

Part Five of the Okal Rel Saga

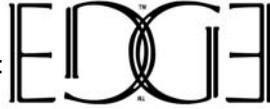
FAR ARENA



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a novel by

Lynda Williams



Title: **Far Arcna**

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Imprint: EDGE Science Fiction and Fantasy Publishing

Category: Science Fiction

Release Date: May 15, 2009

Pages: 306

Format: 6.0" x 9.0" Trade Paperback

Price: \$20.95

ISBN-13: 978-1-894063-45-6

Distribution:Fitzhenry and Whiteside
1-800-387-9776, 1-800-260-9777 (fax), SAN# S1151444

USA Wholesale: Baker and Taylor Books,
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Chapter 1

Eyes on Amel

Perry — One Pureblood Too Many

There was a point, during waiting, when you no longer cared about the outcome, only that the wait would end. Standing in Ops, on *BlindEye Station*, Perry D'Aur sensed that mood all around her. Six hours ago, Horth Nersal had either won or lost a duel on Gelion where swords settled differences among the ruling families of the empire, and if he had gone down — taking his Ava with him — vassals of the new Ava would be leading an invasion right through Perry's territory.

I am too old for this, thought Perry. Too old to be worrying, again, about whether my polygot alliance of rebels can survive a change of leadership on Gelion, or whether I can bear the cost in lives: Amel, Horth, even Ameron himself — damn the scheming bastard.

Perry was a Sevolute of the nobleborn class, tougher and longer lived than an ordinary human, but she was past what would be called middle age in a commoner and felt every year of it right now.

A ship dropped out of skim with a flash on the screen everyone in Ops had given up pretending they were not staring at. Perry's throat tightened.

"It's only Ayrium!" Ops monitor Ramses reported, a hand to his earphone. "Back from trying to talk sense into our Reetion neighbours."

"Put her on speaker," ordered Perry. There was no point keeping news from the Ops crew.

Ayrium's frank, female voice riveted attention. "Hi Mom," she greeted Perry. "Have you heard from court yet... about the title challenge?"





"No," Perry lanced the tension in her daughter's question. Ameron was more than a stabilizing force at court for Ayrium — he was a lover who, in Perry's jaded opinion, her daughter was unreasonably obsessed with, but that — like all things personal — was beside the point right today. "Any luck with the Reetions?"

"They won't evacuate," Ayrium answered, sounding wooden. "I guess invasion doesn't translate, or else they are too fixated on finding out where Ann has taken *Kali Station*. They don't like their stations going missing." She changed the subject suddenly. "If I started in the direction of court, I might be able to get news without—"

"No," Perry said stonily. "I need you here."

Ayrium answered with a long silence.

What will she do if Horth has lost? Perry wondered, never before so afraid of her daughter's Golden Demish intensity of feeling. Will she throw her life away in some rash attack, avenging Ameron?

"All right," Ayrium agreed, at last, bitterly. "I know you need a highborn here to ward the station, if—" She broke off. "I will do my duty," she said, sounding impossibly cold to anyone who knew her. But Ayrium never said goodbye in anger. "May the gods ignore you, Mother," she added, in a warmer tone.

"Not a chance," Perry said, lightening up. "I pissed them off long ago." She turned to the drive monitor, "Boost to skim as soon as Ayrium clears off. Stick to low shimmer, holding position." Whatever was coming, she wanted to see it come, which meant being under skim oneself, even if aboard a lumbering galleon of a space station.

Perry gritted her teeth against the discomforts of reality skimming. She kept her focus on the panoramic nervecloth display ahead of her, where the crimson point of Ayrium's departure quickly grew historic. *Looked damned near Nersallian, that boost*, Perry thought, with pride. Her highborn daughter was doing four *skim'facs* effortlessly. *If only we had fifty Ayriums*, thought Perry. Her expatriate Nersallian ally, Vrenn, had a genius for innovative tactics using nobleborn pilots and even commoners, but nothing was as effective in a shakeup, or space war, as highborns.

"Contact!" Ramses sang out. Perry felt it at the same time, an almost subliminal shudder in the deckplates of *BlindEye Station*. She held her breath as she watched Ayrium's dot on the



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nervecloth dance and flicker the signal for “identify” at the four blue spots approaching her. One of them danced a response back.

“It’s Liege Nersal!” someone screamed in elation.

Perry closed her eyes. Liege Nersal meant Horth, and no invasion. Unless—

If Horth had lost, Perry could not help thinking, there would still be a Liege Nersal. It was easy to imagine Horth charging Dorn, his son and heir, with the job of seeing important refugees delivered to Perry for safe keeping.

Ayrium looped around to join the new arrivals and all five ships blazed towards the station. Perry felt a stronger modulation in the deckplates as the pattern that said *Liege-Nersal* flickered on the nervecloth once more.

“Has to be Horth,” Perry muttered, remembering a drunken bar debate about whether you could predict a man’s sex-style from his signature dance, and a half smile touched her lips thinking about the young Horth Nersal who had laid claim to her as a *mekan’st*, or friend-lover, years before. He was too Vrellish for her to be his only lover by a long shot, and she lived by Vrellish rules herself despite her Demish upbringing and heritage. She didn’t pretend her feelings for an intermittant lover, like Horth, rivaled Ayrium’s great passion for Ameron, but this was personal for her too.

“Drive, drop us out of skim,” Perry ordered as the ships got close, with Ayrium still riding herd.

The Nersallian ships did their usual showy skid-in, dumping speed rapidly, and dropping into their docking cradles with a momentum within five percent of tolerance.

“Docks,” Perry ordered, her mouth dry, “who do we have?”

“It’s *DragonClaw!*” came the excited answer. *DragonClaw* was Horth Nersal’s personal ship. Perry breathed out. “But it’s not him,” docks followed up, in shock. “It’s... it’s Heir Gelion.”

“Ameron named an heir?!” Was the first thing out of Perry’s mouth. “Don’t answer that!” she added at once. “I’m coming down.”

The first person she saw when she sprinted into the docks was Dorn Nersal. *Dorn! Not Horth!* Perry forced herself to sidestep the implications long enough to note that Dorn was standing at the shoulder of a strange young man in black flight leathers who had crisp features, and a closed-down expression.

Heir Gelion? Perry wondered. Ayrium’s report from court, before the duel, had covered the sudden appearance of a new





Pureblood, named Erien, but what could it mean if he was here, now? And which Ava was he heir to: his mother, Ev'rel, or his father, Ameron?

Perry drew breath to ask Dorn for explanations when a wounded man emerged from a docking bay, supported by Horth's brother, Eler Nersal. The man raised a beautiful, sweating face, and fainted.

Perry recognized him at once. So did every one of her crew. In seconds, Pureblood Prince Amel — rarity, scandal, and another of Perry's *mekan'stan*, had all the help he could use. *It's Ev'rel*, Perry thought, in horror, watching her people swarm around Amel's crumpled form. *Ev'rel is Ava! Oh, Amel, what has she done to you?*

Running footsteps signaled Ayrium's arrival. Her blue eyes swept the huddle of people around Amel and then fixed on Dorn as hope drained from her vivid features. Perry drew breath to call her daughter to her, unwilling to risk her streaking off on a mission of personal revenge — and then the last pilot put in an appearance. Perry stared at him as if she had never seen Horth Nersal before, taking in the scarlet liege marks on his collar, the snarling dragon motif on his breast, and most of all his sword, with its worn belt and plain hilt.

Ayrium bounded the length of the docks, threw her arms around Ameron's champion, and kissed him resoundingly on the mouth, crying, "You are a wonderful, *wonderful* man!"

Horth froze; unnerving Perry with how close he had probably come to misinterpreting Ayrium's exuberance as an attack.

"Is the way clear to Gelion?" Ayrium asked him, oblivious. Horth nodded.

Ayrium spun like a dancer and made for her ship. "Launch checks!" Perry yelled at her daughter as Ayrium pelted past, then turned back to face Horth. There was no mistaking that grin, it was Horth, but she heard herself say, "I thought you were *dead!*"

"I am not dead," he said, as literal as ever, and picked her up.

"Horth!" she protested, laughing and clutching at him. "I need to know what happened!"

"D'Therd fought well," he told her in his deep voice. "He is dead. Ev'rel too."

"And this boy—" Perry craned her neck to look for Dorn Nersal and his companion.

"Erien," Horth supplied.



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“—is Heir Gelion?” Perry asked.

But Horth had other priorities. Still carrying her none too gently, he headed for her quarters.

“Horth,” Perry protested, “I can’t just leave Heir Gelion standing on my docks!” But there was no getting down, and besides, it would have seemed ungenerous; in winning, he had saved all their lives.

“Dorn is responsible for Erien,” explained Horth.

The last she saw of her illustrious guests, over Horth’s shoulder, was Eler Nersal launching into a story; and the white, grim face of the new Heir Gelion with Dorn Nersal hovering at his back.

—o—o—o—

Horth was gone by the time a com hail woke Perry hours later. She elbowed on the intercom. “Here,” she said, fishing for her favorite red halter top, which had ended up stuffed between bed and wall. As men went, Horth was beautifully uncomplicated.

“A throne envoy has arrived from Gelion, with dispatches,” Ramses reported. “From Ava Ameron.”

Perry frowned. However glad she was to know Ameron was still Ava, the mere sight of Ameron’s dead-leaves-in-a-gale scrawl did unhealthy things to her blood pressure.

“Hang on to any dispatches for me,” Perry decided. “Where are our visiting highborns?”

Ramses cleared his throat awkwardly. A young, rural Barmian, he was still new to the idea of Vrellish-style *mekan’stan*, and two of the men Perry wanted to know about fell into that category: Horth and Amel.

“Horth, Liege of Nersal, is conferring with members of the local branch of his family — an emissary from Liege Bryllit Nersal. Amel is keeping to his quarters. He says he doesn’t want visitors.”

How unlike Amel! The corner of Perry’s mouth turned down.

“And where is Heir Gelion?” she asked.

“He received his dispatches and returned to his quarters.” Ramses’ pronouns conveyed the grammatical differencing a commoner should accord a Pureblood. *Erien makes him nervous*, thought Perry.

“Any idea yet why we’ve got Horth and two of the empire’s very few Purebloods visiting?” she asked. She herself could





not imagine why they would all have come out to bring the news to Ayrium and herself, in person, if they were not refugees from a disastrous outcome at court.

"Actually, yes," Ramses spoke up. "The Reetions are demanding Amel be surrendered for questioning. Heir Gelion said that is why he's here — to negotiate with Rire about..." Ramses broke off. "You're not going to let the Reetions take Amel, are you, Cap?"

'Cap' was Perry's moniker with nearly all her people. She leaned against her wall mirror. The polished metal was cool on her temple. "Not if I can help it," she told Ramses, knowing her unsatisfactory answer would be spread the length and breadth of Ops within thirty seconds of her closing the circuit... then through all the levels of *BlindEye* in five minutes. Gossip outflew highborns.

"The Reetions should be grateful to Amel for helping to protect them," Ramses erupted, "not punish him!"

Perry snorted. "Ramses, I don't think they even *noticed* they were *in danger*." Reetions made her head ache. Genetically — in empire terms — they were commoners, but their society was very different, with law and administration mediated by sophisticated artificial intelligences known as arbiters. "The last time Amel made one of his trips to Rire," explained Perry, "he did something to one of their fancy computers and it's got the Reetions stirred up. But hell, Ramses," she said cheerfully, "it's not as though the Reetions would harm a hair on Amel's head. Worst they'll do is analyze him to death." She paused, and then asked wickedly, "How did he earn your undying loyalty, by the way?"

Amel had a talent for winking out people's most awkward difficulties — usually interpersonal — and solving them. She could just about hear Ramses' blush sizzle.

"Uh, nothing — that is..." Ramses floundered.

"Nevermind," Perry let him off the hook and signed off. It was time to get some answers and she'd start with Amel.

A self-appointed honor guard drawn from *BlindEye's* heterogeneous society kept vigil outside Amel's door: a shady-looking woman in Vrellish flight leathers; an overweight technician in a baggy engineering uniform; one of Perry's own grandchildren by way of Vrenn who was traditionally armed with a dueling sword; and a teenage station prostitute with the kind of brittle skinniness developed by a life of poor feeding and little physical exercise.



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The angry-looking woman with the Vrellish coloring — black hair and gray eyes — gave Perry a glare. “You are going to give Amel up to that Fountain Court puppy, aren’t you?” she accused.

“Last time I took grammar lessons,” answered Perry, “*Fountain Court puppy* wasn’t proper address for a Pureblood.”

The tech cleared his throat. “What do the Reetions want with Amel, Cap?”

“That,” Perry said dryly, “is one of the things I hope to find out.” She wasted a moment wondering whether to call them all on the casual ‘Amel’ and equally casual pronouns, but Amel himself encouraged such familiarity. She reached over and laid her hand flat on the nervecloth of Amel’s door.

“It won’t respond,” warned her grandson, but he was wrong. Perry was rewarded by a bouquet of flowers blooming in the nervecloth, set to the first bar of a soppy Demish love song. Laughter erupted as she stepped inside and closed the door behind her.

Amel’s room on *BlindEye Station* was without walls or other dividers except for a screen marking off the bathroom. Heavy russet curtains hung from a floor-braced frame over the sunken bed. A wall of nervecloth held the potential to open the room out, visually, onto a spacescape or meadow. Between Perry and the bed was a cleared dance floor. A child’s sword hung in a place of honor, and wound around its hilt was a locket containing a few wisps of golden hair. Six plastic crates sat stacked on the floor, one half-emptied of its luxury items.

Amel was just emerging from under his silk sheets.

He looks so vulnerable, she thought, his beautiful face blurred with sleep, his hair mussed, his clear gray eyes dilated with the all-purpose pain-killer and post-flight drug, *klinoman*. The fair skin of his torso was marked with welts no more than a day old, and the top edge of a large bandage she did not want to speculate about showed at his waist.

She dropped to a crouch beside him. “You’ve got to do something about that venting door,” she told him gruffly, “How’m I supposed to keep my fearsome reputation if you’re playing me love songs.”

“I’ll fix it,” he promised.

“You’ll come up with something worse,” she predicted, and let it drop. “We need to talk.”

He patted the bed beside him. She crouched with a crack of knees and crawled onto the soft bed, grumbling, “This’d look much better if I was a third of my age with a sword-dancer’s





neat little tits." He did not rise to the bait, as he usually did, and reassure her that he found her beautiful. He hardly responded at all until she touched him. Then his body stiffened.

Touch usually reassured Amel. *Damn*, she thought, grimly. He said meekly, "I'm sorry, Perry."

She let a silence pass and then asked in a level voice, "Bad, was it?"

He closed his eyes, failing to hide tears that wet his long lashes.

"Horth told me Ev'rel is dead," Perry said. "I can't pretend to be sorry."

He said nothing, only closed his eyes. She lay beside him staring at the ceiling, thinking maybe this would be the last time he arrived here with injuries he did not want to explain. She remembered the lanterns they lit on Barmi for the harvest festival, and the way that the white moths came flocking out of the darkness to them, yearning for the killing flame. Well, this flame was snuffed, thanks to Horth, and maybe this was the last time Amel would land on *BlindEye* burned and flinching.

"Whatever happened to you in Lilac Hearth precipitated the duel Horth won, didn't it?" she asked, bluntly.

He breathed out softly. "What do you already know?"

"Only what Horth told me, and you know what it is like getting words out of him. This new heir of Ameron's, Erien, fetched you out of Ev'rel's hearth on Fountain Court, and stood up to her when she tried to take you back, somehow precipitating a title challenge between Ev'rel and Ameron. Then, to quote Horth, 'D'Therd fought well. He is dead. Ev'rel too.' Anything else?"

He moved his head weakly on the pillow, "Nothing important."

"Nothing you are willing to talk about, you mean," Perry said more harshly than she had intended, and sat up, commanding eye contact. "Tell me this much. Is there anything in the Court situation that is going to up and bite me in the butt? This Heir Gelion, for instance."

"Erien?" Amel shook his head, surprised. "Erien doesn't mean... He's just young and..." Amel broke off. "Erien doesn't like me, Perry, but he has reasons. I was there when his first foster father, Di Mon, died. He blames me for not anticipating Di Mon's suicide. I was the one who took Erien to Rire with his Reetion foster father, Ranar, afterwards. I've been there every





time his life was disrupted, but despite that, he came for me when I was — trapped — in Lilac Hearth during the fire. Don't be too hard on him."

She frowned at him. "You know," she said, "that's the most you've said to me since I arrived and — guess what? — you're defending someone."

He settled back down. "It's still true."

She grunted. "So what did you do to piss off the normally mild-mannered Reetions?"

He sighed, but what she hoped would be the beginning of a meaningful answer was interrupted by a call from Ops.

"Cap?" Ramses spoke from one of Amel's hidden speakers. "There's a Reetion delegation inbound to *BlindEye*, ETA eight hours. Heir Gelion is on his way over to see Amel."

"Vent it!" Perry sat up. "That was fast!" In fact for Reetions it was damn near instantaneous. She had counted on their elaborate ideas about due processes giving her days to plan. "Can you image the hall outside your room on that nervecloth wall of yours?" she asked Amel.

He spoke a phrase from a poem, in an obscure Demish dialect invoking a vague echo of her childhood: something about windows and mirrors, and an image of the corridor formed on the nervecloth wall. Perry punched a pillow into a hump under her shoulders and settled the kink in her back, hands behind her head, as she settled down to watch.

"No sword," she noted, as Erien, the new Heir Gelion, came into view.

"Erien was raised on Rire," explained Amel. He had on what she called his courtesan look — submissive and calculating. He did not approve of her spying on Heir Gelion but he wouldn't object. Not in so many words. He pushed back feathery black hair, and the movement drew her eye in spite of herself. She made a point of breaking eye contact before he started getting to her.

Erien's stride was measured and precise. Curiously, he kept to the right. Other Sevolites tended to center themselves in the corridor, deferring to their birth superiors and expecting deference from their inferiors. Perry's eyes narrowed at the sight of a Sevolite Pureblood yielding the center. *Like a Reetion*, she thought. He had spent seven years on Rire after the death of his Sevolite mentor, Di Mon.

As for the rest of it, Heir Gelion was a quietly striking young man, with a breadth of shoulder that revealed he had some





Demish blood in him. He took his light gray eyes from the Vrellish, though his were less expressive than his father Ameron's, or his half-brother Amel's. His face, for a Vrellish highborn, was too composed, and although his features were sharply cut, in disposition they were more suggestive of his dead mother, Ev'el, than his living father, Ameron; particularly in the curve of the mouth. He wore a loose shirt in two tones of green, darker on the body and lighter on the sleeves and cuffs, with a pair of earth brown trousers — informal dress.

Does he think he can pass unrecognized when he has just been named Heir Gelion? Perry wondered.

The people keeping vigil at Amel's door made way with untidy laggardliness.

"Nervy buggers," Perry commented.

"He won't hurt them." Amel seemed to be trying to convince himself.

Erien stopped well clear, as was proper, Perry was relieved to see. Reetions tended to crowd you until you itched to pull a knife just to make space.

A knife, she noted, Erien did have: a distinctive one with a turquoise handle protruding from a boot-sheath. It was almost certainly Monatese, which made sense since he had spent his first seven years as Di Mon's ward.

"Good Cycle," Heir Gelion said to the motley assembly, accepting the obligation of the superior Sevolite to speak first to establish grammar. "I am Erien Lor 'Vrel, Heir Gelion. I take it these are Amel's rooms." He used a simple, undifferentenced *rel-to-pol* address: a reasonable compromise when speaking to a group, but still flattering given that he ranked the highest Sevolite in the group by four grammar classes.

"Amel is not seeing anyone, Immortality," said Perry's grandson, "not even friends."

Heir Gelion's expression did not change. There were shadows under his eyes, a tightness to his mouth, and his sharp Vrellish features were drawn.

"Has he been hurt as well?" Perry asked.

"Yes," said Amel.

"I have not come to see Amel as his friend," Erien told Amel's admirers. "I am here as Ava Ameron's representative."

At the mention of Ameron's name, resistance softened. People shifted to make way. Then, all at once, Perry's grandson took a step forward, hand on sword hilt. "We won't let the Reetions take Amel off this station."



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Horth would have backhanded him off the wall for imper-tinence. Erien said mildly, “Amel is not going to be taken any-where by force. But neither,” and his voice became colder, “will the Reetions’ complaint be trivialized. A crime has been alleged against the security of the Reetion Confederacy, our recognized neighbor state, and it will be dealt with in the Reetion fashion.” The next time he spoke, he differenced his pronoun with the full weight of his entitlement. “I am here to see Amel. Now.”

Erien started forward as though he did not intend to stop. Perry’s grandson did something — what it was Perry could not say — but one instant Heir Gelion was reaching right-handed for the door to gain entrance and the next he was in a fighter’s crouch. Perry’s breath caught; he was so fast: Vrellish fast.

Amel scrambled up with a grunt, overcoming his drug-in-duced lethargy. He was through the door before Perry caught up to him. He still managed to wind his sheet into a sort of toga as he went, but Perry had ceased to be surprised by Amel’s throw-away cleverness in small things.

“It’s all right,” Amel told his friends, “Heir Gelion saved my life on Gelion.”

Erien nodded curtly. A wash of sweat misted his forehead and the pulse at his throat and temples beat hard.

Amel’s friends gathered around him. “We heard you were hurt!” the hulking technician blurted.

The Vrellish woman caught his arm and turned the wrist up, exhibiting a flesh-colored dressing. “You’ve been tied up,” she said.

“It’s over now,” Amel said.

The skinny girl bit her lower lip, gathering her courage. “If you really saved Amel’s life,” she blurted in Erien’s direction, interrupting the scrum around Amel, “Thank you!”

“You have to excuse *BlindEye* commoners,” Perry said stiffly to Heir Gelion. “They rub elbows with their betters more than most Gelacks.”

“Perhaps that is healthy,” Heir Gelion assured her.

“Risky,” Perry commented.

“Let’s go inside,” Amel said to Erien, speaking in rel-peerage.

