

# Space Women



## Romana

A "New Woman" Novel



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# Space Women

**By Romana**

The first rays of dawn lighted the rapidly moving flags atop the pointed spires of the central citadel of the Karie, the city of fire. Overhead, slender clouds darted across the sky so fast that they seemed to throw the entire city out of balance. Below, a gray-colored synthoid, a four-meter-high mechanical guard, carried a huge disrupter. It looked somewhat like an impressionist's version of a mechanical woman, as it patrolled the path through the outer-perimeter parapets.

It momentarily paused and moved aside as two women walked toward a secluded, enclosed courtyard. Body features, such as their reddish skin and hair, their thin noses, and their brown eyes with slightly vertical pupils revealed them to be of Lazarrian heritage. The shorter woman wore a regal blue gown, coordinated with laced flat-heeled, blue sandals and a dark blue cape. Atop her head, she wore a red jeweled crown. A huge crimson jewel

rested just below the outline of her breasts, supported by a heavy gold necklace.

The other woman, who was clearly in charge, was dressed ominously in black: a black short-sleeved top and a black knee-length skirt, with a black cape and high top black boots. She also wore heavy red armbands and bracelets, and a wide red belt, to which was attached a sinister black-handled dagger in its black sheath. Streaks of white in her heavy eyebrows and long, windblown hair completed her unsettling appearance.

“The days of recuperation are over,” she began in a voice forced to extra deep tones, as she took a sip of Tavik from a flask, “and now begins my rise back to power. You have successfully restored my matter bridge, my sister.”

“And you have enhanced the power of my crimson sapphire, my sister-brother!” the woman in blue added.

“Our first catch has been made!” cried Kragg as she raised her four-fingered hands to the sky. “Soon he will come: the Earther Lawrence Cooper, with his associate Dr. Zelenska. The years of disrupter-burn pain shall be avenged! Once I have eliminated those annoying aliens, I will return to Taegella, where I shall crush the alliance of Prince Aahn and regain my empire!”

“Our captives have arrived,” announced Zolanda.

Two members of Zolanda’s high guard, the Zark, attired in rust-colored uniforms and narrow black helmets with a front to back ripple on top, entered the courtyard first. They were followed by disrupter-armed, hulking dog-headed members of Zolanda’s lower guard, dressed in black, the Bozarg.

All their uniforms bore the same emblem: a black claw holding a white lightning bolt, that overlaid a red circle. They led a group of captive humans, the bewildered passengers and crew of a commercial jetliner.

Zolanda adjusted the universal translator that was pinned high up on her left sleeve; then she spoke, "Welcome to Vulcra! I am Zolanda, sovereign queen. This is my sister, Empress Kragg, ruler of the universe. You are privileged to be part of a test of my expanded powers!" she exclaimed with intentional hyperbole. She placed her right hand on the sapphire as she raised her left hand, the long finger of which carried the companion sapphire ring. The Bozarg separated the human men and boys from the human women and girls; then they herded the two groups to the edge of the courtyard, below the parapet. Diffuse streaks of orange dawn light ominously illuminated people's heads and shoulders.

Zolanda pointed her ring finger and recited a mantra. The sapphire in the ring radiated an almost-blinding white light, as if it were intensely hot. The human men and boys fell to the inlaid stone pavement, writhing in pain. Some of the human women screamed and tried to reach them, but the Bozarg held them in place. A white crust covered the men, who now lay quivering in place. Next, panic spread through the women and girls when they realized it was their turn, as Zolanda pointed at them and recited another mantra.

Within minutes, the crust covering the humans dried and blew away in the wind, exposing a startling transformation, which became evident as everyone gradually arose to stand again. All the human men and boys, as well as the women and girls, had been changed to resemble Vulcran women, varying little

from each other in size and appearance. Everyone had also lost one digit from each hand and foot.

“My powers of transformation have indeed become wondrous!” exclaimed Zolanda with a sinister glee.

A woman ran to the person who was wearing her husband’s clothes. Upon verification that he was no longer a man, and seeing that they both looked less than human, she broke into sobbing and tears.

“What have you...done to us?” asked the jetliner captain, who was still trying to get used to her new physiology and voice.

“Your previous lives are over,” explained Zolanda. “You who are right-handed will serve my Zark guard as pleasure maids until you die! You who are left-handed, will be sent to work as attendants in the asteroid mines!”

“Preposterous!” replied the captain, as she and the others nervously watched more of the Zark guard arrive carrying large yellow rings.

The rings were mind-control headbands. One by one, each of the humans had one placed on her head. As the units were switched on, the wearer’s eyes blanked to an obedient stare. Once every human had been placed under the power of a headband, Vulcran women clad in green were sent in to strip them bare, to re-outfit them. Soon, all the humans were dressed alike, as women in yellow mini-dresses and yellow flat-heeled sandals.

“The supply of these humans is endless,” rejoiced Kragg. “Soon, we shall be able to send an armada across the matter bridge and subjugate them on their world as well. A prolific, mostly right-handed species

such as this can be useful, so long as they wear the control headbands!”

“I look forward to transforming many future captives. I can even spare a couple of these women for your fatal embrace,” smiled Zolanda.

## **CHAPTER ONE: More Aircraft Vanish**

A crowd of reporters was held back by security, as government officials entered the closed door hearing. Everyone’s identification was rigorously checked before they were allowed to proceed. Two reporters, Bill Taggert and Catherine Wright, compared notes while they strained to get as close as possible to within hearing distance of the events inside the entrance door.

“Five airliners and almost two thousand people vanish into thin air: it could be the story of the century, but they tell us nothing,” complained Bill.

“Now where have I seen that man before?” asked Catherine, as she watched an older, moderately tall, lean man with a well-trimmed beard approach. He was carrying a case in his left hand that was like those used to transport portable personal computers.

“That’s Dr. Frank Zelenska, a noted and somewhat eccentric scientist. He was a refugee from East Germany a few years before the wall came down. His wife was shot and killed during the escape,” explained Bill. “From his appearance, he’s hardly eaten much since then.”

“I remember,” added Catherine, “reading about him. He’s somewhat of a crackpot, isn’t he?”



Bill nodded, as he spied someone interesting: a woman, a short-haired brunette, wearing a brown suit with a calf-length skirt and coordinated purse and shoes. "I wonder who the babe is?"

"Watch it Bill; you're drooling. She's Valerie Rogers, a roving government trouble shooter. She's sharp and she is tough, very tough. She's also a lesbian, so you definitely would not be interested in her!"

### 0-0-0

FAA district director Russell Gordon opened the meeting and quickly went through the obligatory introductions, while Dr. Zelenska hooked a cable into his PC that would allow him to use the conference room projection television system as a monitor. "And so, I now turn this session over to Dr. Zelenska," said Director Gordon. Some officials in the background murmured their disapproval.

"I brought my computer," began Dr. Zelenska in his characteristic Eastern European accent, "because I have several programs to analyze this situation, which I have encountered before. Director Gordon, when I am ready, it would be helpful if someone would supply the coordinates, time, and date of each airliner at the moment they vanished off the air traffic control system."

The program prompted on the screen for the values, which Dr. Zelenska entered as they were recited to him. Once he had typed in the data for all five missing aircraft, Dr. Zelenska instructed the program to process the information.

"It appears that," explained Dr. Zelenska as he verified some values on his hand calculator, "that the

first two airliners vanished 72.2 hours apart. After a lapse of 144.5 hours, the next two also vanished 72.2 hours apart. After a lapse of another 144.3 hours, the fifth airliner vanished yesterday. Now I will cross-reference with stellar formations at zenith.”

A nighttime sky image appeared on the screen. A flashing circle marked the overhead position of the first airliner. As each of the other four airliners had its position noted, the circle got brighter, but its position did not change much.

“It is as I feared,” sighed Dr. Zelenska. “Taegella: the problem originates at that position on the other side of the galaxy! It is a generated phenomenon called a matter bridge.”

“Do we have to listen to this nonsense?” complained another FAA official. “This man’s theories of alien civilizations have all been discredited!” Several other people in the room echoed his displeasure.

“Because of national security, I cannot explain how I know these things,” began Dr. Zelenska, “but, in all sincerity, I wish it were not true! The predicted next occurrence is now displayed on the screen. Director Gordon, will there be an airliner in the vicinity within a plus or minus fifteen minute interval?”

Director Gordon whispered to an associate, who picked up a phone and placed a call. “We’re checking now,” he explained. Moments later, the associate gave him a written reply. “It seems that region has a lot of air traffic. Aero Caribbean flight 1244, from Jacksonville to Caracas, will be practically dead on target, excusing the pun.”

“Give the plane a military escort,” suggested another man; “they will surely be able to establish what is happening!”

“Too dangerous!” countered Dr. Zelenska. “I have a, er...a special experimental aircraft that will work much better. I will need the help of my former associate, Lawrence Cooper, who is co-owner of Cooper-Merriam Flyways. He is fully cleared. He should be instructed to meet me at Bunker-29.”

Background discussions indicated a high level of resistance to the suggestion, but Director Gordon granted the permission anyway, “I have no choice; the Pentagon says I am to give him full cooperation. However, our representative, Miss Rogers, will accompany Dr. Zelenska.”

“I implore you,” said Dr. Zelenska worriedly, “not to send this young woman into danger with us!”

“The decision is not open to debate!” said Director Gordon emphatically. As the room emptied, he hustled Dr. Zelenska and Valerie Rogers into a corner and formally introduced them.

“Miss Rogers, this is Dr. Frank Zelenska. Dr. Zelenska, this is special agent Valerie Rogers.”

“Just call me Val,” she began candidly. “I may not always be the easiest person to work with, but you can trust me!”

“For both our sakes, I really hope so,” began Dr. Zelenska with an air of cynicism. “And, most people just call me Frank, or sometimes Doc.”

## **0-0-0**

“Marge, this is Val,” began Valerie Rogers as she called her office in Washington D.C., “I need some information on a couple of gentlemen. Yes, Dr. Frank

Zelenska, a controversial scientist, and Lawrence Cooper, some kind of aviator.”

## **CHAPTER TWO: Nevada**

Sunset was a few minutes away as the small shuttle plane, transporting Dr. Zelenska and Valerie Rogers from Las Vegas, set down at the desert runway of Indian Springs Air Force Base. As the plane taxied toward the terminal compound, Dr. Zelenska pointed to a blue-green converted military fighter jet that was parked at the edge of the field. On its side was the insignia *Cooper-Merriam Flyways* in gold expanding text, surrounded by white streaks that terminated in silver and gold stars.

Dr. Zelenska and Valerie scarcely paused as they transferred their baggage from the plane to the back of a light-blue extended-cab pickup truck. Dr. Zelenska was dressed in black, including heavy duty black boots. Valerie wore a loose-fitting, tan jump suit and medium-duty, low-heeled brown boots. They hardly spoke to each other, and Val was preoccupied with the odd tattoo she had noticed in the palm of each of Dr. Zelenska's hands.

A young enlisted woman from the motor pool drove them along a series of unmarked dirt roads toward their destination. There was nothing to see but sagebrush and an occasional jack rabbit. As they started up a steep, dusty grade, the young woman asked what was at Bunker-29, alluding to stories of strange lights in the night sky, but Dr. Zelenska only politely answered that everything was classified. Valerie Rogers asked no questions. She just patiently listened and waited, sensing that she would soon know a very guarded secret.

The pickup truck slowed, turned, and stopped with the engine off at an attended gate. One of the two guards made the young woman wait while the other checked Dr. Zelenska's and Valerie Roger's authorization papers. After the guard made a telephone call for final verification, they were allowed to retrieve their luggage, as the young woman started the pickup and headed back toward the Air Force base.

Dust from the departed truck still hung in the dry, warm air as Valerie followed Dr. Zelenska along a dark path. One dim light illuminated a standard-sized door. When they reached it, Valerie realized that it was a side door to the bunker, that the two of them were standing next to an enormous, sturdy, metal, roll-up door that was at least twenty-five feet high and wide. Dr. Zelenska opened the side door and beckoned to Valerie to enter before him.

Valerie and Dr. Zelenska each in sequence tripped an electronic eye of a buzzer as they walked down a short, narrow corridor that was banked with cabinets and mostly bare work benches. "Some of my experiments," explained Dr. Zelenska as Valerie carefully eyed two strange electronic components.

"Doc, you're here!" yelled a tall, blond man who rushed to meet and embrace Dr. Zelenska. He wore matching light blue work pants and shirt, and a dull green flight jacket, the back of which had the same Cooper-Merriam insignia as that on the jet at the Indian Springs air field. He also carried a cane, which he occasionally used to balance a slight limp. Valerie puzzled for a moment, wondering what rapport drove these two men. Her home office had been able to give her nothing more than basic statistics about these two seemingly unimportant men.

“You look well, Coop; I think the last three years have been good to you.”

“Not really, Doc. At times, I think I am going to freak out at any moment. I think about Jean all the time. But you don’t look that good; I think you need to eat more and get some exercise.”

“I can’t spare the time. I’ve got keep trying to figure out that Taegellan physics. At times, I imagine that understanding is within reach; yet, it continues to elude me.”

“And who is this?” asked Coop as he noticed Valerie.

“Coop, this is Valerie Rogers, a special government agent. Valerie, this is Lawrence Cooper, one of my dearest friends,” explained Dr. Zelenska.

“But my friends just call me Coop,” he said as he lightly shook her hand. *‘A very nice-looking woman; it’s too bad that I’m still so stuck on Jean,’* he thought to himself.

“I’m happy to meet you. Everyone just calls me Val,” she added. *‘He’s tall and blond, just my type. It’s too bad he’s not a woman. And he’s also got at least one of these tattoos!’*, she thought to herself.

“Coop,” began Dr. Zelenska as his voice became very serious, “someone has apparently re-established the matter bridge. Five aircraft are missing. We must investigate, before a sixth vanishes tomorrow!”

“I had a bad feeling about this before I even got your message,” said Coop. “I’ve started preparations on the ship.”

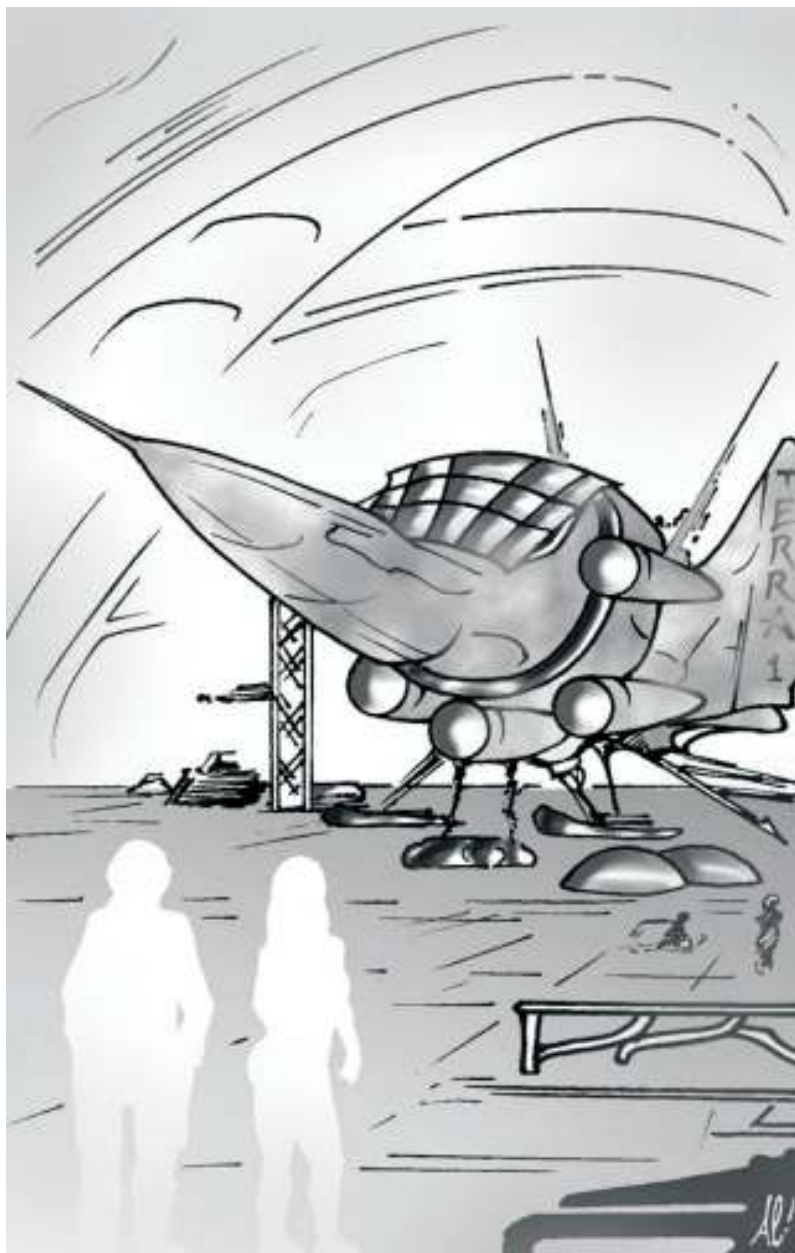
“Good, because we should leave at once,” urged Dr. Zelenska as he and Coop headed for the door to the main bunker.

“What ship are we...?” began Val as she followed them, but when she reached the door, it was as if she had lost her voice. Occupying most of the shadowy extent of the bunker, between the opposite roll-up doors, was a breath-taking, streamlined spaceship. It was iridescently colored in hues of gold, light-brown, yellow, and orange. It was more than fifty feet long. The nose came to a long point, while small fins protruded from cylinders in the aft section that looked like engines. A girdle of contoured cylinders ringed the ship at its wider midsection. Forward of these cylinders, the upper section had several windows that glistened in silver-gold tones. A curving door opened upwards toward the windows, over a stepped-ramp that protruded diagonally from the side of the ship to the concrete floor of the bunker. Written across the vertical rear fin, in fancy black lettering, was the name *Terra-1*.

Val carelessly dropped her luggage and walked closer. There was a shallow, very dark bubble on the aft side of the ring of cylinders. Below it was a circular dark-green emblem, slashed diagonally by a black lightning bolt. It was surrounded by letters or symbols that she did not recognize, despite her familiarity with many languages and scripts. The emblem itself was familiar, however, because it matched the tattoos in the hands of her two new associates.

The hull narrowed slightly and became a translucent yellow; then it gradually straightened and turned to orange at the aft engines and fins.

“It’s fantastic; what else can I say!” commented Val enthusiastically. “What is this stuff anyway, glass?” she asked as she touched the hull.





“Metallic-composite ceramic,” replied Dr. Zelenska.

“And these cylinders in the rear are engines?” she asked again. “But they don’t even have any orifices.”

“Gravitonic impellers, like the ones that surround this ship at midsection,” explained Coop. “They open automatically when turned on. The gravitonic coil is housed inside this translucent yellow section.”

“How far can it take us?” she asked.

“A long ways,” sighed Coop.

“Possibly all the way back to Taegella,” warned Dr. Zelenska, as he pulled a lever on a nearby wall. Some kind of electrical apparatus retracted from the side of the ship. “We must leave soon if we are to rendezvous with Flight 1244.”

“Excuse me, Doc,” said Coop vehemently as he pulled Dr. Zelenska aside, “but we simply cannot take Val. You know how dangerous it is!”

“Hey, I can take care of myself!” Val protested, as she pointed the index finger of her left hand at them in an assertive manner. “I am quite good in hand to hand combat, I know how to survive, and I speak twenty-nine languages.”

“Unless you speak Elazhakgi or Taekbulgi, all those dialects won’t do you any good. And there are unimaginable, demonic tyrants!” explained Coop.

Val quit arguing. She merely picked up her luggage and defiantly carried it up the stepped-ramp into the ship. Once in the ship, she turned to face the others as they boarded, vowing to resist any attempt to remove her. Coop and Dr. Zelenska left her standing

there, to watch the stepped-ramp retract as the outer airlock door closed downward. She had to jump backwards as a hidden inner airlock door moved upwards from the deck and sealed with a barely audible hiss. Val shuffled along as fast as possible in the narrow corridor to catch up with the others. In contrast to the starkness of the work benches of the entry way to the bunker, the walls of the corridor were packed with a variety of strange gadgets.

“You can stow your things in one of these lockers,” explained Dr. Zelenska. Press the black button to open the door, and the red button to close the door.”

“These oppositely-situated doors with the little round windows are the restrooms,” added Coop. “They’re similar to what use we use on Earth, but flushing is totally automatic.”

“These things here are ray guns?” she asked as she pointed to eight hand-gun-like objects, that seemed to be pressed into a special panel.

“They’re disrupters,” explained Coop. “They are in their charging slots. I can personally attest that they are quite nasty!”

### **0-0-0**

There were eight seats in two rows. Coop was seated in the right front side, while Dr. Zelenska was seated to his left. Val took the seat behind Dr. Zelenska. She hunted around for the seat belt assembly, but she could not find it. She also tried peeking out one of the windows, but the exterior lighting was not bright enough to penetrate the very dark aperture.

Val could not help noticing the somewhat ovular, but oddly curved view screen. It was even stranger when Coop switched it on, because it had unnatural colors and a three-dimensional effect. "I take it that this ship is not one of ours," stated Val with a hint of a question.

"It was once the flagship of Prince Aahn of Relkash on the planet Taegella," explained Dr. Zelenska. "He gave it to us out of gratitude. He is..."

"Quite a character," added Coop. "He and his Forest Techs embody everything that is good and bad with his species. Their technology is advanced, but they live in a quasi-feudal society. Aahn will fight to the death for any noble cause, but he ignores social injustice!"

"We will have to go closer to the Sun than Mercury to recharge the accumulator," warned Dr. Zelenska. "Even charging for three years with a thousand ampere service only got the reserve up to fifteen percent."

"Won't it be hot so close to the Sun?" asked Val worriedly.

"Normally, it would be," began Dr. Zelenska, "but we will be charging the accumulator. We will get quite cold during that process."

"The blinking blue light means the gravity brake is set," explained Coop. Brace yourself; I am transferring a bias charge to the gravitonic coil."

Val let off an involuntary grunt as an unseen energy wave seemed to pass through her entire body. She could not see or hear the energy pulsing in the gravitonic coil, but she could feel it.

“Okay,” continued Coop, “we will soon be in motion. Repello field on; we’re a couple of millimeters off the ground. Setting shields to low with radar negation, and activating inertial damper. Now purging the impeller tubes.”

Val could hear unsynchronized popping and hissing sounds as all the impeller tubes were opened during the initialization of a null gravitonic field that expelled the air. “Opening the forward bunker door,” said Dr. Zelenska.

“Now I carefully engage the gravitonic drive and release the gravity brake,” explained Coop, as he pulled back on a complex-looking dual stick control.

Restraint bands automatically unfolded from the sides of the seats and gently moved to constrain each occupant. The *Terra-1* moved slowly at first; then it accelerated. The ship was eerily smooth and quiet; only the high-pitched rush of air around it indicated that it was in motion. There was no sound except for a low-pitched resonant drone that sounded halfway between a hum and a buzz. In one, unexpected leap, the *Terra-1* left the Earth’s atmosphere entirely. Instinctively, Val braced herself for an overwhelming inertial impact, but it did not happen.

## **CHAPTER THREE: The Pursuit**

A glowing red hue in the cloud-covered horizon marked the position where the Sun had set a half hour ago. It was still possible to see some of the colorful decorations on the Boeing 767 that was Aero Caribbean flight 1244, as it ascended above a layer of dark clouds. Soon, the plane would only be visible because of its running lights

Three miles to the rear, the nearly invisible *Terra-1* gracefully dropped from the sky and locked onto the jetliner's course. The spaceship could not be detected by any Earthbound radar system.

Coop, wearing headphones with an attached mouth-piece speaker, had already established contact with Director Gordon by way of a radio operating on a secret and scrambled government frequency.

"I've just about shaken off the chill," complained Val. "If I had not experienced it, I would not have believed I could have gotten so cold so close to the Sun! Let me get this straight: you two are the only ones on this whole planet who can fly this ship?"

"That is correct," began Dr. Zelenska; "our hands have had what I call servo-metric conditioning, which allows us to operate these controls. That is why the government is so cooperative and has not seized this vessel."

"Just what is this accumulator?" asked Val somewhat impatiently.

"It is really like a very sophisticated battery, containing an allotropic form of solid helium, about the size of a basketball," explained Dr. Zelenska. "I am still learning the physics, but it functions by breaking down matter and storing it in standing waves within the empty space in atomic nuclei."

"Enough energy to run an electric automobile for several lifetimes," added Coop.

"Now that would sure solve our energy problems!" exclaimed Val.

"Sadly," admitted Dr. Zelenska, "all I have really accomplished is to install the radio and the remote

door opener. This physics may be beyond my level of comprehension!”

“What’s it like: this planet, Taegella?” questioned Val.

“It’s about twenty-seven percent larger than Earth; however, since it has a lower density, its surface gravity is only about five percent greater,” explained Dr. Zelenska. “There are two major continents—a Northern land mass and islands and a complimentary Southern land mass—that are separated by an enormous equatorial ocean. The South polar area is open water, but the North pole is a massive ice field, just like on Earth.”

“Above the pole floats a huge city, home of the Quemgi, some kind of androgynous race, feared by everyone else on the planet,” added Coop, as he paused in his intermittent conversation with Director Gordon.

“What are these people like?” asked Val. “Of course, I am only assuming that they look something like us.”

“They actually do,” continued Dr. Zelenska, “resemble us; in fact, the similarities are extraordinary. They are very humanoid in physical structure. They are about two centimeters shorter than us, on the average. They are very mammal-like, to the point of having similar dimorphic differences between males and females. They have vertical, cat-like pupils in their eyes and pastel skin colors that vary by race. The most noticeable difference is that they have four digits on each hand and foot.”

“No pointed ears?” asked Val jokingly.

“Their ears are round like ours; in fact, they were disappointed that we did not have pointed ears,” explained Dr. Zelenska seriously.

“They are also nearly all left-handed, though” interjected Coop. “That is the basis of our problem: the legend of the coming of the right-handed super being, but now it’s become all twisted!”

Val defensively pulled her left hand back, a reaction to being a minority in a right-handed world. “It all sounds so amazing, that we’ve found this race of beings so much like us!”

“Not really,” explained Dr. Zelenska, “ because they searched the galaxy until they found us. On Taegella, right-handed people are born as part of a set of fraternal twins, only one of whom is ever right-handed, and that one is usually the girl. Very rarely is a right-handed boy ever born, and he is always born along with a left-handed sister.”

“Now we get to Kragg,” began Coop bitterly, as he unsuccessfully held back the tears, “the most evil person I have ever met. I used to be in superb physical condition, but he left me like this, a near cripple. He haughtily killed my wife, Jean, while he dared me to interfere. He was a woman’s worst nightmare, a kind of estrogen vampire!”

“You’re kidding me. Isn’t he, Frank?” she asked as she turned to Dr. Zelenska.

“Empress Kragg was no joke,” warned Dr. Zelenska. “She was the devil of our dreams, capable of the most diabolic plotting. She had a lethal combination of cunning, macabre ethics, physical strength, and maniacal delusions of grandeur.”

“Hold on!” protested Val. “I heard both he and she. Are we talking about a man or a woman?”

Dr. Zelenska motioned to Coop to answer, as soon as he finished another report to Director Gordon, that the airliner was still ahead of them, flying in an unimpeded sky.

“You won’t understand unless I go to the beginning, back on Taegella,” explained Coop, trying hard to describe events that were so emotionally-charged for him. “Many years ago, the Martial Techs, the Lazarrians, were witness to a miraculous birth: that of Prince Kragg and his sister, Zolanda. The prince was right-handed, but he was of the wrong temperament, as well as the wrong race, to become the Tarrok, the transformed one; besides, only the Quemgi possess the secret enabling the ultimate power through a legendary gender transformation, which involves pairing with a right-handed female and the use of a derivative of the narcotic Tavik.

“The Lazarrians unsuccessfully tried to transform Kragg on their own, but it only turned him into a Tavik addict and warped his mind. Using some kind of a ruse, he entered the flying city and initiated the transformation on his own. I have heard that many people died during the process, including the right-handed woman whom he had kidnaped and taken with him. The transformation was only partially successful, certainly not the one of legend.”

Coop paused for a moment; then he continued at a faster pace, “At the time he returned home to Lazarr, a woman scientist had just completed the matter bridge. Kragg killed her and used her matter bridge creation as a step in his rise to power. Now we enter the story: a little over a decade ago, I was taking my wife of eight months, Jean DeLong, and Doc on a vacation down to Baha California in my Cessna. The



plane was caught by the matter bridge and transported across the galaxy to Kragg's world, Taegella.

“Lazarr, on the plains of the Northern continent, was a terrible place. It was run-down and polluted and filled with vicious people. The ruling class of the Lazarrians neglected all the details of life in their quest to dominate everyone else on the planet. Once we met Kragg, we realized that our situation was worse than we had thought; then we were kidnaped by secret agents of Prince Aahn and taken to Relkash, the forest kingdom on the Southern continent. The capital city of Xehbora was a lot more livable than anything else we had seen, but it appeared that our situation was getting desperate. Prince Aahn, like nearly all the rulers under the yoke of the Lazarrians, if not at war with his neighbors, was at least alienated from them. As three right-handed aliens, we were merely pawns in a complex web of deceit and skirmishes.

“Strangely, most of the people on Taegella practically worshiped us. Using this reverence as leverage, we convinced Aahn to cease waging petty warfare, and instead to form an alliance against Kragg. In less than two years, we had most of the planet united. Kragg's empire crumbled. Jean, Doc, and I were in a contingent that stormed the palace. That's when things went wrong.”

“Our group was ambushed,” continued Coop somberly, as tears streaked down his cheeks. “I fought my way through Kragg's elite guard; then I suddenly found myself confronting him alone, unarmed. That was a big mistake. He was so unbelievably strong that even my best martial arts maneuvers were useless. He pounded and tossed me like a piece of fluff. I remember being thrown into the air, but I do not remember slamming into the wall. I awoke to find my-

self dizzy and bleeding, with many broken bones and ribs.

“That’s when they brought Jean to him. Under the power of his hypnotic gaze, she walked into his embrace of death. It was awful, to lie there, scarcely being able to move. But I did move. I found a disrupter that a guard had dropped; then I crawled along behind Kragg as he carried her body outside to a parapet. When he threw her limp body into the Waterfall of Oblivion, I aimed the disrupter and held the trigger. Kragg stood there in defiance, as the deadly beam turned his body black. The disrupter went dead, he fell, but he got up again. I thought about trying to find another weapon, but he fell into the falls. It was a fitting death for the tyrant!”

With eyes as wide open as possible and her eyebrows arched, Val first looked at Doc; then she looked back at Coop. “You guys are serious, aren’t you? It’s not just a tall tale?”

“It all happened,” began Dr. Zelenska sadly, “as Coop has recounted! Every unfortunate moment is true!”

“And I think I’m not going to like the answer,” she continued, “but I have to know. The Waterfall of Oblivion: just what is it?”

“A grisly Lazarrian death machine,” blurted Dr. Zelenska contemptuously. “They had taken a beautiful waterfall next to the palace and lined the entire pathway with long, sharp spikes. Then they stocked the area with kombeths, small reptile-like creatures that have gaping jaws filled with venomous, razor-sharp teeth. It was the sort of fate that no one deserved, except possibly for Kragg!”

“What’s happening to the jet?” asked Val suddenly as she looked up at the screen and saw the jetliner seemingly bend and twist.

“Matter bridge ahead!” announced Dr. Zelenska. “We ought to be able to lock onto the plane with a coupling field and pull it out of danger.”

“Air Traffic Control is losing contact,” warned Coop. “I’m switching to gravimetric scan, so we don’t lose her too!”

The view screen display had changed from its strange color mode to an even stranger mode. The image of the jetliner had stabilized, but it now looked like it was part of a stark black and white negative. Something else had appeared in the field of view: a curving orange-colored envelope of streamers that formed a growing funnel that had already swallowed the jetliner. Crimson flashes marked the dissipation of energy at the boundaries.

“Locking onto the jetliner...now!” warned Dr. Zelenska. Though they could not physically feel anything, the *Terra-1* began to buck and yaw under the load.

“Doc, we’re being pulled inside too. Hurry with the dispersion field!” yelled Coop.

“It’s not working,” Dr. Zelenska explained in an exasperated tone, “it’s just not working! They’ve changed the configuration of the matter bridge! There’s no time to decipher all the parameters! I’m shutting down the coupling! Get us out of here, Coop!”

Coop tried to steer away, but the *Terra-1* was now as trapped as the jetliner. The three of them helplessly watched as the world they knew was ex-

changed for a twisting orange cyclone, a void empty of any other object except the jetliner.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: Across the Galaxy**

“We’d better get ready while we have the chance,” informed Coop after he returned from the restroom. “It’s a universal translator. It stimulates the auditory nerves to produce an odd, echo-like translation, which is not exact and takes getting used to,” he explained as he pinned a small disk to Val’s collar; then he handed her a disrupter with a belt clip and explained, “You twist the barrel collar to the left for maximum power; the collar will turn black. You twist the collar to the right for minimum power; it will turn red. Push the collar forward to release the safety, and pull the collar back to set the safety.” Dr. Zelenska took a universal translator, but he waved his hand in refusal of the disrupter. Coop clipped it to his belt on his left side, opposite the one on his right.

“How long does this trip through the matter bridge last?” asked Val curiously.

“No more than fifteen to twenty minutes by normal time,” Dr. Zelenska explained. “Yes, I realize we have already been here that long, but time within the matter bridge is dilated. For us, the trip will take almost two hours. The rough part will be the halfway point!”

“Just what will happen?” she asked with a note of concern. Val wondered for a moment if she had exercised good judgment by coming on this mission; nothing in her experience or training had prepared her for the current situation or for what was very likely to come.

“There’s a flaw in the matter bridge,” began Coop, “or rather, it does not gradually compensate for dif-

ferences in angular momentum between Earth and Taegella, so there is a rough boundary zone at the midway point. The inertial damper will not protect us from all its effects. That's one reason we brought these sacks," he added as he handed one to her.

"I hope I don't need this," she said in an embarrassed tone.

"Doc, can they tell that we are here?" asked Coop worriedly.

"I don't know," replied Dr. Zelenska after a brief pause. "Perhaps we should move closer to the jetliner. When we emerge at the other end, we must aggressively resist being caught in the containment field! I'll boost the force shields to maximum with variable high frequency resonance."

### **0-0-0**

Once Val returned to her seat, she braced for the emergence from the matter bridge. All three of them had come through the momentum adjustment turbulence without incident, but now they had to prepare for an inevitable confrontation with hostile alien forces.

"Is the *Terra-1* armed?" she asked hopefully.

"It has a nuclear cannon in the nose," replied Dr. Zelenska, "plus two flash disrupters: one on each side of the ship. Flash disrupters are similar to our sidearms, but the frequency rise time is extremely short, effective for metal components rather than organic matter. We had neglected to tell the Pentagon about any of its combat capabilities."

“Brace yourselves!” warned Coop. “I am moving ahead of the plane. Emergence in...eight seconds. I’m turning to generate shearing forces...now!”

As the *Terra-1* sped forward, a reddish haze appeared before them; then it engulfed them. The ship broke free of the containment field; then they plunged through intermixed layers of black and red-tinted clouds.

A look of consternation came over Coop as he took the ship above the lower cloud layer. “Something is wrong here, Doc!”

“This is not Taegella!” announced Dr. Zelenska. “This is another world on the other side of the galaxy. It has an orange sun, not a yellow-green sun. It is not Taegella, but Taegella cannot be very far away!”

“We have company!” warned Coop. “There are hundreds of them, perhaps over a thousand, approaching from several directions. The shields are already up; I’m activating flash disrupters. I’m not sure where to go!” On either side of the *Terra-1*, the dark bubbles split into eight receding segments; then the gimbaled barrels of the disrupters protruded through the openings.

“We have over eighty percent power,” announced Dr. Zelenska as he activated a vertical black bar on the far left-hand side of the view screen.

“Can I help?” asked Val, feeling helpless. At that moment, there were several flashes of energy. The computer-guided disrupters automatically returned the fire. High frequency shrieks, followed by lower frequency reverberations, marked each firing. The rate crescendoed to the point that it was difficult to distinguish individual pulses from the weapons.

Special control panels lowered from the ceiling into the laps of Val and Dr. Zelenska. Each had a circular screen along with aiming and firing controls.

“Doc,” explained Coop, “you have the left-hand side. Val, you have the right hand side. Use the joy-stick to aim and the black button to fire. The guns work automatically, but you can select an override target. The commands are stored and the targets are tracked, so it’s not a real-time operation!”

An object ahead exploded and the *Terra-1* passed through its expanding debris cloud. Val got her first good look at another one as it came in close and then veered away. It looked like a wide, flat flying wedge, with a single active gun turret on top.

“They’re Lazarrian strato-fighters,” said Dr. Zelenska, recognizing the vehicle type and the claw emblems which they all bore. “At least we know something about our opponents.”

“How dangerous are they?” asked Val nervously, as she selected one on her firing panel.

“No match for us at all, being armed only with proximity torpedoes,” replied Coop, “but there are a lot of them, and we only have a finite amount of power stored in the accumulator. But watch this,” he said as he accelerated so fast that he quickly left all the fighters behind. Cruising at an altitude of about ten kilometers, he steered a course around the planet at high speed. Having passed over a region of dense forests, they crossed an inland sea that was surrounded by a rings of volcanoes. As they crossed into the night, the opposite shore turned into a wide plain that eventually led to a jungle strewn with small lakes.

“The planet is slightly smaller than Earth,” said Dr. Zelenska as he took several measurements. “But it is denser and has a lot less surface water: just two moderate-sized polar oceans and an even smaller inland sea.”

“We are coming up on the point where we emerged from the matter bridge,” warned Coop, as they crossed back into the orange daylight. “The device must operate from that city on the horizon. Prepare for battle; we are going to surprise a few strato-fighters!”

The *Terra-1* destructively drove through three waves of strato-fighters before the enemy realized that they were there. Several fighters exploded, while many dropped like rocks when their propulsion systems failed. However, so many survived the attack that the shields on the *Terra-1* were again subjected to a severe pounding, as proximity torpedoes exploded everywhere.

A jolt shook the entire ship. It was so intense that the inertial damper could not entirely negate its effect. A warning buzzer sounded, and an unusual blinking orange icon appeared next to the black bar on the view screen.

“We have a problem in the gravitonic coil!” yelled Coop. “We seemed to have suffered some kind of damage. I will try to gain altitude, but I don’t think we’ll be leaving this planet.”

“A beam of energy from a tower in that city hit us!” replied Dr. Zelenska. “We must leave this area; our energy levels are dropping, and we cannot take any more such hits!”



“I’m heading for the opposite side of the planet. Maybe I can set her down on that plain beyond the inland sea,” suggested Coop.

“Yes, yes,” urged Dr. Zelenska, “I do not know if we have any allies on this strange world, but we do have the *Terra-1*! Perhaps its auto-fabrication circuits can repair the damage.”

Although the flash disrupters were leaving a debris-strewn path below, wave after wave of strato-fighters continued to pound their defenses. Coop was unable to coax the *Terra-1* above the fighters’ maximum altitude. The black bar on the view screen was shrinking to a perilous size.

“We can’t sustain this!” yelled Coop. “I’m shutting down the inertial damper.” At that moment, for the first time, they actually felt the jarring effects of proximity torpedoes exploding against the shields.

“We have to abandon ship!” warned Dr. Zelenska.

“Doc, you and Val must eject now! I’ll stay a few moments longer to cover for you!” ordered Coop.

“No!” Val protested.

“Hurry!” yelled Dr. Zelenska as he used all his strength to pull her by the arm to the entrance to a transparent cylindrical escape pod. After she was seated, he instructed, “Pull that lever to close the pod; then push that button to eject.”

“I don’t have any of my personal affects!” she protested.

“No time; the emergency supplies within the pod will have to suffice,” he explained as he sat in the pod

next to her and closed the door. Val closed the door to her pod a second later. "Let's go!" he yelled.

Both Val and Dr. Zelenska uttered a brief, involuntary shriek as their pods dropped toward the ground in free fall, within two meters of each other. When Val looked upwards through the clear dome of the pod in search of the *Terra-1*, she discovered that it had already been obscured by several layers of thick clouds.

Coop waited ten seconds for the escape pods to lose altitude; then he fired the first tactical nuclear charge from the nose gun into the swarm of strato-fighters. He did not wait to count how many were destroyed. As he turned the *Terra-1* in a sweeping arc, he fired the four remaining charges; then he steered the ship on a course over the inland sea. The power level bar hovered near zero as he approached the opposite shore.

Coop set the ship on auto-pilot. He paused for a moment to reduce the length of his telescoping cane; then he raced for the nearest escape pod. The shields were going to fail at any moment! Daylight lasted only seconds as Coop's escape pod plunged into the night-time sky over the expansive plains area. He lost sight of the ship for a few seconds; then he saw a bright flash that turned into a streaking meteor. Moments later, as the repello field within the pod was starting to break his fall, and as the landing legs unfolded from the space beneath his seat, Coop sadly watched the *Terra-1* crash to the ground on the horizon.

*'I think we'll be here for a while. This time I had the foresight to put my partner in charge of my personal affairs!'* he thought to himself.

## CHAPTER FIVE: Pursuit

Upon landing, Dr. Zelenska quickly exited his escape capsule. He did not even bother to test the air, because there was no time to delay, nor was there enough air within the capsule for any kind of survival anyway. Having removed the case of survival gear from the capsule, he switched off the main breaker to reduce all electrical functions to zero.

Val had landed about eight meters away, near a large tree that looked like a cross between a conifer and a palm. She had landed intact, but she was staying in her pod. Dr. Zelenska quickly moved to her location, while he breathed through his mouth. The air seemed to have an adequate oxygen content, but some of the pungent odors present were disagreeable. His footing felt solid, but could not clearly see where he was walking, because patches of the ground around him were covered by a thick green fog that never seemed to rise higher than about ten centimeters. The offensive odor seemed to come from the curious fog. Some kind of small, chattering animals roamed through the fog, wildly bumping into his boots.

“We cannot stay here, bad odors or not!” warned Dr. Zelenska as he finally coaxed Val to open her door. As she grabbed her survival case, and as Dr. Zelenska switched off the main breaker in her pod, he continued, “Our situation is not good, but it will be far worse if the Lazarrians capture us! It is a few minutes before sunset, so we must move as fast as possible before we camp for the night.”

“What is this stuff?” asked Val as she stepped into the fog.

“I think it is something like an algae-laden mist. I also think there are small animals that race through it, eating the tiny floating plants as they go.”

“We should contact Coop.” suggested Val as she confidently stepped through the fog, realizing that her boots would protect her.

“They would trace us through the high-band radio signal. The pods have a transponder locator beacon, but it has been shut down at the main breaker. We must leave this area!” warned Dr. Zelenska.

“All these plants and trees are different, to say the least. I wonder if...” said Val as her question was answered. Some large, unseen animal noisily walked through the forest nearby. It emitted a series of low-pitched, hoarse-sounding cries. Fortunately, it was moving away from them.

“I replaced half of the things in these cases with essentials from Earth,” remarked Dr. Zelenska; “however, the flashlights like this one are much better than any on Earth! And these spectrum analyzers are invaluable!” he added as he pivoted on his feet through a full 360 degrees while he pointed a device that looked much like a television remote control.

“Is it telling you anything?” she asked as she tried to figure out its small display screen.

“I’ve got a chart that translates exactly, but that takes time, so I will take rough guesses. There are no major sources of nuclear radiation nearby. I think there are some aircraft in the distance,” explained Dr. Zelenska, “and I think there may be some kind of city towards the pole from our location. We will have to use these devices sparingly, you have one too, because they can be detected.”

It was getting dark, so Val hurriedly found her light and switched it on. She had accidentally pointed it upwards in the trees, where she momentarily illuminated an unusual flying animal. It looked like a large woodpecker, but it had wide, oval bug-eyes and was covered with greenish fur instead of feathers. It flew off into the darkness, carrying something in its beak that resembled a long blue caterpillar.

After an hour of rapid walking in darkness, having left the ground fog behind them, Dr. Zelenska finally stopped. "I'm not young enough for this pace. We are not far enough from the landing site, but we will camp here. We can set up an intruder screen," he said as he removed eight slim cylinders from his survival case. He motioned to Val to remove hers also.

Val never had a chance, as a vehicle sporting bright search lights passed almost overhead. Val and Dr. Zelenska grabbed their survival cases and ran nearly blindly through the forest, as they shielded their lights with their hands. They could hear more aircraft flying toward the area. They spooked a long-necked animal that had been eating fruit, inducing it to gallop away.

"We should follow it!" urged Val.

"Yes, but I could not keep up the previous pace," complained Dr. Zelenska. "I will collapse at any moment."

"Just a few minutes more, Frank," she urged. As she turned toward Dr. Zelenska for a moment, she came to an abrupt stop and dropped her flashlight and survival case. She had run into something or someone, and it was big. Dr. Zelenska's light revealed a menacing humanoid form, as it threw an object to

the ground. The object exploded, creating a bright, constant light. It was a flare.

Val tried to move back, but the dog-headed Bozarg guard was faster than she expected. He grabbed her right arm and lifted her into the air. She tried to use her disrupter, but she could not release the safety with a single hand. She kicked him in the head, causing them both to fall. When she hit the ground, she rolled back to her feet. In a single motion, she turned, pushed the collar forward, and fired the disrupter. The weapon emitted an ear-piercing, blast of sound and energy as it burned through the Bozarg's black uniform, killing him instantly.

Two more Bozarg guards charged from the darkness. They fell near the first Bozarg guard. One of them had been carrying a disrupter rifle. As Val reached down to pick it up, she was startled by gunfire. She turned to see another Bozarg guard, who had sneaked up behind her, fall dead.

"I...had to kill him!" cried Zelenska as he put the tiny Beretta back into his concealed shoulder holster. "Ever since they shot my wife at the Berlin wall, while I helplessly watched, I vowed it would never happen again. I am not a fighter!"

"You are a great man!" she cried as she embraced and kissed him. "If only you had more energy. We have to run; they'll flock to the light!"

"I've caught my breath. I can do it!" he assured her.

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It was a few minutes before dawn, as Dr. Zelenska and Val stirred from their too-brief rest at the trunk of a huge tree. Fortunately, it had been a warm, sum-

mer-like night. They quickly ate and drank some of their provisions; then they headed toward a rocky clearing, a welcome break from the confines of the nearly-endless forest.

“Can we eat the fruit and drink the water?” asked Val.

“Only if the Lazarrians can,” responded Dr. Zelenska. “Their food is not very palatable, but it is edible. If only we can reach one of their bases on this planet, without being detected.”

“Why is it suddenly so quiet?” asked Val, as they watched the nameless orange star clear the trees on the horizon. As Dr. Zelenska prepared to use his spectrum analyzer, large nets were catapulted high into the air. There were so many that the two of them could not dodge them all. When the nets landed on them, they were as sticky as a spider’s web. Both Dr. Zelenska and Val found themselves to be totally immobilized. They could scarcely even breathe.

After they were pulled from the nets, they were held in the iron grip of several Bozarg guards. They were approaching the boarding ramp of a strato-transport, as Zark guards placed mind-control headbands on their heads...

## **0-0-0**

Val stepped forward, but suddenly the boarding ramp was gone; someone shoved her into a dirty, dungeon-like room that had taken its place. The door slammed and bolted behind her, before she could free herself from all the cobwebs and turn around. A startled garden-spider-sized creature emitted faint squeaks as it climbed toward the ceiling. The room was filthy. It had a flimsy bed that was frayed. It also

had a sink and a toilet, both of which were covered with a thick scum. Light came into the room through glass bricks that ran along the ceiling line of one wall.

Val did not remember the trip to the cell, so she correctly deduced that they had somehow suppressed her memory of the intervening time after capture. She hurriedly checked her pockets, but everything that she had stashed there was gone, except several wads of tissue paper. She had even hidden a small knife in each boot: they were both missing. She wondered why it felt like something was pressing against her forehead; her fingers could not find any foreign objects. She presumed that Dr. Zelenska had been placed in a similar cell. Perhaps it was next to hers.

“Frank, can you hear me?” she asked repeatedly, as she walked the perimeter of the cell. No reply came. Finally, she sat on the edge of the bed, with her eyes toward the light. She was tired. After a few minutes her mind drifted toward a contemplative mood; then she almost fell asleep.

Val turned as the door unbolted. An alien woman with reddish skin entered, as a Bozarg guard stood behind her in the open doorway. She paused for a moment, looking Val over with a regal demeanor. She was wearing a black minidress, which was complimented with a black cape and a wide red belt, to which was attached a dagger in its scabbard. Her body was adorned with red-colored ornaments and jewelry everywhere. Her white-streaked, reddish-brown long hair and eyebrows complimented her wide brown eyes, with their nearly vertical pupils. Each pinkish hand had a thumb and three fingers. Though she was undeniably an alien from another world, she was also recognizable as a woman. She was not particularly attractive, but she was imposing.