

Chapter 3: With This Ring

Conversely Kol, like Gaheris, was adamant that self-interest must be *enlightened*. And they were right.

The Wayists say: “When I do something for others, with enlightenment, they benefit. And so, serendipitously, do I. That is how the Divine has architected the universe.”

To their truth – and it is a key truth – I add this inseparable corollary: When I do something for myself, *with enlightenment*, I benefit. And so, serendipitously, do others. That is how the Divine has architected the universe.

– Tamerlane Anasazi, *Memories of the Matriarch*, “Enlightened Self-Interest”

As planned, Kol helped the Perseids raise the first generation of cats. Clones of her originals, in litters of eight, they needed to be hand-raised from the moment of their decanting. Robotic aid notwithstanding, there was no way she alone could hand-feed thirty-two squeaking kitlings every two hours day and night, keep them clean and warm, carefully monitor their growth, and later referee their squabbles, rescue them from overwhelming heights and tangles, socialize them, and teach them the ins and outs of privy-box usage...and then keep up with the mess. Fortunately, the Perseid biologists, gengineers, biotechnists, and admins brought in for the new project became absolutely enthralled with the exotic little creatures from day one. They hung on her every word of guidance and anecdote. Bombarded her with questions. Sought her out in a near panic over every feline snuffle and barf. And, had any of the kittens not survived, might very well have invited the person deemed responsible for the tragedy to take a nice, relaxing stroll on the asteroid’s surface. Sans life support.

In fact, the one time she’d had to fight for something she considered necessary to the resurrection of housecats, it’d been about the gengineering. Recalling sad stories of the abuse and abandonment of cats in overpopulated areas in, for example, the century before her birth, Kol had insisted cats not remain such prolific breeders. It’d taken long consultations with a committee of Perseid biologists regarding the needs and nature of domesticated predators, input by commerce experts regarding the esoterics of future supply and demand, and even an intervention by Poret, before a workable solution had been found. Finally, the gengineers had made the modifications necessary to ensure that future generations of cats, whenever pressured by overpopulation or lack of resources, would naturally toggle from polyestrus to monoestrus cycles and from litters to pairs. The hardest part had been ensuring succeeding generations would toggle back to their normal birthrate pattern when space and resources became available again.

For their part, both the original cats and their clones seemed to think Perseids were quite adequate servants. A few they even elevated to the status of companions-without-fur. Interestingly, by time they were weaned, the favorite of almost all the clones seemed to be Rekeeb, an affection he joyously returned. Based on the kittens’ recommendation, he quickly rose through the project’s hierarchy. In fact, during the cloning of the fifth lineal generation several years later, he become the project’s prime administrator...a role he relished while still insisting on hands-on involvement with each litter.

Six months passed and Kol’s original contract ended. Tyr did not return, however; nor send any message. So, much to the relief of the cat-caregivers, she agreed to continue consulting on an as-needed basis, and to commit to flexi and molyspool all she could about cat behavior, breeding, socialization, maintenance, and medicine.

A seventh and eighth month went by, and still Tyr didn’t return. Nor did Harper. Kol found herself the

darling of a newly formed consortium of Perseid historians. They'd collected numerous ancient records of humankind for which they had no context, and she was able to help explain many of the earliest. Ironically, working with historians paid even better than working with biologists. And since the original project took care of her living quarters, sustenance, and air tax, the consultative fees she was earning far outweighed her expenses. So Kol began to amass funds for plans she hoped to implement in the future. Plans she could pursue with or without Tyr Anasazi.

After nine months, though, Tyr and Harper finally returned to the research facility. Tyr queried the asteroid's administrative AI regarding Kol's whereabouts, and received directions to the feline project's biolab. He arrived at the lab to find Kol in consultation with Rekeeb and several Perseid technists. Without a word, he went to her, placed an instruction flexi before her, set a casting template on top of the flexi, and walked out of the lab. He returned to his ship's hanger to check on the upgrades Harper was installing, and to supervise provisioning by a Than trader he didn't trust any farther than he could throw her in a five-gee field.

Her consultation finished, Kol took Tyr's flexi and template back to her quarters. She requisitioned a stasis chamber of suitable configuration to hold her four cats, and an ayegee pod to transport the chamber and the few clothes and other personal items she'd accumulated. After quickly packing, she picked up the cats one by one and, soothing them, put them into stasis in the cocoon that would protect them from just about anything short of a nearby nova bomb. She programmed the pod to deliver itself to Tyr's slipranger, with a faceplate message keyed to Harper's voiceprint that read "Please keep this load unobstructed. May require offloading before launch. Thank you. Kol."

Sending the pod floating on its way, she left her quarters for possibly the last time and turned her steps towards the research facility's auxiliary crafting center. There, using what Tyr had given her, she began to personally fabricate a gradually improving series of double helixes. It took a number of tries, recycling her failures, but she finally had a pair she considered satisfactory. On the inside of each band, where the sigil of the Kodiak bear was etched, she programmed the etch-laser to repeat a second, smaller bear inside the first one. Carefully placing the two bands, as well as the template and instruction flexi, in her warbag, she left the crafting center and made her way to Tyr's hanger.

Tyr and Harper were standing beside the slipranger, discussing the unloading of some unmarked cargo cases. Kol's pod was not among them. She pondered the alternatives. She doubted the pod had not yet arrived. So either Tyr had allowed it to be loaded, or he'd sent it back. Or, just perhaps, Harper had loaded it without Tyr's knowledge. Whatever the case, she'd follow up after her encounter with Tyr and before the ship left.

As Kol walked towards them, Tyr left Harper with a final word, gestured Kol to follow him into the ship, and led her to and through the command center into the small observation bubble. He polarized the bubble surface to give them privacy, then turned to her.

"So. Kol Kaguta?"

"I'm a new person in your universe. All that I had is left behind; all that I will have is open before me. A facet of that is my desire to be a part of the resurrection of the Kodiak...and of the mission of Tamerlane Anasazi.

"In some ancient human languages, the word *qol* or *kol* means, variously, *all* and *voice*. And Kaguta was the middle name of a leader who, around the time I was born, had brought a large measure of strength and stability to one of the most impoverished and struggling nations of old Earth. His surname was known the world

over in my time, and has resounded thru the ages even to your day.”

She paused, then quietly spoke the name. “Yoweri Kaguta Museveni.”

Tyr took a sharp breath. “Harper explained to me, as I assume Höhne did to you, the ‘where it or I began’ decision-fork in the tunnel. I had an inkling before; now I truly understand why I shifted so far. But why didn’t I ever see that name in your world?”

“Because you never looked for it. Despite knowing you were in humanity’s past, that kind of connection never occurred to you. Remember, you never realized your own name came from that distant past until I mentioned Anasazi or ‘ancient others’ could mean ancient ancestors *or* ancient enemies. I suspect my memories about Museveni never surfaced in your mind even after cross-loading because the name *always* turns your thoughts towards Tamerlane.

“But you knew what the name Museveni meant to me.”

“True.”

“And you didn’t tell me?”

“I chose not to at that time.”

“The line you told your children to meld with?”

“Yes. That too. Speaking of which...”

Reaching into her warbag, Kol removed the larger armband and, laying it across her right palm, extended it to Tyr. He glowered at it, then at her.

“Why should I?”

“Because you *need* to.”

Tyr leaned back against the bubble wall, folded his arms, and smiled sardonically.

“You’re not Nietzschean.”

“There’s nothing in my DNA that Paul purged from the Nietzschean genome. You yourself called me proto-Nietzschean. I have Nietzschean nanobots, and the enhancements they fostered. Arguably, the progeny I left behind became direct ancestors of the Nietzschean race. It’s a leap for you, but not an insurmountable one.”

She gestured at her forearms.

“No bone blades. But there are Nietzscheans who’ve given up their blades. Outrooted them, for example, for vital long-term espionage missions. Being forced into that position might initially dishonor them, but succeeding at and surviving such a mission more than compensates. And if we ever do need me to walk that path among Norms, I have a better chance than *anyone* of fooling them.”

Tyr shook his head, more in contemplation than in negation.

“Your husbands tend to die young.”

It was a cruel retort, but Kol responded calmly.

“They lived well, and left worthy progeny. It mattered little when and how they died, so long as they died better men than they imagined they could be, and no worse than they feared. Which they did.”

Tyr blinked; she had just essentially quoted Drago to him. Enough sparring; it was time to cut to the heart of the matter.

“Why do I *need* to marry you?”

Kol sat down cross-legged on the bubble floor and looked up at him. After a moment, he slid down the wall and crouched, one arm across his raised knee.

“You’re unable to find a wife because you have no wife.”

At his raised eyebrow, she nodded, then continued.

“Tyr, I think I see things you don’t because they’re *not* second nature to me. So, a Nietzschean’s sense of smell is very acute. Pheromones are extremely, almost consciously, important to Nietzscheans. And very potent, which is a big part of why Norms so often find themselves inexplicably attracted to Nietzscheans. But the pheromones *you’re* producing, while alpha strong, have long been just a tad off. I suspect this is a problem for all Nietzschean males: the longer you go without becoming a husband and father, the more skewed your pheromone composition becomes.

“No matter what your head tried to tell you, before you met Freya your physical system ‘knew’ you were unwed because you were unwanted. Some sensation, some strength, some wisdom, some will to power in Freya helped her see past that. But when you lost Freya, once to circumstances and again to death, your system ‘knew’ you’d failed as a husband and father. So your pheromones scream out to potential mates that, though this man is arguably alpha material, something’s wrong. Nietzschean women find themselves realizing – and wondering why – you’re not already, or still, an espoused husband and father of many.

“Like Freya, I choose to see past that. If you accept my proposal, you’ll have the right to wear another armband for all to see. And your pheromone production should then rebalance.”

“Will it, woman? What good is a wife who doesn’t give me children?”

“Then I will. As I understand it from scattered memories of yours, the Nietzschean genome contains a nanobot-constructed, artificial, ring-shaped chromosome...centromere but no telomeres. It contains the additional genes for new characteristics Paul wanted his created race to express, such as the bone blades. When a Nietzschean parent’s germ-cell nanobots don’t encounter their counterparts from the other parent during conception, they simply don’t construct the ring chromosome. The child is born a Norm.

“You know, I wonder how many false starts and failures it took Paul to work out such a method of ensuring Nietzschean purity. It ensures there’ll never be any Nietzschean halflings while still allowing for Nietzschean procreation with a non-Nietzschean human. *If*, that is, the Nietzschean partner cares so much they’re willing to forgo Nietzschean offspring from the union. Because, after all, whatever feelings the Nietzschean partner might have, by definition they must be stronger than anything similar a Norm could feel. Which makes those feelings very Nietzschean in and of themselves, so apparently Paul chose to accommodate them if necessary. I’ve wondered, though, whether Paul contemplated some more draconian measure – such as ensuring that halfling children would die horribly, perhaps instinctively be killed by their Nietzschean parent – to discourage any such couplings in future. But I suppose I’ll never know.

“Anyway, we know I won’t pass on any purged genes. So, if your genes dominate, if the somatic nanobots you gave me follow their auxiliary germ-cell programming to synthesize and implant the ring chromosome, then our children will be indistinguishable from any other Nietzscheans. If not, then we’ll send them away to acceptable nurturant parents to live a decent life as Norms.”

“You’d give up your children?”

“Didn’t you give up *your* child, at least for a while? To protect him? For the good of your people? And haven’t I already given up my children to come with you? Willingly left them behind to live their lives. To become *your* ancestors. Tyr, I wouldn’t be giving our children *up*; I’d be giving them a better genetic heritage than I ever hoped possible, even for Norms.”

Tyr shook his head and sighed. She was right. She was right about all of it. She'd thought it out and expressed it in a Nietzschean way. She was bending the universe to her will. Bending *him* to her will, and convincing him to go along with it. He knew what she was doing, but she was so good at it. In her gentle and straightforward way, she was arrogant. She was vain. She was manipulative. She was selfish. And she would love their children. Her soul was what Drago had said a Nietzschean soul *is*. She was good wife material. Good mother material. Good....

"I accept." His voice suddenly wavered with uncharacteristic trepidation. "*If* you will commit to be Matriarch when we resurrect the Kodiak Pride."

It was Kol's turn to be stunned. And suspicious. What *did* this man have up his gauntlet? She searched her mind and heart to understand not only why Tyr was really accepting her proposal, but also why he'd want *this*. Now, as never before, she had to think like a Nietzschean without being limited by Nietzschean thinking.

If Tyr and Freya, she thought, had the genetic complement necessary to procreate the true genetic reincarnation, then it stood to reason Tyr might very well recapitulate Paul Museveni, as Freya would Styrka Kraft. In other words, Tyr was what Paul would've been had Paul himself been Nietzschean; conversely, Paul had been what Tyr would be were Tyr a Norm.

Of course, Paul hadn't been Nietzschean. He'd wanted to be, but couldn't; so he'd done the next best thing. Created a Nietzschean son, Drago. And when that succeeded, created more Nietzscheans, starting with Athena Kasov as a wife for his son. He'd used the best genes available, eliminating all potential lethals, developed workarounds where elimination of a lethal also meant loss of a positive attribute, and gengineered them with the help of the nanobots his wife created for the project...nanobots that stayed with the resultant children.

Kol started making mental connections. When he'd infected her, Tyr had expected her to die, and been stunned when she didn't. Instead, his nanobots had found her with no inferior nanobots, no cyborging, and no genes – neither eliminated lethals nor any artificial genes associated with other bred races like aquatics, heavy-worlders, spacers, and esoterics – that would flag someone as being other than Nietzschean. So the nanobots had gone to work at what they do...“healing” her. For over a year now, they'd been enhancing her metabolism. Rejuvenating her organs. Strengthening her muscles. Densifying her bones to support the added pull. Hardening her lungs against toxic gases. Increasing her ability to digest and take nourishment from organic matter. Patrolling and scrubbing her circulatory system,. Upgrading her immune system. Revitalizing her sight and hearing. Augmenting her olfactory sense and pheromone production. Optimizing her brain function. And who knew what-all else. She hadn't thought to test; but for all she knew, they were even introducing the ring chromosome in her cells at normal mitosis. To all appearances, the only thing they hadn't done was express bone blades; but then, they didn't normally do that except immediately post-infancy.

Tyr had long held his very fundamentalist vision of Nietzscheanness. Kol felt this stemmed from his spending his first decade in a Pride, followed by two decades without a Pride. He hadn't done the kind of questioning of one's parents and culture that normally comes with one's teens. And there was absolutely nothing harder to combat and overcome than the idealized image of something lost. But when he'd come to the Andromeda – where, ironically, Dylan was in the throes of trying to recapitulate his own unrealistic image if something lost – that teenish reevaluation had finally started to happen.

Kol called up some of Tyr's specific memories, milestones she recognized in his personal evolution.

He'd certainly seen things in Yvaine, for example, that – especially when compared with what he was really seeing about his own people – he'd admired. Even loved about her. Big step. He'd *almost* displayed his inner turmoil and feelings to her twice, but couldn't follow through. All the questioning, the reevaluating, had still been too new. By time he'd been trapped in the tunnel, he'd taken another step: seeing things he loved and admired in Beka and at times actually wishing she were Nietzschean. He'd never openly told her so; but Kol knew he'd been planning to. *Big* step.

And now here was Kol herself. When it had looked like he might be trapped in her world forever, he'd been even more at the mercy of the exigencies of his environment than he had on Midden. Over time, he saw in her things he'd seen in Yvaine. He saw in her things he'd seen in Beka. He saw in her things that – having come of age neither as self-secure nor as open-minded as might've Nietzscheans of a less dangerous era – he'd never been given nor given himself the chance, the *permission*, to see in a Norm woman. On top of which, he'd just learned that *this* woman had a direct and conscious hand – the first intentional hand – in preparing the universe for the Nietzschean race...and vice versa.

It hit Kol like a thunderbolt, then. All that, and then Tyr had suddenly done something no one had ever done since Paul Museveni. He'd created a Nietzschean. Not procreated. *Created*. Surely, the Paul in him had to respond to that. And perhaps subconsciously he felt that, like the archetypal Pygmalion, he'd created a Galatea. Not, like Paul, a wife for his son. Rather, as Paul may've dreamed when he dreamed of his own wishful Nietzscheanness, a wife for himself.

Every person, Kol knew, has a personal “attractor” image in their head that, when someone matches it, attraction results. For Tyr, part of that image was “qualities I admire” and part was “genes Paul Museveni selected for” and another part was “Nietzschean nanobots...preferably Kodiak, but I'm willing to be flexible on that.” Freya had filled the bill. Suddenly, so had Kol. Plus, when the infection happened, the nanobots remained in communication for hours. Just as Tyr had been in Kol's head, so she'd been in his. He'd not only truly known her, he'd realized she truly knew him...and wholeheartedly approved. When had been the last time a female of *any* ilk had wholeheartedly approved of him, no questions, no doubts, no reservations?

And there was Tyr's son. Tamerlane had a destiny to fulfill, Kol knew, and she wanted to be part of it. She looked at Tyr, solitary, expressionless. His people sounded so lost. They'd been sent their messiah now, but could they really comprehend who he was, what he meant? When he was ready to lead, would any of his people be ready to follow? Even the Kodiak? Even his own father? Tamerlane was not merely a unifier, she believed; he was a Voice of the Divine. Despite recognition of him being in their genes, when the Nietzscheans learned he was other than they with their limited vision expected, they'd not follow easily. They were individualists. They followed no one they didn't consider greater than themselves. And they didn't consider the Divine greater than themselves. They didn't consider the Divine at all. They had little experience with spiritual faith. She knew the Divine was not dead; they'd never known the Divine. Maybe, by example, she could help them learn. To so serve a Voice...what a life's work!

Tyr was waiting patiently as she cogitated. Had she answered quickly, she knew, he wouldn't have respected her answer at all. She felt near to understanding the ramifications of their exchange. Only a few more things to consider.

Added to all, Kol reminded herself, there were recognition pheromones. As part of their attractor image, people are attracted to recognition pheromones that are like, but not too like, their own. They react to

pheromones on the instinctive level, then go back and “explain” why they’re attracted. The familiarity of Nietzschean pheromones was based on those of the original Nietzscheans. Which, before enhancement, were inherited in part from the Museveni line. Which Kol’s line, apparently, indeed *had* mingled with in the distant past. Subconsciously, he recognized her pheromones. And she his.

Finally, Kol comprehended. Not only about Tyr. He’d just taught her something about herself, too.

Take up the role he’d so diffidently requested of her? Be his ace in the hole? Knowing that when the time came, if she didn’t match up and do so better than anyone else, he’d ensure she didn’t survive to be an embarrassment? But that was Nietzschean. It was proper. It was *mete*. She was willing. Her reply was abrupt and firm.

“If I survive.”

She wrapped the large marital band around Tyr’s left upper arm, then encircled her own with the smaller band. This order was the reverse of the usual Nietzschean rite, but Tyr remained impassive. She had his memories. She knew how it was usually done. If she wanted to alter that for her own reasons, it was her choice. Her right. It was not his place to question. She was his wife. Hers was the power. She would be his Matriarch. Hers would be *all* the power.

Tyr opened the bubble bulkhead. As the pair stepped through into the command center, they found Harper seated at the pilot’s console.

“Everything’s loaded in and battened down, boss.” Harper stuttered over his words as he noticed the armbands, then grinned. “Including your loaded pod, Kol. Snuck it in when the big guy wasn’t looking.”

Tyr glared at the irrepressible engineer, a look that did little to erase the pilot’s dimpled grin. Tyr’s opening words, though, caused Harper to gulp theatrically. “You *thought* I wasn’t. So, head us out. You know where.”

“Uh, yeah, sure, Tyr, OK.”

Still, he watched Tyr and Kol leave the command center and turn towards the quarters corridor. Then he shook himself, muttered something, lifted the slipranger off the hanger floor, and began threading the egress tunnel.

In the quarters corridor, Tyr opened one of the doors and stood aside to let Kol enter a small suite. She walked in and looked around. The quarters were Spartan and impersonal, but comfortable-looking. She finished her cursory inspection and turned to Tyr, still standing just outside the door.

“You may enter, husband.”

For the first time in too long, Tyr’s face lit up with the heart-stopping smile she remembered from infrequent moments in her original world. She smiled back, and he entered her quarters and activated the door lock.

Their consummation was an exciting surprise to both of them. She’d lived many years with two different husbands; he’d known only one other woman in his life, and then only twice. Tyr’s size and strength far outweighed Kol’s. His chemical signals – hormones and pheromones alike – were raw and screaming, hers more tempered and quiet. Yet they fit together. They were by turns gentle and voracious, conservative and uninhibited. They yearned and burned for each; and there was long and surging ecstasy between them.

At the moment of climax. Kol felt a sharp pain in her right abdomen. As she lay spent, an equally spent Tyr holding her, she looked inwards, somehow “reading” her nanobots to determine what had happened. Slowly

she smiled at Tyr.

“I’ve released an egg.”

“Tyr looked surprised. “You did? How do you know?”

“I felt it. I don’t know, I can...*see* it. Isn’t that how it works? Unless using an ovulatory suppressant, Nietzschean women release an egg when they share a primal climax? I have a vague memory of you learning that’s how Paul architected things. It ensures procreation whenever feasible, but protects Nietzschean women from bearing the fruit of rape.”

Tyr’s retort was angry. “The Nietzschean genome does not contain the twisted genes for that particular sickness.”

“Nietzscheans are not the only humans, Tyr.”

Tyr sneered at the suggestion that a mere Norm could forcibly take a Nietzschean woman. Then, harking back to what Kol had first said, he calmed down.

“Yes, Kol, that’s how it’s supposed to happen. But it doesn’t, always. Demonstrating that desired attribute is a sign of a truly Kasovian woman.”

Kol raised her eyebrows. “Indeed?” She fell silent and still in her husband’s arms, and let the associated memories surface.

Nietzschean men could be psychologically or physically Dragonian, very close to the Nietzschean ideal expressed in Drago Museveni. In like manner, Nietzschean women could be psychologically or physically Kasovian, very close to the ideal expressed by Athena Kasov, Drago’s wife and the first Nietzschean Matriarch. Kol pondered the ramifications of her newly discovered, physical, Kasovian attribute: First, that she herself manifested it. Second, that it must have been instilled in her via the molecular manipulations of Tyr’s nanobots. Third, that it was another possible sign of her cells containing copies of Tyr’s ring chromosome. And fourth, that since she and Tyr apparently shared both a complementary gene set and a common – albeit now separately evolving – nanobot line, their children should also manifest this desirable attribute.

After resting a while, Kol started to stir. Tyr raised his head and looked down at her.

“Hmm, my lady, do you want more?”

“Yes, yes, yes, please.” Kol smiled and stroked her husband’s smooth skin.

Tyr’s tone was warm but teasing.

“Didn’t I satisfy you?”

Kol lightly slapped his chest. “So satisfied that I insist you satisfy me some more.”

Tyr growled softly and complied. Their lovemaking this time was less urgent, but no less satisfying. At the moment of climax, Kol experienced a sharp pain on her other side; her left ovary had also released an egg. Tyr noticed this time, and was bemused.

“Again? Two? *Twins*?”

“Apparently. It makes sense. You were created to be humanity’s warrior poets, roaming the stars and building an ever-advancing civilization. As pioneers, you needed the ability to produce children quickly. And with twins as the norm, birth-weights would be lower without being detrimentally so, meaning delivery would be easier and safer even on frontier planets with little medical infrastructure. You should be happy, you know. We’ve a Pride to build.”

“Yes. But what if we....I mean, triplets, quadruplets, where would it stop?”

“At twins, I suspect. Two ovaries, two releases. Of course, given the timeline of human conception, both ova might very well be fertilized by the product of the first, most replete joining. I’d wager the twin-producing window is narrow – perhaps mere hours – to ensure a second child is not conceived so much later that the timely birth of the first would precipitate the premature birth of the second. And there seems to be no tendency towards monozygotic twins, so two pairs of twins at once doesn’t seem to be an issue.

“I suspect Paul knew exactly what he was doing. I’d even venture Drago’s mother Styrka had a lot of input. That elimination of unplanned multi-births is definitely a boon. As is control over bearing children of rape.” She sniffed disdainfully at the thought of the average Nietzschean woman letting an attempted rapist live long enough to climax anyway, then smiled.

“No, beloved, this is our wedding night and you are *not* done.”

It took Tyr and Kol only one night to start their family. But they spent most of the next two weeks exploring their union, leaving Harper to avoid unwanted encounters and pilot the slipranger to the planet their cargo was destined for. Once there, Tyr surfaced long enough to conduct business with the buyer, then instructed Harper to handle the offloading. This was typical. Tyr always left the scutwork for Harper. Not because he thought, as many Nietzscheans do, that “slaves and kludges do the dirty work”; but because “the most alpha, of either gender, don’t” was his default assumption. To Tyr’s mild surprise and Harper astonishment, though, Kol came to help. Tyr suspected there’d be another lesson or two taught. Perhaps for Harper’s benefit, perhaps for someone planetside, perhaps both. He was right. It didn’t occur to him that he was also included.

Business concluded, Tyr gave Harper another cryptic order. As the Nietzschean returned to his connubial bliss, Harper again piloted the ship to their next destination: Midden.

Launching from the cover he’d originally set up, which Harper had helped the household enhance over the years of his absence, Tyr had used his months away from Kol to obtain a position as a wilds-monitor on Midden. His fictitious persona – solidly built over several years and including a small household – had been perceived by complacent, blasé Drago-Kasov administrators as the innocuous lesser scion of a discreet but well-heeled line. They’d accepted the liberal bribes distributed in the persona’s name, handed over an essentially meaningless sinecure, and pretty much forgot about it.

Tyr had moved his household into a larger, more comfortable house attached to his still-remote wilds monitoring station. The station estate’s isolation, the planetary administration’s familiarity with the slipranger, and everyone’s dismissal of “Shogun Nkruma” as a dilettante ensured that Harper had no trouble landing the ship near the house, where Tyr had ensconced what the occasional passer-through believed were his grandmother, his youngest brother, and two household slaves. Tyr and Kol were in the small, efficient galley of the ship when it touched down.

Suddenly Harper’s voice intruded. “Hey, boss, get out here. We got trouble.”