

Tanzrobian Nights

By Brantley Thompson Elkins

It seemed like a paradise on Tanzrobi, before the Aureans came.

It was a world without cities, without factories, without roads or vehicles to travel them. It was a world without television or any other forms of mass entertainment. It was a world without any central government, or corporations, or money.

The Azizi required none of these things.

Not that they were primitive. Thanks to the Scalantrans, they had personal computers and comlinks, medicines for themselves and their cattle and other livestock, and such other technology as befitted their way of life. For these they traded *objets d'art* made from the hides of lions and leopards and other exotic creatures brought by the Galen millennia earlier, elaborate carvings from local hardwoods, exquisitely designed fabrics -- and sometimes themselves.

The human exports were the violent or disaffected of the lower septs who felt out of place on Tanzrobi after range boundaries had been settled and the future divisions of new territories mapped. Their kind chafed at the roles they played in the harmonious Azizi culture of nomadic herdsman and village craftsmen. Some were seduced by tales of more civilized worlds, including a Terran African planet called Alecan, seeking to escape the disadvantages of their birth.

Nobody knew what the Galen had had in mind when they'd transplanted Bantu stock from Earth to Tanzrobi at a time when the Bantus had begun to displace earlier races in eastern Africa. These harvests had taken place in a land far removed from the Mediterranean, where the demigods from the stars were then most active, assuming the aspects of pagan Gods.

Nobody knew why the Galen had futzed the Azizi as they had, endowing but a few with the strength and invulnerability later reserved for the Velorians, while leaving the rest in their natural state or at five intermediate levels. Certainly it had complicated things on Tanzrobi, and the Azizi had dealt with the situation as best they could, forming communities based on septs.

Members of the highest sept, the *asaba*, assumed the role of guardians for the rest, although there was little to guard against nowadays. Occasionally, a lion or other beast gone mad might threaten the herds or even the herdsmen, but would soon be chastened if the *masaba* placed themselves in the path of its teeth and claws. The *masaba* could also rescue people from fire and other calamities, or draw unto themselves the lightning of especially violent storms.

Masaba had no communities of their own, but were assigned by lot to each *jumula*, a community with its own range to which it held herding and foraging rights. There would be a central village, or *kijiji*, but only the elderly and mothers with small children dwelt there while the others traveled with the herds, some of them gathering the harvest from crops planted here and there along the path of their migration.

The Scalantrans had made things easier, supplying electronic barriers that kept animals out of the plantings, tracking devices for any that went astray, and so on. Computers and comlinks made it easy to manage the simple economy, and for those on the march to keep in touch with their home villages. The Azizi asked nothing more.

The end of their paradise, although they could not have known it, began with a strange cloud in the sky.

The Galen themselves were believed by most Azizi to watch over them from the clouds. Some claimed to have actually seen them, and nearly all believed that their god-like creators looked upon them with special favor..

It didn't matter that the Scalantrans had never seen them; why would the Galen take any interest in such as the Scalantrans? And so the sight of clouds had always been a source of comfort and even pride. But this new cloud was different.

It was like one of the lenticular type that sometimes formed over mountains. Only this cloud didn't form over a mountain, and it moved more swiftly than any cloud should...



Thabo and Zanele Oweaba were of the *asaba* sept, chosen guardians of the Ilanga Elikhazimulayo or Bright Sun clan. Their wards were of the *apili*, who averaged about halfway between an ordinary *akwanza* and an *atatu* – the latter equivalent to Aurean Betas, although none on Tanzrobi were yet aware of that.

The Bright Sun people, like nearly all clans, were patriarchal, and their leader was a man named Siyanda Ndlovu, who boasted a herd of some 50 cattle through his own efforts and his providential marriage to Mbali Umkhize of the Ifu Elimhlophe or White Cloud people.

Azizi married within their septs, but outside their clans. The White Cloud range was many weeks' journey from that of the Bright Sun people, and the match had been arranged by comlink – along with a reciprocal betrothal of one of

the more comely Bright Sun maidens, Nolwazi, to the new chief of the White Cloud clan.

Nolwazi meant “the one with knowledge” in the Azizi tongue, which turned out to be ironic. For Mbali – whose name meant “flower,” and who was indeed a beauty – was the more intelligent and knowledgeable of the two. She became Siyanda’s confidant as well as his bride, and proved especially shrewd in her dealings with the Scalantrans at the regional *bisharonyesha*, or trade fair.

Zanele knew nothing of trade. It was none of her affair. Yet she knew something of tradeoffs. While Mbali was taking inventory of the clan’s needs and preparing to deal with the Scalantrans at their next visit that year, she was headed away from the clan’s village, having been invited to judge a dispute for the *Umfula Obanzi* or Broad River people. Because *masaba* belonged to no clan but their own, they had come to be trusted in such matters, where local chieftains might be considered biased.

She strode naked across the land, as was her custom: *masaba* rarely wore clothing of any kind, but when they served as judges their nakedness conveyed the message that they brought nothing but themselves: that their minds were unencumbered by prejudice, just as their bodies were unencumbered by the outward expression of any clan loyalties.



Thabo remained with the Bright Sun people, for it was also custom that no clan be left unprotected. That, as well as the sexual needs of the *masaba*, had made it custom that they were assigned as mated couples. It was permitted,

however, for those visiting other villages to share themselves with guardians assigned there – as long as their mates did not object.

The dispute she was to judge was between a herder and a fish farmer. The Broad River people had long migrated along the river, some fishing its waters and others foraging and tending their herds along the rich bottomland. But just as some of the gatherers had taken to planting crops here and there, one of the fishermen had taken to building ponds and farming particular species in them to ease her labors.

Herdsmen had always known that they must not allow their cattle to trample plantings, and they had thus respected the ponds. But one had allowed his cattle to relieve themselves upslope of the ponds. This had never been a problem before, as any wastes that reached the river dispersed too quickly to have any serious impact. It was obviously different with the ponds.

The correct judgment was also obvious; the Broad River people could easily have settled this informally among themselves, but they evidently considered a ruling by an *asaba* more authoritative. Or perhaps they thought the case should serve as a precedent, and be communicated to other clans.

Zanele's journey was without serious incident. It had been years since she had encountered a predator that considered her a potential meal. The lions and other big cats had grown wary of humans – not only humans in groups but lone travelers like herself. They generally seemed to assume that all humans were like her own kind, and that they would have nothing to show for their efforts but broken teeth and broken claws.

On the second day, she encountered a pack of *vikuto* closing in on a *swala*, one of the magnificent antelopes brought here by the Galen along with most of the life forms that now inhabited the planet. Normally, she would not have interfered, but the *swala* was in its prime – not old and ready for death as was usually the case with the *vikuto*'s prey.

Zanele silenced the nasty creatures' nasty laughter and drove them off with a small blast of her heat vision before approaching the *swala*. The antelope's left front leg, she found, was caught in a snare – the work of some human scavenger, outlawed by his clan for some crime against the community. She freed the animal, seeing that there was no apparent permanent damage, and it bounded away.

"Jambazi!" came a cry from behind her.

She turned to see who was calling her a thief. It was a scrawny man dressed in rags and carrying a spear. His eyes were filled with hatred.

"Jambazi!" he yelled again, and ran at her with his spear, which broke against her invulnerable body.

The man looked at her, looked at what was left of the spear in his hand and, with a dejected look, turned around and began slinking away – perhaps to some rude camp, perhaps to oblivion.

When Zanele arrived at the Broad River village the next morning, the herdsmen and their families awaited her. That was according to custom;

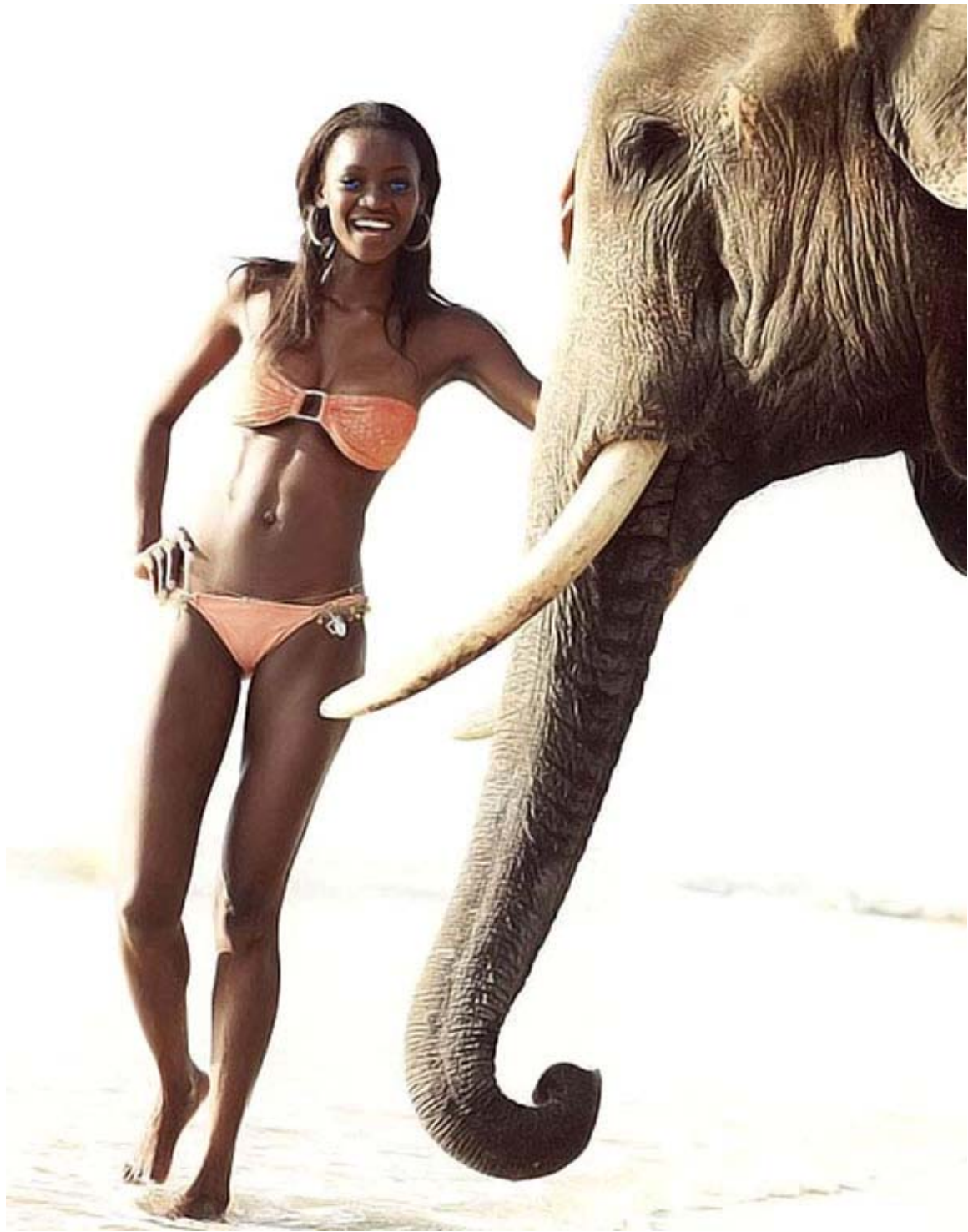
judgments were traditionally scheduled for such times as the entire clan could be assembled.

Isilo and his mate Ayodele, guardians of the Broad River people, were there to greet her. They were twice as old as herself and Thabo, but didn't show it. *Masaba* aged very slowly compared to other septs.

Unlike the Bright Sun guardians, they had children of their own – a boy and a girl. When Senteu and Symbala came of age, they would find mates and no doubt be called to new clans. Until then, they were both a joy and a nuisance. In infancy, they had to be watched carefully, for they did not yet know their own strength.

It was almost like Mbali and her pet elephant, which had caused no end of trouble back for the White Cloud people until she managed to get it properly trained. At times, her birth clan's own guardians had had to intervene to keep it from trampling plantings or even people.

Why she had wanted an elephant as a pet in the first place, nobody seemed to know – at least nobody would say. But her parents had indulged her whim, and when she was married off, Tantor went with her. Came with her to the Bright Sun people. Because Mbali was so beautiful, Siyanda too indulged her in this and other matters.



Senteu and Symbala couldn't trample crops or people like elephants, but they could be even more dangerous before they were taught to know the difference between themselves and the Broad River people. Innocent play could be deadly, so they were not allowed near the other children at first

They could still get into mischief, however. Once when Isilo was distracted for a moment Senteu climbed into a huge cooking pot where sugar bean porridge for a community festival was being prepared, splashing around in the boiling mess until he tipped over the pot and spilled the beans. That got him into hot water he *could* feel: a thrashing by his father.

There would be a community festival this afternoon, too, after the judgment.

The judgment itself was a simple one: Waltherero's fish ponds could not be moved, but Kadokechi's cattle could. It didn't matter how long they had used that particular patch of ground; the herdsman would have to find another.

To keep peace between them, however, Zanele set a condition: that Waltherero would supply Kadokechi with one fresh fish a week, as soon as the ponds could be brought back into production after being cleansed of fecal pollution. Nothing was said about compensation for fish that had died from that pollution.

Everyone seemed to be pleased, even Kadokechi, who agreed to co-host the festival with her erstwhile complainant and take charge of serving the beer, a native brew made from *amabele*, or sorghum. She now rather regretted that fish

wouldn't be available, and least not in sufficient quantities, the random catch from the river being unpredictable.

Not that it mattered. Because this was an *ukubonga*, a celebration of life going well, there was beef on the menu – both *inyama eyosiwe*, roasted on coals and left scorched almost black on the outside and very rare on the inside, and stew called *inyama yenkomo*. Beef was only for such special occasions, although the curdled milk called *amasi* was a regular part of the diet.

The Broad River people gathered on grass mats, as was their ancient custom, but ate from enamel plates – trade goods from the Scalans, but custom made: the artisans of some distant planet using Tanzanian designs they must have learned from hangings and baskets and the like that one of the clans here had exported in the first place.

Once appetites were satisfied, those with musical skills and instruments began to play. One soon heard the sounds of the cone-shaped *asiko* drums, *agidibo* thumb pianos, stringed *gojes* and others, along with much chanting and hand-clapping in infectious rhythms. As the beer flowed, as inhibitions loosened, married couples began leaving to make music of their own in their huts, and single men and women of age who had not yet experienced that music were, with the blessings of the community, encouraged to lose their virginity.

It was during the festival that the strange lenticular cloud appeared in the sky.

“The Galen themselves have blessed us!” shouted Gakere, chief of the Broad River people.

“They seem to be in a hurry to bless others,” remarked his wife Maarifa.

“Surely we can expect great days for all of us.”

A harmless superstition, Zanele thought at the time.

She would soon have cause to think differently.

When Zanele swapped stories that evening with Isilo and Ayodele, the children having been sent to their own hut, she mentioned the incident with the *zwala* and the outlaw.

“An evil man,” Isilo said, with apparent recognition. “*Kibaya*.”

“You know him, then?”

“We knew him once. No longer. He is nameless to us, and the name he bore shall never again be given to any son of the Broad River people.”

Isilo said no more, but Ayodele gave a brief explanation.

“He bothered his sister. His own sister.”

Zanele didn’t want to hear any more, so she changed the subject to small talk. Like Mbali and her elephant. That led to double-entendres about trunks, and teasing about their size – Thabo’s versus Isilo’s for example.

Such banter was common between clan guardians and a visiting *asaba*, and often led to more than just banter. As in the case at hand.

Isilo’s *zubo*, already semi-erect, grew before their eyes, huge and thick and hard.

Zanele’s mouth began to water, and Ayodele could tell. But she still smiled.

“Would you like to try it?” she asked.

Would she!

“Of course, you’re welcome to try Thabo, if fortune brings you together.”

Now it was Isilo who smiled, as Zanele took him in her mouth, licking and sucking and biting. Amazingly, he resisted all her efforts to make him come.

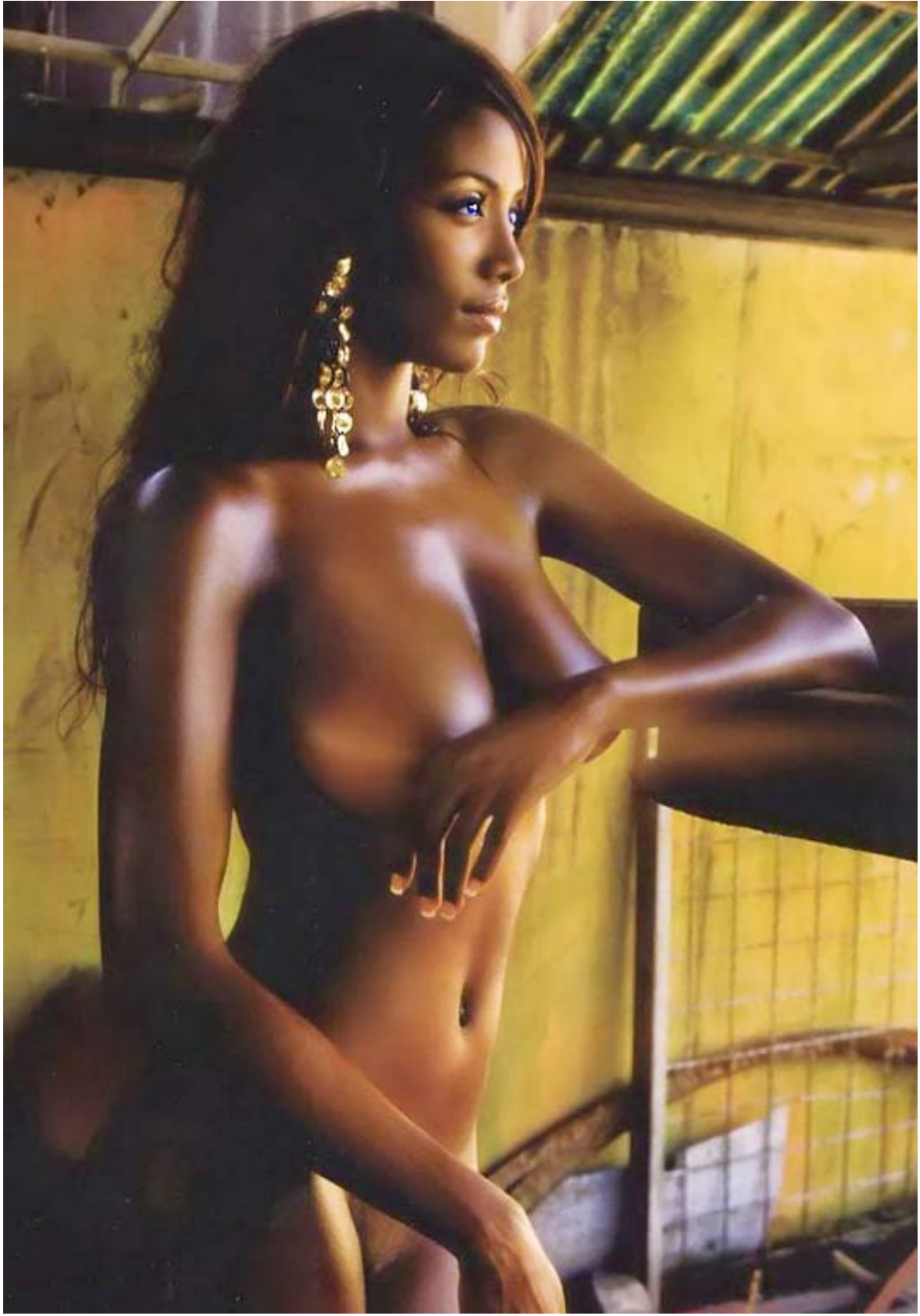
“*Insimbi*,” she murmured as she took a break. “Iron.”

Zanele redoubled her efforts, attacking him as savagely as a lion gone mad. Even iron couldn’t resist forever, and before long she was rewarded with Isilo’s glad shout and a mouthful of tasty *manii*.

One good turn deserving another, Isilo soon had his head between her legs, sucking and licking and biting like a starving man. Zanele screamed and shuddered so much that one might have thought she was having a fit rather than multiple orgasms. Then it was time for Isilo to bury himself in her and pound her into the ground with wild abandon, after which she took top position and pounded him into the ground.

But even Zanele was impressed with his stamina when he did it all over again with Ayodele.

It was a memorable night, a fitting conclusion to her mission.



Zanele was all aglow when she reached home, from the success of her mission and her night with Isilo. Thabo was out with the herdsmen, but would soon return at a trot in answer to her summons, and she was ready to greet him decked out in bangles and nothing else.

“Did you have a good time?” Thabo asked when he stepped into her hut.

“What do you think?”

Her mate gazed at her from head to toe, with special attention to her *madodo* – the Azizi term for young, firm breasts that looked like mangoes – and her *kuma*, which he could see was moist and inviting.

“I think you must have had a very good time,” he said.

“I think I’m going to have a better one here.”

With Isilo, it had been fast and furious. With Thabo, she knew, it would be slow and languorous. But with interludes of the fast and furious...

So when he slipped his *zubo* into her, she just lay there at first, savoring the sensation of being filled and stretched. Thabo, she knew, was savoring the sensation of being surrounded and squeezed. With perfect control of the muscles of her *kuma*, she teased him unmercifully, relaxing and tightening her grip again and again, thrilling as his hardness pressed against her clit and the nerve endings within her that were the legacy of the Galen’s manipulation of Tanzanian sexuality.

They had made a game of it, which of them would yield first, surrender to passion. But tonight Thabo didn’t want to play fair; instead he began to play with her breasts, stroking them and squeezing them, pinching her nipples, sending

shock waves of pleasure to her *kuma*. She tried to remain still, to retain her control, but she couldn't: she thrust against him, longing to feel the movement of his *zubo*. There came a premonitory shudder, and then an explosion – not just one explosion but a staccato series, as her multiple orgasms matched his, as she felt the eruption of his *manii*.

Manii of the *masaba* could be a dangerous thing, they had learned. It must touch no flesh but that of an *asaba*, for the sperm could bore into that of lesser septa and possibly cause internal damage. When they began to masturbate, adolescent male *masaba* – and for good measure those of the *asita* and *atano* septa – were advised to shoot their seed into the ground, and there were all kinds of jokes about *mumumbi*, or diggers.

Mbali had told her of a legend offworld that *asaba* males came at “supersonic” speed – she'd had to explain that – and could use their *mazubo* as weapons. Probably a story spread by the lower septa makwanza, Zanele surmised. Anyway, she hadn't ever heard what Mbali described as a “sonic boom,” or a sound like the cracking of a whip. She'd had Thabo shoot at her breasts from a distance – out in the savanna, of course, in case he missed -- to test the theory. His aim was good, and she was turned on when some of his *manii* hit her left nipple, but it wasn't like being hit by a spear.

Or having her mate squeeze and suck and bite her breasts, as he began to do now. As she lay back on the mat in their hut, they pointed proudly north, their nipples like arrows aimed at the sky as well as his mouth. As his teeth raked them, she cried and squirmed with delight and her *kuma* was once again on flow.

Thabo kept his hands on her breasts, squeezing them and mauling them and tweaking her nipples, but kissed his way down her belly, swirling his tongue in her navel, brushing his lips against her pubic hair, then seizing her engorged clit in his teeth and biting down hard. .

Zanele arched in ecstasy as she came, thrusting her *kuma* against his mouth, inviting him to drink his fill of her juices. When she came back to earth, she invited him to seat himself on her so that she could watch his *zubo* – its eyelet seeming to watch her breasts. She lay there doing nothing – nothing much. Just displaying those marvelous mounds with their steel-hard tips, looking hungrily at him, and blowing him kisses. She never even touched his *zubo*; she didn't have to. He came as naturally as the rain, the droplets that shot from him falling on her chest and shining like pale jewels against the rich darkness of her flesh – except that these were edible jewels...

They lay together then, hugging and kissing, whispering endearments, feeling the closeness and the warmth, all thoughts banished except for their love. This was not the quick taking she had enjoyed with Isilo; it was a slow giving *and* taking. As if they had all the time in the world.

As if sensing the drift of her thoughts, Thabo asked her if there were anything else she wanted.

“Children,” she said.

“I think it's time.”

“I'll let it happen, let myself become fertile. Next time my cycle is right.”

They talked about names for them before they made love again, before Thabo returned to the trail

On the trail, Mbali was going over accounts on her PersComp with Siyanda. Tantor had been tethered for the night, and the cattle likewise. Gatherers had inventoried the squash and beans and other crops harvested during the day, along with the small game that had to be salted or otherwise preserved beyond that immediately consumed.

“We’ll need more drugs for the cattle, especially if we increase the herd this year,” Mbali remarked. Siyanda only nodded; he trusted his wife in these things. His only regret was that she had not yet given him children; she had suffered a miscarriage the year before. She feared there might be something wrong with her womb, but no one here had sufficient medical knowledge. Perhaps she could ask the Scalantrans – not that they’d know, of course, but they might know someone *who would*.

Shani, the clan’s *tabibu*, or healer, thought she must have been cursed, and had proposed an exorcism. Mbali didn’t believe in such ancient folklore, and had advised the healer that her proper function was only to administer medicines to man and beast, according to the teachings of the Scalantrans, who were wise in such things, having visited many human worlds. But Shani, who carried out that function most of the time in any case, resented her.

If only the Scalantrans could help. Their next visit, their next trade fair, was still many months away, but she was already counting the days, almost counting

the hours. The comically strange (to her eyes) traders from the stars had always been punctual. They had always driven a hard bargain, too, but she had learned to do likewise, and had of late been working with the clan's artisans on some new designs she was certain would impress the red aliens and their clients.

The weather had been good this year, with gentle rains that blessed the grass of the savanna and augmented the harvests from the plantings along the route. But tonight it was clear, and the stars shone in the heavens. Billions of them, the Scalantrans said, and thousands and thousands of them inhabited – their planets, that is. There were humans, her distant cousins, on countless worlds seeded by the Galen and those appointed by the Galen.

That made her doubt that the Galen took a special interest in Tanzrobi now. The gods were fickle, she supposed; they had moved on to other things, other experiments. The Velorians were one of them, she knew, although she had never seen one and never would. The Aureans – “spoiled Velorians” the trade captain from the *Star Chaser* had called them when she met him at the last fair.

The Scalantrans should have “finished them off” when they had the chance, he'd said, Just how they might have accomplished that, he didn't care to say. They had attacked the Aureans once before, avenging the seizure of one of their ships, but hadn't finished the job. Now it was the Aureans who were on the attack, singling out their trade worlds, he'd said. No, they wouldn't ever come *here*, he'd added – they were afraid of the Galen.

The *Star Chaser* shared the Tanzrobian trade with the *Spirit of Youth*, which was said to be unusual with the Scalantrans. Perhaps there were a number of

worlds, the others richer than her own, in this sector. Or perhaps it was some sort of political arrangement – she didn't have any idea about the politics of these strange beings, who seemed at once involved and aloof in their dealings with humans.

Taking a break from her work, Mbali stepped outside her tent to look at the stars. They were beautiful, as always. They also raised a thousand questions, and answered none of them.

She returned to her work, and she and Siyanda made love before drifting off to sleep.

“Have you seen it? Have you seen it?”

It was one of the children who rushed in. Only young children and oldsters were in the village this morning, Thabo having raced back to join the rest of the clan at a pace possible only to the *masaba*. Zanele was covering for him here.

Puzzled by Pandu's excitement, she went out to look for herself. There was a strange cloud in the East, like nothing she had ever seen before. Huge and bright and roiling. She couldn't tell how far away it was, but its base seemed to be beyond the horizon, in the direction of the Broad River village.



Something seemed to be lighting it from within, like a great fire. Yet she couldn't imagine a fire this great. Then came a dull rumbling, as of thunder, but very distant.

Zanele quickly returned to her hut to retrieve her comlink and query other guardians and chieftains. But the comlink didn't work. Neither did her perscomp.

They had always worked before.

She went to Siyanda and Mbali's hut, and tried their spare comlink. It didn't work, either. She couldn't even reach Thabo, let alone those more distant who might know more of this phenomenon.

Zanele had to make a quick decision: stay here, make a run for Broad River, or make a run for Thabo and the rest of the Bright Suns. She decided on the last, if only because the Bright Suns were closer.

Heedless of any obstacles, she set off at her highest speed. To any onlooker, she would have been a blur. Her distance vision was good, as was her memory of the route, so she could avoid major rock outcroppings and the like; but small trees and unwary animals were another matter.

It pained Zanele that she annihilated an antelope that bounded into her path and left her covered in blood and gore, and she knew that she had killed any number of smaller animals and even birds that had swooped down in search of rodents. But she needed to talk with Thabo and Siyanda and Mbali as soon as possible.

She slowed when she spotted the herd and the herdsman in the distance, the gatherers flanked to the side filling their bags and baskets. And there were the three she needed to talk with, already in earnest discussion.

They were shocked at her appearance, but that wasn't what they wanted to ask about.

"Have you heard anything?" asked Siyanda.

"Are the coms working back at the village?" asked Thabo.

"No, and no," Zanele said.

"I don't know what to tell our people," Mbali said, a touch of fear in her voice.

"I sense we may be in danger. The Scalantans—"

"What do the Scalantans have to do with this?" Zanele broke in.

“*Nothing*,” Mbali said. “But I have talked with them when they were here. Not just about trade. About themselves and their history. About the worlds they visit. About the universe. Hardly anyone here thinks about the universe. We have nothing to do with it, except for our trade. We *want* nothing to do with it. But it’s always been out there. And now it may have come here.”

All eyes turned to Mbali. Did she know something the others didn’t?



“What we saw this morning, what we still see, might be one of two things,” she now said gravely. “It might be that some object from space has struck our

world. Such things occur, the trade captain once told me. And not just by accident: once they threw rocks at a planet they said had cheated them.”

“These are the kind of people we deal with?” Siyanda wondered. “Perhaps it would have been better to keep to ourselves.”

“The other thing we might have seen was a nuclear weapon,” Mbali continued, ignoring her husband’s complaint.

“What is that?” Thabo asked.

“It tears apart atoms – what all things are made of, the very fabric of existence.”

None of the others knew of such things, and even Mbali was unable to explain them any better. Physics was something the Tanzrobians had never known, nor had any use for. But Zanele knew one thing: Mbali was as close to an authority as they had.

She it was who recommended the course they now took: to return to the village, after gathering as much food as they could, and rounding up stray cattle – the tracking devices, like the comlinks, had ceased to function.

It seemed that of all of them, only Mbali was keeping her head together.

It took them until nightfall the next day to reach the village.

Gathering the food and collecting the stray animals had taken longer than expected. The herdsman were used to relying on their tracking devices for any cattle that wandered out of sight, and were now at a loss, so some of the gatherers had to be detailed as runners to help track them down.

Then there were the objections of the healer Shani, who argued that cutting short the migration violated the customs, the very essence of the Azizi, especially the Bright Sun people. Siyanda and Mbali overruled her, but with some misgivings, for her traditional role as advisor and even soothsayer was still honored by many.

That first night, when they were forced to make a stop to give the *mapili* a rest, had brought strange portents in the skies: new lights, no bigger than the stars, that moved against the firmament.

“Spacecraft,” Mbali surmised. “Or maybe aircraft: ships specially designed for the air. It can’t be the Scalantrans; they have no interest in the air -- only... the enemy.”

“We have no enemies beyond this world,” Siyanda pointed out.

“But *they* do, and the Aureans consider any friends of the Scalantrans to be their enemies.”

“We are the enemies, then, of people we have never met?” pondered Thabo.

“I fear that we are about to meet them,” Mbali said.

“Then we *masaba* shall strike fear into them,” Thabo vowed. “We have nothing to fear from such vermin, come they from the earth or the sky.”



When they reached the village on the evening of the second day, there was a strange figure at the entrance to the guardians' hut.

It was Ayodele, but she hardly seemed to be the same person as when Zanele had last seen her. Her face, her whole body, was a study in pain – the kind of pain usually seen only in the lesser septs.

“A great fire, and a great wind,” she wailed. “Nothing is left but smoke and ashes, and I alone escaped to tell you.”

Her story came out in chaotic words, tinged with madness.

She had been with the Broad River herdsman, a day away from their village, when it happened: the great fire that turned her people and their cattle to ash before her eyes, then the great wind that scattered their ashes, leaving no trace

that there had ever been living beings there. Nor was there any trace of the savanna – no blade of grass, no bush, no tree.

Ayodele had run back to where the village had been. There was no trace of that, either; only an immense crater filled with river water blackened by ash, and boiling furiously. No sign of Isilo, or Senteu or Symbala. It was impossible that *masaba* could be destroyed; she had always believed that – and to learn otherwise, to learn that she had lost those she had never feared to lose, had unhinged her.

“Nuclear,” Mbali said. “That is what the Scalantrans call it.”

“What good are the Scalantrans to us?” thundered Siyanda. “We should never have put any trust in them. We should have trusted only in our creators, the Galen.”

“They have forsaken us!” Ayodele screamed.

“If that is so, it is only because we have forsaken them. We should have kept to the old ways in all ways.”

Siyanda knew nothing of the old ways, before the Scalantrans, the times of ritual wars and disease and poverty. But it was useless to argue with him now. Mbali and the others instead used soft words to calm him, and eventually did.

Ayodele gradually became more coherent as the night wore on, perhaps only because she had company now, having had none before. In the morning, she appeared sane, if still shaken. With communications down, she had even found a new purpose.

“I must spread word to other villages, other clans, and have them spread it in turn,” she declared. “They must know what is happening. Perhaps someone wiser... someone will have an idea. Something we can use...”

Thabo and Zanele, based on what Mbali had told them, thought it was probably a fool’s errand. But they did not try to stay her; what was the use?

They never heard from or even of Ayodele. But they soon learned their own fate, the fate of their world.

There were still lights in the sky by night, and now tiny objects by day. It was on the third day that one of them became more than tiny. It grew and took shape before their eyes, like one of the Scalantran trade ships. Only it looked nothing like the Scalantran trade ships.

They had no way of judging its size, while it remained in the sky. But they could judge its intent.

“Scatter!” Thabo told the Bright Sun people, and they did, all but Mbali.

“You too,” Zanele urged her.

Mbali looked at her, as if pleading. Zanele shook her head. Reluctantly, the chief’s wife joined the rest, seeking cover among the trees, behind rocks – wherever. The cattle were forgotten, their huts and possessions as well. Could they but save their lives, that would be enough – for now.

Now that the others were out of earshot, Thabo voiced his misgivings.

“Do they mean to incinerate all of us?” he asked.

“They’re too close for that; they’d incinerate themselves.”

And indeed the strange craft must be about to land. From its ovoid body there suddenly sprang metal legs. It was close enough to judge its size now – six or seven man-lengths, far smaller than one of the trade ships. The craft made a soft purring sound as it slowed to a hover, then gently settled to the ground.

Nothing more happened for a few moments. Then a door opened in the side, unfolding into a ramp. Down the ramp came a dozen men. White men, men with straight black hair. Azizi had never seen the like before, nor the like of their peculiar black clothing, or the devices they carried that were presumably weapons of some sort.

One among them, presumably their leader, carried a larger weapon. It was apparently very heavy, and he was having difficulty with it. He let it touch the ground as he barked an order in some strange language. The other Aureans aimed their weapons at the *masaba*.

“People? Where?” the leader suddenly asked them, in barbarous Azizi. “Not tell quick, we shoot.”

Zanele looked at Thabo and Thabo looked at Zanele.

“They can’t harm us now that they are so close to us,” she told him. “We can take them. We can make them tell us about themselves, about the great fire weapon. We can turn that knowledge against them.”

Thabo nodded, and they both began advancing on the Aureans, who began to fire at them. Projectile weapons of some sort; Zanele could feel the tiny hard objects hitting her body, like dozens of spears all at once. Some were bouncing

off her breasts, making them tingle. If this hadn't been serious business, she might have given free rein to the sensation, let the pleasure wash over her.

The Aurean fire became ragged, the soldiers looking to their leader. He wore some sort of a mask that concealed his eyes, and heavy gloves with which he was raising his own weapon – bringing it to bear on Thabo, the closest to him. The other Aureans, Zanele noticed, had turned tail and run.

There was a flash of white light, almost blinding even to Zanele, and Thabo vanished into it. Could she hear him scream, or was that sound the scream of the weapon itself? Less than ten seconds had passed when the glare faded. There was a loud *whump*, and then Thabo came into view – what was left of him: a charred corpse, torn apart as if he had exploded from within.

This cannot be happening, Zanele thought. But it was. Her stunned disbelief quickly turned to horror and then to rage, or she would not have lived another minute herself. The Aurean was struggling to raise his fearsome weapon again, as if in slow motion, for her body and mind were both racing as she flung herself upon him and killed him with one blow.

The other Aureans turned to see what was happening. When they took it in, they began fleeing for their lives, but to no avail. Zanele finished them all off in less than a minute.

Only then did she return to Thabo – what had been Thabo. Now there was only smoldering flesh, burned beyond recognition, like some *apili* caught in a brush fire. Coming down from her horror and rage, she could no longer feel anything; she was numb inside.

Was this what the others felt, those of the lesser septs, when they lost their loved ones to accident or disease? Or was it different, because they knew what to expect, because they were prepared for it, as she was not? Because they had tears as an outlet, which she did not?

She could only stand there, torn between disbelief and utter certainty.

“We’ve got to get rid of the ship, We’ve got to get rid of the bodies.”

It was Mbali, Zanele had been so absorbed in her own hurt that she hadn’t heard her approach.

“And then we’ve got to get rid of ourselves. We can’t let them find us here.”

Only now did Zanele respond, and only: “But how?”

“Their own weapon.”

“But—“

“If he could fire it, we can. At least, you can. He and the others are no better than *matatu* at most. He appears to have worn some sort of protective device, but I don’t think you’ll need that.”

“I can’t think about this. Not now.”

“Now is the only chance we’ve got. These people will be missed. Those who sent them are certain to come looking for them. We must destroy the craft, utterly. We must destroy the bodies, utterly. Then we must fire the village, make it look as if their own people attacked it wantonly, then left. That may throw them off the track... for a while.”

“And after a while?”

“We hide. We plan. We fight.”

“Against such things as this?” Zanele gestured tiredly at the weapon lying beside its erstwhile wielder.

“Help may be available.”

“From the Galen? Would they have suffered this?”

“The Scalantrans, then. The Aureans are their enemies, too. And they know how to fight, if they do not often do so.”

“What use are the Scalantrans? We cannot go to them.”

“They can come to us. They always have.”

“Only this time, they’ll find themselves in the midst of their enemies.”

“We need to learn more about them. You should have let one of them live.”

Zanele accepted her reproach without comment, knowing it was deserved, yet knowing also that Mbali did not truly blame her – only what had enraged her.

Enough talk, She sent Mbali back to help Siyanda gather the others, have them take from their huts whatever they could carry. As for herself, she picked up the demonic weapon and examined it for a moment.

The mechanism was a simple one, the trigger designed for human hands. The weapon was light in her own hands, as it had not been for the Aurean, and she had no trouble aiming it at the airship, which twisted and melted and finally vanished altogether. The bodies went quicker. All save Thabo’s. But of him, too, she dared leave no trace.

Siyanda and Mbali were already forming up the clan, the old people and the young mothers and children included this time. They would have to avoid the

usual routes, live off the land as their ancestors had done long, long ago before the Azizi had traded with the stars.



It was near dusk by the time they were ready to move, the evidence of the Aureans destroyed, the village destroyed. Let any who came looking for them make of it what they would.

Siyanda and Mbali led the way. She had left Tantor behind; the elephant had been a childish whim, and there was no longer time for childish things, no time for distractions. Zanele followed, looking grim but resolute: there was no time for grief, nor for regrets. Stretched out behind were the cattle and the herders and the gatherers, many bearing extra burdens, all the food they could carry.

The sun sank below the horizon, and the myriad stars came out, but there would be no stopping this night. They all knew that they must get as far away as they could as quickly as they could. If they were in luck, they might find other fugitives, share what they knew, little as it was. It might help. Even the Aurean weapon might help; they were saving that, not knowing how long it might work.

Only one thing was certain. The blissful Tanzrobian nights were over. Now there would be only nightmares. Unless they could find a way to bring a new dawn.

Continued in "Murk and Reprisal" (www.brightempire.com/Murk.pdf)

Note: Tanzrobian septs, in ascending order from normal to supremis, are *akwanza*, *apiili*, *atatu*, *ananu*, *atano*, *asita* and *asaba*. As with many Azizi words, the plurals are formed with an initial m: i.e. *masaba*.