

Part One of the Okal Rel Saga

The
**COURTESAN
PRINCE**



a novel by

Lynda Williams

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EDGE

EDGE SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY PUBLISHING

AN IMPRINT OF HADES PUBLICATIONS, INC.

CALGARY

The Courtesan Prince
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Edge Science Fiction and Fantasy Publishing
An Imprint of Hades Publications Inc.
P.O. Box 1714, Calgary, Alberta, T2P 2L7, Canada

In house editing by Adam Volk
Interior & Cover design by Brian Hades
Cover Illustration by Echo Chernik
ISBN: 1-894063-28-7

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EDGE Science Fiction and Fantasy Publishing and Hades Publications, Inc. acknowledges the ongoing support of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Alberta Foundation for the Arts for our publishing programme.



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts
du Canada

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Williams, Lynda, 1958-
The courtesan prince / Lynda Williams.

(Okal Rel Saga)
ISBN 1-894063-28-7

I. Title. II. Series: Williams, Lynda, 1958- . Okal Rel saga.

PS8595.I5622C68 2005 C813'.6 C2005-902176-4

FIRST EDITION

(t-20050404)

Printed in Canada
www.edgewebsite.com

Dedication

To Alison, for being there with me through every draft; to Janice, Richard, Adam and the team at Edge Science Fiction and Fantasy, for their help; and most of all to Edge publisher Brian Hades, for having the courage to be different and the heart to dream large.



Pilots Are Uncomfortable People

“Contact?” Ann asked. “With Sevolites?”

She was lounging in a deck chair on a patio. Her recruiter, from the Explorations branch of the Reetion Space Service, perched opposite on a chair, indifferent to everything about her except for her talent as a pilot of faster than light space craft.

“Contact, yes,” he told her, “but not necessarily with the beings you might think of as Sevolites. Just ordinary, human Gelacks.”

“Naturally,” said Ann. “You wouldn’t want me to imagine that this mission you’re offering me might be interesting, or anything like that.” She paused to inhale a lungful of cigarette smoke in defiance of common civility and a lifetime of health education. “So why am I supposed to be interested? Do I get cut loose if I volunteer?”

“You’re not exactly tied up,” her recruiter pointed out.

Ann had to concede that much. Her group home was set on a white beach on the planet Mega: a sort of holiday resort with built in counseling. But she could not go where she liked or do what she wanted. Not, at least, without a whole triumvirate of counselors giving their fussy approval.

Ann frowned. The recruiter was okay to look at — bit soft in the middle and saggy at the shoulder, but well groomed — and the only company she’d had for a month. All the same he was becoming a bore.

“So,” she said. “Why are we so interested in Gelacks again after — what’s it been? Two hundred years? I thought we were pretty thoroughly out of touch.”

“We were,” the recruiter said, “but there have been ... developments. Your job would be to work with an anthropological mission named Second Contact, that will investigate whether there are, indeed, Gelacks on the far side of the Killing Reach Jump. Unfortunately there are limited records from the Old Regime. But what we do know is that First Contact seems to have been rather poorly handled. We hope to avoid those mistakes with the Second Contact mission.”

“Rather poorly handled!” Ann repeated, with a laugh. “What would you call the Big Bang? A bit of a rough start?” She sat forward, stubbing out her cigarette. “We got kicked out of Killing Reach down to the last ship — by Sevolutites!”

“There are no *Sevolutites* in Killing Reach,” the recruiter assured her. “No real ones. Certainly, the only Gelacks we’ve encountered —”

“What?” Ann interrupted; skin tingling as if she had been dunked in a cold bath. “Encountered? As in now?”

“Why, yes!” he exclaimed. “It’s on the record.”

“I don’t like reading when I’m clinically depressed,” said Ann.

The recruiter frowned. Such ignorance of current events ought to shame any self-respecting Reetion. “Perhaps you’d like to review the record on your own,” he suggested. “Catch up. Before you decide whether you’d like to join the mission. Acquaint yourself with its principle champion, Ranar.”

“Ranar?” Ann frowned. She didn’t know of anyone called Ranar. It sounded nice though — sort of sensual. Two round, smooth syllables: *Rah-nar*. “Is he a pilot?” asked Ann.

“A pilot? No, no. Ranar is a brilliant young man. A Voting Citizen at seventeen and the youngest member of any net-wide council at twenty-four. Gelackology is a bit obscure, to be sure, but —”

“Good looking?” interrupted Ann.

The Space Service recruiter frowned. “You’re an intelligent woman, Ann. It’s in your profile. And while pilots may be more extreme, emotionally, than most people, you do not have to play up mindless stereotypes.”

Ann shrugged. “I have a high libido.” She leaned forward, enjoying her ability to make him angry. “That’s also in my profile.”

Her recruiter resorted to lecturing. “Second Contact is going to be an historic mission, with the potential to make up for a lost opportunity to reunite us with another branch of mankind. You should be honored to be asked.”

Ann was no taller than her visitor, and weighed less, but as she rose to her feet it seemed to her as if she towered over him in spirit. “You’re not recruiting me for my diplomatic skills,” she pointed out. “All you’re interested in is my pilot’s *grip*. So you’ll have to put up with the rest of the package.”

“You’re a very uncomfortable person,” he complained.

“Pilots are like that.” Ann said, with a shrug.

“Will you take the deal, as offered?” he asked.

She had already decided. “Of course.”

“We’ll send someone to collect you in the morning,” he said, packing up the few things he had brought with him.

“I can find my own way to a space port,” said Ann.

“As you prefer.” He took his bag and strode off.

As she watched him go, Ann wondered if looking forward to meeting Ranar might be construed as a little shallow when N’Goni, her lover and mentor, was languishing in a catatonia ward at the nearest Space Service hospital. But how long was she supposed to mourn? It wasn’t as if she hadn’t tried to warn him either. But oh, no! He couldn’t possibly be succumbing to the wear and tear of the faster than light piloting. Not N’Goni, the hot shot exploration’s pilot. No “little girl” was going to show him up! Not even if her piloting psych-profile had always been better than his. Ann told herself she had done what she could, right down to

socking Lurol for refusing to use an experimental treatment for N’Goni’s post-flight coma. The fact that N’Goni had indicated he didn’t want such treatment, hadn’t mattered to Ann. N’Goni had been showing classic signs of chronic spacer’s syndrome in Ann’s opinion and Lurol was supposed to be the hot shot space psychiatrist. She should have noticed. The assault on Lurol was the reason she was grounded now, on Mega, instead of out there working. Surely N’Goni himself would prefer that she got on with her life, now. The odds were he would never wake up again. How long was she supposed to be depressed about it?

Ann’s primary counselor came out onto the patio from inside the group home. “What does Space Service want?” he asked.

Ann didn’t even turn around. “I’m Supervised,” she snapped. “Access the record if you want to know.”

“I was hoping we could talk about the offer,” he began, but gave up when she shouldered past and dove into the common room beyond.

Inside, the big jerk who thought every woman with a high libido must be dying to try his out, hailed her with his usual salute from the common room couch. “Your place or mine?” he bellowed, using a line he had picked up from one of the old Earth movies that Ann liked to watch. Ann did not reply. It just encouraged him.

She went quickly down a short hall to her bedroom, where even in a group home she was out of scope for fellow inmates and the average citizen. Only the ubiquitous surveillance of the AI’s known as arbiters applied in a domestic setting, making sure that citizens did nothing to violate each other’s human rights. Since Ann was Supervised, her counselors could also check up on her at will, but that didn’t particularly bother Ann. Her behavior had been someone else’s business all her life. When it wasn’t counselors, it was pilot handlers, and before that it had been her parents.

Ann's room contained very few personal effects, which was typical for Reetions and particularly expedient for pilots. Most of what defined her was in digital storage, available from anywhere upon request.

"Stage on!" she ordered, as she entered. Her customized arbiter interface presented itself as a fat middle-aged man, stark naked except for a pair of thongs. His appearance was a composite of nudists she had spied on in her childhood on Rire. Ann had not imbued him with an interactive personality, though. Conversations with an arbiter always worked better if you accepted that it was out to reduce you to a handful of demands with modifiers.

"I want information on a Voting Citizen named Ranar," Ann told the interface. "He's heading up a mission known as Second Contact."

"Ranar of Rire," her nudist told her, "is a social anthropologist who has been exempted from citizenship duties from the age of seventeen in recognition of his intellectual contribution. Ranar is currently twenty-four standard Earth years in age and serving on Foreign and Alien council. He is Rire's leading authority on Gelacks, the humans presumed to share Earthly origins with Reetion civilization, who were first encountered two hundred years ago in the Killing Reach War."

Ann stripped out of her close-fitting yellow sun suit to pull on bright yellow pajamas. She liked yellow — it flattered her light brown skin.

Her stage displayed a reach map that located the world of Mega, where Ann was serving time in the group home. The display showed Mega within a translucent bubble with two exits, known as jumps, located at either end. One jump was labeled *Killing* and the other *Rire*.

"Ranar's got a thing about Gelacks," Ann summarized, pausing to shake out her hair and rub a breast under her loose top. "What else? Any bad habits?"

"No anti-social behavior is on record," said the customized interface.

"He never threw rocks? Lied? There's got to be something." She hesitated. "Maybe he isn't interested in sex."

"Citizen Ranar has registered two relationships since puberty. Both concluded amiably. The first —"

"Skip it!" Ann decided, remembering the jerk in the common room. Ranar might trace requests for his personal information, just as she had, and she didn't want to give the wrong impression. She toyed with asking for a picture but decided not to spoil the surprise.

Ann got onto her bed and drew her knees up. Her morph mattress adjusted under her. "Tell me how Ranar's Gelack mission got launched," she ordered.

"Ranar initiated the process," said the nudist, "based on the discovery of Gelack artifacts traced back to a colony of renegade Reetion pilots living in an abandoned station near the Killing Reach Jump." It indicated the spot on the reach map.

"Renegades?" Ann stiffened, legs sliding down as she sat up. Any pilot who put himself beyond Space Service's control was a hazard to civilization and had to be hunted down by the best pilots that Space Service could field: pilots like N'Goni and herself. "Reference my last mission with my partner, N'Goni," Ann told the arbiter. "We were looking for renegades in the same area."

She paused, almost holding her breath, until the screen displayed proof that the arbiter had the desired context nailed down. "Yes, that's the mission," Ann confirmed. "Are the renegades we were looking for the ones that Ranar found, later?"

"Almost certainly," the arbiter confirmed.

Ann shot up off the bed. "That's not possible!" The feeling of being one-upped raised a flush. "How could he find them when N'Goni and I couldn't? He's not even a pilot!"

"Ranar was able to trace some unique Gelack artifacts appearing in the Reach of Paradise. These artifacts were found in the possession of a pilot named Thomas, and it is believed they had been acquired as trade goods. Subsequently,

Thomas cooperated in the apprehension of his fellow renegades by Space Service and was later deemed fit enough to be granted exemption from Supervision in exchange for assisting with the Second Contact mission."

Ann's chest clenched with anger. *Stupid, lawless wipe head!* she thought. *He gets off. I get Supervised. And N'Goni got worse than that!*

"Revert to default interface," Ann ordered crossly. "Blank the nudist."

"This customized interface represents an investment of two hours," the nudist pleaded its case without a scrap of concern about the injustice of shooting the messenger. "Are you sure you wish to destroy this investment?"

"Yes!" Ann flared. "Yes, damn it! Can't you just do what you're told! Can't anything be simple?"

The naked man became a yellow cube, rotating slowly on the display stage in the middle of her floor. Ann scrubbed her face and threw herself down on the bed again.

"Queue me digests on Ranar's investigation of the Gelack artifacts," Ann ordered.

"Prepared."

"Stage off," said Ann, and the yellow cube disappeared.

Ann hauled up a butler arm fixed to one side of her bed and adjusted its screen, her legs stretched out beneath it on her morph mattress, and settled down to read the virtuously austere digest. Research showed that plain text was less likely than multimedia presentations to play irrationally on the emotions, especially when compiled by an arbiter, which is why knowledge was presented that way. But Ann found it hard staying engaged. She lingered, instead, over diagrams illustrating Gelack embroidery that were included out of scholarly necessity, but even so her eyes began to droop. After ten minutes she pushed the screen away. "Play me a synthdrama about Gelacks," she told the stage.

For the remainder of the afternoon and evening she followed the rise and fall of neo-Arthurian empires, populated

by fictional characters with walk on appearances by Ameron, the Sevolite king — although the title used was “Ava” — and a fierce, gray-eyed woman called the Liege of Monitum. Lovers argued on her bedroom stage, Reetion dark and Gelack pale, as Ann walked around them trailing a hand through their solid light projections. Battles were waged on impossible, space-faring steeds capable of faster than light travel by Sevolites waving swords that cracked space stations. All the bad guys plotted against Ameron’s desire to spare Old Regime Reetions and were duly thwarted. All the couples paired up to live happily ever after.

Ann fell asleep feeling like she had overdosed on floss candy.

* * *

Her counselor woke her up early.

“There is someone waiting to go with you to the space port,” he told her.

“I don’t need my hand held,” Ann grumbled.

“I know we can’t do anything right for you, Ann,” he said, “by definition. But there is something I want to be sure you know before you go.”

“Flying is bad for my health,” Ann said sarcastically.

“Of course, but I didn’t mean that.” He looked down into his big, gentle hands. “Lurol is one of the mission triumvirate.”

Ann was thunderstruck. “Not the same Lurol!”

He nodded. “The same space psychiatrist you assaulted for declining to treat N’Goni.” He paused. “Ann, the mission is based on the same station. It is the only one near the Killing Reach Jump.” He paused. “Still want to sign on?”

Ann snatched up her clothes in answer, determined to change in front of him if he didn’t get out of her bedroom.

“I understand why the mission appeals to you,” he lectured. “That’s what I am worried about. Just because the modern Liege of Monitum is a man, not a woman — according to Thomas — that doesn’t mean he is going to turn out to be

a dashing hero out of a synthdrama, Ann. He is more likely to be a run-down wreck like Thomas, whether or not he is supposed to be a Sevolite, to judge by what little we do know about the modern situation.”

Ann froze with her pajama top half over her head, exposing her breasts, and dropped it back again. “I’m going to meet the Liege of Monitum?” she asked.

“You did not read the digests, did you?” He sighed. “Ann, you’re still a bit depressed. We could veto your assignment on the strength of that, but —” he added quickly, seeing her react, “— you are a pilot and you are more likely to improve under stress than not.”

“I want to go,” Ann insisted. “Lurol or no Lurol.”

* * *

A cheerful woman counselor kept her company on the public transit ride to the space port. Ann made conversation like crazy to keep her companion from asking probing questions. Beneath it, she brooded about Lurol. She should have guessed the space psychiatrist would still be in the picture. Lurol haunted high-risk piloting missions hoping for a chance to test her experimental visitor probe on consenting pilots. The name “visitor probe” was a vain attempt to make it sound friendly and welcome, but it had the power to change you, if only for the desirable purpose of restoring mental health in pilots who succumbed to post-flight catatonia. Physically it looked like a harmless white cylinder lying on its side and big enough to sleep in. Ann remembered having to lie in it to establish her baseline. It hinged open for her to get inside. After that, Lurol’s staff had immobilized her head in preparation. When it closed, and the finely tuned fields that messed with her brain were engaged, she was left staring up at a saline drip that kept her eyes lubricated while she underwent treatment. Some of this was familiar to any pilot, since the visitor probe was an extension of Rire’s psych profiling technology. But there was one, alarming difference. Instead of merely reporting reactions to simulated stimuli, the

visitor probe had the power to impose subtle changes. There was a therapeutic reason. Given adequate calibration of a pilot's normal psych profile, the visitor probe could re-impose that profile on a pilot suffering from spacer's catatonia, and in three out of five trials to date, had actually revived the pilot. Ann thought of it as reloading the pilot's own consciousness, to counter the mind-altering effects of reality skimming caused by exposure to what was called the *gap* dimensions.

Like most Reetions, Ann accepted the need for psych profiling, because a malicious act by someone piloting a faster-than-light vessel could be catastrophic. She saw the visitor probe as the next step in profiling development. But N'Goni had refused to consent to the visitor probe. Ann suspected he didn't want to think about becoming comatose, as if planning for the unthinkable might bring it about. And Ann had let the matter drop, even though she suspected he was showing signs of spacer's syndrome.

"I don't want to talk anymore," Ann announced, in the middle of the counselor's carefully weighed responses to one of her throwaway remarks.

The woman did not give her an argument.

At the space port, Ann took a seat on a passenger liner and docked with an orbital space station where she submitted to the usual pre-flight exams, "flight" referring in this case to reality skimming. She argued with the resident psychiatrist about flying cargo, which was pilot slang for being transported out cold in a life-support cylinder. The physical wear and tear of reality skimming was unavoidable but people could fly cargo to reduce the impact of *gap*.

Gap was pilot slang for exposure to dimensions that were ordinarily coiled up in the stuff of the universe. Only pilots with *grip* could contend with it. Arbiter-controlled ships simply popped out of existence, and weak pilots were at much higher risk of disappearing or succumbing to a hazard known as time slip, in which the laws of Einstein's special relativity exerted themselves. Ann wasn't much for following

the math. She just knew that *gap* was the enemy and to combat it a pilot needed *grip*.

It was crazy to want to fly conscious when you could be spared experiencing *gap*, but Ann's instincts still rebelled as her handlers put her under, embarrassing her with the memory of last minute, futile resistance when she came around on *Second Contact Station*, hours later. Reality skimming trips never took more than hours, unless someone time slipped.

"Hi," she was greeted. "Have a good nap?" The voice was unusually cocky for one of Lurol's medical staff.

Ann floundered like a landed fish, trying to sit up with the drugs still in her system.

"I don't know why you let them fly you cargo," said the bizarre-looking man to whom the voice belonged. "Any ship I fly in, I pilot. You got that?"

Ann ignored the comment beyond registering that he was a pilot. "Be useful," she grumbled, "and help me up."

His grasp was both strong and frail at once, trembling despite a bite that hurt her arm. He was dressed in stained beige pants with a vest worn over a narrow, naked chest and had piercing eyes set in a face that looked prematurely lined. His hands reeked of stale smoke.

"Thanks," she said, when she was sitting up, and scared up some professional camaraderie. "My name's Ann."

He nodded. "Thomas. Thought I'd tell you in case you haven't looked me up. Gather you don't do much of that." He grinned. His teeth were stained and the gums had shrunk back. Ann, whose many faults included an inclination towards physical beauty, was repulsed.

"You're in pretty good shape for a pilot," he concluded, looking her up and down.

"Can't say the same for you," said Ann. "Who the hell are you, anyhow?"

Thomas whistled. "You really are info resistant, you are."

"I'm depressed," she said tartly. "I don't think you're helping."

He grinned again. "See you at the briefing tomorrow."

The smell of stale smoke he left in his wake was enough to make her think about quitting, which reminded her she had not packed her cigarettes and the station wasn't going to supply them.

As Thomas walked away, she got a good look at the back of his vest and realized the embroidery was Gelack, depicting a sword in the grasp of a well-muscled arm. Then she remembered that Thomas was the name of the renegade pilot excused Supervision in exchange for helping out Ranar. The one who was supposed to teach her how to make the Killing Reach Jump. So far he didn't inspire confidence. Learning how to navigate a jump was a very nearly mystical experience, or in space psychiatry terms a function of dream-like self-consciousness. In either case, it called for sufficient trust to let your guide take over your *rel-ship's* phase-slicing envelope and essentially pilot for you. Not something a girl wanted to do with just any guy and Thomas definitely looked more chewed-up by reality skimming than she was.

Ann passed her post-flight review and was taken to her room by one of Lurol's staff. Promising herself she would study the mission after a nap, Ann lay down to sleep, only to be woken by her bed a whole day later, exactly twenty minutes prior to her briefing with Ranar. Ann dressed in a rush, skipped eating, and pulled on the clean yellow stretch pants and breast band that she found in the closet, pushing her gritty hair off her forehead with the matching headband. She wished that she had time to shower and resolved to expand her lead time on appointments to one hour.

When she walked into the meeting room, an urbane young man interrupted himself to greet her. "Ann of New Beach, I am gratified that you accepted our offer. You are the best pilot Rire has on record."

"Ranar, right?" said Ann, smiling. He was handsome in an understated way, like an Oxford-educated Raja in a British Empire drama from the 20th century Earth repertoire of

feature films that Ann indulged in for entertainment. His tunic fell from neck to thigh over matching slacks, a conservative style for Rire redeemed by the exotic addition of a twisted braid motif for decoration. The pattern of the braid never repeated, but tumbled down his body worked in browns and reds evolving through a white phase into solid green dominance.

Ann snapped her fingers and pointed. "That's Gelack!" she remembered. "Green is House Monitum's color."

Ranar's fingers brushed the green threads at mid-chest. "This was copied from images we have of Liege Monitum's vest braid. Of course, fashions may have changed in two hundred years," he added, sounding wistful.

Lurol stood across from Ranar, dressed in the ridiculous white lab coat that was her hallmark affectation. Thomas sat curled up in a morph chair. The room's central stage displayed an idle blue diamond interface.

"The first thing I want to know," said Ranar, "is whether you can work with Lurol."

Lurol stuck her hands in her pockets. She had a wide nose, thick lips and a lanky build with short, brittle hair that was perennially uncombed.

Lurol the brain mechanic, thought Ann, sarcastically. But she said, "My friend, N'Goni, did not give consent to be visitor probed. Therefore Lurol was right to withhold treatment."

"But," Lurol was ruthless, as usual, "I could have ruled N'Goni incompetent on the grounds of advanced spacer's syndrome. I had that authority. But I truly believe he was of sound mind when he declined the visitor probe option. I had to respect that."

"And I did my best to break your face for it," said Ann. "For my part, we're done. You?"

Lurol shrugged. "You work with pilots, now and then you expect the odd assault."

"Good enough," Ranar decided.

"I like this guy," Thomas told Ann, hooking a thumb towards Ranar. "He's driven."

"If you mean that I take this mission seriously," Ranar answered him, "I do. It ought to be self-evident that the black market is an ill-advised way to reopen relations with another human culture. Especially a potentially dangerous one."

"Gelacks aren't dangerous." Thomas lit a cigarette. "They're pathetic."

If he is going to smoke, Ann thought, he could at least offer me one. But he did not.

Ranar ignored the rudeness of Thomas lighting up, although his nostrils seemed inclined to pinch closed. "Have you considered," he proposed, "that the Gelacks you have been dealing with may be the dregs of their society, no more representative of their kind than you are?"

Thomas blew smoke at him. "I understand Gelacks better than you. I've traded with them. They're spacers, like me. Without arbiters to make up rules they've got to live by."

"Arbiters only implement our rules," Ranar corrected.

"Whatever," Thomas answered him languidly. Then he perked up and grinned at Ranar as if he had caught him out. "Hoping to find Sevolites, aren't you? Real, live super-pilots who don't wear out flying." He let smoke drift past his stained teeth. "You're dreaming," he gave Ann a meaningful look, "like some kid hooked on a synthdrama." Thomas paused to cough. "Sevolite is just some dumb title. I've met one and he looks worse than I do."

"You met a Sevolite?" Ranar cross-examined him. "Why haven't you mentioned it?"

"I did. He's the *Trinket Ring* station master. My contact. I just didn't tell you that he goes on about being ten percent Sevolite like I should be blown-away awed."

"Ah, yes," said Ranar. "The man who agreed to arrange for me to meet with Liege Monitum."

"Yeah," said Thomas. "After he stopped looking at me like I'd asked him for directions to Earth. I tell you, this

Monitum character's mythical." He blew smoke. "Gelacks are always on about their gods. There's a whole pantheon of 'em from some never-never land called Fountain Court. 'Cept Gelacks don't pray to them. They pray for them to leave 'em alone."

"Including Liege Monitum?"

"Yeah, well, they'll tell you there's been a Liege Monitum, lives on Fountain Court, since the world began." Thomas extinguished his cigarette against a callused pad on his left palm. "Gelacks call themselves Sevolites to make out they're related to these so-called highborns way, way back. You know, like Hercules being the son of Allah."

"Zeus," Ranar corrected.

"Whatever." Thomas dropped his cigarette on the spotless floor and turned to Ann. "I gather that this station's got a recreational pool, and I hear Reetion women have taken to swimming nude since I was hanging around lawful citizens last."

"Only if they're nudists," Ann told him, still put out because he hadn't offered her a smoke.

"I'll go see if I can convince some of 'em to take it up," said Thomas and strolled out.

"I don't like the idea of you risking your life on the strength of that one's *grip*," Lurol told Ranar, "let alone his good intentions. Thomas is a dozen trips shy of a medical discharge."

"I know," said Ranar. "But he won't be psych profiled or evaluated."

"Part of your agreement," Lurol muttered. She thrust her big hands in the pockets of her silly lab coat.

"It is my life to risk," Ranar said. He turned to Ann, "And yours."

Creamy hot chocolate, Ann thought, gazing at him appreciatively. *Well, maybe a little cooled off, but still rich and warm.*

"Ann?" Ranar asked.

"What? Oh, yeah. Sure."

Ranar frowned. "You haven't any idea what's expected of you, do you?" Ranar sighed. "Let's find somewhere more congenial to talk."

Ann thought, *I'm all yours!*

They picked up refreshments from a self-serve bar on *Second Contact's* promenade and sat down together at a table with morph seating that conformed to their respective preferences without needing to ask what those were. Ranar talked about Gelackology's unfortunate tendency to be dramatized in shoddy synthdramas that contributed, in his opinion, to his not being taken as seriously as he should.

"Gelacks," he insisted, "might be what's left of Earth's population. A beta colony that explored in another direction after our jump to Earth collapsed a thousand years ago."

"I thought Earth got trashed in the collapse," Ann said, hoping to sound knowledgeable.

"We don't know that," said Ranar. "In the absence of reliable observations it is impossible to know which maths apply, let alone compute the range of the space-time disturbance on the other side." He went on about the difficulties while Ann listened with her chin propped in her palms.

"I thought you were an anthropologist," she said, during a pause. "You sound more like you study space science."

"I did," he smiled, self-consciously. "When I was a boy."

Ann's chair adjusted as she straightened. "If you are saying we should be leery of poking around in Killing Reach because there might be something nasty in it, I can make sense of that."

"No," he said with force. "I am saying it would be foolish not to make diplomatic contact before informal ones get out of hand."

"You lost me," said Ann, spreading her hands.

"Thomas is not the only one trading in Gelack artifacts," Ranar explained with the air of someone forced to explain the obvious in words of one syllable. "I authenticated other examples, at commercial-economy ports outside arbiter jurisdiction, artifacts Thomas denies ever seeing before."

"Maybe he can't remember," suggested Ann. "He must have a few blank spots between the ears from flying as much as he has."

"The point is," said Ranar, "that the Killing Reach Jump is being used again. Probably by Gelacks. In fact I think Thomas may have learned about it from a Gelack. Someone like his *Trinket Ring* friend, perhaps."

"What?"

"Have you read any of my work at all?" he asked.

"Some stuff about embroidery," she said lamely.

Ranar sighed. "The significance of that is that the work is done by hand, which is typically Gelack."

"How do you know they're not fakes someone manufactured?"

"It can be deduced with a fairly simple analysis. Do you really want the details from me, here, now?"

She scowled. "If you are so smart, how come you took up a subject as obscure as Gelackology?"

"Ah," he sat back, loosening up for the first time since she had met him, as if he was laughing at himself now. "If you really must know, I think I had a crush on Ameron, the Gelack's Ava."

"Ameron?" cried Ann. "But he's a man!"

"Is something wrong?" asked Ranar.

"No! No, I, uh — are you homosexual?" Ann asked.

"Is that a problem?" Ranar asked, puzzled.

"No. I, uh, no! Of course not." She scowled. "Do you think I'm some sort of retro nut case or something?"

"I'm sorry," he said. "You just seemed ..." he lifted a hand in a gesture of uncertainty, "upset," he concluded.

"You're the genius," she told him narrowly. "You figure it out."

He did, but it took a moment. Then he said, blandly, "Oh. I'm sorry. I hope that wasn't a factor in your acceptance of the mission."

"Hell, no! You think meeting sword-wielding Sevolites isn't more exciting than doing time in a group home?" Ann would have claimed a passion for embroidery to change the topic.

"Shall we continue then?" Ranar asked, coolly.

"Yeah. Sure."

He quizzed her on the mission details for an hour. The politics were the hardest to figure out. Foreign and Alien Council was the mission initiator but Ranar, as its champion, enjoyed uneven support. Neither of the mission's other two triumvirs had much clout: Lurol was only on the first expansion of Human Ethics and not a Voting Citizen, and the mission's third triumvir, Jon, was a Space Service executive who happened to serve on the third expansion of the powerful Assembly of Sibling Worlds.

Ranar was anxious to connect with Liege Monitum fast, before his mandate to do so got revoked back home.

"The more clearly I state the obvious concerning the Killing War," Ranar complained to Ann, "the more hotly I am accused of fantasizing threats out of a synthdrama. It did not help at all that Thomas insisted on talking about swords."

"Do they really use those?" asked Ann, perking up.

Ranar closed his eyes. When he opened them, his tone was flat. "We know Gelack politics are neo-feudal," said Ranar. "Fencing might be an elite sport, or swords may be religious symbols. There are ample explanations that fall well short of dueling from horseback in hard vacuum!"

Ann blinked at his vehemence.

He exhaled with force. "I am sorry. It is just that I am sick of people fixating on the damned swords. If the Gelacks are a threat to us, it won't be because of the swords."

"What then?"

"I do not know!" Ranar lost his temper, which upset him more than it did Ann. "If I knew," Ranar told her stiffly, "I could write it up for the record and go home." He excused himself.

Ann sat alone a moment, then went back to her quarters to brood. She considered resorting to a mood lifter, but that always felt like admitting her emotional existence was no more than a by-product of biochemistry. She preferred to feel that she had every right to be miserable.

Instead she invoked her stage. "Has this station got a casual sex roster?"

"Yes."

"Show me."

There were only two entries, both male heterosexuals.

The first was a bit of a production. He had a great body and gave her ample data to prove it. His medical record came complete with links to everyone he had slept with for years. A trophy collector if she had ever seen one.

The second was Thomas. "Needed," his notice read beside a simple picture, "a willing woman." That was it. His medical record was provided by default. The collection of anti-bodies suggested he hadn't been celibate, but her own list of minor risk factors was half as bad. The shock was discovering Thomas was only twenty-five.

Ann shut the stage off without adding herself to the roster or contacting either man. "Show me historical images of Gelacks," she ordered. "Specifically Liege Monitum and Ameron." Both appeared wearing swords.

Ameron, the ruler of the Gelacks at the time of the Killing War, was a pale, lean man with sharp, pronounced features and gray eyes. He was dressed in an embroidered vest laced tightly closed over a white shirt and slacks. The Liege Monitum of his time was a woman, although you had to look twice to be sure; she was so lean and muscular. She had a slightly darker complexion than Ameron, but was still light-skinned by Reetion standards.

Ann listened to one of the few extant recordings which was no more than a snatch of small talk captured, at random, in a corridor. The language spoken was English, the only one that

both sides had in common. Ann's stage provided a Reetion translation on a ribbon of streaming text, near the bottom.

Ameron said, "Have you no decent food?"

"Decent?" sputtered an unidentified Reetion of the old, pre-arbiter era. "We're starving and you dare to complain when we provide you with the best we have?"

There was a thud accompanied by sudden movement and Liege Monitum's alto voice ground out, "Speak to him like that again and you will eat your tongue."

Nice people, Ann thought.

She was interrupted by the arrival of a member of Ranar's first expansion. Ann's stage announced her and the door to Ann's room let her in. An expansion was a political unit able to stand in for another political unit when required. Each expansion included a larger number of people than the previous one, but functioned with the same net authority. In Ranar's case, he had brought along a team of anthropologists qualified in First Contact Gelackology, to act in his place as one of the station's three triumvirs while he was away in Killing Reach. In the meantime, they were helping out generally. Ann's visitor was there to make sure Ann was well enough informed to get her safety waiver on record, which meant a review of the mission.

First, she would learn the jump. Normally that took at least three training runs but Ann hoped for fewer. She was talented. Once she knew it, Thomas would fly Ranar through and dock with *Trinket Ring* to make the rendezvous with Liege Monitum. Ann was to act as back up. She was not to dock, just receive transmissions from the sub-arbitorial crystoneics unit Ranar would take along with him, which was about the size and shape of a suitcase and was known as the mission box. If something went wrong it was her job to make it back to Rire and report.

After putting her informed consent on record, Ann slept again and turned up on time for the next meeting only to find it already in progress.

"You are out of your mind!" Lurol was dressing Ranar down, her posture belligerent. Ranar looked stubborn. Thomas was enjoying the spectacle. The new triumvir, Jon, had arrived and was listening with a concerned air.

"I need your agreement, Lurol," Ranar pleaded. "If we have a hung vote, it will go to first expansion, and since neither you nor Jon have a complete first expansion on board, a hung vote would bog us down badly. The whole point is to act before the next mail delivery shows up."

Ann took the morph chair beside Jon. "What's up?" she asked.

"Ranar wants to cancel the training runs and go across right now," said Jon. "He didn't like the net traffic that arrived with my flight. The lobby opposed to wasting resources on Gelacks is gaining ground. He's afraid he'll be recalled."

Ranar was saying, heatedly, "It is my life to risk, Lurol!"

"What about the pilots?" she countered.

"It was my suggestion," volunteered Thomas. "I got laid something fine last night — it's good luck."

Ann guffawed.

"The Gelacks I met swear by it," said Thomas. "Before and after. They say it perks you right up if you're space stoned."

"Oh yeah, right," said Ann, cynically. "Have sex with me right now or I'll lapse into a coma. No pressure."

"For the love of reason!" Lurol exclaimed like a disgusted parent. "Enough of that. Ann!" she demanded. "How do you feel about Ranar's proposal? Would you support moving the mission up to the first run?"

Ann shrugged. "Sure."

"You would risk getting stranded in Killing Reach if something happened to Thomas," Ranar scrupulously pointed out. "Since you won't have time to master the jump properly, beforehand."

Ann shrugged. "I can learn a jump in one pass."

"Space Service recommends a minimum of three training runs in wake-lock with a veteran," Lurol pointed out.

Ann gave her a withering look before returning her attention to Ranar. "I'll do it," she gave consent. "Soon as you want."

Thomas got up and straightened out his clothes. "Let's go."

"Thank you," Ranar told them both warmly, "but it is Lurol I must convince to approve the proposal."

"Submit it formally," Lurol insisted, "or let it drop."

Thomas touched Ann's arm. "Come on," he said. "Let's go suit up." Ann looked back at Ranar as Thomas added, "Either he'll join us on the first run or he won't." Ann fell in, accepting the logic of that.

She was itching to ask Thomas about the jump but knew that would be breaking an unwritten law. In all the years she had flown with N'Goni she had never known how he internalized his jump experiences. It was a pilot superstition not to ask. To her, jumps were like plunging through water, sometimes churned by angry currents, sometimes packed with playful dolphins out to get her lost. Would this one be similar? Or something strange and new?

Thomas crinkled his blue eyes at her. "You checked out my roster entry last night. What put you off?"

"Apart from it being you?" Ann asked tartly, and walked on.

"The record says you've got a high libido," Thomas went straight to the point.

"But discriminating," said Ann.

He lifted a hand and waggled it side to side.

"Looked up all my relationships too, huh?" she asked.

"That what you call your one night stands?"

"The answer is still no," said Ann. Thomas looked exactly like what she didn't want to imagine as a pilot's future: prematurely old at twenty-five with signs of palsy in his hands.

“When we’re in that jump together,” he predicted, “you’ll appreciate my finer points.”

To make it through the jump Ann knew she had to surrender herself to his guidance. Some pilots claimed they could sense each other through the *gap* dimensions when their wakes merged, but Ann didn’t believe in that. She figured it would have happened between her and N’Goni if it was possible. It certainly wasn’t going to happen with Thomas.

Gravity lightened as they dropped toward the station’s zero-G hub. A pilot handler — a sort of specialized paramedic counselor trained to deal with post-flight symptoms — met them at the terminus. Ann enjoyed watching the handler fail to convince Thomas to put on a pearly white flight suit that provided at least modest protection from radiation. Thomas preferred his embroidered vest, insisting it was good luck. He also refused to let them put an arbiter persona on his ship. He was still flying the ship he had stolen when he turned renegade, and he had painstakingly overhauled it to rely on algorithmic software alone.

“I let you put a persona in there,” Thomas told the flight crew, “and it won’t be my ship anymore. Besides, no arbiter nav-persona is going to make it whole through the Killing Jump. No AI has the *grip* for it.”

Ann floated in the bay listening with amusement for a moment before shoving off in the direction of her own ship.

Ann’s *rel*-ship was a blunt-nosed exploration vessel known as a scout, with a built-in cocoon affectionately known to pilots as the slug, a device that distributed G forces under acceleration and boasted built in life support. She had to take her stretch pants off to benefit from all the hook ups. Her slug irised around her body, sealing her into a cushioned and monitored environment while her onboard crystronics downloaded a flight persona. Ann launched and waited, listening to pop songs as she drifted away from the station.

“Your guide is go for launch,” a voice from the station hailed her by radio. “He has Ranar on board.”

The next communication was from Thomas. "Okay yellow buns," he referred to her clothing preference, "we're doing it for real the first time."

"Let me talk to Ranar," she asked when they had settled into their distancing run from the station.

"Here," the anthropologist's voice came back.

"When's the last time you flew with your eyes open?" Ann asked.

"Never," he admitted. They both knew it was necessary this time, because they could not count on there being revival facilities on *Trinket Ring Station*, but it surprised Ann to know it was Ranar's first time.

Thomas chimed in. "I'll hold his hand. Listen, once we bite —" one of many euphemisms for transition to reality skimming — "we're only minutes from the jump, so stay close. If you don't make it through with me I won't pop back to find out if it was just because you chickened out."

"Just kick up a wide wake, big mouth," Ann gave him back.

"That's my girl!" said Thomas.

"Fat chance," said Ann.

Their ships did some last minute communicating to make sure their splicing fields were synchronized, then both pierced the skin of the space-time continuum. The transition hit like the insult it always was.

The psychological adjustment was the worst part. The whole concept of existing seemed ridiculous. Ann's ornery streak came to her rescue — there was no way she was going to lose that leering idiot Thomas. He churned up a froth on high shimmer — the physical component of reality skimming — as he screamed toward the jump. Ann pulled ahead, then let him match her mix of gap and shimmer and was enveloped.

Ann inhaled like a kid at the top of a joyride as layers of reality tumbled about, reduced in her mind's eye to the transparent skin of drifting jellyfish. It was definitely jellyfish this time, not dolphins. Then they were out on the other side.

According to prevailing wisdom, jump hallucinations were something the conscious mind slapped over the hole left by *gap* exposure. But they were very real to pilots who made jumps by clinging to their personal internalizations of them. Ann was eager to commit hers to memory. As she snatched at fading impressions, however, she was interrupted by an alarm.

Her flat stage confirmed that her ship's flight persona had been wiped out by the potent dose of *gap*.

"Oh great, just great!" Ann moaned.

She called up algorithmic software, irritated by how fiddly it was just to do that, although she could still rely on voice commands.

Thomas barreled heedlessly on.

"Will you stop!" she shouted, pointlessly. Communication was impossible at faster than light displacements. All she could do was observe his wake signature. At least it was distinct from her own, now. The two ships had slid harmlessly out of wake-lock. She buckled down to follow.

Seventeen minutes into Killing Reach, Ann was getting worried. According to the star map Thomas had put on record, they were about to run over the little Gelack station if they didn't cut out soon, and even a near miss could quake it apart.

Not a polite way, Ann thought, *to open a diplomatic dialog*. Her nerves were on edge by the time Thomas dropped out of skim and she gratefully followed.

Thomas hailed her on the radio as soon as that was workable. "Are we sane?" he asked.

"I am," she told him curtly. "How's your passenger?"

"Out cold!" He sounded merry about it. "Our boy genius doesn't have as much *grip* as he thought. But don't worry. He isn't comatose. Just not laying down memories. He'll come around. I'm going in to dock."

"Stay in touch," Ann threatened.

"Or you'll what? Report me to Space Service?" He sounded smug.

“Damn right I’ll report you if you screw this up,” said Ann. “You got an amnesty deal for this. That must mean something to you.”

“Maybe,” he drawled. “Or maybe I want to settle down on this side of the jump.

Ann absorbed that with a cold little shock, but he sent her the frequency that he could be reached on, so she decided he was just trying to shake her up.

“Don’t talk to me to pass the time of day, okay, yellow buns,” said Thomas, taking charge. “Hearing us talk to each other in Reetion might freak them out.”

“You don’t want me asking questions,” she told him grimly, “you make sure I don’t have any to ask.”

The silence that followed tried her sanity more than the jump had done. Thomas’ ship reached the station and was quickly swallowed up. Presumably, that meant he had docked without incident. She watched the station after that, but there was no external lighting and very little energy of any sort leaking out. She switched from pop music to old Earth vintage and played *The Rite of Spring* by Stravinsky from twentieth century Earth, watching for signals from the silent mission box. The longer she waited the more it nagged at her. She scanned for the expected transmission from the mission box, cursing Thomas under her breath, but the station proved impenetrable.

When the data stream from Ranar’s mission unit finally came on, it was relayed through what Ann suspected was a specialized communication channel, like a window in the station’s hull. The visuals were murky, but other data channels were pretty clear. The mission box sent Ranar’s life signs, sounds, air analysis, and echo location schematics of a large room full of bolted-down furniture. English translation capacity had survived in an idiot-savant function of the box, but the voices she heard were not speaking First Contact English. They were using a kind of traders’ pidgin,

instead. Ann's view was further hampered by dim lighting and thick smoke. Ranar appeared to be drugged, to judge by his medical read outs. Ann made sure her personal log noted that. Thomas was smoking one of the vile cigarettes that fouled the air with something Ann's analysis said was not tobacco smoke. The Gelack across from him sat with a trio of henchmen at his back. At least one henchman looked like a woman and wore a sword. Ann thought the greasy station master wore one too, but couldn't be sure. One of the other henchmen wore something that looked like a hand gun of some sort. None of the details were very clear, at all.

As Ann watched, the woman with the sword flanked Thomas and another henchman picked up the drooping Ranar. Then the mission box jerked up off the floor and Ann's view of *Trinket Ring's* interior went bobbing and swaying through an unevenly lit corridor that seemed to be part of the main promenade around the rim of the station's rotating torus. Pools of light alternated with shadow as the mission box passed. Light was cast by lanterns jutting out from the inner wall that were crammed full of something soft and luminous.

Her party went up in an elevator that opened on a cleaner, brighter floor, and then through a set of double doors. Ranar was lugged into a suite of rooms and dumped onto a bed amid a scattering of dirty clothes.

"Hope you're comfortable, yellow buns," Thomas said, leaning over the mission box. "Looks like it's going to be a bit of a wait after all. You just keep an eye on Ranar here, while I have some fun."