards smiled, looking at those seated around the table. The dinner set out before them all the best the cook could make.

"We have found our `second Janet Rogers'," Darlanis smiled, glancing at Lorraine, the Warlady nodding, looking at her plate.

"We did it `together'," the Queen of Trelandar spoke then.

"We did have `help'," the Imperial Warlady "smiled" back.

"You said that Maris found the last remains of the Simmons," John Richards spoke then to Darlanis, changing the subject here.

"The `location' of their graves leaves one with certain `implications'," Lorraine said, her dark eyes like piercing lasers.

"Maris said that they left for their own time of their own free will," Darlanis spoke, sharing the thoughts of her Warlady.

"Anyone in `contact' with the Priestesses of Lys has no `free will'," Lorraine suddenly spoke, her words seeming to echo about the room, even the slave girls kneeling there raising their heads in awe at her words! "The Priestesses `used' the Simmons for their own ends, and then sent them `back' in time after they had no further `use' for them," Lorraine continued on saying now.

"Tomorrow Arsana!" Paul smiled, lifting his cup to me then.

"Don't get your `hopes' up," I smiled, well aware of the flaws in my navigation after a voyage of this length. We might sight the coast line of North America tomorrow, but where was another question. I was sailing on the same latitude now as the strait that separates Dularn from the mainland, but whether or not we'd sight that first was another question I couldn't answer!

"There's only `one' Maris Marn," he grinned back at me then.

"She is not 'infallible'," I pointed out, sipping my wine. A knock at the door proving to be Diane, who announced that there was a row of dark clouds on the horizon and that Karis wished to shorten sail, the barometer having also fallen a bit in the last few hours, I'd noted, although nothing too "serious" as yet here.

Chapter Fifty Seven

"And we're so 'close' now too," Karis breathed, the clouds now just visible there ahead of us a dark threatening line on the eastern horizon while the sun a glowing globe set now behind us. Paul standing there grinning to himself over some private "joke" no doubt. My husband being a man with a true sense of "humor"... He was of course well aware of what a storm like this might "do".

"Probably just one of those 'summer storms' we get from the east," I smiled, aware that it would be necessary to shorten sail now despite any of our wishes otherwise. Karis cursing a bit under her breath... Her words making me smile a bit to myself too!

"Aye, aye, your majesty," she grinned, barking her orders.

"Have steam raised," I smiled, seeing her grin and nod now!

"At least we'll make some 'headway'," she smiled back at me.

"Might as well burn up some of that coal we've got," I said.

"No sense in hauling it back to Dularn," she grinned back.

"Heading right into the 'teeth' of it too," Karisaid, the wind gusts warm and smelling of rain. I saw no reason at this point to try to collect rainwater as we had, given the distance I now calculated that we were from land. A bright flash of lightning leaving little doubt that we were in for a storm now too... The clouds there ahead of us like some encroaching sky monster. The black smoke pouring from our funnel as we got steam up now, the propeller starting to turn as the engine got steam pressure. The engine was small, designed more to just move the ship about in a calm than to serve as a primary means of propulsion, but it would help hold the ship in place against wind and wave here now.

"Take down everything but jib and spanker," I answered her, the smoke now rising from the funnel being blown behind the ship with the wind as the seas rose, the ship plunging into them now. A jagged bolt of lightning suddenly striking the sea ahead of us!

"Good thing it's 'warm!'" Karis breathed, the spray flying the length of the North Star as she smashed into the great waves. The heavy black smoke from the funnel flying out behind as we drove forward into the teeth of the storm, the spray leaping up over the bow in great sheets now to soak the length of the ship.

"Not making a knot headway," I replied, glancing over the side at the water. Even with the engine at full

power we could hardly match the force of the wind and waves striking against the hull. On the other hand tacking into such a storm as I once used to do wouldn't have gotten us much further. We'd just have to ride this out even if it meant that we didn't see land for another day now. It was frustrating, but there wasn't anything that I could do about it, the North Star's engine not that "powerful". The best that it could "do" being around four knots, I've noted.

"Should 'blow out' eventually," my first officer commented.

"You'll have to get your hair 'rebleached'," I smiled back, changing the subject just as bit as we stood there side by side.

"All Dularnian women are 'supposed' to be 'blondes'," she grinned. That was why the Californians "believed" of us, I knew.

"And we're all 'good' with swords and bows," I added then.

"Boat ahoy!" the lookout yelled down then to the deck!

"Fishing boat of some sort!" Karis gasped in shock!

"Dismasted, out of control!" Paul spoke beside me!

"Line throwing crew to the deck!" I now snapped out!

"Some of us 'know' what to 'do'," Karis breathed, Diane and a couple of burly seamen already at the jib as the dismasted boat now rapidly drifted down on towards the approaching North Star. It would take quick work with the jib and engine in this sea...

"I'll take the wheel," I spoke, the helmsman stepping back. I reached out, slowed the engine, the North Star now "dead" in the water as the fishing boat drifted down upon us. With the jib now "free", and the spanker yet set, the North Star was held bows on to the sea, with only the rudder and screw to guide her now.

"If that boat drifts down under our bow...", Karis breathed. The frail craft would be smashed to planking by the ship's weight as the North Star fell with the waves upon it! I had to edge the North Star "over" just a hair, the fishing boat now just visible. I could see a man and a woman, a teenage boy, and a young girl.

"Line's thrown," Paul spoke, standing there beside me now.

"Hope they know enough to draw the main cable over," I said. That was attached to the light throwing line with its big float. I already had the engine in reverse so that the North Star might drift with the wind along with the fishing boat. The ship almost uncontrollable in a wind like this, although Karis' work with the spanker was allowing me to hold the lithe threemaster in place so far, the jib under Diane's guidance being allowed to fly free.

"Only 'Maris Marn' herself could do this," Paul said to me, his face like mine wet from the spray and the falling heavy rain. The thunder like a drum roll as the lightning flashed over us...

"They have the cable secured!" Karis yelled, the fishing boat now drifting alongside the North Star, several men with fend offs trying to keep it from smashing itself against the ship now!

"ThankLys!" I breathed, pushing the engine repeater to forward once again, the North Star now once again meeting the waves! We'd tow the fishing boat with us, I quickly informed Karis now, those aboard scrambling upon over the side to stand dripping on the deck, perhaps thankful toLYS that their Queen had "arrived"!

"Lys answered our prayers!" the woman said, her husband nodding, their son of sixteen or so holding their little girl. Often such "fishing families" sail out of sight of land for fish. We were apparently a bit "closer in" now than I'd thought here. The family was "light haired" like many sea faring Dularnians... Their attire leaving no doubts either as to what they did for a living, the "odor" of long dead fish now filling the cabin too. The steady "beat" of the steam engine at work a comforting sound.

"When this wind goes down I'll give you a spar for a mast," I said, the Queen of Dularn aware that this episode would just be another part of the yet growing "Maris Marn" legends now common!

"The fishing was good before the storm came," he "smiled".

"We have been a bit 'short' of fresh food," I "smiled" back.

"You did cross the ocean," the woman spoke, her voice filled with awe. I wondered too if she believed the Earth was "round"? There were those who believed it was "flat" like some "pancake".

"And we 'met' with a Japanese warship," Prince Paul grinned.

"The Queen of Dularn will 'buy' your catch," I said to them.

"Haven't had a 'meal' like that since we left Arsana," Paul said to me, wiping his lips, the fresh fish having been "good". Karis, Diane, and Danny nodding in agreement as Kathi "cleared", setting goblets of wine before us. Such being from my own stock.

"I think I've learned what 'seamanship' means," Diane said.

"I've had a lot of 'experience'," I "smiled" back at her.

"You handled the North Star like a row boat," Karis said.

"An understanding of the 'vector of forces'," I answered.

"There is but one 'Maris Marn'," Danny Oaks smiled in reply.

"We should sight land tomorrow," I said, getting ready for bed. The storm had died out, and we were once again under sail with the fishing boat in tow astern bouncing over the waves now.

"I'm getting 'used' to living like this," Paul said to me.

"Our bedroom is larger than this cabin," I smiled back.

"There's something comforting about being rocked to sleep," he said, lifting the blanket so that I might get in beside him.

"It will seem 'strange' at first when we get back home," I answered, giving him a kiss. I was naked

beneath my night shift. I felt him reach for mybody, draw the woolen night shift up now.

"Maris Marn is also `good in bed'," he said to me smiling.

"A Queen of `many talents'," I smiled back, kissing him.

"I'd like to fly to Dularn," Darlanis said toLorraineas they ate breakfast, Black Lady tied down before the manor house. Powered by common alcohol, the airplane could be refueled in any major city of the 26th Century. Oil and spare parts however had to come from Mars, and that required getting into communication with Raspa, something that also now involved the Priestesses with their "restrictions" on spacecraft from the red planet Mars.

"TakeSharonwith you if you go,"Lorrainesmiled back. A "nod" from the azure eyed Empress being an adequatereply then...

"Her captain can sail the Astarte back," Darlanis "smiled".

"Ten knots, your majesty," Karis said to me. We'd do a bit "better" than that if we weren't still towing the fishing boat, I knew, but I didn't like to leave them out here to make repairs...

"We should raise land by nightfall," I assured Karis then.

"Kind'a hate to see it," Karis smiled softly back at me.

"The `end' of a voyage that's made history," I smiled.

"At least it's something no Imperial's done," she said.

"Lorrainewill probably try it next," I grinned at her.

"But we'll have been `first'," she reminded me then.

"And `that' is something we'll never forget," I said.

"You're pretty far `out',"Sharonsaid, looking at Darlanis. It had been a long flight, even for the swift black Beechcraft.

"Just `hoping'," the Empress smiled softly back atSharon. Theocean like a rippling pond there two miles under the wings.

"Something ahead,"Sharonsaid, getting the binoculars.

"A ship?" Darlanis asked, straining her older eyes.

"Three masts, Dularnian second rate,"Sharonsaid.

"Take the controls," Darlanis spoke, taking the 10x60's.

"Something in the sky!" Karis cried, drawing my attention!

"It's not a Tarl!", the look out then informed us all!

"Could just be...", I muttered, thinking of Darlanis!

"Lorraine?" Karis asked, handing me the telescope.

"I think not," I smiled, thinking of Darlanis.

Chapter Fifty Eight

"You should have been a `jet jockey'!" Sharon breathed as Darlanis "buzzed" the North Star, almost flying between the masts as she pulled up from a screaming dive Lorraine wouldn't have much "appreciated" the Empress doing had she known of it then... Black Lady was no "jet fighter", and she wasn't built for such!

"It's the North Star!" Darlanis cried with joy, coming around in a climbing turn that almost stalled the black V-tailed Beechcraft out then! The Empress' skill at flying not that good! There being old pilots and bold pilots, but never both, Sharon remembered as she then now took over the controls from Darlanis.

"You belong in a saddle, not an airplane!" Sharon snapped!

"Sorry," the joyful Empress grinned, Sharon nodding back.

"Just don't do it again," the young woman smiled back.

"It's Black Lady all right," I said, the airplane's dive at the ship having caused some of the crew to even duck for cover!!! "And only Darlanis would fly like that," I explained to my crew.

"It's coming back," my husband spoke then from beside me.

"Flying more `level' now," I observed thoughtfully then.

"What do you think Darlanis is up to?" Karis asked me.

"I'm sure we'll soon find out," I smiled right back.

"Water's too rough for a landing," Sharon said to Darlanis.

"The North Star can pick me up," the Empress replied, undoing her ornate weapons harness and removing her lovely boots. A look of awe in Sharon's eyes as she saw what Darlanis intended!

"You'll hit the water at a mile a minute!" Sharon gasped!

"Let's just hope the North Star picks me up," Darlanis said, suddenly leaping from the plane as it flew low over the waves!!! Sharon circling about, praying to see that Darlanis had survived!

For Darlanis the impact was like falling off a unicorn at full gallop as she slammed into a wave feet first, the airplane having been about a dozen feet over the water when she'd jumped! The Empress, stronger than most women, grunting with the impact! Then she struggled back to the surface and managed to wave to the circling airplane as the North Star came sailing up, the sails a flap as I ordered the ship to heave to and a boat then lowered...

"There is only 'one' Darlanis," Paul said to me as the boat's crew dragged the dripping Empress over the side of their leaping craft. The airplane circling us like some mother bird.

"The term 'dumb blonde' doesn't really 'fit'," I smiled. I knew of Darlanis' courage, of the fact that she feared no man or beast. The only time I'd ever seen her show fear had been when we'd fled the EVIL ONE, and I think that was a fear not of physical danger, but perhaps of a danger to our own immortal souls!

"You're going to get yourself killed doing 'things' like that!" I said, giving Darlanis a great big hug before everyone. There is "something" about Darlanis that is very likable too! A sort of "wild recklessness" at times that can be very endearing!

"The 'impact' was greater than I thought it would be," the Empress admitted with a rueful smile. Black Lady's slowest speed before stalling out was about sixty miles per hour, I recalled...

"I 'worried' about you," I said, looking into her eyes.

"I 'too'," Darlanis answered, holding me before her.

"I think you did the 'right thing'," Darlanis said to me as she sat there in the stern cabin of the North Star. I had cast off the fishing boat this morning, the family eager to leave, saying that they wanted to return to the school of fish that they had been exploiting before the storm's winds had dismantled them. Black Lady under Sharon's command had left to head for Arsana, a distance of some sixty miles or so, Darlanis had quickly told me.

"I wouldn't have been so 'cautious' had you been with me," I answered, seeing the Empress of California nodding back in reply.

"We could have ended up 'kept' by the Japanese Emperor," the golden haired ruler answered, her golden attire "fitting" on her. "And forced to construct for the Japanese ships like our own." A fleet of "steam frigates" that would have been a "telling" weapon in a culture where such vessels were totally unknown, I knew too! "Just like the 'ideas' I once held about Lorraine," she added...

"We are, as the Priestesses have said, a 'war-loving race'," my husband smiled, giving the beautiful Empress a big grin now. That was part of the reason why the Lorr and the Women considered themselves "superior" to us, both being quite "unwarlike" races.

"On the other hand we have a 'vitality' others lack," the Empress smiled back, her azure eyes for a moment now holding his. She is a strikingly beautiful woman, even perhaps one of a kind.

"You plan to sail through the night?" Darlanis asked me.

"My lookouts are competent," I smiled. In any case there would be plenty of eyes to seek out the land, which I expected to spot shortly, if only the lights of some fishing boat in the strait, that being surprisingly enough where the North Star was now headed, my navigation having been better than I had thought! There was just enough "wind" to fill the sails, and I had everything set, the North Star beautiful with all her sails aloft now. "I also plan to sail into Arsana this very night," I told her. Sharon had gone on ahead to tell everyone that I would be coming.

"You have no idea then as to just 'when' the North Star will arrive?" Sharon asked, Tori Wells' eyes meeting hers as the captain of my guard nodded back. Arsana was all "abuzz" with the news of the unexpected return of the North Star this "soon" after it had been felt by many that the ship and their Queen would never return. The fact that the ship had reached Japan was "news"! This information having been sent by signal light to the airplane as Sharon circled the ship, although "more" than this was beyond the capabilities of the young Queen to understand the Morse Code .

"There is the wind, and the tide," Tori smiled back then.

"You remind me a bit of Carol Simmons," Sharon grinned.

"Others have noted the same thing," the captain said.

"You must be 'proud' of your Queen," Sharon said then.

"All of us are," Tori spoke, her eyes meeting Sharon's.

"The lookout has spotted lights ahead," Karis said as she stepped into the stern cabin. No doubt those of fishing boats.

"I will come up," I smiled, throwing on my cape then.

"I see you lit our own running lights," I said to her.

"I felt it wise," she grinned in the binnacle light.

"It would not do to have an 'accident' now," I noted.

"It might be wise to get up steam," she "suggested".

"Do so," I answered, the wind seeming to die out.

"Dularn," I spoke to Darlanis, the Moon now rising over the land, a mist there on the strait as we came in under steam power.

"A proud moment for the Queen of Dularn and her people," the Empress said to me, standing there huddled underneath her cloak.

"We have learned to work together as friends," I smiled.

"Perhaps `that' is more valuable than trade," she replied.

"Did you ever note that all our countries are now ruled by women?" I grinned, the thought having occurred to me earlier now.

"Perhaps we have `found' our `Janet Rogers'," Darlanis said.

"The `lights of Arsana'," Karis said to me as I stood there.

"Sharon must have made it O.K.," Darlanis spoke softly then.

"You worry about her flying skills?" I asked her in reply.

"I know how `poor' a pilot I am," the Empress laughed back. "And I fear a saddle is more my `speed' than a airplane cockpit."

"Just a `beautiful barbarian'," Paul grinned from beside me.

"I think I prefer being `what' I am to what I might have been in another era," Darlanis spoke, looking at the city lights. "As Lorraine once said to me, it is easy to confuse `technology' with `civilization', something I think we've done in the past..." I suspected then that she was not as "dumb" as people thought!

"There's the North Star!" someone cried, the cheering echoing off the walls of the royal palace as the people gathered on the quays and docks to greet the return of their beloved Queen.

"I think we have learned much," Tori said to Sharon then.

"I too," the Queen of Orgon smiled back at my officer.

"Let us `hope' we do not `forget'," Tori answered back.

Chapter Fifty Nine

"I don't think there's any `doubt' now," Darlanis said to me as she stepped on to the float of the airplane, Sharon inside the cabin waiting for her. I nodded, took her hand, held it in mine.

"They will `come' to us, I'm sure," I said to her in reply.

"It is perhaps `better' this way," the Empress agreed. I would pay her a "visit" once I took care of things here at home. The North Star laid now at anchor, needing only supplies and a crew to make another voyage across the Pacific to other lands...

"I think Diane has learned much," Tori said to me, her glittering chain mail and helmet making her look

quite "warlike", I "mused" to myself, recalling what Darlanis had said to me before. It seemed strange to be on dry land again after so long at sea. I had also put on a few pounds during the voyage, something I'd noted the first time I tried to get into one of my fitted gowns.

"She has learned much of `seamanship'," I smiled back.

"And of taking `responsibility," Tori grinned then.

"I think she'll make a good officer," I answered.

"She was found wandering the streets," the guardswoman said, holding Mara by the arm as she stood before Lorraine Richards... The Queen's dark eyes like deep brown coals meeting Mara's now. The girl had quite obviously run afoul of some Trellian "mugger" from the looks of her, the man having taken everything of value.

"Where is your home?" the tall Queen asked as she sat there on her throne, looking very much too the true ruler of Trelandar.

"I am from Dularn, your majesty," Mara spoke, bowing a bit.

"You're `lucky' we're `civilized' now," Lorraine grinned. The Imperial Warlady well aware that there had been a time not so long ago when any like Mara would have been quickly collared as a slave girl. There were still those who looked upon the women of other nations in terms of whips and slave collars, but Lorraine hoped to eventually put a "halt" to such activities if she could.

"She did seem rather `confused'," the guardswoman ventured.

"And what is your name?" Lorraine asked with a warm smile.

"Mara, your majesty," Mara answered in a soft voice then.

"Tara is now back in Mexico," the Priestess smiled, leading Mara by the hand. Tara's inexperienced use of electronic hypnosis had been of little avail against the awesome skills of those who now ruled the solar system, whose "allies" now "ruled" the Universe.

"Like a bad penny," the tall brunette smiled back at her. Lorraine had "suspected" something like this after questioning the girl, the thought of Tara with electronic hypnosis something she had always feared, being well aware of "what" could be done.

"She is in `possession' of a `forbidden technology'," the Priestess answered. "I have taken the liberty to inform Tais," she added, such a matter like this being one of much concern now!

"If you can run down Tara..." Lorraine answered, seeing the Priestess' eyes as the woman nodded back. This time there would be no "doubts", Lorraine knew, well aware of "what" Tara was... Mara's protests about Tara's "character" having meant little.

"We will `try'," the Priestess replied with a smile.

"A world at peace," I yawned, getting ready for bed. In a way I "missed" the sort of "excitement" I'd

known earlier in my life, although at the time I had often lived in fear of my life! Taking the North Star into waters patrolled by the Empire was not the sort of a thing that you did for "enjoyment", I assure you...

"There will be 'someone' to 'upset it'," Paul grinned back.

"The Princess is 'GONE!'" Kathi cried, shaking me aware as dawn now peeked in through the windows of my bedroom. "And there is a 'LETTER' addressed to you!" the blondish wench declared now! Had Tarastruck again? Stealing Hope herself from us now? Such were my "fears" as I opened the letter, fearing the worst here... Paul there next to me in the bed, now looking over my shoulder.

"JUST A NOTE TO LET YOU KNOW THAT THE SIMMONS ASKED ME FOR THEIR DAUGHTER, AND I FELT IT BEST TO 'AGREE' WITH THEIR WISHES." The letter being signed by First Priestess Tais herself here! I looked up at Kathi, gave her a smile as I saw in my mind the vision of a lovely brown haired woman holding her little girl in her arms. Hope did "belong" with Carol, not with me, I knew now.

"Carol has her daughter back," I told the slave girl then.

"I 'miss' her," Kathi answered me softly in reply then.

"She was 'one of a kind'," I smiled up at the delight.

The End