

# Foreign Harbors

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## Chapter 1



The sleek

Deluxe Belton, affectionately called D-Belle, cruised unhurriedly at 4gs through interstellar space. Consoles on the unoccupied bridge blinked sporadically from sensory updates. Currently, only three passengers were occupying the eight-person yacht, leaving plenty of room for privacy for the one-year journey back to their sector of space.

In the cargo bay that also served as an exercise area, was where two of the passengers, soldiers, were working off their boredom. Thumps, grunts and panting made up most of their conversation.

The virtual image of a referee had been disabled, as the two combatants decided points didn't matter. The winner would be whoever was left standing. Sweat glistened on exposed skin creating a slippery surface on each opponent. Both women were breathing heavy as they looked for a weakness in the other's defense.



"You're going down JG," her adversary huffed. "There isn't any trick you have that I haven't seeen!... ooffff, urrrgh!"

Dump, thump, bang.

The prone woman struggled to regain her breath as JG stood above her grinning. JG took a moment to mop the sweat with her sleeve. She kept

an eye on the prone figure.

"Bloody moon, JG! That's cheating!" the downed woman wheezed out.

JG smiled smugly. "Megan, you complain too much."

Megan rolled out of reach and leaped up, kicking out at JG. JG stepped in and grabbed the attacking foot. She hoisted Megan over her and again brought her down hard on the mat, successfully pinning her arms.

"All right!" an annoyed muffled voice hollered. "So, you're so much smarter," she rolled to her feet when she was released and shook out her arm. "I know you want to tell me, so tell me. How do I get out of the grip so next time I won't tear a freaking muscle? Damn bored ground-pounder," she accused under her breath.

"I'm not bored. I'm keeping fit. Okay, since you asked nice, I'll show you."

"Can I ask you a question...off the record," Megan asked.

*Ahh. A delay tactic. Not going to work, Megan. You're still going to go down.* She nodded grinning.

"This is your ship, technically...I mean possession is nine tenths of the law. Why are you letting the commander captain it? I'm just curious," she insisted.

"She's a line officer, Megan. Of the three of us she's trained and has experience in spaceships and in more varied military capacities than the two of us put together. Now if it's grunt work, that's us."

From Megan's look, she wasn't really listening.

"She grew up in a family where supervising groups and representing them is part of her duty, and she's also served as a successful battlefield officer, with medals to prove it," she said ticking off her fingers, "and she's negotiated military and nonmilitary agreements, she's commanded scout ships, worked on a flagship's battle planning table,

arbitrated for political prisoner releases ...helgas moon, soldier! What else does she need to convince you she's perfectly capable to captain this yacht? You served with her on Arnica. Didn't she pass your muster as a leader?"

"I want to know that the person I'm following into a 'kill-or-be-killed' skirmish is not going to wig out."

"Just what is 'wig-out' to you, Megan?" JG asked patiently.

"Is she going to kill the other guy that has a weapon pointed at me?"

"Well, for that matter, Megan, I don't know if I would. I would need to know what the options are and the circumstances." She watched Megan's face as she struggled with her bias against Commander Montran, without being insubordinate. "We aren't in the killing business anymore."

Megan laughed but it was half-heartedly. She gestured to JG that she was ready. However, she was unprepared when JG swiftly stepped in and lifted her in slower motion, and then dropped her to the ground and pinned her arms. Megan grunted and woofed out air as she hit the deck again.

"I did it nice and slow. Did you get the moves?" JG asked.

Megan was too busy trying to catch her breath to answer.

"General Quarters," the ship announced, then the clangons started.

JG sprinted to the exit hatch with Megan rolling to her feet and following.

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Lady Alexandra was jolted from her meditation when the clangons sounded. Quickly she unwound her body from Āsanas as her awareness leaped to a different level of consciousness. Sprinting to the open hatch she paused before exiting. Pounding footsteps in the passageway warned her of a potential collision. Her two companions dressed in damp workout uniforms passed her in a run. She suppressed a laugh. The scene looked like a hare chased by a hound. However, this hare had a good lead.

The bridge hatch opened and the three in quick succession dropped into their seats.

"*Rouster*, report!" demanded Major JG Zohra. She waited impatiently for the console to be unlocked from autopilot.

Lt. Megan Vanster quickly silenced the clangons and took the autopilot offline as she heard Lt. Commander Montran take her seat.

"OOD transferring Conn to COB," Lt. Vanster quickly announced.

"Captain on the Bridge, receiving transfer of Conn," Commander Montran responded. Data pertinent to the alarms scrolled across her console the moment the Conn was transferred.

"What report do you wish to review, Captain?" the ship's computer calmly responded.

"Verbal report on the cause of the alarm," Commander Montran said.

"Scans are showing a heavy concentration of debris on the programmed course. Arrival time is ten standard minutes. Hull damage is unavoidable. Unknown elements in the debris have been identified," the ship reported.

"*Rouster*, give a recommendation," Major Zohra asked.

"Go around the debris field, Major Zohra."

"Gee, I wish I thought of that," Lt. Vanster muttered sarcastically.

"So, the programming needs more work," Major Zohra said.

"Why? It gave you exactly what you asked for," Lt. Vanster retorted.

Alexandra silently groaned at the exchange. Since they left Arnica both women had been stumbling in their reconnecting as friends. Their previous rapport had always been based within a military atmosphere fraught with competition and disdain at those that showed weakness. Their last assignment together was in Committee space as covert operatives to infiltrate a group that had ties with galaxy smugglers.

Both women had changed during their separate experiences on Arnica, a strange planet in itself. It created a profound disconnect they were struggling to overcome. The most notable difference was JG's marriage to her, Lady Alexandra Harriet Montran.

Alexandra gave a mental sigh. Being the only one with more training in ships and their systems she withdrew from their squabbling and nit picking, deciding to only step in if any safety protocol was threatened.

"Helga's bloody moon! It'll take a week to go around," Lt. Vanster complained. They all stared at the scans. A picture slowly appeared showing a dense cloud formation.

"It's not like we're really busy at the moment," Major Zohra reminded her, pleased that their arrival home would be delayed.

Home was the operational word. JG and Alexandra were newlyweds and had not gotten around to discussing where they would call home. Would it be in Collective space where Lt. Commander Montran served as an officer on the flag ship of the Centurion's *Ziggy*, or Committee space where Major Jina Gari Zohra's Shield House was?

Alexandra looked at Lt. Vanster in mock annoyance. "You haven't been wishing for something to relieve your boredom, have you Leut?"

"Yeah!" Major Zohra demanded in a childish tone, changing the competitive mood into playful energy.

The two women laughed at Lt. Vanster's expression. They felt relieved the tension on the bridge dissolved.

"I'll give you that stuff about thoughts having power on Arnica, but off...nah uh. Otherwise I'd be having wild nights of sex and fun with exceptionally fine partners that I can image."

The newlyweds chuckled, feeling only slightly guilty that a woman known for her sexual proclivity was reduced to satisfying herself while they, in a surprising cloud of sensuousness, were always finding reasons to be alone together. It was a soldier's lament to find pleasure where and when she could.

"Lieutenant, do you have the break-down on the debris yet?" Major Zohra asked as she looked over the computer's possibilities for course changes and assessed any possible threats from unknowns.

"No. Still scanning and building a model. Give it a little more time," she muttered. She scowled as she drummed her fingers impatiently at the slowness of the system.

"It's looking like a small satellite planet that exploded," Alexandra murmured, studying the same readings as Vanster. "Clean it up, Leut," she ordered impatiently.

"If a certain uncertified person would stop tinkering with it, it wouldn't need cleaning up," grouched Lt. Vanster. Her fingers slid over full paragraphs of commands, cutting them, and then restarted the first command.

Scrolling data filled the screen.

"JG, darling, perhaps you should leave the programming and tweaking of the ships' systems *off* your list of 'to do'," Alexandra suggested softly.

Major Zohra leaned towards Lt. Vanster's screen to see what she was doing. "I have to exercise my brain too," she griped in a mocking tone.

"There are a lot of 'brain' games loaded in the DB," Alexandra pointed out.

Major Zohra took a breath to begin the same old argument the three women had since she started to meddle in Lt. Vanster's territory, navigation.

"Let's not go there," Alexandra told her softly, looking up into eyes that suddenly darkened. She held her breath as the all-too-familiar flush of sexual excitement rushed over her.

Major Zohra cleared her throat, watching Alexandra's eyes flutter from the closeness of their bodies her thoughts wandered off in a different direction than her intended argument.

"Do you two mind?" Lt. Vanster demanded slightly put-off. *Helgas bloody moon! There are enough pheromones in here to set a herd of baroas into a premature rutting season.* She tapped the environmental controls to neutralize the air, ignoring the face Major Zohra gave her.

Alexandra gestured with her head that Major Zohra was to stand back. Major Zohra pointed a finger at herself and mouthed a silent 'me?' Alexandra nodded and signed herself the number one designation and Major Zohra two.

Moving to the back chair, disgruntled that as much as she believed what she had told Megan about Alexandra's command, she was antsy with the inactivity of only being in charge when it was her shift to take the CONN. She was also in charge of all shore parties and anything to do with security, but they didn't visit enough ports to give her something to think about.

"Sssshh!" Alexandra shushed her annoyed.

Embarrassed at forgetting that Alexandra could hear her thoughts, and then because she easily became upset at what should be something minor Major Zohra decided she should find something else to do...off the bridge.

"Call me if you need me," she told the two preoccupied women.

JG trudged down the corridor examining her confused feelings of competitiveness and her hyper-sensitivity to being challenged...which translated into a need to dominate Alexandra. Alexandra as an empath was more inclined to give into her demands to avoid conflict. Eventually, JG knew in her heart, this would cause Alexandra to leave her. Alexandra's assurances that they would adjust and adapt as they went along gave her only momentary relief.

*You're maudlin!* she declared. *It's cabin fever. Yeah, that's it,* she decided pragmatically, but it didn't ease her mood. She needed an outlet other than having to prove herself to Megan that she was still the JG both of them thought they knew in their cadet years, or groping Alexandra whenever she was near.

JG took a deep breath. *You're getting yourself down about nothing. We're doing just fine. Sex is good. Intimacy is right in there...* Her eyes lit up and a broad smile broke out on her face as she contemplated the intimate connection that kept her on a high. It was addicting, she admitted, and that made her want her marriage to work.

She sighed heavily. A distraction, that's what she needed. *But beating up Ninja Master is getting old,* she thought with conviction. Maybe if they all were longing for a nice bit of adventure it would happen. She also reminded herself that with adventure there was sacrifice and that was originally why the sleep pods in military transports were installed. Losing an army because they were bored and went looking for trouble defeated the war effort.

*I am not going to get in the sleep pod for the duration of the trip home! What is cabin fever anyway...boredom? So, I'll make the Ninja Master a naked... hm...Alexandra.*

She shook her head perplexed as her thoughts again returned to what she would rather be doing and to whom. Why this sexual haze between them? They had consummated the marriage. That energy should have dissipated the tension or at least dropped it to a manageable level. An image of their unquenchable drive to make love

brought a silly grin to her face. She quickly looked down the corridor for Megan who seemed to take issue with her preoccupation of Alexandra.

*Helgas moon. What's wrong with Megan anyway? Can't she just let go of childhood hurts and move on?*

She realized that when tension with Megan increased, they resorted to their old combative ways, somehow bypassing their recent changes from Arnica.

*Well, being on a small ship with not very many places to escape certainly forces us to find a way to talk without doing damage to the other. Jeesh, Megan. Either we're going to find a way to sit and have a conversation or there isn't going to be any relationship.*

That gave her pause. *I don't think we've ever had a girl-to-girl talk. Oh, Helga's moon. What are we going to talk about besides military maneuvers and who can lay with the most women or men in one leave? And I'm not going to brag about my sex life with Alexandra. Bloody moon, I know that would tick Megan off. She didn't do too well with my explanation of why it made good sense that Alexandra be captain of the ship.*

*Helga's moon! I've been acting as a CMSgt longer than an officer in my covert work. And Megan certainly hasn't dropped her enlisted attitude. Someone's going to have to speak to her about the difference between an officer and NCO.* JG groaned softly, knowing that it would likely be her.

The cargo bay portal slid open. The workout with Megan didn't have the calming affect a hard workout used to give her, but now she understood why. Opening the weapons locker, she reached for the leather sheath, a gift from Queen M'Lu on Arnica. Slowly she drew the intricately etched blade out of its cover, admiring the colors that played on the sharp foreign metal. Dropping the sheath near the locker, she moved to the center of the workout mat. The moment she decided to work the blade a profound peace settled in her. And so, began her dance with the blade.

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"Lt. Commander Montran, were you two like this on Merker's?" Lt. Vanster asked as the ship moved to its new setting.

"I don't remember it being anything like this." However, Alexandra's lips quirked into a smile, remembering their evenings alone on Merker's Outpost. Of course, they

were new to each other at the time, with an invasion to worry about, but their feelings for each other were strong.

"Supposedly, the last ritual dance takes the sexual edge off the relationship. Instead it heightened it. Believe me when I say it's not just driving you crazy." *I'm going to have to look up more information on this bonding ritual thing or maybe our species mix. Bloody moon! We never thought to look that part up,* Alexandra thought with annoyance.

"Big concession. You have each other to work it off with," Lt. Vanster grumbled.

"Go get your own dolly, Leut. I'm not loaning mine out," Alexandra laughed, shaking her head with orange curls bobbing around. She pushed them out of her face impatiently. "Helgas moon, but we need some time off this ship. As the captain of this vessel, I order us up some R&R. There has to be friendly civilized planets around here. We're far ahead of the other two vessels so it's not like we're avoiding them...entirely."

"I'm glad you said that, *Captain,*" Lt. Vanster responded eagerly. "I was going over the incidental hailings *Rouster* received on her trip to Arnica." Lt. Vanster eagerly searched the data base for what she had found earlier before taking a break. She intended to speak to JG about it but somehow the conversation became a challenge to a wrestling match.

"We had that many incidentals? Look at all those vacation advertisements! Did you find something that will make us *all* happy? Somewhere that newlyweds can be alone and not get bored."

"Right. Don't want everyone being dragged off by a hotyamababe. I have a few marked. At the speed *Catching Butterflies* and *Emperor's Last Chance* are moving, I'll bet they've been stopping at a few of them. By the time they're in this area, we'll be on our way again."

Alexandra struggled not to laugh at Megan Vanster's wistful voice.

"Yeah. Herding those SEC ships must be driving their helm crazy. Prisoner confinement ships aren't meant to travel as fast as war ships like *Emperors Last Chance* or for sure not like the new class ship, the Vernaut - *Catching Butterflies.*"

Alexandra shook her head at something that occurred to her. "I can just imagine a council member getting it in her head that prisoners captured in distant galaxies deserve

to be brought to the nearest galaxy tribunal as speedily as possible so that the crime they are accused of is brought to trial within the life span of their victims. They would have to retire the majority of the old cruisers that barely go faster than the present SECs. Oh, bloody moon. Every ship building company would back it to get the boon to business. Taxes go up, and only the economics of the planets that own interest in the shipyards would be clapping their hands." She sighed at the mixed blessings all changes brought.

"As long as it's not me that has duty chasing down an escaped prisoner, I'm..." Lt. Vanster paused for a moment, thinking about the thrill of the hunt.

"Don't be wishing that on yourself, Leut, at least, not while you're with us. That reminds me, wonder why we haven't received any messages from *Emperors* or *Butterflies*."

Lt. Vanster did a search and then snorted. "They're right here. *Rouster* filed them under miscellaneous. They weren't marked urgent, so the ship didn't notify us. Someone turned off the notification for anything not considered serious. Commander, she's dangerous. Can't you get her to keep her hands off my..." she did have the where withal to stop short of declaring possession of the helm with the captain on the bridge. "Well, to stop messing with stuff," she finished lamely.

"Before you point the finger at your comrade, make sure the previous owner didn't have a hand in it," Alexander cautioned.

As captain of the ship *Alexandra* had to pay attention to the accusation one officer made of a superior officer, deciding if it was meant to be an official report. It put her in an awkward position.

It was important to keep a command structure in place, especially when they were moving through unfamiliar space. It became complicated when she took into consideration the fact that the three of them had graduated from the same military academy the same year. *Alexandra's* experience of commanding soldiers and sailors taught her that if those she commanded didn't respect her, then an order given would not be acted upon quickly which could cost lives. She could feel Megan Vanster's distrust of her and knew one day she would challenge her, and it would probably be when they all could least afford it. She was saddened that their experiences together on *Arnica* merely widened the rift between them.

Alexandra closed her eyes as something disturbed her line of thought. It came from outside of their ship.

Lt. Vanster glanced at the captain and noticed she had a far-away look on her face. She waited, hoping it was not something that went along the same vein as their last assignment on Arnica.

Alexandra took a deep breath and brought her attention back to the bridge. She tapped the yellow alert to bring JG to the bridge.

"Captain?"

"Trouble," she said softly.

"Where?" Lt. Vanster's hands moved over the screen pulling up scans. There were no alerts, but since JG had messed with the system, she now wasn't sure who to believe more, the computer or the captain.

"What's up!" JG rushed onto the bridge, sliding into her seat while stowing a sword sheathed in its leather tooled cover near her console.

Her damp workout uniform clinging to her athletic body brought images of a different sort to Alexandra's mind. "Something," Alexandra told her faintly, smiling at the image of her naked lover performing a kata.

"One of those feelings...huh?" Unaware of the effect she was having on Alexandra, JG studied her console as the results of Megan's scans filled her screen.

"Found it," Lt. Vanster whispered. *Helgas moon! How did she know? Never mind. Tell me I didn't ask that question.* She took a deep breath and returned her attention to a ship appearing on their screens. "Hiding from someone, you think, Captain?"

"No. I believe the ship is really and too close to that cloud of debris for her own good. I don't feel anything lurking about using it for bait. Lt. Vanster, give the ship a hail," Captain Montran ordered.



"Aye, aye, Captain" she replied. "Message away."

"Captain, no readings on what's inside yet," JG reported calmer than she was earlier. "Whatever is in the debris is interfering with our scans at this range. We're going to have to send out a bot to analyze it further."

"Four life signs aboard," Captain Montran informed her crew softly. "I can feel them. Two are frightened and two are seriously injured. One of the injured is an infant."

"Getting some readings now. Let me narrow this and change the range," Lt. Vanster reported. "I don't recognize the ship's configuration from our neck of the woods."

"Come about so we are running alongside, Leut. Major, prepare to board her."

"Hey, she can't go alone!" Megan objected, excited with something to do. Her fingers automatically calibrated the other ship's trajectory and speed and had *Rouster* moving into intercept position smoothly.

"Right, that's why I'm going too." She blinked her eye lashes at JG playfully.

"I don't think that's a good idea," the two opposed.

"Why not? I'm the captain."

"Exactly, Captain," JG told her firmly.

"That's not fair," she returned in mock indignation.

Lt. Vanster rolled her eyes. "One month and we're cracking up."

Alexandra and JG laughed. They all were relieved at the break in their routine.

"You're right. We're getting too lax. Okay. We know the drill – Major, take the Leut with you. While you suit up, I'll belly up to her hatch. Looks big enough for you two to enter but you'll have to stoop a bit."

"*Rouster*, this is Lt. Commander Alexandra Montran, captain of this ship, taking full bridge command. Switch on my mark...mark."

Systems the navigator and second in command usually supervised were switched to her console. She activated the infirmary and watched the status bar come up, showing the progress of the diagnostics that ran a check on the medical system. The three spare cabins were activated to prepare for guests with the small cleaning bots coming online. However, since one of them was an infant, she suspected this was a family and they would not need the three cabins.

She expertly adjusted to the unfamiliar ship's changing trajectory. She guessed some of the floating debris *Rouster's* systems had not recognized had breached the disabled ship's hull and was destabilizing it.

"*Rouster*, run another scan on the debris, recalibrating for unknown substances with trajectory analysis." She was worried that whatever had left the gaping hole in the bulkhead of the drifting ship may have been missed by its sensors. Forewarned is forearmed.

Gently the two ships bumped energy shields. The umbilicus reached out, pierced the shield of the other and resealed as the cup fit over the injured ship's hatch cover.

"Hailing boarding party. Major Zohra, come in. Over," she called.

"Boarding party to helm. I read you clear, Captain Montran." Alexandra could hear the smile in her voice and smiled back in reflex. "No breathable air on the other side of the hatch. We're taking over two gurneys and the backup medibot, over."

"Copy that. *Rouster* confirms your air reading. Major, the child on the lower deck...I'm getting a weak life signal. Over."

"I read you, Captain. I think their life support is down. Whoa!"

The two women nearly fell to the deck of the boarded ship. It had lurched to the side and both could feel the deck under their feet shudder.

"Captain, we're splitting up! Lt. Vanster will take the bridge. Go!" she ordered the lieutenant.

"You have thirty stan at the most, you two. Over." Alexandra struggled to right herself in her chair from the sudden shift of the other ship. *Rouster* gamely adjusted to compensate, slowly moving back into a righted position.

"Copy that. Over."

Lt. Vanster headed towards the bridge where her scanner detected three life forms. She could feel the ship move unnaturally as it lost more power to its stabilizers. Before her was a wall and according to her sensor on the other side were the three she was here to rescue. As she approached the hatch, it suddenly slid open and a person dressed in an unfamiliar AEG pointed something at her that she didn't recognize. With effort, Vanster reminded herself firmly this was a civilian ship and she could appear as a pirate to these people.

"Hey! Put that down. You can hurt someone," Lt. Vanster exclaimed, holding up both of her empty gloved hands. She wondered if she could sic the gurney behind her on the figure. Lt. Vanster gestured where she wanted to go. "Come-on. This ship is not stable."

The figure shook his head and then looked back in the room, exactly what Vanster was hoping for. An invitation to help. She stepped in without resistance and could see another person kneeling over a prostrate form.

Vanster touched the key on her sleeve and the gurney came sailing in. She and the other person quickly laid the unconscious form on top of it. When Vanster looked up the other person was gone. "Major come in. You've a survivor that may be heading in your direction. Over."

"Leut, copy that. Captain. Come-in."

"Captain, here. Go ahead."

"I've a baby in a medical pod. It's detachable but I don't think it's compatible with our equipment. Over"

"Copy that. I'll be ready. You two get on back. That ship is collapsing. Out."

The ship shifted again, causing everyone on board to stumble.

## **Chapter 2**

Captain Montran was kept busy using *Rouster* to steady the destabilizing ship as the shift of weight increased its drift towards the denser part of the debris cloud. While she managed the two ships, she set *Rouster's* system to access the other ship's computer. The download of medical data was completed by the time Vanster and her two rescued crewmembers were safely on board *Rouster*. The medibot created a stasis chamber in the infirmary for the two life-forms.

Major Zohra entered the umbilicus with one of the rescued crew holding a small chamber. The movement of the two ships caused dangerous undulations in the umbilicus. As soon as they were in the *Rouster*, Major Zohra hit the close and retract buttons at the same time, giving some immediate stability to *Rouster*.

"Captain! We're all on board."

"Prepare for a rough breakaway. The other ship's situation is deteriorating rapidly," Captain Montran announced over the ship's PCC.

*Rouster* shifted sharply but the effects of the acceleration were absorbed by the ship's interior stabilizers.

Once Major Zohra stepped into the main passageway, she saw Lt. Vanster's figure standing outside of the infirmary with her AEG helmet recessed, and her short dark hair curling in all directions. Standing beside her was one of their rescued members without his helmet. His violet eyes glinted in the light as he glanced at Major Zohra and her companion as they raced toward them with the small chamber. The other had insisted on carrying the infant, which Major Zohra knew better than to challenge. For all she knew it was her child.

"Arax!" Lt. Vanster's companion shouted both with relief and some anger.

Arax nodded and brushed past Lt. Vanster into the infirmary. Arax reluctantly handed over the small chamber to the medibot. The helmet recessed and a young woman with elfin features was revealed. She and the man watched with troubled silence as the medibot released the lid from the chamber and placed the infant beside the unconscious woman who was also elfin. Zohra noted the man and child were not biologically related to the two women.

Once the child's life-signs were stabilized, Major Zohra felt the tension in the room dissipate. She glanced at Lt. Vanster and noticed her gaze was on Arax. She was a

young woman, the kind Megan usually liked to spend down time with. "Lieutenant Vanster," she called quietly.

Lt. Vanster looked over at her. "Yes, Major?"

"Why don't you..."

"General Quarters," the ship announced. Clangons interrupted her.

"Stay here with the guests, Leut!" Major Zohra commanded. She was not going to leave strangers unchaperoned on her ship.

Major Zohra headed up the passageway bracing herself from bulkhead to bulkhead as the ship began evasive maneuvers. Managing to keep her feet under her, she pulled herself through the bridge hatch and fell into the seat next to Alexandra, whose hands quickly moving over the screen.

"What's happening?" Major Zohra demanded.

"Looking for a place to hide," Captain Montran muttered. The ship took a dive and then slid sideways. "Right now, we're behind some of these unidentified clumps of matter that didn't register on our first scan. Let's see if our pursuers know about it."

The ship shuddered.

"Guess they do," Major Zohra replied. Quickly she primed missiles and concussion torpedoes. "Armed and ready to deploy."

"I don't think they are a good ..."

The ship shuddered again from another hit, but their shield held solidly. Whatever their attackers were using was not enough to damage their protection.

"Did you hail them?" Major Zohra asked, annoyed at being shot at and not shooting back.

"Yep. They called themselves the Recruiters and demanded we were to pull over and be boarded. I took issue with that," Captain Montran explained. She could feel her lover's need for action. She reached over and patted the back of her hand without taking her eyes from her screen.

"Recruiters? As in 'you're with us, fall in'?"

"They didn't give me a chance to ask." She glanced quickly at JG, "I think I surprised them that I not only found them but caught on that they meant to do us harm."

"Why don't we just take a pot shot at them?" Major Zohra asked impatiently, but mindful that this was Alexandra's territory.

"Because some of this debris has gas pockets ready to explode with the right stimulus. And, we out gun them and have more guts in our engines. No sense in giving too much of what we're about away."

"Gas pockets? Helgas moon. I didn't think of that. As for out gunning them..."

Alexandra chuckled at JG's image of a little dog nipping at a bigger dog's heels. After a few moments of playing hide-and-seek Montran used the ship's energy shield to push into the other ship, knocking them into a large cluster of rocks. The recruiter ship chose that moment to fire. The shot went wild, igniting a gas pocket.

"Idiots," JG grunted. *Serves them right!*

*Rouster's* sensors indicated a heat buildup in the attacking ship's engine. Small pods from the doomed ship shot out and scattered but were pulled back into the debris cloud. Some disappeared into the debris and others blew up either from crashing into a fellow pod or with debris.

"Let's get the hell out of here," Captain Montran muttered. "This cloud is starting to pull energy from our ship. Send out a concussion one hundred fals. That should break us from this pull."

"Aye, aye, Captain. There she goes," Major Zohra reported, expertly aiming for an area that was sucking them in.

"All hands, brace yourselves," Captain Montran announced over the ship's intercom.

Captain Montran held her hand over the throttle, waiting for the first crest of energy to reach them. The scans picked up the wave of energy, like an ocean wave. Skillfully, the captain maneuvered the ship to catch the energy at the right point, then hit the throttle, giving them more power that sent them past the fire blast that was accompanying the energy.

"Whooooowhoo!" Alexandra yodeled softly as they felt the lift and then the ship's navigation adjust and push forward. Dampeners made it easy for the passengers, but the screen images showed both women how it looked.

"Yeah!" Major Zohra grunted as she quickly made calculations and verified that the ship's systems were not affected by the unidentified elements in the cloud. "All systems checked and cleared," she reported to the captain.

"All hands, stand down," Captain Montran announced over the ship's comm.

"Hey, is this what you two were looking at after I left? Look at all these attached advertisements in different languages. Just like home, huh?" JG noted. She looked up at her lover. "You two planning on something?"

"R&R. My crew needs it. What do you think number one?"

"Oh, now I'm number one," she teased.

"Just choose something you like, and we'll draw straws if need be."

"How about this one?"

Alexandra looked at the advertisement and laughed. "Just like the Leut. What's with you two? It certainly will keep Megan busy for our entire R&R. I thought two or three days. By the way, what do we pay with? It's not like we have funds."

"There's always someone at space ports that will trade goods for local credits. We have enough gifts from Arnica to weigh down a regiment of pack animals."

"Let's not give something away without all of us deciding," she strongly recommend to JG who had an aversion to one of their wedding gifts.

"Humph. I'm going to see to our guests, Captain. We need to drop them off somewhere before Vanster woos the young woman and finds she bit off more than she can chew," JG chuckled.

"She got her wish, did she?" Alexandra laughed.

JG nodded. "I can feel it. Helgas moon, if I had this sensitivity before I went into the covert corps, I would..."

"Don't start with regrets, darling. Believe me when I say, what ifs don't do anyone any good," she told her gently.

## **Chapter 3**

"So, JG, when are you going to file your report on the destruction of the *Esstas* and our taking on survivors? I'll need it for my message to *Emperors* and *Butterflies* by 0800 tomorrow," Alexandra asked JG softly.

JG lifted her eyes from the game board. She looked back down at her player and moved it to stand next to her magician...only it turned into a rock.

"Helgas moon!" she muttered, "you said that on purpose so I would lose concentration. What do you mean I fill out a report? Those are the perks of being captain."

"But it was an operation that took place off this ship," Alexandra pointed out, and then made four of JG's plunders disappear and then reappear in her dungeon.

"As captain, you ordered it," JG took Alexandra's magician's pet dog to punish her.

"Okay. I'll include your report with mine," she smirked as she dropped a net over JG's key player. "Gotcha."

"Where did you learn to cheat like that?" JG asked dismayed as she watched the score tally up.

"Ha! I used to be the ranking CheeMaat player in Committee space."

"Well, I can tell you didn't hone it on *Spinner's Tale*."

"I sure did. They may have been slow in a lot of things...but at board games they were masters."

"Selective dumbing," Megan remarked from her comfortable couch nearby. Arax was also in the couch, napping. Her mother, Lashay and mother's husband B'eme, were enjoying music in their quarters. Lashay's recovery was coming along well though the infant, M'thore was still weak. Apparently, they were transporting the ailing infant to a hospital for the child's parents who couldn't afford to accompany the child. Relatives of the ailing child would care for him until the family could afford to return him to his parents.

"You don't have any argument with me on that," Alexandra replied distractedly as she mentally touched each of their guests. JG, who still possessed some of her sensitivity, chose to let Alexandra do the 'touchy" stuff.

"Arax says C'logi Space Station is busy but is every bit of what it advertises. Mind if I take liberty and disappear for a few days?" Megan asked.

"Just tell us where you're going and check in daily. On the third day, maybe we can meet for dinner or something." Alexandra looked over at JG to see as head of security if she had a problem with that. JG caught the tone it was asked in and nodded her okay. Then she looked back at the board game to study the log showing Alexandra's moves. She hated getting beaten.

"You two make me feel like you're my parents," Megan complained.

"We're in unknown territory and we don't have a troop for backup," JG told her seriously.

"Sorry, Major," Megan mumbled. "I...its reflex."

JG waved the explanation away. "*Verow delate*," she quoted. It was a Black Rose warning that someone was getting too lax.

Megan was uncertain of what to do with the young elf. Since the first day, the young woman had been pursuing her. She wondered what kind of signals she was putting out that indicated she was interested. Megan was interested in both men and women, and right now she was fed up with female energy. She was looking for something different - more course and rough.

"Well, I'm going to take a security look through the storage bay and make sure everything is locked down for our downtime," Alexandra announced.

Megan glanced at JG who was frowning over the board, trying to figure out how her spouse fooled her. Megan hated that game. Too much fighting with unseen weapons. The woman leaning against her moved, brushing a sensitive area as she did. Megan looked into the normally silver eyes of the elfin and found them almost black. She wondered if that was the color they turned when they were sexually turned on.

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Alexandra was disturbed by the emotions she was picking up from their guests. They were polite and very grateful that they were rescued, but she could feel something underneath the politeness.

As with all military ships, guests were restricted from certain areas, and on *Rouster* there were not many places their guests could roam without an escort. The adults

accepted the restrictions and kept to their quarters and the mess. However, Arax was curious; therefore, when Megan was not on duty, she stayed close to Arax so she could move restlessly about. Alexandra could feel Megan's interest in the young woman, but knew if they reached harbor, she would seek others. She wondered what Arax would do about that.

Alexandra entered *Yanaba, Rouster's* shuttle, and ran a diag then began the lock down sequence. It took thirty stan minutes since she wanted to first make sure no one had tampered with the shuttle. As she was leaving B'eme was stepping onto the ramp. Alexandra held up her palm and shook her head.

"This ship is off-bounds," she told him. "And so is this area."

He nodded smiling. "I just thought I could get a look since someone was here. I'm curious how different your ships are to ours."

His tone was amiable, but Alexandra could see erratic flashes of energy around him that left her unsure of his ulterior motives. Since she wasn't familiar with his species, she relied on her instincts.

Alexandra shook her head and gestured for him to leave the area.

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Space Station C'cogi was bustling with travelers of various species from nearby planets. The rectangular multilayered station with bulbous eyes that formed dots on her exterior orbited the planet Marigold. Ships either awaiting their turn to unload or just at station keeping while their crews shuttled over for business or a break from duty, formed a cluttered half circle around the station, leaving the space between the planet and space station free for shuttle travel. The station was colorful with advertisements, hawkers and brightly clad passengers.

Major Zohra stepped off the ship with Lt. Vanster eagerly tailing. Since this could loosely be termed a recon mission, the major was in charge which left Captain Montran aboard to gather information and make certain there would be no unwanted boarding while they were docked. Alexandra sighed as she began the search for what the Talog Collage was. Space Station C'cogi was a part of that organization.

"Okay, it's the name of the collection of planets around here that unified under the premise to agree to disagree on individual planet business but to keep the space around them open for trade," Alexandra read into JG's comm. "It sounds like most political galaxy organizations. Gawds, but I hope you two don't take long. Look at all this stuff to look at!"

"Don't get too excited about shopping," JG said in her comm. "Wait until Megan and I check and see how sharp the local pick-pockets are. Let me finish up here," she added in a whisper.

Major Zohra stepped out of the harbor patrol office with a more permanent docking space and a list of laws for the station and the planet Marigold, just in case they should decide to visit planet-side.

"We've been moved to Dock CC020. It's a week-long space. Let me know when you're tied up," she teased.

Megan led the way to their next job, seeing their rescued survivors were safely taken care of.

A ripple of anxiety passed through the milling crowd, causing JG to look for the source. A small party of uniformed people moved two blocks away. The crowd parted before them, quickly, seeming to loathe their presence.

"Thank you all for rescuing us," Arax spoke, distracting JG. She gestured to one side of the station. "The trade tents are over to the left. Go to Trader Orontha. Tell him I sent you. He will give you a fair trade for your goods and advice on where not to spend your dacas, or credits. You can use them here and on Marigold, should you wish to visit."

"Thank you, Arax. We're glad we could be of some service to you," JG answered. "We're sorry we couldn't save your ship."

Arax waved a hand in dismissal and grinned. "If Pater B'eme had spent the extra money on upgrading the energy field instead of gambling it away we would not have had the problem."

"So, you don't mind not having a ship...to explore the stars?" Megan asked surprised. After trying to answer all her questions about space travel, which Megan knew little about, she had assumed Arax loved to travel.

"Not in that heap of metal! We've been lucky. If his family invests in another ship, it will be mother that will be handling the money this time around." She glanced at the group she had introduced as her pater's family. They appeared to be waiting for her. Reluctantly Arax moved to join them.

"See you around," Megan told her gruffly. Arax turned slightly and smiled before disappearing in the crowd.

"Well, let's go and see what we can get for this stuff." JG hugged her package closer.

"I thought you liked that?" Megan referred to the vase that had been a wedding gift from a young Kiuzu trainee on Arnica.

"I do," she admitted embarrassed. "But I don't like who gave it to us. She was flirting with Alexandra."

Megan broke out in laughter. She quickly stifled it when she noticed the startled looks on the people passing by them. She couldn't remember her stalwart friend ever showing jealousy or possessiveness with anyone she had been with.

"Helga's moon. JG it was meant as a compliment. It's to show the groom...uhh...other bride...that they have a valuable catch." Megan's stifled laugh started to sound like giggles, as JG's expression changed to a rueful smile.

"How did you find out?"

Megan glanced at her. "Well...I...had issue with her attitude and had a chat with her," she admitted embarrassed.

JG let out a puff of air. "I should have done it myself. I just got...uh...busy with other things." Her eyes caught a vendor that had boxes with intricate designs, and she weaved her way over for a closer look.

Megan looked around anxiously. "JG, I don't like this crowd," she told her in an undertone.

Guiltily, JG quickly brought her attention back to their surroundings. "It's edgy. Come on. Let's look for Arax's friend and we'll see just how fair he is."

Trader Orontha's tent was well marked and JG liked the feel around his area. He was elfin though not with the same features as Arax. His skin was darker and his eyes were golden. After mentioning Arax's name he became more open with advice. He recommended not to sell the vase on the station but rather go to Marigold. He even gave her the name of a shop that would give her a fair price.

"On our way here, we encountered a ship that only identified itself as Recruiters. Do you know who they could be?" JG asked.

He studied the two women with an appraising eye. "They won't bother you while you're on the station, but once you're free from the harbor patrol's territory, they'll board you and conscript you to their military games. They troll the station for hopefuls and wait until their mark leaves the station. Since you said you had an encounter, I take that to mean you were able to escape. Best to keep an eye on each other, because that is a challenge."

He glanced around him and the two women made discreet glances too.

He leaned closer to JG. "They've been getting bold the last year and kidnapping those they think will make good fighters. That's overstepping their recruiting charter."

"Fighters?" the two muttered in a threatening voice.

"For the arena. That's the military games. We don't have planetary wars anymore. We have the arena where trained soldiers refight battles from history, with the outcomes changing as the bets. The fortunes of those foolish enough to gamble on such an imprudent game, are many. There's been an increase of hostility among the losers of late.

Rumor is that some of the fights are predetermined. And all that loss of life," he added sadly.

Both women glanced at each other, echoing silent warning signals.

"Is there a law to protect the kidnapped?" JG asked.

"Who's going to stand up to them?" He gestured to the recruiting posters hanging among the other advertisements. "They're supposed to ask. At one time there was over ten recruitment companies vying for willing members, but now there's one. Sooner or later the magistrate and the council will have to stand up to that...general. And it better be sooner!"

JG picked up his unspoken thought. His clan was disappearing. JG knew elf folk did not make good soldiers unless the war was for their cause. The trader feared that his kin were being used as prey for the training of the company soldiers. JG thought so too.

The two wished the trader well and thanked him for his advice and information.

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"Hi, hon," JG plopped in the seat next to Alexandra and leaned over to kiss her cheek.

"Hi, love. What did you find out about the local customs?"

"That we're going to have to keep our eyes peeled for the Recruiters when we leave this harbor. They've taken up kidnapping for potential soldier material. They have area games with real deaths."

"That's what I've picked up from their local newscasts," Alexandra said.

"I went back to the Station Master's office. The official comment was that the station and planet are neutral zones and the recruiters have authority only to pursue AWOL soldiers."

"I hope they know the difference between AWOL and tourists. Well, we're here and I plan on having a good time...just you and me." She leaned over and kissed JG tenderly.

Megan was in her quarters changing into her newly acquired attire. She made arrangements for her days off while JG went to make sure the Station Master understood why it wouldn't be a good idea to target them for a foreign military's draft mob.

*She probably told him in no uncertain terms that besides the sisterhood, they would have to worry about two military galaxy powers, and Lady Montran's clan that would come and whoop their army if anything happened to us.* Megan grinned as she attached her sexy underwear and stepped back to scrutinize the effect. *Uh huh. Tough love in a leather thong.* The cut of thigh muscles was admired as she flexed one and then the other, admiring the results of her hard work to keep herself strong.

Next, she touched her pulse points with scent. For outer clothing a tunic was selected designed to be removed easily, but also concealing her strong physique. A long skirt was wrapped around her lower torso and tested for movement.

Megan didn't dress in what could turn out to be a handicap should she be attacked. She picked up the hardcopy of an image of the advertised male model she had selected and studied him for a few moments. He was not muscular, but he had enough meat on him in the right places and he was advertised to be strong in other areas. She intended on playing mistress to a man who had enough fight in him to resist her long enough for her to feel the heat of conquest.

Humming, Megan met her crewmates in the cargo bay.

"Call us daily," JG ordered her. "We'll be staying at Manfra's Home Away From Home." She slung her pack over one shoulder and gave a smile to Alexandra who also picked up her pack.

Not planning on going anywhere but the brothel she was unimpressed with the warnings. She had been to many foreign ports and spent her downtime alone in various brothels. Anyone who thought they could take her down spent time recuperating in a medical ward, rethinking their mistake. "Yes, ma'am," Megan responded distractedly as images of slave scenarios played in her mind, forgetting altogether that her two companions could read her thoughts.

The three walked down the ramp and into the busy crowd of various species. It was end of a shift the tourist advisory had informed them. If they wanted a shuttle planet-side it would be better to wait an hour when they were not so full.

Alexandra and JG had reserved a honeymoon suite on the station with the intent of working off their unbridled sexual energy. It was easy to find the hotel. It was two levels up from where they docked with a view of their ship. The balcony bowed out into

space with an expansive view of stars and ships, comfortably nestled in their moorings. However, the two occupants were not interested in that view.

"Wow. Look at the bed!" Alexandra studied the dials on the side. "Not like on Merker's Outpost. You can dial smells and sounds but not the rest of the atmosphere. Oh," she purred both in sound and thought, setting up a pleasant vibration along their telepathic connection when arms encircled her. Clothes were tossed haphazardly about as they connected on all levels.

In their connection the casual finger that stroked the length of an arm was as arousing as a tweak of a nipple or a tongue in the ear. A climax shared in thoughts was like experiencing a supernova, from explosion to implosion, and then a need to go on even when energies flagged. It could easily become addicting. Hearts became open and the two saw the other's frailties and fears, but most of all, the depth of love for the other.

For the staunch woman trained to be a warrior since a child, it was a new frontier and Jina Gari Zohra willingly opened herself, realizing why she and Megan Vanster could not share a relationship as intense as she was now able to experience.

Megan Vanster despised her own frailties and would never embrace them, therefore never able to accept a loved one's weaknesses. Following the brief insight, JG fell exhausted beside her spouse and into a deep sleep.

Alexandra sprawled across the large bed, resting a hand on her spouse's arm, too tired to move. She could feel something different in her and her lover but was too satiated to want to think any further about it.

## **Chapter 4**

Lt. Megan Vanster nearly jumped when a small hand slipped around her elbow pulling her out of the way of a stumbling traveler. She thought she saw an annoyed look on the man's face as she avoided the collision.

"Arax! Be careful! I could have knocked you down thinking you were a thief," Megan warned her, but realized Arax only had her welfare in mind. "You're not going with your mother?"

"No, Lt. Vanster. I thought it would be better to show you around; that way you will not lose your dacas. You have them still, yes?" she teased.

"Arax, I'm going where you can't go. I already told you...you look like a kid and are probably too young for me. Besides, I don't feel that way about you." She uncurled the young girl's fingers from around her arm, and continued walking.

Though Megan's legs were longer, Arax kept up effortlessly.

"I'm old enough. I just age slower than you."

Megan stopped and turned to face her. Taking a deep breath, she decided to get tough. "Arax, I told you that though I like to have sex with men or women...I want to be with a man tonight and I don't want to have to worry about you."

"Why would you worry about me?" Arax asked surprised.

Megan resumed her walk, spotting the sign of her destination. She pushed open the door and headed to the front desk. The proprietor was lying on his side atop of the desk with a long smoking pipe in his mouth. His black eyes looked at her and then to Arax. At the sight of Arax he frowned.

"I made arrangements for a companion for my stay," Vanster informed him.

He pointed his pipe at her, "I recognize your voice. New in town, are you?" he purred. "However, you didn't mention..." he began and then glanced at Arax.

"She's not with me," Vanster told him firmly.

He raised his eyebrows. "Well, I have your room ready...however, the one you picked is not in yet. He's late!" With that he bit down hard on his pipe. "But he shall be here soon."

"Can I wait in my room?"

"Certainly!" He pushed a card with symbols on it to the edge of the counter. "I'm sure you want to get ready." He looked pointedly at her pack.

"I'll show you where it is," Arax told her and picked up the card before either of them could say anything.

The proprietor looked at Megan. "You have your hands full with that one. You must be pretty strong to schedule a second person."

Megan was going to object to his incorrect summation but Arax returned and pulled her after her. Megan's curiosity was piqued.

"Come-on. You don't want to hang around down here too long. You'll have all sorts of residents dragging you into their rooms and charging you." She took the stairs instead of the elevator. Megan's eyes were stuck on watching Arax's rump that was a few feet from her face as they moved quickly up the stairs. By the time they reached the right floor, Megan was sweating, but not from the workout. The room was three doors from the stairway. Arax slid the card in the box near the door and flung it open.

Megan looked around the room, not especially impressed. The bed had a lot of gadgets attached with a cabinet nearby. She opened the cabinet and looked at the apparel that was sized to fit her and her male partner...when he arrived.

All the things she asked for were in the drawer and...she sniffed the air. Following her nose, she opened up a large bathing room. The tub was filled with scented water and by the smell of it, drugged to enhance performance and feeling. She could feel the drug coyly wrapping around her and settling into her pores.

"It's all right," Megan said with approval.

"It's the deluxe room," Arax spoke behind Megan. Megan turned to look at Arax and was surprised. She was still wearing the same clothes but seemed different.

*Ahh. The herbs. Okay...Rule number one...don't carry extra credits that can get stolen. Rule two, when in a strange port and with someone you don't know...don't get tied up. Rule number three...don't take any drugs. Okay. That covers most of the don'ts. But I think...it's too late for the drugs.*

Arax moved toward her in a slow sensuous walk. Megan's heartbeat faster as a thin hand lifted to rest on her shoulder. The other ran along her tunic slowly releasing the catches. Megan watched the elf's hand as it unhurriedly slid her tunic off. She quivered, wondering why she had never gone out with an elf.

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Alexandra rolled over to see where she was. She bumped into a heel. Grabbing the heel, she shook it. "Hey, I recognize this," she croaked. "I need water." Gingerly she rolled from the bed and trudged to the bathing room.

"Hm!" Leaning over she studied the controls to get the bath to fill. Finding something she twisted and was rewarded with water and at the right temperature. Going

through the bottles that lined the tub, she found herbs. Many of them had drugs to enhance whatever experience the bather was intent on having.

"We don't need any of that," she muttered as she poured her selection in.

"Any of what?" JG rested a hand on the bent back as she looked to see what Alexandra was doing.

Alexandra gestured at one of the bottles. "It not only heightens your sexual feelings, but it also gives you the belief you can last a year."

JG laughed. "After last night's experience...I don't want to go nonstop for a year." She kissed Alexandra. "How are you feeling?"

"Better...but like you, sore. What's up with that, Gari?"

JG shook her head. "I don't know. But whatever it is..." she shrugged.

"So, are we going to stay in here all day or do some sightseeing?"

"What's your choice, the space port or the planet below?"

"Somewhere where we don't have to walk much."

"Tour bus...we sit in the back...privacy doors? Helgas moon. I feel like a soldier that's been away too long."

"And you, my sex starved soldier, are so lucky you have a sailor that can keep up with you," Alexandra told her.

JG laughed and brushed Alexandra's wild hair out of her face. "I can ask the desk downstairs while you bathe."

"I'll be here," Alexandra told her, as she slid into the water.

*This is so nice. It's helping the sore spots too. Hmm, I think I could fall asleep in here...however, there is no bot to pull me out if I should slide under.* She laughed humorously.

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JG stepped outside their room and took a few moments to orientate herself, then headed toward the elevators. The corridor was deserted and the car that arrived was also empty. She had not checked the station time.

"Hm. In my part of space - station hotels never close," she muttered. As the elevator began its descent she idly thought of the night before and the time since their wedding, two months ago.

*I wonder if there is another part after the bonding ceremony nobody told us about. Maybe I should look up her species and mine. I never thought to ask her. Come to think of it, I know little about my mother's family or my father's. Well, it's not like this compulsion to jump each other's bones is hurting us.*

The elevator car went past the floor she wanted and continued past others. JG cursed mentally to herself.

When the door slid open four uniformed Recruiters with weapons lifted in ready position looked expectantly inside for their new draftee. A surprised voice echoed in the empty elevator. What could be curses were brief. The elevator door closed and moved upward, back on its programmed path.

JG dropped from her hiding place, having pulled herself through the small emergency exit above the roof of the car. She punched the button for the top floor. Sniffing the air, she picked up foreign scents and a particularly offensive odor. Carbou, JG's nose twitched. The scent was a heavier smell than female Carbou huntresses left. The scent was marking this as an official hunt, and she was the prey. Intense feelings such as fear, were like an odor to Carbou so JG diminished thoughts on all levels, going into automatic mode. Their reputation in Committee space was that they were the fiercest warriors than any other species that went to war, however it was a misnomer. They were the most intense. They loved the challenge of the hunt and left the fate of their captured prey to those that accompanied them.

She needed to warn Alexandra. As soon as she punched the button, she lifted herself back through the small service panel and squatted on the top as it moved up. It stopped at the original floor it was meant to. Grabbing the frame of the next floor's closed door she pulled herself against the door and pressed against it as much as she could. There was a space between the actual door and the frame of the elevator car that she could squeeze into. The elevator moved up the shaft, past her. As it moved over her, she grabbed onto a brace then swung to the bottom of the car. She hung for two floors and jumped to the lip of the fifth floor. As she worked to get the door opened, she heard the elevator stop, then the alarm went off as it did a free fall past her, and then abruptly stopped. She hoped no one was in the car. The door above the floor opened. She watched

two soldiers enter the shaft and drop onto the top of the car. Flipping open the small panel, one dropped into the car while the other remained the look out.

There were no other lookouts opening elevator doors on the other floors...a mistake on their part. JG's controlled fall onto the lookout rendered him unconscious. She stripped him of his weapons and dumped his body down the hole after making sure no one she knew was in the car. She tossed in an unexploded ordinance and shut the hatch cover. Quickly she scaled back up the wall but changed direction when she saw her escape door was being pried open.

She studied the walls of the shaft for exits. There were four small maintenance doors, two of which she would not be able to fit through. She opened a door to another shaft. The air gusting through it took her breath away. Hanging on with both hands she swung out and clung to the side of wall, studying her alternatives. Once decided, she was moving. She felt her pursuers on her trail. Nothing was taken for granted where she was going. When something appeared to be too easy or she was being herded she did the unpredictable and turned on her pursuers. When it came time for her to pull another unpredictable move, she didn't change her path but rather met whoever was chasing her head on. She would make sure that whoever fought her would rue the day.

A cloud of darts felled her. She would have rolled down the stairs if one of the men had not grabbed her and pulled her onto his shoulder.

"Wait for the other," the leader instructed the other three.

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JG was crouched in a water ditch with other soldiers. They had been dropped in what was thought a safe spot to begin their deployment to surround the enemy troops, but their spotter was mistaken. Outnumbered and exhausted after being driven to their present location, the troop was taking a moment to mentally and physically regroup.

"Corporal JG," a voice whispered near her elbow.

"Yeah," was all the energy she wanted to waste on small talk.

"The Leut's and Sarg are dead. That makes you..."

"Shit." Now she knew why the troop was scattered. She rubbed her forehead. "Are we Black Rose or not?"

"JG, are you going to give a pep talk?" he tiredly whined.

"It's time to prove our name. We're going to go in splatter shot mode."

The assault on her troops began before everyone had moved into their assigned spots and she was getting angry that her sharp shooters had no effect while the other side was getting hits. This was not how she remembered...

The scene changed quickly to her kneeling amid the dying and dead. The stench from days of body rot was gagging her and the others.

"Here they come! Bayonets!"

Automatically, Private JG pulled her bayonet out of its sheath and locked it into place at the end of her rifle. She could hear some of the others praying. Not her. She was a survivor creating her own luck and with hard work. She was going to take death to the enemy. Let them come.

And suddenly the enemy was upon them. The din of shouting, dying and screams were all around her. She blocked and pushed and toppled anyone that came close to her. She was moving steadily forward, into the ranks of her attackers. The hated enemy.

"Kill! Kill! Kill!" a voice shouted somewhere.

But she refused. She knew what that was like and had promised herself she would not do it unless her life or Alexandra's life depended on it.

"You will kill!" the voice shouted again, but she refused, knocking another soldier unconscious, but this time a fire shot through her nerves, dropping her boneless into the mud of blood and human waste.

The stench in the trench was suffocating. Bodies were wasting in various stages with no water for the survivors. JG didn't dare take a deep breath.

"Here they come! Get out there and kill the enemy!"

JG's lip curled back, and her mind shouted a defiant no. Again, pain shook her body with convulsions and into darkness.

This time JG was standing with others on a dry dirt field. She didn't have to look behind her to know there were hundreds of soldiers dressed just like her. She held a sword in one hand and a shield in the other. They were waiting for their generals to give the order to charge.

"Atttaaaack!"

JG refused to run and was trampled by those behind her.

## Chapter 6

Captain Bian Malchi bolted up from her cot, knocking her companion onto the floor. Shaking her head into wakefulness she tried to identify where the alarm was coming from.

"Bian!" her bed partner grumbled, rolling to his feet. "What the hell is that about?"

"Oh, Feta Morga!" she gasped and reached for her com. "Delta delta Captain Onry...we have a problem."

"Can't this wait?" the captain's voice returned. In the background she could hear another alarm go off. For the last two weeks *Catching Butterflies* had been running on yellow alert because they lost two SEC ships. The strain was evident in the Captain Onry's voice.

The SEC ships were prison ships programmed to avoid danger and to notify their guardians when a change in course was initiated. The SEC ships changed course and didn't notify the battleship following it. However, it could have been because the debris they were moving through was interfering with communications and scans. *Catching Butterfly* and *Emperor's Last Chance* were not able to locate the two ships they had been following when they exited the debris field. They were a day behind *Rouster*.

"Birds of prey," she whispered.

Curses came over the com link.

"Why couldn't it be you found the SEC ships? Meeting in the War-room...ten minutes," he growled.

Captain Malchi was already in the shower. She was not going to sit in a room filled with fellow officers smelling like she spent the night making love...which she had.

Running down the passageway ten minutes later she stopped at the lift breathing heavily, more from apprehension than exhaustion. The elevator opened with Lady Dell, head science officer and Lady Malu, first officer of *Catching Butterflies* already in the lift. They stepped aside to give her room. They too looked as if they had just been awakened. Silence was heavy in the elevator as it rose to the fifth deck where the war

room was located. They were joined by Malchi's second in command, Lt. Visu and her recent love interest, Lt. Commander Beka, head of *Catching Butterflies* security.

They all could feel *Catching Butterflies* changing course. Captain Malchi thought the Captain must have more information to change course so quickly.

The war room smelled of kelapa, a strong beverage. Captain Onry was sitting in his chair, with the four leaders of the koan. DeDe, Trin'ette, Una and Zytka in attendance. They wore grave expressions. The new arrivals quickly took available seats.

Captain Onry nodded at Malchi to go first.

"I lost connection to Major Zohra."

"Interference?" Lady Malu asked.

"Yes. Someone is in her head, so to speak, big time."

"Telepathic influence?" Captain Onry asked, looking at the Koan leaders.

"No. It would have to be given willingly...this is not the case. She has Thebieuan genes from her father's grandfather and elf from her mother," Madre DeDe of the Koan said.

"By the strength of the interference, I would say a heavy number of drugs and a machine are enabling the intrusion," Madre Trin'ette said.

"Our last transmission from *Rouster* was that they were going to C'cogi, a space station orbiting Marigold, but jointly owned by the Talog Collage. Talog Collage is made up of six planets, Marigold, Jumplier, H'lo, Mois, Maerc, and Nahc. They were going to drop off the family they rescued at the medical center on the station and take an R&R for three days. From our last R&R stop, our historian reports his contact reported this section of space is not recommended to pass through. People and ships disappear," Lt.

Commander Beka reported. "*Rouster* was a day ahead of us until we lost the SEC ships and have been trolling the area for a couple of days. So, their message is three days old."

"How long for us to get to C'cogi?" Captain Onry asked his First.

"A week if we keep our speed to what the locals move at or one and half days if we hit our top," Lady Dell replied.

"Captain to the bridge. Lt. Benie?" Captain Onry called.

"Benie here, Captain."

"Are we on our new course?"

"Yes, Captain."

"I want our speed to be best possible to C'cogi space station. What can you give me? Tops."

There was a moment of silence. "Engineering reported 8gs if you need it, 6 comfortable. Capt?"

"Give it 7gs for a day. Engage when ready. Send a note to the division heads I'll update them at seven hundred bells in the Captain's Ready Room. Captain out."

"Copy, Captain. Out"

Captain Onry took a deep breath and released it, looking around the table then back at Captain Malchi. "Madre Trin'ette called me right after you did, Captain Malchi. Right now, all they can sense is trouble for Lady Alexandra and Major Zohra. Lt. Vanster seems to be oblivious to what is going on with her shipmates so I will assume they have been separated. *Emperor's Last Chance* will continue searching for the two SEC ships."

"I have a bad feeling about this, Captain," Malchi said slowly. "If someone messes with the major and with what she learned on Arnica, we have no idea what she's capable of. For that matter, we don't know what Lady Montran will do when someone this close to her is attacked."

"Commander Beka, Lady Malu and I have been discussing whether we should just head for a space station and tell the local authorities we lost two ships with dangerous prisoners. It looks like that decision has been made for us by our three wandering soldiers."

Commander Beka looked like he bit on a sour stick.

"Commander, want to share with us your thoughts?" Onry encouraged.

"We've been warned ships and people disappear from around here. Are you sure we should be leaving *Emperor's* alone? What if the SEC ships are a result of that problem, disappearing ships?"

"We're going to have to see for ourselves what is causing ships and people to disappear. If it was just ships, I would say it's a space anomaly, but people disappearing too makes me suspicious there's something akin to pirate activity that can be the explanation."

"Sir, we all had the opportunity to see Major Zohra's skills during her competition with the Queen's commander of the Kiuzu guard. If someone should turn her into something like the metrasoldiers..."

Lady Dell, head of the science staff nodded her head. They all had cause for alarm. She would be someone's one-woman army. She glanced at the message that was just sent from her third shift staff. "We've located *Rouster*. The coordinates put it at the space station C'cogi. Right where we're headed."

The captain nodded. "Good. Well, let's get some sleep if we can. In the morning, seven hundred. We'll work on a plan. Keep me posted, Bian - Shris."

## Chapter 7

Alexandra's eyes popped open. She lifted her arm and found her hands shriveled from soaking too long. "Gads," she mumbled. *How come I feel so tired? Didn't we just wake up? Where's Gari? She's supposed to wake me when she got back.*

"Gari?" A disquieting feeling filled her. There was no sense of Gari.

Toweling herself off quickly, she walked around their suite looking for JG. "I wonder if she met someone downstairs and lost track of time. No. She's not like that." Feeling anxious, she sent out another mental hail. Nothing. Maybe it was the station. From her experiences on various planets and space stations, some had a sub audible sound wave running to prevent the unscrupulous from invading others' dreams or thoughts.

Alexandra dressed, planning what to do. First, she needed find out where JG was. That meant going back to the ship and activate the bio locators. It also meant disturbing Megan. She feared that JG may have been abducted by the Recruiters. Alexandra stopped for a moment, taking a deep breath and quieting her heart and thoughts. Was she overreacting?

*No. One of us is missing. We're in a hostile environment...the recruiters are looking for likely candidates and Helga's bloody moon, she would be a great draft pick, except she's already taken...by me! Concentrate! Don't panic.*

She slung her pack over her shoulders and picked up Gari's. She was even more concerned since she didn't leave with it.

The moment her hand touched the door to open it she knew there was trouble on the other side. Turning quickly, she headed for another exit. There too she felt the same danger. Looking out the window, she cursed at that option. She headed into the bathing room and remembered the utility closet she had opened when looking for extra towels. Every hotel room had a secret entrance and that was where she found this rooms. Opening the door wide, she pressed and leaned until the cupboard clicked. Pulling it out, she peered into the dark corridor. Hearing nothing, she entered, closing the cupboard behind her. Dim lighting came on. It was clean and appeared like the service access.

She ran as quietly as she could, intending on putting as much distance as she could to their room. Stopping suddenly, she studied the glowing emblem over one exit, and then opened it. She came out behind a stack of towels. Next to her was the attendant's desk where a busy pursuer was taking reservations. Wrapping a huge towel around her head and body she escaped to the locker rooms where she tossed the towels and escaped to the elevator car filled with tourists.

When the elevator door opened the bustle of the occupants pushed her forward into the lobby where she melted in with a large group of noisy people. Behind her angry voices were yelling. They were directed at an official of the station. There was a group of the hotels personal in their hotel uniforms gesturing at a uniformed woman whose dress was military. Her bushy brows rose and fell with each punctuated yell.

*Where is Gari?*

The group she was surrounded by were tall, bulky, and loud. They wore garish outfits that stood out from the other milling citizens and smelled of a strong pungent odor. Being slightly shorter she remained hidden. Like a cup in a wave she was swept toward the beach, only in this case they were heading towards the dock. Peering between her living pillars Alexandra spotted soldiers dressed like the poster recruitment ads. They moved out of formation to stand along the walkway, scanning the citizens. The civilians' resentment against their intrusion was giving Alexandra a stomachache. Her priority changed to putting distance between the two groups of energy.

Her tourist group moved onto a shuttle where everyone took a seat and pulled out tokens that were similar to what the trader gave her the previous day. Fumbling with her pack, she pulled out a token that looked like the others. The attendant moved down the

corridor, pushing a small wheeled box that the passengers dumped their tokens in. At the moment she was not concerned about where the shuttle was heading only that she leave the space station.

*Gari where are you?* she plaintively called.

Nothing.

Alexandra rubbed the back of her head where a headache was building up. She had not had a headache in a long time. Leaning back with her eyes closed, her fingers searched for her acupuncture points, along her hand, arm and back of her head, getting a little bit of relief. She focused on relaxing before she worked out what she was going to do next.

By the time the shuttle landed on Marigold, Alexandra had a plan. She needed allies to help her find Gari. Or maybe she should see about getting something to settle her stomach. The headache receded but not her upset stomach.

*Helgas moon, this is not a good time to catch some blasted foreign virus!*

Alexandra looked around the station for something that could give her information on finding the local magistrate. Alexandra glanced back at the group she had arrived with. They were met by four elves dressed in the same clothing as they. Everyone was laughing and gesturing to the outside where large open transportation vehicles were waiting. She moved behind a pillar with frescos painted in subdued colors and scenes depicting stories that always had elves either in diplomatic meetings or celebrating an important event. On the walls were hints of Marigold's cultural development and advancement into space travel. The floor was a display of the stars in their galaxy and how far they had explored.

*Well, that's helpful but...not what I need right now. I need to find a way to contact Megan.*

She exited the building, into the soft sunlight where the heat was cooled by the air from the surrounding snowcapped mountains. The last of the vehicles with her colorful companions moved off. Singing and whoops faded out as they turned a corner and disappeared out of sight.

Disorientated from the sudden rush of thoughts from many life forms, Alexandra leaned against a tree waiting for her senses to adjust. It was astonishing how being on the

ship for a month she had forgotten what it was like to be in tuned to other life that was vibrant with its own destiny.

A whoosh from the arrival of another shuttle brought her eyes back to the airfield. The shuttle slowly maneuvered into position and settled on its mark. The moment the shuttle doors opened, and the occupants spilled out the ground beneath trembled from the discord of the new arrivals. They were hunters. Alexandra knew them from her own experiences in the Collective and Committee space.

*Helga's moon, Megan Vanster! Mentally were you dialing an adventure without asking us?* Hiding behind the tree she looked around for an escape.

*Cripes! I feel sick and I have hunters on my tail...and I lost Gari.* Her despair was adding to her nauseous feeling, she realized immediately as her stomach took a plunge as if she were on her first drop in a troop ship.

A tram nearby caught her attention. Quickly she moved to it and hopped in, fed it a coin and it replied in a language she didn't understand.

"Repeat please," she asked frantically, wondering if it would since she was not speaking the same language.

An elf with pale gray eyes stepped up to the tram and pressed two selections and then nodded to Alexandra. "Safe journey, stranger."

Before she could reply the tram moved off with a jerk, knocking her back into her seat. Alexandra turned around to watch the group she had her misgivings about.

"Oh, oh. That's not very friendly," she muttered as three of the soldiers pulled passengers out of a tram and got in themselves. They didn't seem to be concerned about the angry group they were leaving behind. She leaned back in her tram and studied the interior.

"All right, no buttons, no steering wheel, and no pedals. That's one way to keep the tourists on the trail and not go traipsing on their own. But...ugh." A pain in her gut had her clutching her stomach with one hand and holding onto the seat arm. With all the new feelings rushing through her she wasn't sure what the pain was about. When the pain eased, she noticed the tram had begun its ascent up the mountain.

The mountainside was covered in a greenish blue carpet speckled with bright yellow and orange flowers, with rocks and boulders scattered about. That disappeared as

she got higher. Trees began to replace the meadow while one third of the mountain was a rock face of gray and red stone. Faces were carved into it, but they were worn and lost much of their defining features. The ride took about an hour, giving Alexandra's stomach time to settle. She could feel the air getting thinner as she neared the summit. That could work to her benefit since JG programmed their living space with the same mixture.

The tram slowed as it turned a sharp corner and Alexandra jumped as it rounded the corner out of sight of the one following her. Pausing to get a feel for the area she took off towards a thin line that looked like an animal trail. She wanted to find a place where she could communicate with the guardian of the area or spirit of the planet...not just out of respect but out of immediate necessity. After interacting with the divas and various guardians on Arnica, Alexandra's sensitivity to these various spirits gave her an appreciation of their importance and how helpful they could be.

Alexandra heard the tram above her, and she flattened herself on the other side of a tree. Hunters were good at what they did because they had species attributes ideal for this type of job. Those looking for her wouldn't be fooled for long and less than two minutes she heard a yell and knew they would be jumping from their ride as she did and back tracking for her scent.

Alexandra glanced up at the trees to see if tree travel was possible but decided it wouldn't be a good idea. She had enough lead to set a false trail with traps, but there was enough of them to send someone on each trail she took precious time to set, so she would only be wasting her lead. She found a stream bed, but it was too rocky and filled with storm debris to help.

Alexandra leaped off the path, catching an overhanging branch and pulled herself up. She was pacing herself well, but the coming and going of her stomach and headaches were slowing her down. Leaping to another branch, she crossed back over the stream and jumped onto a boulder and slid behind it to rest and take stock. She needed to start setting traps. She was sure that was why they had not caught up with her, they were being careful to check for traps.

Emptying the side pocket of Gari's pack she found the wire and rubber band she had in mind. Quickly she set her trap moving further from the first and set a second. She

felt her pursuers' nearness. She moved on. Even if they found her traps, it would slow them down further because now they would know she knew how to set them.

Further up she back tracked. She found a tree a boulder leaned against, making it easy for her to climb it. There she waited within view of her trap.

The lead hunter was Carbou. When he paused with his muzzle lifted to sniff the air one of the other hunters passed him and fell into her trap. The unfortunate thing for a fellow hunter was that while a hunt was in progress, whatever injury you received, you were responsible for yourself. After the hunt, someone would come back to see if you were okay. She had extended her trap so that those going around her trap would also be injured. She had whittled small darts and attached it to the rubber strip. It was a beginner's trap...but she didn't want them to know much about her.

*Never leave home without your kit, and always be sure it has something for every occasion,* Alexandra quoted a Spartan adage that JG and Megan liked to say it originated with the Black Rose.

As the others moved on, she moved to where the fallen hunters were. She wanted some answers. The two were unconscious. Their energy fields were not moving as an awakened person would. Checking the uniforms, she found what could be termed weapons. Those she confiscated with the intent to remove a tempting weapon from use.

Back she went up the trail they had traveled. Near the tram trail she found what could be called a trash bin and into that she tossed the weapons. Moving on up the mountain she could hear the cry of a Carbou giving the call of the hunt.

*Great. Obviously, he thinks I'm a worthy prey and he has to announce it to the world that is listening. Every stray Carbou is going to be here. This isn't good for me.*

Pausing at another curve on the tram trail she looked down the side of the hill.

*Those idiots! Their marching up the hill and damaging the plant life. Oh, gawds. I've brought destruction to the area. This is not going to bode well with my introduction to any guardian around here.*

Putting her head down for more speed she missed the turn and went over the edge of the trail. Bouncing painfully into a tree she dragged herself around it. Feeling numb on one side from the impact she took a few moments to gather herself. Gari's pack was

hanging in front of her and her own on her back. She was sure if she was not this well protected, she would have hurt herself.

*I really am sorry about what I'm bringing here,* she apologized.

One set of footsteps trampled above her and passed where she had fallen. Then came another. There were three missing. She took out two so that left one more.

*If you can show me the way...I will remove myself and these people,*" she offered to the guardian.



A small pixie the size of her fist appeared eye level with her, it's wings creating a breeze.

"Ya brought those Recruiter's nosers with ya," the small figure accused. "The queen shall not be pleased with ya a'tall."

*Recruiter's nosers. I thought so,* she thought with disgust and then promptly felt panic for Gari's welfare and then Megan's.

"I'll show ya all a way out..." And the pixie disappeared.

A cry from above her went out and a net was tossed out.

"Shit!" Alexandra watched as it floated above her and then started to drop.

However, she dived over the cliff, spotting water below. She was hoping that it was deep enough for her to dive under and not so deep that she would have to leave her packs behind.

Her dive took her across a threshold...cold... then, she fell onto a carpet at the feet of the pixie that suddenly grew in size. Landing on a pack was not comfortable. She imagined the impact on her spine probably would necessitate an adjustment.

"Ya followed me!" it accused waving both hands at her angrily. "Ya will git us both inta trouble!"

In a blink of an eye Alexandra and the pixie were surrounded by various members of the fairy world. The pixie quickly shrunk back to it's tiny self. Elves, tall and short, round and thin, with pixies, and brownies...and all very irritated as well as surprised, pointed sharp objects at her. She was surrounded.

"You crossed the threshold...uninvited into our realm," a tall thin gray elf told her.

"If I was uninvited, I wouldn't be here," Alexandra countered. It was something she had learned from Queen M'Lu. Nothing happens in another's realm without the ruler's knowledge or permission. So, she was challenging these people to prove that she had no right to be here. It would mean she would be taken before someone of more importance ...but there was no telling how long that was going to be.



Alexandra's hand went to her midsection, feeling a sudden pain, but she kept her attention on the elf in shimmering robes. He finally nodded. Others her height assisted her to her feet.

She was escorted to a room that was comfortable...but it was to be her prison until she was granted audience. Her packs were removed and taken. Alexandra sank on the bed, gripping her stomach that was cramping. She curled into a ball and sent JG and Mean wishes of prudence and better fortune.

\*\*\*\*

In Alexandra's dream, her heart was pounding as her pursuers came into sight. She had no weapons, but she didn't need them.

"Halt," she ordered, holding her hands before her. Her hands were not like she remembered.

The soldiers, dressed in unfamiliar uniforms, continued to charge her.

"Guardians, slyths and ancestors, I call for your aid...give me your blessings and strength to stop them...harming none in your realms."

From her palms a light bounced into a bolder and from it a rock wall appeared blocking the mountain pass.

She turned back to her path and with less urgency she moved forward. A bright bird dropped on a branch before her and she merely glanced at it.

"It's about time, brother," she told the bird as she passed it.

"Well you're not the only one with problems," the deeper voice from behind her informed her. She glanced back and a lad her age fell into step with her.

"Where's mother?" she asked.

"Which one...Jina is set on catching Elkin and Andra is surrounding the other forces in the bog. And then there's the aunties and uncles who are caught in the spell and trying to find a way to break out. They are giving me a headache."

"Helgas moon we were so unprepared!" his sister told him disgustedly. "Do you have what we need to undo the spell?"

"Yes. I was waiting for you. Ha! Wait until our mothers hear about this! One day back from school and look what we can do!"

"It's not amusing. It's not every day one of our uncles sets his troops to invade our lands...especially when it's at a wedding he arranged!"

\*\*\*\*

Alexandra bolted up from her bed breathing rapidly as if she had been running. Her eyes tracked to the elf that was dipping a cloth into a dish another held. By the head band and ring on her finger she was from a royal house.

"Greetings, friend of the portals." Her voice was genderless while her eyes were unlike any Alexandra had ever seen. She blinked her own and didn't dare to stare too deeply.

The attendant left, leaving the bowl of herbal waters behind. The steam from the bowl coyly tantalized her nose, bringing alertness to her thoughts.

"Fribeth cannot see the Gorb much less cross it without the Queen's or King's blessing. I feel the influence of Arnica," she smiled. "And how is the royal house of Gei?"

"Queen M'Lu is ruler of Allint. Her mother has stepped down and now mentors the Kiuzu for her daughter."

The elf gave a nod, looking pleased. "It is how we see it."

"You're a guardian of a portal," Alexandra whispered excitedly. She had the same odd color in her aura as Maa, the Copoc that was guardian of portal Mer on Merker's Outpost. She didn't realize this oddity until she had seen Queen M'Lu's aura.

The elf laughed with the sound elves were known to enchant others with. "I am Guardian Oonagh, Queen de Danaan Portal in the fairy realm. I can see now how you found gorb, the gateway into our fairyland. I congratulate you on your bondmate on your pregnancy."

"Pregnancy...who's pregnant?" she repeated faintly. "Oh! JG is pregnant! That's why I've been feeling...nauseous? Because of her? Oh!" Alexandra's heart sped up at the thought.

Queen Oonagh smiled. "You do not feel your own pregnancy? For an empath as sensitive as you, that is odd." She looked worried for a few moments and then looked relieved. "You both have been distracted by the last of the Shunja's energy," she informed her. "In our land it is a month before a newly married couple appears publicly."

"It can't be me!" In a lower voice she added, "I'm unable to bare children."

Images of why made their way to her consciousness. The knife once again twisted inside of her, and the sickening feel of her own blood dripping down her legs was not as great a pain as seeing what was left of her troop tortured to their deaths. She thought she had dealt with those memories and put them where images were not so real.

Queen Oonagh leaned forward and touched her head and then her heart chakra, easing the anguish of the memory.

"Your body was healed on Arnica. It was part of both Queens' blessing upon your union." She smiled. "I can feel their handiwork. What is in your heart is what still lingers and that you must heal...and it will with time."

"They...can do that?"

"Anything good is possible on Arnica."

"Oh." She really didn't know what to think about the news. She had never thought to have children even when she had the ability. Alexandra suddenly felt fear for their child and then it left. "Wait until Gari hears this news," she murmured and then groaned. "Arnica. That's about two months ago."

Queen Oonagh smiled. It gave Alexandra an uneasy feeling that she was not telling her everything.

"Wait a moment...in my dream there were two children, twins. Mine?"

Oonagh nodded that she was correct.

"Helgas moon! Twins. This is going to take the clan by surprise."

Queen Oongah rose. "The king and queen of this fairyland wish you to join them for supper. I will inform them you shall be ready for tonight. Until then," she gestured to a see-through door that led out to a garden. "Please sooth yourself with the peacefulness

of our gardens. The wood nymph is interested in speaking with you since you had offered to contact her."

"Excuse me Guardian Oongah but have you news of my bondmate or Lt. Vanster?" she realized that news of them was probably nil since the two were not on the planet.

"Tonight. The king will give you news. Rest."

## **Chapter 8**

"I told you not to let her live!" an angry Boreon DeLeon shouted at the uniformed general. General Tatolormufamesambula, head of the only recruitment organization, showed no response to the person venting his temper. Like with all the pretentious political figures he dealt with in the past, letting them vent gave the sensors a lot of information that could be used in the future.

The person he was referring to was one Major Zohra from the purple fuzzed faced official's part of the universe. Emissary Boreon DeLeon had something to fear from her. The general was impressed with Major Zohra's ability to escape from his specially trained soldiers and had to have a group of bounty hunters assist. She also defeated the training program which was no easy feat. She had defied the powerful drugs and shorted out four machines she was hooked up to. Credit wise, it was better to let her go. In the old days she would have also been given the golden award allowing her free living for the rest of her life; however, he was running the programs now and there were other uses for such people. He was shipping her to his private research center. His scientists were excited at the idea of such a brain to experiment on.

General Tatolormufamesambula turned his lizard body to his aid that approached the two. Cl'mandata was furious that someone should be showing so much disrespect to his General and was nearly flickering his tongue out in agitation.

"General, entrance to the ship had been denied. It appears the code supplied does not work," Cl'mandata reported in an irritated voice and pointedly ignoring the loud visitor.

Emissary Boreon DeLeon's bargaining chip was based on what he could give to these people. It was imperative that he give them a way into the *Molta*, the SEC ship that contained the metrasoldiers, without damaging the goods.

"I gave you the code, underlining!"

"It did not work," the general told him evenly, giving a sign to his assistant to let him handle this foreigner.

"Take me there! I will show your underlings." Actually, this was working better than what Boreon had planned originally. The emissary turned on his heel and led the underling out. Frankly, he was glad to get out of the office of the prissy pretentious general.

The general touched the sanitizer, cleansing his room and scenting it with mint. He went back to his desk and administrative tasks. He chuckled to himself at the emissary's thoughts that he easily picked up.

He picked up his com when it buzzed.

"Go ahead," he ordered crisply.

"The other escaped to Marigold."

"Did I not tell you they were good? We need to test our soldiers against them. Let the Commanders know and for them to be ready to present me with their plans in two hours. Where is the third soldier?"

"The sidhe took her to the *Pleasure House*."

General Tatolormufamesambula thought for a while. "If she steps away from the sidhe, pick her up."

There was an intake of breath and then, "General," the voice lowered as if not wanting even the air to carry this conversation. "The sidhe may be from the Unseelie Clan. I think we have been pushing the sidhe too far already and with this clan getting involved..." He had no need to tell the general that all the planets were getting restless under his recent liberties.

"Then do it when she's not looking. Chances are she'll use her up and then discard her. It'll put her in the mood, will it not?" The general laughed at the rumors that sex with a sidhe left the partner feeling extremely virulent. Since he had not met anyone personally that had the experience, it was just another worthless bit of rumor. His caution

about the sidhe was from childhood and he kept reminding himself that he was the leader of the only recruitment company and therefore should not be giving into these fears. His fingers traced on his desk top the warding off sign he saw his mother do often.

"Send out a team to track and capture the other," he added before hanging up.

*Another challenge and they better not fail!*

Though he wouldn't admit it out loud, his first defeat after a long time reawakened the challenge of competition in him. His knee-jerk response was to beat the victor to death, or to send her to his labs. He had two more to try to best.

General Tatolormufamesambula went over in his mind who to bring to this hunt. His private laboratory had been finding drugs and genetic enhancements to improve his fighting stock and now was his chance to test it on military from another galaxy. His tongue flitted out of his mouth, tasting the victory in the air. His battle vignettes had become soldiers with genetic modifications versus drug enhanced soldiers. No one was more interested in the war reenactments than he and his scientists. Now he could test each group out on a foreign adversary and if all went well...

General Tatolormufamesambula paced. For the last few years he had been thinking of expanding his armies and challenging other star galaxies. With this captive he would be able to gather information of where she came from and her experiences.

The general thought about going over to the laboratory. He wanted to speak with Vantor Sujay.

He hit his com. "Get me Vantor Sujay at once."

"Yes, General Tatolormufamesambula."

It was not long before his connection was made.

"Vantor Sujay! How is our new arrival looking?"

"General Tatolormufamesambula! This is a pleasant surprise and so is your new addition to our specimens. Where did you get her? She is magnificent?" then suddenly his voice got nervous. "She is pregnant. If the..."

"Then don't tell anyone," the general told him impatiently. "Surely you have some kind of experiment you always wanted to do on an empath forming."

"Empath! You don't say!" the ventor's voice took an upswing. As a matter of fact, he had always wanted to see what would happen if negative sound waves were vibrated around an empath as it formed in the womb.

"Now, how is the business?"

"Ah, General Tatolormufamesambula, it is doing well...we lost three subjects...but it was expected. We found the average stress a sidhe can withstand. Also..."

The general listened with half an ear. He decided he was going to visit the laboratory and he knew the Ventors didn't like him around because his thoughts disturbed their experiments with the brains of the sensitives. But he wanted to see his new specimen.

"General Tatolormufamesambula ...are you there?"

"Yes. I'll be visiting tomorrow..."

"General Tatolormufamesambula can you wait for maybe four more days? We are in the middle of some very important tests and your arrival will..."

"Four days then." He hung up and called his secretary in. He needed his office cleaned again.

## **Chapter 9**

Megan Vanster thought her eyes were going to roll into the back of her head if Arax brought her to climax again. Though the drugs were keeping her body from shaking from the exertion, she knew under natural conditions her limbs would be boneless. Two days had passed, and she was praying for the third to come quickly. She felt sorry for herself.

Weakly she pushed Arax from her. She pulled herself out of the pool and nearly fell flat on her face trying to lift herself out of the tub.

Arax laughed teasingly at her. "And you thought you would be too much for me." She effortlessly rose from the waters and assisted her lover onto the bed. Vanster melted into the bed not finding the energy to moan.

Arax watched the lashes behind the dark eyes blink as if the lights were too bright. She dimmed them and then lay next to her lover, stroking her skin until she fell asleep. Her fingers followed the deep cuts in her muscles liking the feel of the strength they projected, knowing it was only a physical display. Vanster was easily manipulated when her courage or strength was challenged. But Arax liked her. Beneath all of the bravado, she was funny, courageous and loyal. Arax also saw her fears and prejudices, hidden even from herself.

Pleased with herself she leaned back on the bed poster. Suddenly she rose from the bed looking about her in jerky movements, sensing from one angle and then moving to another. The air shimmered around her and then a daoine sidhe from Tuatha de Danaan appeared. The tall slim elf looked around noting everything in the room including the unconscious form of her lover.



Arax had never heard of the sidhe being able to project in form off the planet.

"I am Win, the messenger," he told her quite proud. She was sure it was because of his being able to appear off the planet. "Queen Freenah and King Jonetha command you to bring the fribeth to the gorb by this night at high moon." And he was gone.

Arax sighed disappointedly looking at her lover. "Maybe it is for the better. You need some rest before I show you more pleasure."

She sat next to the slumbering warrior and thought of how to get to Marigold when she didn't have credits and nor did Lt. Vanster. Frowning, she remembered there was a return of credits for the male she didn't use...but that would not pay for her entire fare. She didn't dare ask her mother and her current husband. He was angry with her about her rebellious attitude against his wish for her to marry a miner on the moon colony. He thought it was a profitable arrangement for everyone; however, to her, it was against her sidhe nature. Sidhe didn't do well on moons, she had pointed out to him and then to her mother. She was sure he was trying to get rid of her because it was time for her to go out on her own.

A sudden idea came to her. Lt. Vanster had a ship. Leaning near her ear, she whispered what she wanted, using all her skills in persuasion. A fairy with a mission could talk a leprechaun out of his pot of gold, her mother used to tell her.

In her sleep Vanster stirred and even shook her head, but it took longer than what Arax's pride would have guessed. A dark brown eye peered into her slate gray eyes and then the other brown orb appeared.

"What are you doing?" Lt. Vanster asked groggily.

"Waking you. We have been summoned," she informed Lt. Vanster. She guessed Lt. Vanster would understand the importance of the summons since she was in the military.

"By whom or who," she muttered as she rolled to her side and pushed up. "Oh!" she exclaimed as her weight settled on her tender genitalia. She looked over at the young elf. "Who would ever have believed..." she left the rest unsaid, because Arax knew exactly what she meant and grinned with pride.

"I had more planned for the day and into the night...however," her face became serious. "We need to get to Marigold, and I don't have transportation..."

"We or just you? And why? Is there something you haven't told me about you that I should know?"

"We were summoned by Wen. He is a daoine sidhe from Tuatha de Danaan."

"De Dannan you say? Is that where you're from?"

"He's not from my Tuatha. My mother's ken is Solariaan. He didn't say why we have been summoned. It is not wise to ignore a summons from any Tuatha's' leadership."

Lt. Vanster's interest pricked up at the mention of de Danaan. It was the name of one of the portals that had access to other planets. *Gotta get word of this to JG.* It was times like these when she really did wish she had some kind of telepathic power.

"Well, let's get ready then," she yawned, cracking her jaw.

Vanster hopped around on one foot as she looked around for her other boot. Arax fished it out from under the bedsheets that were entangled on the floor.

"So, how do we get to the planet if we don't have enough credits?" Arax asked.

"If someone asks you to be somewhere...they usually make sure they supply you with the transportation or means unless you already have it," Vanster told her sensibly.

Since Arax had never dealt directly with the sidhe outside of her mother's Tuatha, she listened to Vanster. However, she had her doubts. She also wondered why Lt. Vanster, who could be very stubborn, was so willing to make this journey.

"Lt. Vanster?" she asked as she watched her tug her tunic into place.

"Megan," she answered. Then looked up and turned a little red in the face. "My friends call me Megan."

Arax's eyebrows rose nearly to her hair line. She wondered how this woman got such a name of honor. She shook her head. Perhaps in her homeland they didn't know how much reverence the name Megan held in other star systems.

Arax smiled thinking of what it was like to explore new worlds and in that brief moment she felt a hot desire to see for herself what it was like.

"Megan," she mouthed feeling the roll of the words on her tongue as she spoke it in her language.

Megan's eyes blinked and then darkened with pleasure. "That's nice the way you say it." She walked over to her and kissed her gently on the forehead. "So, what is your question," she nodded towards the door, indicating she was ready to leave.

"What if a ride is not waiting for us?"

"Then we won't be wherever they asked us to be. We need to stop at the desk downstairs. I need to contact the Major and Commander and let them know of my whereabouts. " She looked at Arax expectantly.

It was Arax's eyes that caused Vanster to jump back into the room, flinging the door shut. It didn't shut but rather hit two people that were charging in the room. Vanster easily handled the first two and locked the door before the others could help.

"That is wrong!" Arax shouted as she followed Vanster who was pulling her into the bathing room.

"Helgas moon, we're going to have to go out that door." She spun around pulling Arax with her as they headed back to the front door.

"They cannot 'recruit' you! I registered you as with me!"

Megan turned around suddenly nearly knocking Arax off her feet, however she was agile and quickly stepped back.

"What did you say?"

"I registered you as my interest so they can't harass you. That's why I followed you...well that and because I like you."

"When we have more time, you have to explain just what you're talking about," she got out between clenched teeth. "Now, can you fight?"

Arax looked insulted. "Of course! When I was younger..."

"I'm talking about now," she cut her off quickly.

"Yes."

Vanster motioned for her to stand behind her. In case they had something to fire at her she picked up a chair. She pulled the door open and tossed the chair. It was quickly covered with darts.

Megan followed after the chair looking for the surprise advantage. There were only two agents. She flipped a pillow at one and before she could do anything, Arax knocked out the other with a flying kick.

"I am impressed," Vanster told her hurriedly as she frisked one of the men for weapons.

Arax removed enough weapons from one of the recruiters that could earn her a good week pay. They were good quality.

Even if Megan didn't understand the weapon, she took it anyway. She would get Arax to show her how to use it.

There was no one at the front desk or in the lobby. It confirmed to both women that it was an illegal bust. As the two women ran out front a hover craft dropped down and an elf opened the door and waved the two in. Arax hesitated, not recognizing the sidhe and not liking his smirk at all. It was enough for Megan and she darted around a tram and then ran up the street, having faith that Arax would follow. Right now, Megan was worried about the Major and Commander. If they were after her, would they go after those two?

"This way," Arax called ducking into a side street. The hover craft tried to keep up with them, but the by the alarms that were going off in the space port city, something was wrong. The sidhe tailing them finally disappeared. Above them hung laundry stretched on ropes from one side of the street to another two floors up. Megan knew that was what saved them from the hover craft.

"Who was that?" Megan asked breathlessly as they stopped to get their bearings.

"I don't know. He looked like a recruiter, but I've never seen a sidhe being in such a dark business."

"I already belong to a military corps...Major Zohra made that clear in the docking office," Megan complained.

"Lately, that doesn't mean anything. If they think you are a good prospect...you are drafted. The longer you evade them the higher your value as a fighter becomes. Whoever catches you will get a bonus. That is how this business of war games has become."

"Well if they get too close, I'm going to permanently hurt them. We've got to get to some kind of communicator so I can get hold of my shipmates."

Arax pulled her into a sheltered doorway. Recruiters were at both ends of the alley.

"We should think about taking your ship...it may be the only safe place," Arax suggested.

"No," her tone firm. "For one...that would be an obvious place for me to run to and therefore full of traps. Two, we are outnumbered. I need to find the Major Zohra and Captain Montran." *Helga's moon I have to find out if they are all right.*

"We need to get to Marigold," Arax told her with conviction.

"Why?"

"If anyone can help, it would be the sidhe. They know more than anyone else."

"After I conta..." Megan suddenly grabbed her head and dropped to the ground. Pain shot through her eyes and head, reminding her of Alan Fermin's control over her. Then the pain left, replaced with a headache that nearly blinded her.

She realized the slight Arax was carrying her over her shoulder.

"Let...me...down," she huffed as the air was jolted out of her with each hop to another ledge and sending stabbing pains through her head.

Gently she was set on her feet. Arax grabbed her hand and pulled her along.

"In my pack...something for headaches," she gasped as she stumbled along.

"In a bit. We have to get out of here."

## Chapter 10

*Catching Butterflies* was docking when a security message crossed the screens of those on the bridge. The two SEC ships had been located in a nearby slip. Captain Malchi's eyes widened as she read it and then glanced at Captain Onry, Lady Malu's and Lt. Commander Beka.

Captain Onry was focused on making arrangements with the illusive Harbor Master for a face-to-face meeting, sooner than later.

Lady Malu rose and joined Captain Malchi at her console.

"Looks like we found three of the ships we've been looking for and one of our missing crewmates, Lt. Vanster," Lady Malu said.

"They located her," Malchi said. "Someone is using a thought disrupter specific for Lt. Vanster's bios. If she did have the chip still implanted, she would have been immobilized. Someone knows too much about the illegal business in our neck of the galaxy. My suspicion is Emissary DeLeon. That means at least one SEC ship has been breached and he's free."

Lady Malu was quiet for a few moments, letting security do their job of gathering further information on the SEC ships without entering them. Security had accessed the bridge on both ships and ran diags and security sweeps. Both read the results on Malchi's screen.

The SEC ship DeLeon was on was breeched. There were a dozen unauthorized personnel on the ship and DeLeon's capsule was empty.

"Take your team and investigate *Rouster*. Commander Beka's team will accompany Captain Onry to the Port Authority and see why it's so difficult to get an interview. Keep me updated."

"Will do, Commander. What about the SEC ships?"

"I'll take care of that problem."

Malchi's team had dressed to blend in with the eclectic crowd on the space port. The mixture of species was like any other busy space port but there was a feeling of wariness. Her team stuck out due to their attitude was unlike the people they were trying to blend in with.

"People, you are not fitting in," she whispered over her comm.

"There's fear in these people," Pvt. Jill commented from her position. "I can try and find out what it's about."

"Do so."

Pvt. Jill's partners stood watch around her while she focused on one of the shop keepers, then when she felt in tune with him, walked to him to ask questions.

The rest of Malchi's team were within sight of the *Rouster* when her scouts spotted uniformed and heavily armed guards near the ship.

"Report, B're," she whispered.

"*Rouster* is being watched by two uniforms. If you noticed the recruitment posters all around the station, they're part of the arena military. You think they're here to recruit our three wandering soldiers?"

"With all those weapons on them, they mean to impress."

"Another thing, Captain, notice no one looks at them or comes anywhere near them?"

"Check them out and find out what they're up to," she ordered. She glanced around for her second, Lt. Visu. The woman was quickly at her side. "Did our friends leave a message?"

"They did, just in case we came calling and they weren't on board." Visu grinned, handing her Captain the PD.

"Lt. Vanster's at Pleasure House, the Major and Commander are at Manfra's," she read. "Nothing is said about them noticing the SEC ships."

"Why am I not surprised Lt. Vanster would start her leave there?" Visu shook her head. "Maybe we should inquire what Manfra's is like. Could be the same thing only for couples."

"Bertrand, come in," Malchi called softly.

"Here, capt."

"I want you to join B're and keep those uniforms under surveillance. Visu, you and your group go over to the Pleasure House and I'll take my team to the Manfra."

By Visu's face Malchi knew she thought she was getting the better of the two assignments, but Lt. Visu had never went in search of information from a brothel in an official capacity. Many an investigation was turned into a tumble in bed or elsewhere.

Ten minutes later, Malchi's team halted when they spotted two soldiers dressed in the same uniform as the two that were watching *Rouster*, standing off to the side watching other uniformed officials surrounding people that were exiting the hotel.

"What's wrong with that picture?" Malchi asked Otadan.

"By the pictures on the posters, those arena soldiers are noncoms and they're giving orders to the spaceport police who look like they should be the ones giving the orders."

"Yes. The people they're gathering are also frightened. Rou, take Otadan and Jill the back way and see if you can get in the hotel and check for our missing officers."

Gunny stood next to her watching the arena soldiers terrorize the people. They were enjoying themselves until one of them got a call and then began to hurry the questioning of the people with less emphasis on striking terror with their posturing. After each guest and worker was questioned, they were allowed to run back into the hotel.

"Captain. We're in the hotel and on the floor our subjects are supposed to have a room on. There are Carbou hunters sniffing outside of their room," Carloa said.

"How many?" Captain Malchi asked.

"Three. Do you think they're like the Carbou in our area of space?"

"You mean assigning three per hunt pack? There are only two soldiers out here. Not enough for a pack. Do you see any other soldiers?"

"On each floor we passed there were a pair of soldiers banging on doors and entering the rooms to search."

"Everyone report back to me. Amali's and Bertrand, see if you can pick up a trail on any of our missing soldiers. This space station isn't that big to lose all trace."

Malchi found a restaurant with tables on the outside. She and her team took over the empty tables. A frightened face stared at them through the restaurant window. After looking up and down the walkway she came out and dropped menus on everyone's table and then hurried back in the restaurant.

"What will we use for paying for what we order? This picture makes the food look good," Jill said.

"Didn't you learn not to eat the local food?" Mira teased.

Malchi held up her hand for them to be quiet. "Amali'a has something."

Rou handed something to Jill. "I checked out the local currency picked up some currency at the docks. I also took time to check out what's edible. You should do the same, so you won't be complaining we're starving you."

"I'm glad to see someone taking care of us," Jill said. "So, what can we order?"

"Nothing right now, but we can leave something for taking up their table space," Malchi said.

A slim gray figured Arnot slipped into the empty chair near Malchi. "Lt. Vanster is on the other side of these docks; she's in pain making it difficult to read anything more from her," Amali'a reported. "Bertrand is tracking one of the Carbou that's following her."

"Let's go. Rou, leave some credits as a thank you for our time here."

They caught up with Bertrand who was following the Carbou hunter, who was following a zig-zag trail Vanster was taking her pursuers.

Malchi was certain she would not head back to the *Rouster*.

They spotted Lt. Vanster's pursuers before they spotted Lt. Vanster. One Carbou hunter and four soldiers using a thought disrupter were tailing her. Usually Carbou hunters savored the chase of their prey and the emotions of fear. Thought disrupters didn't have any of the fun a Carbou would like in a hunt.

"Disable that damn thought disrupter," Malchi ordered. "And put those soldiers somewhere that they won't bother anyone for a while."

The energy in the air quickly changed when the machine was disabled. The four soldiers were neutralized and dropped in a trash bin. However, it gave Lt. Vanster and the person that was helping her, the opportunity to disappear on a shuttle. The Carbou hunter escaped and took off after them in an official looking shuttle, with the emblem of the Arena Martial Academy on it.

"Let's get back to *Butterflies* and our own shuttle. Lt. Visu, come in?"

"Visu here, Captain. We have poster soldiers all over this place."

"Return to *Butterflies*. We're going to pursue a Carbou hunter that's on Lt. Vanster's tail."

"*Butterflies* OOD, this is Captain Malchi. We're on our way in. We'll be taking *Meister* to the planet Marigold where Lt. Vanster and a Carbou hunter are headed."

"This is Lady Malu, OOD. We'll give you a brief before you take off. Your ship is being prepped. We'll track all traffic headed to Marigold, so you'll have a location."

Captain Malchi and Lt. Visu's met at *Butterflie* ramp.

"Visu, what did you find?"

"We couldn't get in and everyone around wasn't saying anything. There were a dozen or more uniformed types like on those posters plastered everywhere, that were going through the hotel intimidating the hell out of everyone. We were approached by a piddling noncom that tried to round us up for recruitment to fight in the Arena. We had to get aggressive when they tried to swarm us on the way back here."

They all reported to the officer's meeting hall where Lady Malu and Captain Onry were waiting.

"Did you lose anyone?" Lady Malu asked.

"No, though Lt. Visu reported some aggressive recruiters approached her team on the way back."

Captain Onry frowned. "I spoke with the Port Authority. An underling because his boss is terrified of being seen speaking with us. From what I was able to get from the underling, and only because the Koan used their influence, the Talog Collage members, the six planets, have no military only local law enforcement. To prevent wars between the planets, they did away with their militaries and developed arenas where they stage war games with volunteers training to fight in the arenas. They used to have over a hundred owners of fighting battalions but now only one person owns all the fighters. His name is General Tatolormufamesambula. The Recruiters are groups of his soldiers that go out looking for enlistees only, they don't ask, they grab whoever they please and that is why ships and people are disappearing in this section of space. I believe that's who has Major Zohra and is hunting Commander Montran and Lt. Vanster. The Koan don't believe Commander Montran has been captured or Lt. Vanster. The SEC ships were hauled in by a team of Recruiters. That's why we weren't able to find the ships in the debris field. It's

just our bad luck that Emissary Boreon DeLeon was the only one they were able to release. Our ship's security was able to get on the ships and take back ownership. Unfortunately, the recruiters that had been on the ship are all dead. Apparently, the Emissary failed to warn them that opening up the pods without a code will arm the ships defense. My guess is the Emissary is going to sell the metrasoldiers to General Tatolormufamesambula. I was told in no uncertain terms, whatever happens to us is between General Tatolormufamesambula and us. Captain Malchi what have you?

"Lt. Vanster and a companion are on a shuttle heading for Marigold. We'll follow them. We have not been able to locate the Major or Commander. My team can't feel their presence on this station though they have been here."

Lady Malu nodded. "The Koan also can't locate the major and commander. We will continue searching. This station is seething with resentment against the recruiters and General Tatolormufamesambula. My skin's crawling with this energy. We may have to distance ourselves in order to locate the major and commander."

"On your way to Marigold, study the laws and customs. Since we officially have been told no one will involve themselves with us and these arena soldiers, we need to be sure we don't injure any civilian. Stay in touch," Captain Onry ordered.

"Will do."

Malchi left the room with her aides quickly. She had faith in Lt. Vanster's skill in staying free, but the sooner they came to her aid, the faster they could find the major and the commander. She trotted up the ramp to her ship, *Meister*. Taking her seat, she quickly signaled she was secured and the ship promptly moved out of the *Butterflies* bay.

The shuttle left so quickly Lady Malu wondered if it had been cleared with the harbor master. They were not making friends on this station, she thought ruefully. Then her thoughts returned to the SEC ships they had located. They were claimed by General Tatolormufamesambula and now that they had reclaimed them, it was the same as throwing down a challenge. She was anticipating a message from the general. The Koan profiled him as a man who believed himself to be the most powerful and feared person in the Talog Collage. All people in places of great power had phobias and the Koan knew his.

## Chapter 11

"I located the shuttle she was on Captain and the one that was tailing her. Both landed in a meadow. There are two shuttles belonging to the Arena Academy that are approaching the meadow. No signs of life around the shuttles. What do you want me to do?" Gunny reported.

"Scan around the meadow and look for our lieutenant and just in case, the major and commander." Malchi looked at Amali'a who was tracking Lt. Vanster.

Amali'a shook her head. "She won't be thinking logically. Right now, she's going to have a migraine in both hemispheres. Whoever is helping her will be guiding her wherever they're going."

"Can you get a read on who is helping her?"

"It's one of the family members they rescued from the accident outside the debris cloud. Other than that...she's blocking."

"Arax, an elfin. What about the emissary? He anywhere around? I don't trust a DeLoen even in deep freeze."

After a few moments Amali'a nodded. "He's awaked all right. I can feel his interest in this chase." She was quiet for a few moments, getting a better sense. "He's getting closer," she frowned. "He got in pretty quick with the local baddies." She suddenly grinned. "He's using his thoughts to say he's got bigger guns than we do. He's on one of those shuttles that's approaching the meadow."

"Gunny, do you have any information on those two shuttles?"

"One has no weapons loaded and the other is running hot. They're trying to lock us in target, but our equipment is running interference."

"Is DeLoen in the ship with no ammunition?"

"I can't say."

"All right. Before we get too involved here...send a message to *Butterflies*," Malchi ordered.

"He doesn't know who we are," Amali'a said softly as she muddled around in the man's head. She yelped and laughed. "He thinks we're local law enforcement and is threatening that they'll bomb our cities if we continue interfering with their business."

"Message coming in, Capt," Rou informed them.

"Go ahead," she responded.

Captain Onry's face appeared on her screen. "Greetings, Captain Malchi. The Koan Shris were able to reach a government authority on Marigold. An Elf Elder said the recruiters don't visit Marigold after he had accused them of kidnapping some of their citizens when they travel in space."

"So, these shuttle visits from the Arena Academy are unusual. They might be using the excuse that Lt. Vanster isn't an Elf, therefore they can hunt her down. We found Emissary Boreon DeLeon."

Captain Onry's smile grew broader. "He's on Marigold?"

"Not yet. There are two shuttles from the Arena Academy approaching a meadow that the two shuttles we're interested in have set down. He's in one of those shuttles. We'll try and take him alive and secure him in a sleep pod until we can move him back to SEC."

"The Elf Elder said, technically, they can't assist you, but they won't interfere. Good hunting, Captain."

"Thanks, Captain. Good luck on your search for the Major and Commander. Out. Gunner it's all yours. Bring both birds down gently," she ordered. "We're going to recapture that sleaze, DeLeon."

"Helgas bloody moon, but I love these new toys," Gunny muttered as he locked onto one of the shuttles.

The shuttle that had no loaded weapons was dropped first. The shuttle that was flying with their weapons hot began firing at *Meister* before they were in range. *Meister's* pilot kept out of range to let them use up their supplies.

"What kind of soldiers are they that they waste ammunition?"

"They're probably ground pounders," Malchi said. "Have you been able to locate Lt. Vanster?"

"Not yet. I'm scanning all around the meadow and no trace of her or the hunter."

"Gunny, let's stop toying with them and bring them down. We need to get our trackers down there. Bring them down in the meadow. Chitu, it's up to you to get them over the meadow," Malchi said.

"This is too easy," Gunny muttered as he waited for his target to be in the right place. "There they go, Captain."

"Chitu, drop low enough so we can drop our teams." Malchi looked over at her troops. "Lt. Mira, take team B and C and secure those shuttles. Lt. Visu, get your team down there and pick up Lt. Vanster's tracks."

The three teams dropped to the meadow and spread out.

"Captain, if these are Arena soldiers, then they'll be in their element when Lt. Mira's group moves in. There's going to be casualties," B're said.

"So far, they haven't shown any superior technology. This is Lt. Mira's element."

"Captain, Lt. Visu's group has picked up the hunter's tracks," Rou said.

"Gunny, are you keeping an eye on Lt. Visu's group?"

"I am Captain. They're moving fast."

"Rou, remind Lt. Visu to be careful about following a hunter. B're, what's happening with Lt. Mira?"

"Enemy fire, but she's letting them waste ammunition while her teams are setting up."

A head popped around the corner from her post. "Captain! I've found Commander Montran!" Amali's voice was excited. "She's somewhere here but I lost connection again."

"Do we continue after Lt. Vanster?" B're asked concerned.

"Is the major here?" Malchi asked Powd.

"Never has been. I picked up on the brief connection with the Commander and some of her thoughts. She's with a portal guardian, Captain."

"That shouldn't surprise me," Captain Malchi said. "Every planet has a portal and I guess she's sensitive enough to find where it's located. Anyone know where the portal is?"

The other shook their heads.

"Elves live here. They're going to know how to shield it. That's maybe why the general hasn't gotten directly involved with the Marigold. If they control the portal, they can use the energy to make the general disappear."

"Captain, they've captured our target and have immobilized him."

"We'll give Lt. Mira ten minutes. If she can't take the shuttle, we'll disable it permanently and lock the exit hatches. We'll let *Butterflies*, pick them up and direct our energies to finding Lt. Vanster and Commander Montran. By the time we find one, we'll find the other."

"Lt. Mira reported her team has captured both shuttles. She's asking for pickup."

"Chitu, let's pick up our teams. Open a comm link to *Butterflies*."

"Comm on, Captain."

Lady Malu's face appeared on the screen.

"Lady Malu, we have DeLeon in custody. We also have four shuttles with two of their crews that need to be picked up and dealt with. I have a team of trackers following Lt. Vanster's trail. We also believe Commander Montran is on Marigold...with a Portal Guardian."

"You'll have to keep your prisoners for a while longer. We're playing a game with the general up here. We know he has the major and he's torturing her. And he knows we know."

"We'll handle it," Captain Malchi said. "We'll find the Commander. She'll be able to lead us to where the major is."

"Let us know as soon as you do know. Good hunting."

"Thank you Lady Malu. Over."

"Secure the area then settle *Meister* nearby, Chitu. Lt. Mira?"

"Yes, Captain?"

"We're going to have to secure the area and take care of our prisoners ourselves for a while. *Butterflies* is preoccupied."

"Will do, Captain."

"Lt. Visu, this is Captain Malchi. How's your hunt going?"

"We caught up with the hunter and four Arena soldiers. They fought to their deaths. We're now looking for a sign of Lt. Vanster and Elf, but if an Elf doesn't want to be followed in a forest, our chances are not good to find them."

"Can you sense a Portal?"

"Yes."

"That's where you'll find Commander Montran and my guess is, Lt. Vanster."

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## Chapter 12

Captain Onry watched the reptilian, General Tatolormufamesambula, take a seat at the meeting room in his private office. Captain Onry was in the captain's mess watching on a screen with the Koan sitting out of sight. The general refused to meet with him in person. It was what the general thought a good military tactic.

The general was so used to staged battles the Koan felt he didn't see himself as possibly losing when facing a real military organization he didn't control.

"Everyone is here," Ambassador Buaxas announced to everyone from his office. "Would you like to begin General Tatolormufamesambula?" The diplomat Buaxas was representing Talog Collage.

The general gave a dark look at Ambassador Buaxas. The Koan picked up that the ambassador committed an indiscretion that the general didn't take lightly.

After a long moment of silence, the general finally acknowledged. "I am here to see what type of people you are to disturb the Talog Collage's area of space."

"These warriors are from another galaxy," the ambassador said nervously. "They don't know our ways and they have shown an interest in the Talog Collage's greatest general to have every lived."

"Foreign warriors," General Tatolormufamesambula voice was disdainful and the flickering of his tongue was an intended insult. "I have the most powerful and the only military in Talog Collage space. I uphold the laws and make what laws I see are needed. My military forces will overcome and triumph over your pitiful showing of military might. Their lives depend on it," he said with great satisfaction."

"We are here to retrieve what is ours. We located our two ships you have disabled and towed into this space port. We have also found you are responsible for the disappearance of three of our crewmates."

General Tatolormufamesambula smiled, his tongue lashing out aggressively. "You are not such good warriors if you lose two ships and crewmembers."

The transmission ended.

"Ambassador, we have taken back possession of our two ships and are in the process of repairing the damages done to them, so we can resume our voyage. We intend on getting back our missing crewmembers," Captain Onry said.

"We have no control over General Tatolormufamesambula," he said hurriedly. "He is his own law. He has the armies, weapons and money that we don't," the ambassador lifted his feathered wings in a shrug.

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"Well, what did you make out of all that?" Captain Onry asked his advisory team.

"The ambassador is scared to death of the general and hopes we take him out for them," DeDe reported for the Koan.

"From the beams he was trying to ride in on his transmission, he was trying to get into our ship's databases," Commander Beka of security reported.

"What did he get?" the Captain asked curious.

"A child's story about leaving home for the first time," Lady Dell smiled.

"He may enjoy it. I liked the songs when I was younger," Captain Onry said. He toyed with his cup of java, thinking over his approach with the general. DeDe had said with his personality and how everyone around him acquiesced to his desires, it would be better to be blunt and forceful with him. It would put him at a disadvantage.

"We've been able to gather information on him and put together a profile," Commander Beka offered. He pulled up readings for them all. "He said he has the only army in this neck of the woods, and he is correct. Anyone that opposes him or people that he backs he drops a few bombs on cities and all becomes quiet. Local law enforcement is trolled for recruitment material in his arena armies, so you can image people's lack of interest in taking up that career track. His primary recruitment strategy is to send out gangs of soldiers that pick out potential fighters among the populace and that would be anyone that shows any athletic ability. Age makes no difference."

"What is preventing others from guerrilla warfare?"

"He's got the weapons and he's brutal to anyone that shows a reluctance to do as he says. I would also like to point out, he has never fought a battle that he hasn't fixed or decided who was to live and who was to die before it starts."

"We'll soon see what our challenge to his authority does. *Emperors Last Chance* has arrived and will patrol Talog Collage space for any unlawful behavior. I think the fighter pilots are overjoyed they get something they can do. They'll see to it that our back is covered. So far, what weapons the general has aren't superior to ours. I'm hoping it doesn't cause anyone to get sloppy," Lady Malu said.

"Good, good. Lady Dell's group recognized the general has a skin condition that requires medication to keep under control. That means he owns a laboratory, because he would not tolerate someone to have power over him. We need to locate it," Captain Onry looked over at Commander Beke, his security officer.

He nodded. "Lady Dell's report was reviewed by my staff. We have seven possible sites. We are now narrowing them down."

"Good. How are we doing with locating Commander Montran and Lt. Vanster?"

Lady Dell cleared her throat next to him.

Captain Onry turned to Lady Dell surprised that she had the information.

"Commander Montran and Lt. Vanster have been located, somewhere on Marigold. Captain Malchi believes Commander Montran is with the Portal Guardian of Marigold and Lt. Vanster will probably join her, since her guide is a sidhe. What we need to worry about is that Major Zohra and Commander are both pregnant, and all this business with the general will cause development problems."

"Pregnant?" Everyone echoed.

"I thought Commander Montran had sustained injuries in her earlier years as a Spartan Captain that prevents her from having off-spring," Captain Onry said.

"Anything can happen on Arnica," DeDe said drily.

"That puts not just a high priority on locating Major Zohra, but an immediacy in getting her out of the situation she's in." He sighed heavily. "I'm going to have four angry clans and Major General Aglauros after me. Lady Malu, you have a connection with the Montran clan and the sisters of Hekate; I'll let you handle this delicate notification of kin. Or maybe you should hold off until we have both of them back and we know they're healthy."

"That would be a good course of action," Madre DeDe said.

## Chapter 13

Vanster's headache subsided as she rested her head against the tree trunk whose branch she was sitting on. Arax was leading them further into the forest, where trees grew so close together daylight didn't reach the ground. Arax didn't have them travel through trees because it was an easier method of travel, but because it made their trackers work harder to follow them. As her head ach became tolerable Vanster's hunting senses returned. Turning her head slightly, she picked through the sounds around them, listening for unnatural sounds in a forest, like the crashing to the left of them. Their tails were trying to drive them in a particular direction.

"Why not turn this around and hunt the hunters?" Vanster asked Arax, irritated that she was running from trouble.

"You're barely able to keep ahead of them and you want to pick a fight with them? They out number us," Arax said.

"We can outthink them," Vanster said, realizing she wasn't physically capable of putting up a good fight.

"You're not thinking clearly, otherwise, you wouldn't make such an unwise decision."

"I'm feeling fine," Vanster said.

"In case you've forgotten, they're using a weapon you have no defense for. Carrying you until you can walk is a sure way for the recruiters to capture us." She looked up through the branches at the sky. "We don't have much time to get to the meeting place. Being late to a summons isn't done."

A piercing bird's cry was suddenly cut off. Vanster's eyes narrowed as a bush moved without the aid of a breeze. She waited for her eyes to adjust to the shadows. Arax signed that the hunting pack was circling them, cutting off the one exit.

Vanster pressed against the tree trunk as a Caribou hunter moved into sight. It lifted it's head, sticking out it's tongue to taste the air. It touched the tree Vanster was on and the tree actually shivered. Vanster waited until it leaned over to touch the empty water container she had purposely dropped. Silently, she dropped on top of it, hitting it with all her strength to knock it unconscious. Just like in her part of the galaxy, the same

soft spot existed; however, not trusting biological development across space sectors, she slid off her pack and quickly pulled out a sleeper kit. Her reader fed the information to the sleep patch on how much of a dose was needed to knock it out for hours.

While Arax remained in the tree watching for the rest of the pack, Vanster rolled the Carbou under a bush.

"We have to keep moving," Arax told her softly.

"Where is this place we need to be at?"

"We're almost there."

Arax backtracked the way the Carbou had come. They met none of the Carbou's teammates. The forest thinned as they began another climb up a rocky incline. Vanster found she was winded and had to stop to catch her breath.

"No more stops," Arax said. "We haven't the time."

"Easy for you to say," Vanster huffed. "Living on a spaceship doesn't offer...she sucked in air and kept moving. Another annoying thing was something kept buzzing near her ear. "Blasted bugs," she muttered.

Arax looked back at her and burst out laughing.

"What's so funny?"

"We've arrived. The brownie will escort us to a gorb. That's doorway to you."

Vanster stared at the small irritant not seeing it as anything more than a bug. The pause was welcomed, because it was getting harder for her to catch her breath. Suddenly, a small bug grew larger into a small creature with wings. A small voice squeaked an indignant retort and then flew ahead of them.

"Did I say something rude?" Vanster bent over, taking deeper breaths.

"Brownies are not known for eloquence and politeness. They just get a job done. You need to get over this miasma you have hanging around you." Arax slapped her in the back of the head.

"Hey!" Vanster straightened up, feeling as if her thoughts were clear and her breathing back to normal. Arax didn't wait for Vanster but was hopping from boulder to boulder, following a zig-zag course the brownie was setting.

Looking back over the path they had come, Vanster saw only a gray mist. Fearful of being left behind, she quickly followed the two, remembering which boulder Arax had

jumped to. Her longer legs should have had her shortening the distance in little time, but it seemed they were pulling a head. Vanster increased her speed and ran through a cold spot and then there was just space.

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Someone put a cup to Vanster's lips and encouraged her to drink. She opened her eyes to a beautiful Elf looking at her with concern. She had never dreamed of elves or thought a dream figure could feel so powerful. Even the air around her was heavy with the smell of flowers, something she only experienced on Arnica. Vanster held her breath for a moment, not sure where she was.

"I am Queen Oongha. How are you feeling, Lt. Megan Vanster?"

Vanster nodded numbly. She felt foolish that after meeting the two queens on Arnica that she didn't recognize this Elf as a queen. She promised herself that the next queen she met, she wouldn't have to be told.

"Fribeth seldom cross the gorb, the gateway to fairyland. Two incongruent consciousness's in a sacred space."

"Fribeth?"

"Nonfairy folk."

"Arax said we were summoned. Why?" she asked nervously.

"You were allowed to cross over by the grace of the Queen and King of this fairyland because Lady Alexandra is concerned about your safety."

"Commander Alexandra Montran is here? Where's the major?"

"She is here. Her bondmate, Major Zohra, has been picked up by the recruiters. We fear for her because she has been taken to their laboratories."

"Laboratory?" Vanster felt numbing fear, as memories of what it was like to be under Alan Fermin's control due to an implanted microchip came back to her.

Queen Oongha touched her forehead and her fear dissipated, and even though she remembered her experience of Alan's control over her, it no longer had a dark grip on her soul.

"Can I see Commander Montran?"

"She's sleeping. We haven't spoken to her of where her bondmate is, but I sense she knows."

"What kind of laboratories?"

"Research. It is a place of pain and mental anguish for my people." She stood, looking ready to leave. "Your companion, Arax, is in the garden."

Vanster could see Arax through the flowers sitting on a bench and smelling deeply a small flower she held in her palm. She looked up when Vanster joined her.

"It is peaceful here, no?" Arax asked.

Vanster looked at her blankly. "I guess it is. Commander Montran is here but not the major." Vanster impatiently flicked a twig off her leg.

Arax grinned as another landed on her shoulder and she automatically brushed it off.

"Hey!" Vanster leaped up and looked around her suspiciously when the third hit her on the nose. Then many small pieces of wood splinters sailed her way.

"Naye!" Arax laughed and rose to hold Vanster back as she moved to swat at the tiny flock of brownies.

"What did I ever do to them? They're pests!" Vanster said.

"And what you expect, is what they give you," Arax told her practically. "So, what do we do now?" she asked to distract her.

Vanster sat down, looking sheepish. She shook her head to loosen some chips caught in her curls. "Well, the recruiters have the major and my priority is to rescue her," she said.

"Did they say where she is?"

"A research laboratory," Vanster said.

She didn't notice Arax blanch at the mention of the laboratory.

"I need to speak with the commander. The sooner we get to making plans the quicker we can get the major back."

"Perhaps you will feel better doing something," Arax said and rose to her feet, tugging Vanster's elbow.

"What is there to do here?"

Arax showed her a clearing. "I will show you something you will enjoy."

Arax kept Vanster busy teaching her a form of self-defense that Vanster thought she could use. When Vanster felt tired, Arax stopped. She led her to a room where she

could wash up and change into clothing provided. When Vanster was cleaned up Arax escorted her to Commander Montran.

The room Vanster walked in was a soft color that vibrated to a soothing pulse. Her eyes found the pale looking Commander curled up on a bed.

"Commander! What's wrong?"

"Besides being pregnant...nothing." Alexandra slowly sat up. "It's good to see you, Leut, though I wish you were out hunting for Gari. She's got herself in some kind of trouble," and then the tears trickled down her face. Vanster stood stiffly before her, at a loss at what to do.

"Pregnant women are so emotional." Arax standing next to her didn't appear to be worried.

"Who's pregnant?" Vanster demanded.

"She is. Can't you tell?" Arax said.

Vanster looked at Arax, certain her translator interpreted incorrectly.

"Pregnant as in what?" she asked, afraid to look at Commander Montran, for a reason she wasn't able to say.

By Arax's expression Vanster felt she had said something that was incredibly naïve. Her thoughts went over all the conversations she could recall about Commander Montran and knew it couldn't be her physically and just trying to image JG pregnant was incongruous with the Black Rose soldier JG used to be.

Commander Montran was watching Lt. Vanster's face and when it got to a point where it took on a purple color, she knew Megan Vanster had reached her tipping point.

Arax jostled Vanster. "Didn't anyone explain to you that when a union is formed, there usually follows children?"

Lt. Megan Vanster fainted.

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"Hey, Leut. Rise and shine. We've got a meeting to attend," Commander Montran's voice interrupted her dream.

The dream was interesting and really odd, so Vanster didn't mind the wakeup call. Turning slightly in her bed, her eyes blinked open. Sitting up quickly she looked around her, the sight confirming that she was not in familiar territory.

"Commander!" she jumped out of bed and went looking for the commander in the garden. The commander and Arax were sitting quietly staring at a fountain of water. As she neared it, she realized what she had thought were birds playing in the water were Brownies.

"Hey, Leut. Have a nice rest?" the commander asked.

"Yes, Commander. Commander Montran, did I hear right when you said earlier that you were pregnant?"

"Yes. JG and I are. See what so much fooling around on Arnica can do?"

"Well...I ah...I heard that you couldn't..."

"Anything is possible on Arnica, Leut., if you let it happen." Alexandra tilted her head at the uncomfortable looking soldier. "You're going to be an auntie...I'm having twins. No telling what JG is having."

"Twins! And the major? Are you certain about the major? I mean..." she glanced at Arax, not wanting her to hear her stumbling around. She took a deep breath and felt off balance, especially with the commander smiling at her the way she was.

"Have you ever been to a clan birthing party, Leut," Alexandra asked.

"No. Never had the...opportunity," she admitted. "But if it's like the Sisters of Athena, it's a carnival."

"That's exactly what it is. It takes a while for clan members to arrive, since everyone is scattered about the galaxies, but carnival tents are put up for yearlong arrivals, reunions both good and bad occur, no privacy or break for the couple and I'm not ready for that part."

"Where do you put all those people?" Vanster asked.

"JG and I have our own island. So, we don't burden others with the care and expenses, chances are that's where we'll receive our well wishes. But that is far down the road. By the time we get into our part of the galaxy, we'll have other priorities."

Vanster sat up suddenly. She was still in bed. "I hate these strange dreams," she muttered.

"If they're only dreams, what's there to hate," Arax said.

Arax was sitting near the door watching her. Commander Montran chose that moment to walk in. Both were dressed in similar clothing.

"Good evening, Leut. You've wakened in time for dinner," Commander Montran said. "Are you feeling better?"

Vanster looked at Arax then the commander not feeling sure about anything.

"I'm fine. Where's the major?"

"Captured by the enemy. But we have a plan. Let's go to dinner and afterwards, our hosts will convene a meeting on the subject."

"Commander, we have to get her as soon as possible." Vanster's voice trembled with fear for her friend.

"My feelings too, Megan. But we can't just dash about trying to locate which lab she's in. We need a location and a plan."

"Right, right," she said, not feeling much relief.

The beautiful gardens and fountains they passed weren't seen by Vanster as she paced behind the commander and Arax.

Dinner was not a noisy affair which had Vanster nervous. After her stay on Arnica where speech was mostly in thoughts, she suspected that was here too and she was left out. However, the foods soon took her attention, as before her were dishes she liked. Not thinking how this was possible, because it would mean someone was either reading her mind or making her think she was eating her favorite foods. Both were disturbing to her.

By the end of dinner, she was ready to take a walk to exercise off her meal.

"Don't go far, Leut. The meeting is in a half," Commander Montran warned her. Commander Montran walked the other way with a small brownie leading.

"Hm," Vanster grunted at the spectacle she thought it made. She turned abruptly and ran into Arax. "Hey, you keep turning up," she accused. "Where were you at the dinner?"

"I wasn't invited. I ate in the garden...with the brownies" she teased.

"They don't talk much at dinner, do they?"

"Sometimes music is played but this evening it's a very somber time and no one is in the mood for music."

They moved to a tree with a bench underneath it. It had a view of a fountain with a bird statue shooting water out of its mouth.

"So, what are they doing to figure out which lab the Major's at?"

"The general visits his two laboratories at different times, with no regular schedule. We do know when he is about to embark because he sends out soldiers to make sure there aren't any traps set for him. He's been distracted by the arrival of two of your large warships. He's never had to deal with an outside threat, so his generals have some real battles to plan and they don't know the outcome."

"JG's a good soldier so he'll want her alive...she won't let herself be killed."

Arax didn't have the heart to tell her he didn't need the person to be alive only the brain.

Vanster jumped up and paced. She needed to get a ship and find this laboratory. She had a lot of experience in slipping behind enemy lines without detection.

"The meeting is about to start," Arax said. "This I'm invited to attend."

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The meeting had not gone in the direction Commander Montran wanted. Everyone decided she was not to be part of the group selected to invade the two places General Tatolormufamesambula had his laboratories on. *Catching Butterflies* found the two sites and had recon teams looking over the sites while *Emperor's Last Chance* was patrolling space, taking out any of the general's ships that posed a threat.

What the Queen and King of fairies provided was a liaison with various people on the seven planets that had been planning to rid them of General Tatolormufamesambula and whatever threat his arena soldiers posed. They had been removing the bombs the general had planted around the planets to enforce his laws.

Lt. Vanster was elated she was assigned a team to lead. She was oblivious of Commander Montran's anguish and disappointment. Not wanting to waste any more time, she went in search of Arax who was to accompany her. She was speaking with Queen Oonagh, the guardian of the *de Danaan* portal.

The two elves watched Lt. Vanster approach them from the other side of the garden, with purpose in her stride.

"She will need a lot of help, young sidhe," Queen Oonagh said to Arax in their tongue.

"I know. But I don't wish to change her...only challenge," she said with a grin.

The queen gave a short laugh. "It will be an entertaining adventure. You have our blessings."

"Greetings Queen Oonagh. I've been sent to fetch you, Arax. It's time for us to meet with the others," she said, not hiding the excitement in her voice.



"Let's go then," Arax told her. "We will join your friends in Fraram's meadow."

It was only Arax and her that left. Walking through the gorb to the ordinary world was to Vanster, comforting. No buzzing Brownies and no strong smells of flowers. Everything

was normal.

"She told me you're going to be a tough nut to crack," Arax offered.

"Who said that?" Vanster demanded. "Why does it matter?" Lt. Vanster was annoyed there was a conversation about her, then became more annoyed because she wanted to know.

"That you're set in your ways," Arax laughed.

"Why should that be anyone's concern? And who said that? she asked worriedly.

"It's not a concern. It's an observation."

"I'm flexible. To be a good soldier, it's necessary to be flexible."

As they climbed to the top of a slope Vanster could see the tip of a shuttle. "That's our ride out of here."

## Chapter 14

"Deploy the team, Lady Malu," Captain Onry ordered. He was elated they located Major Zohra, and that she was still alive.

Four representatives of the Collage that were willing to openly gather against General Tatolormufamesambula sat with Captain Onry in the war room aboard *Catching Butterflies*. The four didn't feel safe anywhere else until the general's power was eliminated. The captain's purser was moving around quietly, making sure everyone was taken care of.

"Captain, they have met with the first wave of resistance," Lady Malu announced. "We have stepped in and neutralized some of their weapons. Captain Malchi reports this has given the local law enforcement an even footing."

"What about Vanster and the elfin...Arax. Are they in?"

"Nothing yet, sir. They will let us know when they find the major...we're getting visuals from them now," she added relieved.

Immediately images showed Arax's view of the containers that were lining a wall with lines running out of them and into computer banks. Vanster's view was on the other half of the screen. She was reading the names above the brains in containers. The representatives were making cries of anguish as if they knew the names.

The two women moved hurriedly into the next room just as lights started to flash. One of the representatives spoke up.

"That is an alarm that warns everyone to evacuate because the place is going to be flooded with a poisonous gas. In this case...I will guess it is not gas but something to destroy this evidence," Representative Bulowan explained in a deep calm voice, belying the turmoil that was going on within him. He insisted on representing the Talog Collage rather than Buaxas since he and the others felt he may compromise the Collage with his first contact with the strangers.

"Did you hear that Lady Malu?"

"Passing it on."

Vanster and Arax started to run, passing beds now that still had actual bodies that were attached to lines. Vanster spotted a chamber in the center of the room and its occupant floating.

"How do we get her outta here without hurting her?" Vanster asked.

"There is a green red black yellow sequence that will disengage it," Representative Bulowan informed them.

However, the empath in the room caught Onry's eye.

"There is a color sequence to disengage on the panel near you," Captain Onry told her but hesitated as he waited for the empath to tell him the correct sequence.

However, Vanster and the elfin were already studying the panel and began to push the buttons in a sequence they knew. Slowly, too slowly the body rose to the surface of the tank. Vanster and the elfin were leaning over it, pulling the body that was in a suit out. Malchi and a group of soldiers were beside them pushing AEG suits on both of the women. As the two dressed in assistance, Major Zohra was laid out on a gurney, her vitals hurriedly checked, and then they hurried out in the opposite direction than what they had entered in.

"What about the others?" one of the representatives demanded.

"They can't rescue them all! Can't you see the place is going to go be destroyed?" Representative Bulowan told them excitedly.

The others looked shaken and upset.

"We'll dismantle this organization. We'll move our own..."

"We will discuss this at another time, Maorua," Representative Bulowan admonished firmly. Maorua looked his way nervously and nodded.

The images became shaky and then they lost the image completely. Everyone around the table sat back and waited. The tension in the room raised as time passed.

"Operation Rescue Falcon is completed, Captain." Lady Malu announced.

"Let's take our guests back then. Return to..."

"Erocorn, if you don't mind," Representative Bulowan asked. "I have families I need to notify. If we could also have a visual copy of your operation."

"We can certainly supply you with a copy, Representative Bulowan," Captain Onry told him politely. "I'll leave you here until we reach your planet. Anyone else? If you should need anything...there is a buzzer."

"Ah, Captain, I was wondering if maybe you have an underling that could take us on a tour of your ship. We've never seen anything like this," Representative Bulowan asked.

"Maybe another time. Right now, we're still under alert status and I don't have any extra personnel to show you around. It shouldn't be too long."

"But Captain...perhaps your servant here." Representative Bulowan pushed.

"My pursuer has duties he must attend to...and we don't have servants in our part of the galaxy. That's why we have bots," he nodded and bowed to each one and left.

The two Spartans outside of the door braced when the captain and his purser exited.

Captain Onry waited until the door closed and then locked it. "They will try to get you in there and overpower you. You will only respond to them over the monitor is that clear?"

"Yes, captain," two voice echoed.

"Carry on," he told them. His purser went ahead of him, clearing the elevator.

Lady Malu rose from the captain's chair and stood next to it as Captain Onry sat.

"Our guests knew about the laboratory. Did you see the look on two of the representatives faces?"

"Yes. They knew the place in detail. Maybe some family members were there, and they were shown the place as a means to get them to comply with the general. I'm sure that there's going to be a lot of maneuvering for one of them to take over the leadership of the Talog Collage."

"So, are we going to stick around to make sure there's going to be a fair representation after we get rid of the general's army?"

"Lady Alexandra said Queen Freenah and King Jonetha on Marigold, assured her that the problems will change as the situation does and they will not need further assistance from us."

He rubbed his eyes to take away what he had seen. He felt compassion for the locals who were part of the operation, taking names and recording in detail what they found. There would be no explosion or poisoning as the representatives believed. The empaths had found spies that gave them what information they needed to shut down any sabotage that would prevent their safe rescue.

"How is the major?" he asked in an undertone.

"She may lose the child she is carrying," Lady Malu informed him softly.

He said a prayer under his breath. He was not surprised by the report that either woman was pregnant. Self-fertilization or same gender fertilization was something that occurred in many species as his biology teacher had pointed out and as he was proof of.

"How long until we get to Marigold?"

"Twenty minutes. We'll station keep until we get an invitation."

"I have a bad feeling in my claw that something is not scratching right." He curled his fingers and stretched them, letting the long sharp claws unsheathe, and then retracted them.

## Chapter 15

*Major Jina Gari...she hesitated. Major Jina Gari Zohra, reporting for duty.* And then she burst into tears, falling into the arms of her adopted mother as she sensed the profound loss of her child, though it was three days old. It was a boy...another loss because it meant the brotherhood would raise him, though she would be free to visit him. Her heart hurt and her body felt as if she had been beaten with sticks. Her mother rocked her, singing songs to comfort her. Many times, she jerked into wakefulness, crying again because she could still feel the spirit that came to experience this short moment of pain.

JG remembered floating in the weird world where she had no sensory input which put her in touch with the beginning of life within her. She didn't question how it could have gotten there...she was in too much awe at it's wisdom. Then the sound waves started. They prevented the spirit to escape and it hurt both of them. The sounds were like hateful thoughts changing the cells of the fetus and creating changes in her own body. Frightening things she encountered and her touch with goodness was gone...just by a

sound...the sound of hate. Her need to protect her fetus had her creating sounds that neutralized what was bombarding them. Each time she stopped the hurt a different tone was picked. She was given less and less time to combat the hate in its many guises and finally she had surrendered to love by remembering Queen M'Lu's countenance. As she moved to this, she became horrified as her memories started to be erased...the one's she was accessing to gain strength. Before she was rescued, she followed her child's example by sending out love towards those that were doing this to her and her unborn...

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JG's anguished cry brought Alexandra to her side. She had been in Āsanas, enveloping her lover in love. JG's eyes opened to look deeply into the eyes of love. The red rimmed eyes of her lover had her reaching up to touch her tenderly.

"I'm home?" she asked hoarsely.

Alexandra leaned over and kissed her forehead. "Wherever we are is home...yes. You are home," she told her. Alexandra gave her a sip of water. "How are you, love?"

"I...was it real?" she asked, her voice trembling.

"You were with child and lost it from what they were doing to both of you. Mother Aglauros came across the portal to stay with you."

Alexandra felt the tears slide down her cheeks.

"Why...why didn't you?" JG asked feeling guilty at the loss of their baby, though she understood from the soul of this entity, that it had not intended on seeing its term to the end.

"Because I...I'm an empath...who is pregnant and it would affect our other two," she explained softly.

"More!" JG voice went up, almost sounding like a keening.

"Yes. We are still going to be mommies and Mother Aglauros has informed me that if she could, she would drag us both over the portal and back home safe."

"If she could?"

"I told her we need to work this out without your family and mine hovering about and driving us both crazy." She stroked the shaved head of her lover. Whoever had taken her prisoner had cut her long dark hair. "I made a decision without you. The good thing is that it's not irreversible. Megan wants to stick with the *Rouster* for the trip back and we

certainly can't let her fly back alone." Alexandra waited for JG to make a decision, knowing it was too soon for her to think about things like this. But she also knew that JG needed challenges outside of herself to give her a break from the ones inside her. She watched the colors around her body, feeling some of the healing that had already taken place.

"Where are we?"

"de Danaan."

"The portal?" She took a deep sobbing breath, trying to release the tightness that held her chest in a painful grip. "They were erasing my good memories," she whispered. A few tears tracked down the side of her face.

Alexandra leaned down and kissed her sensuously. "We'll make more...but I'm not so sure they're gone. You'll see as you feel better. Now, sleep. We're leaving at the end of this week and I need you strong."

JG's eyes closed at the mention of sleep.

Sharon Teal stepped out of the shadows and studied the sleeping woman's drawn face. Her fingertips touched her forehead and lightly drew lines and signs that would help her with her weariness and sadness.

Alexandra was tired from the emotion of being away from her suffering bondmate. She had to be shielded from JG as she struggled with her anguish of losing the beginning of life within her. Alexandra knew exactly when the life had been brought into being, the day of JG's capture. Their two remaining babies' consciousness had not fully entered into her womb yet, but their little spirits were hovering around, and she knew they shared the grief of their little brother that was only with them for a short time.

Sharon turned to her and drew lines around her. Alexandra was not aware of being helped to bed where she laid next to her lover and bondmate. Satisfied Sharon turned and left them. Guardian Oonagh was waiting for her.

"So, what do you think?"

"They and their two children will do just fine. They would be miserable if they returned through the portal and I don't advise such travel for one so early in the gestation phase."

"I see the same," she nodded.

"Her mother certainly took a lot of talking to let her daughter grow from this in the best way possible," Sharon said wryly.

"That's what mothers do. Help carry the burdens should their child's become too heavy, thus forgetting their own."

Sharon nodded.

Guardian Oonagh walked Sharon Teal back to the portal. "Your work on these people with these chip implants...do you think it will help those in the prison ship?"

Sharon pursed her lips in thought. "Some things are difficult to predict...but it was necessary to remove the chips now. Too many people know of their existence. It wouldn't be fair for those two ships that have still a long way to travel to worry about everyone they meet intending on stealing them and reprogram the soldiers as their own."

"Go in peace and harmony," Guardian Oonagh wished her.

"My heart to yours," Sharon returned.

Sharon stepped over the threshold and watched as the energy around her harmonized with her and then she moved forward, back to Mer where her work was piling up.

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"Megan, it has been decided by our leaders," Arax told Megan, as she paced the floor. "I am traveling with you and you'll just have to get used to it. You do get to boss me around," she added.

"You don't fight fair," Megan said, pausing to think what advantage she had in bossing a new recruit around that had more stamina than her.

Arax reached over and tickled Megan.

Megan whooped and grabbed the tickling hand. "Helga's bloody moon, Fae! Don't do that!"

Arax laughed, releasing her hand.

"You think that's funny, Ensign Arax?" Megan challenged.

## **Chapter 16**

Alexandra was furious at the Koan's insinuation that she was not capable of captaining *Rouster* in her pregnant condition and since Major Zohra was still in deep mourning also was not fit to command. They wanted *Rouster* to dock inside *Catching Butterflies'* cargo bay for the rest of the trip home...their home.

"You have no right to order me or anyone on *Rouster* to do your bidding."

Lady Malu raised her hand to DeDe the Koan's speaker to stop her badgering of Lady Alexandra Montran. "She is within her rights to tell you to mind your own business and she is justified in not trusting your intentions. Even I know you want to monitor the two for your own curiosity." She held up her hand again at the outburst. "You have this whole new universe to explore on our way back home. You will leave Lady Alexandra and Major Zohra to their own business unless they ask or offer."

The four left in a huff. Alexandra tiredly sagged in her seat.

"You two are an oddity to them. They obviously have not been around much of the universe." She chuckled. "If Captain Onry was not feeling so sick, he would have not even allowed this meeting to take place. I am sorry I didn't catch it sooner."

"Are we that strange?"

"No. But most of this crew, aside from the empaths, have been to many different planets and are familiar with the multitude of variations of species reproduction. As a sailor you have to be aware of those things." She smiled and took a deep breath to change the subject.

"The major **is** fine," Alexandra told her in anticipation of the next question. "The depression is not immobilizing her. She's just not going to allow an empath she doesn't know to dig into her mind." Alexandra was quiet as she thought about how she was going to add this bit of information that she knew would end up in Zohra's military records, but it had to be in there. "Her intuitive level she reached on Arnica was lessening as we moved out of the planets influence but what the general's scientists put her through in their experiments elevated her back into that high level of telepathic connection."

Alexandra gave a bitter laugh. "At a terrible price, she now has the ability to protect herself from our twins, who are going to be a handful. Otherwise, they would be wrapping her around their unformed fists before she could find some kind of defense."

Lady Malu's hand raised in surprise. "You are saying they are telepathic?"

"Yes."

"And you? I sense that you still have something dark hanging around you."

Alexandra's eyes teared for a moment and then she shook her head. "I...I once thought I couldn't have children, and really had never thought about it until that choice was taken from me. I understand...not just as an empath what she is going through." She wiped a tear away and then smiled briefly. "We will have no problem too big we cannot handle with our young ones. The Montran's have a forum of four, also called the Koan, that are sent to each parent that are about to have Fideh children. They call them magical souls, but it's really an old term. The support is to create a safe buffer for the children to grow and to protect the family from their outbursts."

Alexandra looked thoughtful. "I wonder if General Alagros is aware of her grandchildren's proclivity and how she will take the Montran's taking over their protection?"

"The General is a sensitive herself. I'm sure she knows. Would you like me to send any messages to anyone?"

Alexandra shook her head. "The clan knows. They feel these things. I'm just wondering how lucky Gina is going to feel when the aunties began to instruct her on proper attitude around her little helions and how to protect herself as well as them. Helgas moon but that woman is going to be shy about bedding with me again."

The two laughed heartily.

"I sense deep within her, that she cares for what you carry."

"Yes. I know. She also can feel the awakening of their telepathic connection. It frightens her yet at the same time thrills her. I hear her nightmares...and know of the telepathic connection she had with her fetus, so she is not totally unprepared."

"The healers have also voiced concern about the depth of her grieving."

Alexandra shook her head. "That is who she is. She wouldn't have been able to survive her work with Naboth's Vine in covert work if she couldn't recover from hurt that deep."

"So, what do you think of the young sidhe you are taking with you?"

Alexandra smiled. "Well, she will certainly be helpful when I'm not able to take my shift. She boasts that she can sail any private ship and defend herself are truthful. I

think Lt. Vanster is too pleased that she found someone that she can beat up most of the time and teach navigation to. JG has not been a good student."

Lady Malu nodded. "When the SEC ship repairs have been completed, we'll be leaving port. They give it four more days. Are you leaving before us?"

"Yes. I think we need time away from polite inquiries into our health. Lt. Vanster is tired of being our secretary and refuses to leave the ship."

"Give us your time of departure and destination. Did you get our proposed course?"

"Yes. Thank you again Lady Malu for your help and influence."

"Lady Alexandra, it was my pleasure. I just hope the next bit of excitement isn't so heart breaking."

"Me too," she whispered as she took her leave. She walked by the bridge and glanced out at the view of the *Rouster* and beyond that, the SEC ships being repaired.

## Chapter 17

The four women sat on the bridge, cleared for launch and now waiting for the count down.

Lt. Vanster didn't look at her friend, JG, but focused on her screen. She didn't need to be an empath to know that she wasn't well. The idea that JG, a warrior of her caliber would want to have her own child was inconceivable to Lt. Vanster, so it didn't cross her mind that JG's depression was anything more than the body's natural reaction to the loss of a fetus.

Lt. Vanster had seen it in many women under war conditions and self-inflicted when a woman was raped by the enemy. She had developed a mental barrier to prevent herself from being affected by this sadness, not realizing what it was doing to her own ability to empathize and have a more profound relationship with her friend.

Empathy was a handicap to being a good soldier, was her reasoning. It didn't make Vanster cruel or mean, just not able to understand some types of feelings, or see the need to.

Lt. Vanster's eyes flickered back to the readings on the left of her screen as the ship's computer continued its countdown. Restlessly she moved her feet to find another comfortable position.

"Lt. Vanster?" Arax voice broke through her boredom.

"Yes, Ensign Arax?"

Arax gave her a smile at her new designation. "I am reading an uneven flow in this cooling system," she told her confidently. It had taken her three days of practicing on this new ship for her to be able to appreciate the differences in this ship and the ones she had previously worked on. The luxuries were far superior and the weapons more powerful.

All three women looked at the cooling systems.

"Aft. Someone forget to close something?" Alexandra asked as she rechecked the compartments that were accessed for storing fresh food as well as this side of the galaxy's version of space food.

"I'll get it, Commander." Lt. Vanster jumped up eager to do something physical.

"Take Ensign Arax with you. She needs the practice," JG said.

"We've got thirty stan minutes yet," Alexandra added.

"Come on Ensign Arax. Your job is never done," Lt. Vanster said.

When the two left Alexandra stretched her hand to take Zohra's. Quietly they sat communicating without speech.

The light signaling an incoming message had Alexandra casually reaching over with her free hand to acknowledge receipt.

"Harbor Master Ha'l from C'Cogi Station. Your sailing time has been upped to five minutes. Have you a problem with that?"

"The problem light is cleared," Major Zohra said in a subdued voice.

"We have no problem with that, Harbor Master Ha'l. All hands, prepare for flight in four minutes," Alexandra notified over the ship's Comm.

The count down on her screen changed.

"Captain Montran, problem cleared. Loose nob on panel will have to be replaced," Ensign Arax reported.

"We checked to be sure nothing in the panel was tampered with. I think the nob just wore out. It's secured with bali," Lt. Vanster said.

"Good old bali," Commander Montran said. "You're the navigator, Lieutenant. Get us out of here."

"Captain, moorings have been dropped," Vanster said. "Moving out of the slip. Clear of traffic. Should we sail by *Butterflies* and *Emperor*?"

"No," Captain Montran and Major Zohra said emphatically.

"Easy out and come about to...0 7. Engage to 3gs when out of standard station distance, Leut," Alexandra instructed. "Then we blast out of here at 6," she added in relief.

"Easing out....steady at a slow erg..." Lt. Vanster glanced at the message that flashed on her screen. "*Catching Butterflies* sent 'happy sailing', Captain."

"I see. Give her the ole 'leaving ya in my wash' kinda message."

Vanster's hands moved to key in a new heading. "Coming up to our mark for blasting out of here, Captain," she reported.

"Engage when ready."

"Ready. Engaged."

"In fifteen stan minutes, fire it up to 8gs, Leut. Let's see how long we can run at high speed, then drop down to 6gs."

"As you say, Captain," Lt. Vanster replied, happy to leave.

"Officer On Deck, Commander Montran transferring command to Lt. Vanster OOD," Captain Montran reported to the ship's log.

"Lt. Vanster, Officer On Deck," Lt. Vanster verified.

Alexandra took the silent JG's hand and they exited to go to their own quarters. It was late and both of them were exhausted.

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Alexandra woke when a hand gently stroked her stomach. She smiled in the dark and glanced at the woman lying beside her. In the dim lighting she could see the shiny head of her lover turned toward her.

"Can you feel them?" she whispered to JG.

"Yes," she answered. Her hand caressed Alexandra's stomach feeling something that was not quite a kick against the rounded stomach.

"I have dreams of them," Alexandra informed her.

She heard a heavy sigh and then, "Me too. I think we're going to be in trouble with these two."

"We'll be sharing the joy. The Montran clan sends out babysitters to assist in the upbringing of clairvoyant off-spring. It helps the parents get rest."

"Hm."

Alexandra smiled at the face next to her. JG's hands were more than soothing.

"Hey, you," she leaned over and kissed her slowly, feeling the kiss returned with tenderness. Alexandra took it to a deeper passion.

After lovemaking, Alexandra laid in JG's arms, feeling their connection heightened by their little ones.

"I'm sorry about your loss."

"Will I sound horrible if I say I'm glad...in a way."

"No. I'm sure you have a reason." Alexandra could feel the hot breath behind her neck.

"He wasn't meant to come to full term," she admitted quietly.

"Did he tell you that?"

"Yes. He was there to help me survive my time in the tank and to tell me not to let what I learned on Arnica fade away."

"Oh. We've never talked about our beliefs on afterlife and things like that."

"No. I...I knew this soul from..." JG couldn't continue, her arms tightening around Alexandra.

"From?" Alexandra prodded, feeling that JG needed to acknowledge who this was to someone other than herself.

"My biological mother," she whispered.

"But you still feel guilty..."

"I think I should be feeling bad about it's passing yet..."

"You don't want both of us pregnant at the same time?" Alexandra felt air expelled on the back of her neck. "Well, we have plenty of time to work on another little

one for you, if you want," she teased, just as the thought occurred to JG, "Helga's moon. How on earth are we going to know who is going to get pregnant? And how do we prevent it, so we don't turn each other into brood mares? I'm not willing to give up sex with you. Have you thought of that?"

"Yes. We control it. On some level, you wanted a child. I certainly wished I could. I didn't expect to be the one carrying."

Alexandra tuned in her arms and kissed her bald head. "The spirit of your mother is with you. Can you feel her presence?" Alexandra could feel JG's heart rate increase.

"You think?"

"Hmm. My namesake, Henry CJ Montran, was with me through some really low points in my life. I wasn't always able to hear him, but I knew he was there. In real life I didn't know him. I've always been taught that we pick up guardians and lose some along the way as whatever they are helping us with comes and goes."

They were quiet for a while, both thinking about memorable people in their pasts.

"You know, these kids are a combination of some interesting genes...we may be starting a whole new species," Alexandra thought out loud.

"Please don't tell me that," JG mumbled, "I'm going to have nightmares of people from my past telling me how I should run my life."

END

End of Journey I of the Journeys to *Foreign Harbors*.

I used as a guide to faeries, Cassandra Eason's *A Complete Guide to Faeries & Magical Beings*.