

Arnica

I Christie



Prolog

The gong sounded in the hall, announcing a request for admittance. Before the vibration faded, the Emissary rose from his seat, signaling they were ready.

"Enter!" the attendant boomed in the near empty audience hall.

Sitting among a handful of council members, Lord DeMonte peered surreptitiously over his steeped fingers at the new and old members that were present. His bright orange hair, a characteristic of his mother's side of the family, was worn in the manner of the older warriors. It was drawn back out of his face, braided in one tail reaching to his shoulder, and bound in leather. Lord DeMonte's clothing befit his rank in both clan and within the new United Worlds Planetary Council, UWPC, revealing neither his shape nor what may be hidden within the cloth folds. His eyes caught the dim outline of guards as they moved to a more alert position when the doors opened. The physical presence of armed guards, though not as effective in subduing actual violence as modern security technology, could be mistaken for part of the decorum.

The group that entered with military precision were officers from two galaxy powers, the Collective and the old Galactic Committee of Families and Communities. Though the UWPC had not officially formed a military structure yet, there were officers from the defunct GCFC among those gathered.

When GCFC was dissolved, it was agreed military personnel would come under the jurisdiction of their home planets to keep formation and discipline intact. For those with no home planet Lord DeMonte absorbed them into Mendoca's forces. No one wanted to see the seasoned and current training go to waste until a new council was ready to form a new military. The new structure would have stronger guidelines in deploying troops and the qualifications of who was to command them would be higher. Civilians that had never served as an officer need not apply or look to be appointed.

The council waited for them to neatly line up. Lord DeMonte could feel the officers' tension. It was from the excitement of exploring the unknown, and the possibility of interacting with new species. The political powers in the known galaxies were still adjusting to their own expanding borders and had not set out on any long explorations since the construction of faster, larger, and safer vessels was costly. However, companies that wished to make a profit on selling chances to the foolhardy, to settle on frontier settlements that were investigated solely through robotic-attended ships, had sent out people to establish settlements in the company's interests. The colony freighters were one-way trips for millions of people, sleeping their way to their distant destination with whatever equipment and supplies they may need for two years, or so the contract read. No one knew better than the settlers on their arrival at the new worlds of what little they were given to survive at all. Who could they complain to but their fellow travelers and the natives of the planet they were abandoned on?

Forty-seven officers stood before the council, ramrod straight and proud, filling the audience hall. They represented the crew of over two thousand.

The crew for *Catching Butterflies* was in the last stages of preparation. This meeting was merely a formality with key officers assigned a specific task, to reaffirm the purpose of their mission. *Catching Butterflies* was composed of military and nonmilitary personnel, who were being sent across the vast stretch of space into another part of the unexplored galaxy to a planet called Arnica. They were to bring back the late Alan Fermin's soldiers, and see if any damage control measures would have to be made on Arnica.

"Reporting for duty, High Council." Newly promoted Captain Malchi, head of a special security team, moved one step forward from the others then stepped back in line. She had been elected to represent the group of officers assembled who in turn were elected to represent the crew on the ship.

Emissary Si'en from the Council of the Rings spoke for all parties that had interests in *Catching Butterflies* business, since the Council of Rings was trusted as being nonpolitical. The COR was the highest authority in dealing with matters between the various galaxies political parties and any species deemed in danger by another's aggression.

"By being here for this final bid of good sailing, you have all agreed on your assigned duties and will act according to the Rules of Kamahi, a warrior's code of ethics. One of the most important rules is that you follow the laws of the planet you will be visiting – Arnica. There's no killing and no needless violence. You have your orders, Captain Malchi. Render Alan Fermin's metrasoldiers harmless, bring back as many as you can, preferably alive, clean up whatever mess they created without creating a worse problem...and return safely. My heart to your hearts."

"Aye!" they said, with their voices sounding like a cheer that reverberated against the walls and caused the ceremonial bong to rumble.

That done, the group moved out of the room. Their excited murmurs were cut off as the council doors closed behind them.

Lord DeMonte slipped out a side door. He didn't want any more continued talk with Lady Varina whose presence made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up, nor to be cornered by C'hi A from another group that he didn't trust. Their joint effort of cornering him before the meeting, thus preventing him from talking to Lady Ja,uma, made him all the more suspicious that they wanted a delay in their meeting. However, they were too late. He had met with her the previous week and her informants affirmed that Varina and C'hi A, though enemies, made a temporary truce to send agents to investigate potential business on Arnica, something that COR had firmly stated was not to happen. There was to be no prospecting or politicking on Arnica.

He waited for the elevator on the next level. The door opened and Captain Malchi, her first, and second officers, were standing in the elevator silent, as if the stopping of the elevator halted their conversation.

Lord DeMonte stepped in and inserted a key. The car resumed its movement to the next stop. The group got off and crowded into a secured room.

"What did you find?" DeMonte asked.

"There are twelve spies among the officers and about fifty-six among the crew. However, we don't know what their intentions are."

"Was everyone checked for mind control biochips?"

"Yes, Lord DeMonte. With the new information we have, we can scan for them easily. Those members will all be replaced before we ship out." Captain Malchi frowned.

"I hope those officers haven't figured out yet that this ship is more than a deep space science vessel."

"We'll find out soon enough when they're taken in for questioning. If it's anything you need to know, the kone will be sent a message. L'uenbeng, guardian of Merker's Portal, has given us a few gifts from his laboratory that you're to test without the general ship's population knowing about. Unless you deem it necessary, let the captain know. This ship is far in advance of any ship known in our two galaxies. Don't lose her."

Captain Malchi nodded with a grin. "Aye, Lord DeMonte. She is a prize. It'll take years to learn all her secrets."

"Your contact on Arnica is Commander O'Malley, the Queen's protector. The shamans are not willing to say any more about Queen M'Lu other than she is a powerful force and an old soul. Keep in mind, that once you are in Arnica's sphere, anything you do, say, or think, Queen M'Lu is aware. Don't make the same mistakes as *Emperors Last Chance*."

The officers nodded that they understood.

"May you all ride the tides of adventure with good fortune and health."

"We shall bring Lady Alexandra back safely, Lord DeMonte."

A quick grin appeared on his face. "Likely it will be that she brings herself back."

They all smiled and laughed softly.

That night, *Catching Butterflies* sailed from her dock a week early and with no fan fare, leaving behind unwanted crew members. After a few gate hops, she picked up



better screened replacements.

After a busy week of doing a shake-down and getting acquainted with their new ship, the entire crew retired to their sleep pods for the rest of the ride. A Sha'Kar, from Merker's Outpost, an unseen passenger for most, moved alone in the corridors and other spaces on board, pinning for a friend.

Chapter 1

The moon was on the other side of the planet, leaving a dramatic display of a canopy of glittering stars against a dark background. An occasional luminous pair of eyes blinked as they peered through the forest fauna. Leaves rustled from a cool breeze fluttering through them, carrying the smell of the nearby sea mingled with odors of the surrounding life. The potpourri of scents was a delight to a sensitive nose.

Nearby, a slight ghostly figure paced restlessly on the grass. Bare feet missed the dirt border that separated the grass from the herbs and flowers neatly arranged in Mandela patterns.

Her fists balled up in frustration and then relaxed, sending little snaps of electromagnetism to prick the space around her. Turning again to pace to the other side, she once more reviewed the myriad of thoughts, feelings, and sensations near and far that she could call to her awareness.

Still there was nothing that appeared out of the ordinary. She couldn't identify what or where this anomalous sense was coming from.

Why did she think it a menace?

Knowing the dimension it was coming from would be helpful. Her eyes lifted to stare past the garden and into the forest backdrop. Pausing mid stride, she turned toward the rose covered archway that opened into her garden.



Another breeze wafting by brought the smell of someone familiar with mute sounds of soft footsteps, and rustling fabric. Her handmaiden came rushing through the archway with a robe, wrapping it around her small figure and then tying the sash securely. Her thin sleeping gown was covered completely by a thick, soft golden robe that fell to her ankles.

<company>

<i will see him>

The woman bowed and paused, staring down at the glow of white against the dark. No slippers. She gave a disapproving clucking sound.

When her handmaiden left the garden the tall Micas, commander of the Kiuzi Warriors, stepped forward. His six-foot athletic trim figure filled the archway as a dark

silhouette against the stars. His tall form barely passed through the flowered archway; however, a strong scent from a bruised petal suggested that his braided hair had bunted a bloom. He was not wearing his uniform, as the outline on his shoulders were round and smooth, without the epaulets flat shape. She didn't have to look to know that he had no weapons.

"Commander O'Malley. Blessings upon you and your family," a child's voice greeted.

He bowed to her and stepped forward where a whispered conversation could be carried on.

"And to you and yours, High Priestess."

The form of address indicated to her the subject of the visit.

"The Temple of Ilo has requested the presence of the High Priestess to authenticate a reading," his deep voice continued, heard as a drone to anyone a few feet away.

"I shall be at the beach in a quamit."

The commander bowed and returned to the boat. By the short period she gave herself to be ready, he suspected she had anticipated this request.

Commander O'Malley stood in the dark forest near the path leading to the beach, watching for the High Priestess. The damp night air didn't bother him as much as the pounding surf that could mask the movements of unwanted visitors. Night creatures called out, and wisps of benign spirits floated about. It was like any other night when most solids didn't wander, least they intrude in others' business. He almost missed the small figure dressed in a dark robe as she moved intentionally unseen to most. She was abreast of him when she revealed herself. He followed her to the shore, glancing around to be sure that not even a creature noted their passage, though he knew Priestess M'Lu had taken care of that.

The boat quietly pushed off into the ocean, smoothly cutting through the waves with the wind blowing loud past their ears. The engine remained off to avoid the heat signature. The commander suspected that the power the High Priestess exerted would get them to their destination quicker than the engine. And so, it did. Their speed belied her calm demeanor, and this urgency weighted on his mind. Mentally, he accessed where

each regiment was, and their degree of training, thinking this call had something to do with the off-world soldiers that were disrupting life on their planet, Arnica.

Hardly had the boat beached on the island, when the priestess was out, and her form quickly swallowed up in the darkness. The commander gave a sign to his two warriors to stow the craft and return to barracks. He didn't need to tell them to remain silent of their mission. They were Kiuzi Warriors.

* * *

The wet gray mist that had blanketed Temple Ilo and the surrounding environment was evaporating as warmth spread from the mid-morning sun. It left behind structures dripping with moisture that collected in heavy drops, and then trickled in rivulets to the ground. M'Lu stood on the ornately carved temple balcony, peering through the last beach. Idly, she roles as one of the chose, she could as it joyously dived green waters, plunging deep enough to catch its morning breakfast, and then pop up on the ocean surface further down the shore, taking time to swallow the tasty morsel. But that was for another day to enjoy. Breathing in deeply, she held the cold dampness in her lungs, delighting in the heavy brine taste it left on her palate, grounding her in a solid world with the simple pleasures of the mundane environment.



residue of the mist on the island's watched the birds engaged in their oceans many caretakers. If she become one with the winged hunter through the mist into the cold dark

She lifted her shoulders that were covered in a heavy dark purple cloak, interwoven with gold threads in a floral design unique to her, and then dropped them, relaxed as she expelled the air in her lungs. She wore dark brown pantaloons and a lighter shade of brown and green blouse with the same gold floral design pattern found on her cloak. Resting heavily on her flat chest was a medallion with a dull stone matching the one in her signet ring, the same design as on her clothing.

M'Lu had been groomed for her position from conception, and still learning at twelve winters. She was Queen M'Lu of Allint, and High Priestess of Drusu. Sometimes referred to as Dorsuans, they were enlightened peoples of the 1st continent Allint, and undisputed stewards of the planet Arnica.

Her fingers played with carved beads, while her other senses sought for anything amiss on Ilo. Flux, chaos, renewal, and harmony. Life weaving its multitude of rhythms through all things that lived and shared consciousness with the island's ecosystems channeled to her. Nothing wasted, but rather transformed into another form of energy, moving in a constant renewal, rising in consciousness at each completion of existence.

She moved her eyes and thoughts toward the distant shore of Allint, still hidden by the damp haze. Her senses pierced the barriers of space and mist, seeing the lush green forest that grew close to the beach. M'Lu knew the forest and lives that it teemed with, intimately. The thought of their sudden disappearance, and the repercussions along the many streams of consciousness was profoundly unsettling.

What made the inhabitants of Allint stand out from *commoners* was not an easily distinct physical difference, though some claimed they could tell, for they were of the same mixed and unmixed species that claimed to be among the higher functioning inhabitants that resided on Arnica. Allintans were different in that they were sensitive to all life around them and were able to view the various subtle energy bodies surrounding the physical one due to their life practice of Drusu techniques for higher energy vibration.

However, M'Lu sighed disappointedly, it was not any of the inhabitants on Allint, but a neophyte to the temple on the island Ilo that had asked the right question and received a disturbing answer.

Behind M'Lu the novices of the temple were preparing for their day. She could feel their life force; hear their movements, thoughts, and their whispered prayers as they moved from their sleep areas to the bathing area. Their day began by sanctifying their bodies, both the physical and spiritual. Order displayed in thought, ritual, and body movements, from inhalation to exhalation, were a part of their lives, making the mundane tasks more profound than a commoner could understand. She personally found sharing space with an animal in the wilderness to be more liberating, inspiring, and insightful in understanding the underlying rhythm of life in its many dimensions. However, she was just as studious in her daily practice of breathing and physical exercises in her material form, as she was in her other studies.

Standing in a corner, quietly waiting was the commander of her Kiuzi guards. His body was still but the energy around him was vibrating. He was deciding how to go about examining his warriors for deceitfulness, starting with his top officers.

The clicking of beads identified someone higher than a novice was approaching, and by the pace, it was someone with a mission.

M'Lu turned to face the pale orange robed figure that halted at a respectful distance waiting for her. His face and head had not received their daily shave yet, showing a red shadow on the monk's usually shiny head and face. The old man was from a species mix of Human and Maligro. With his head shaved and his nails neatly clipped, his Human side was more evident than his Maligro. Even the purple shading around his eyes was faded as it did happen with older Maligros.

<speak>

"My Priestess, the Council is only awaiting Gi and Talara's presence." He gave a respectful bow, one hand placed against his heart chakra, fingers splayed, and his other holding his prayer beads still.

"Time."

"In one meca."

By the time she finished her climb to the tower, they would be present. No doubt they would be transmitting from a temple on Padma, probably from the Valley of Quadrang.

<what have you found in the matter I tasked you with>

<the energy is contaminated from below, and only in select areas on allint: we have already begun to clean the ley lines that feed into the areas>

M'Lu was well aware beloved Allint had been contaminated but to impress upon her followers of a lapse in vigilance she needed them to see for themselves. It was serious enough to warrant mindspeak rather than a vocal affirmation. There was no need to alarm the acolytes at this time.

<do not touch the actual contaminated areas until I personally give the word: there are undercurrents from an unknown origin here, which must be handled with extreme care>

The monk bowed in deference to her instructions. Turning he retreated into the temple to seek out other monks he needed to consult with. He had a lot of work ahead of him.

<intrigues> three mind-thought in unison.

She gave one more glance at the beach as the faint cry of the birds drew her attention, then proceeded into the back area of the temple. A novice waited at the foot of the stairs to take her heavy cloak. It was too cumbersome to climb the stairs with it about her shoulders, though she knew the tall Kiuzi commander would have gladly taken it for her, or she simply could have expended the mental energy to have it follow behind them; however, such displays of power were silly to her. What would she need the robe for in the meeting room?

The
where the
meeting was being
panoramic view of
continents
below. In addition,
underground ley
temple. Such a
energy resulted in
of temple
refrained from
another potential
force was coming



chamber in the temple tower
Supreme Council of Allint's
held had a breath-taking
the four oceans from the four
commingling on the beach
the energy from the
line enhanced the power of the
temptation to misuse this
the dismissal of the last group
attendants. Queen M'Lu
sighing her annoyance that
for shaking the planet's life
from Drusian's. Who said that

people that spent their lives devoted to compassion would make them impervious to the usual mundane foibles of pity, sentimentality, greed, and the need to have dominion over others? The insidious displays of arrogance and pride were lowering the energy on Allint.

The Queen lifted her pantaloons higher so that the cuffs would not drag on the steps. The gold threads weaved throughout the fabric of her blouse glinted as she passed the opened windows where the morning sun and warmed breeze came through. The energy grew stronger as she neared her destination, lifting the fine hairs on her arms and

the nape of her neck. The stone in the medallion and ring began to glow steady but the heat was contained by the expenditure of a small amount of the Queen's will. It was not necessary for her to make the physical climb, but it was the principle of the matter. She needed to exercise to stay physically healthy. Besides, it gave her time to gather power around her, check out the atmosphere, and think. She couldn't hear the footsteps of her commander, but she knew he was two steps behind her.

A frown appeared on her face as she thought about the amount of information, she had learned in only four miters. Like the monks, she had not been asking the right questions or looking for trouble at home. It was not because she was influenced. That was the first thing she had sought to discern. No. She had trusted others to do it as part of their duty.

M'Lu had not been physically to the island for over six moons. Her mother's illness kept her physical visits around the planet limited to the palace grounds, visiting her farmland, and the Queen's Cultural Center. Anywhere else, she projected her form wherever she was needed. She now realized that in her attempt to be everywhere for everyone she was taking short cuts. That was going to change. Many things were going to change.

M'Lu grinned at the thought of *this* meeting. For the last year, attendances at the meetings had dwindled. Normally there were fifty members but from transitions and the rest of the council's lack of interest, the group was down to twelve active members with the remaining twenty-two generally absent. So far, polite reminders to appear got no results. If they couldn't fulfill their attendance responsibility, then they would forfeit their positions on the council, and the amenities it gave them and their families, she had decided. Today would determine who would stay and how many seats she would fill. Such a trifle problem compared to this larger one, but these small matters were something she intended to address at the meeting, knowing it would help in the end. The inhabitants of Allint were getting indolent, thus threatening the life of the planet.



She took a moment at the doorway to catch her breath and with a thought, changed her appearance to a ceremonial dress more in line with this stately moment. She then studied the others that were present, in both the physical form and in apparition. Not many members were putting in an appearance, and this was an emergency meeting. It made it easy to determine who would stay on the committee.

A'Nka, a Breatharian that didn't show her ancient age of 200 'errs, was dressed in a cool serape that fluttered a bit, suggesting she was sitting out on her veranda, enjoying the rising sun. Breatharians preferred the low hot deserts, where few other species found comfortable to visit and less to live. Their dwellings were mounds with three fourths of their living space underground. Verandas and maybe a building for their travel vehicles were above ground. Recently, the Dwarfs had collaborated on a joint effort to create a large city underground. It was unusual since Breatharians did not like crowds, so the city was actually living spaces connected by tunnels elaborately decorated with occasional open areas for businesses, museums, and schools. M'Lu guessed A'Nka was tired and ready to retire.

Occupying the space to her left was B'Reah, a Cowashian and the oldest member of the council. He was dressed in a coarse and heavy brown cloak used to keep out the cold. One hand idly played with his talisman resting on his chest while his other hand clinched his well-worn walking staff. His old knuckles once hairy were bear with age. He obviously was not liking what he was hearing from Talara, also a Cowashian, who was seated on the other side of him. Talara was dressed in the drab sexless garb of a traveler; light weight all weather clothing. News on the other continents would be the content of their conversation, the Queen guessed, since B'Reah had been an avid traveler in his youth. If Talara considered the information important, she would get a more detailed report from him after the meeting, otherwise Talara would report to her at his usual time.

Gi, tall among her species the Malalises, was sitting next to Talara, also wearing the traveler's garb. She had been sent to the 2nd continent two moons ago as a Drusu initiate on the 5th level to assist in stabilizing and energizing a temple in the city of Indez,

and just recently met up with Talara on the 3rd continent for further instructions. He was her mentor for becoming more enlightened on the path of Drusu. Her eyes glittered even when she was in apparition. Queen M'Lu was pleased that Gi was doing so well on her path. She had great potential to become the next Sha Alamar, spiritual councilor of Drusian's. It spoke volumes on Talara's skill in mentoring the gifted. Queen M'Lu was looking forward to relinquishing some of her responsibilities when Gi was ready.

Next to Gi was C'Opre, a Catalls. She was one of the most talented teachers on Arnica in M'Lu's opinion. Her grasp of how to approach any student had M'Lu in awe of her charms because not everyone wanted to be a student. She, however, loved visiting other continents, experiencing the myriad of feelings commoners radiated rather than Drosuans that knew how to guard their thoughts and feelings. She and Gi were in an animated discussion, causing their images to shimmer from the energy their laughter created. Both were always pleasant, which M'Lu's mother often said is the most important part of spiritual life...retaining one's humor and sharing it.

S'Bo was seated next to C'Opre, looking uncomfortable. S'Bo belonged to the self-appointed teacher's clan, Ju'n. They were Caladia. At the moment his arms were drawn across his small chest in a disagreeable pose as he listened to the conversation between H'ya and L'marta, the two youngest members of the council. The loud animated one-way conversation of H'ya's was also annoying V'Sasa, H'ya's older sister, who wore a sour expression. H'ya and V'Sasa were Zanzars, as was the royal family.

L'marta was the youngest member and a Dwarf, radiating his discomfort at being among the older members. He was new and had not yet learned his duties. Hopefully H'ya wouldn't be his self-appointed mentor.

Queen M'Lu studied H'ya for a few moments. He was physically present, as she had ordered him to be. If his loud voice had not given his feelings away, the colors swirling around him did. She guessed it was because he had been ordered to put in a physical appearance. He ignored her request to be here on time, so her guards sought him out. They easily located him in his teacher's home, refusing to acknowledge the summons. She heard he was dragged out of bed, and unceremoniously hauled onto a flyer. He dressed in whatever the Kiuzi grabbed for him to wear, which was a relief. Normally he dressed in outrageous colors that were too loud for council business. H'ya

hated physical exercise. It must have been an extra wounding that he had to climb the stairs to the tower's meeting room with his Kiuzi guards on his heels. As she studied her cousin, she realized that he was also uncomfortable in the energy of the tower.

His morning had not started well for him nor would it get any better.



The Guardian, C'Lea, also physically present, had sensed the Queen's presence and watched her from the doorway. Her jeweled staff glittered, as did the eyes in the talisman that beaded her cap. An uninitiated would believe it was from the morning light, sending rainbow prisms across the floor and onto the opposite wall.

The Sacred Jester, Ji'am, was also in physical attendance, and though he appeared to be aloof of the others he was in tune to each member's mood and to their deeper motivations.



The Queen stepped into the room, and awareness of Her presence brought a silence from all but one.

"Well, it's about time you got here," grumbled H'ya, loud enough to bring embarrassed looks from the older members.

Guardian aimed a piercing look at him. H'ya's eyes nervously moved to the eyes in her cap and then away.

The Queen glided across the room, and gently seated herself onto the plush cushioned chair, remembering not to 'plop' into it as her mother had schooled her. Her cousin's usual antics of disruption, and grandstanding were not going to be tolerated anymore. Had he listened to his Kiuzi guard he would know that Guardian would hold him to the rules of behavior from this meeting forth. She sat for a moment letting the energy in the room settle and giving her cousin more time to think before he rudely interrupted, showing a lack of courtesy for the gathered members. Courtesy and respect for all should be a natural inclination of all Drusian's.

H'ya had been directed to the wrong path by others who had their own agenda that used him as their tool. It was time she intervened before he became too ensnared in the dark path he was being led down.

The Guardian of the Chambers received the Queen's nod. "This meeting is now closed to all others who have chosen to be late or not appear." The Guardian's staff flashed energy to erect a barrier of privacy around the tower room. She turned to the Queen.

"Let us begin," Priestess M'Lu intoned. She moved her hands into the proper mudra position and breathed in and then out in rhythm. Once would have been enough, but she repeated it three times. The atmosphere changed quickly.

The Priestess began the prayer to the spirits that protected their way of life and the lands on which they dwelt. The intensity of the energy in the room increased. M'Lu channeled the energy through her, connecting to each member in a colorful link. In the connection, she felt her cousin's discomfort. She mind-thought to Guardian, keeping the conversation private and unheard by the others as mind-thought was a conversation only heard by whoever it was directed to.

<there is more to this link than what meets the nose: gentle my sister, we do not wish them to know how sensitive we are>

It was the Guardian's job to see that whatever went on in the council meeting was kept between the members; therefore, she erected her protective barrier. But if a member should bring an uninvited guest...

M'Lu felt amusement from the Guardian, her sister, as a stern warning was sent to Ju'n T'La at his indiscretion via a charge in his link to their cousin. It was strong enough to give both H'ya and T'La a headache, and enough to embarrass the pair that they were found out. Commander O'Malley took grave issue with those that surreptitiously dropped in on meetings closed to the public, something young Drusian's liked to do to test their talents.

There were obviously a lot of interested parties in this emergency meeting. They should be, the Queen thought wryly. Why Ju'n T'La blatantly invaded a meeting he wasn't invited to wasn't just a disgrace but a bad example of behavior to their young cousin. It could mean that he felt he was dealing with inexperienced children.

Lightly M'Lu touched her link to Commander O'Malley to be sure he was aware of what she and Guardian had determined. A mental nod from the commander affirmed

her belief. By the slight change of expression, she was sure Ju'n T'La, leader of his clan, would be hearing from the Kiuzi guard of his offense against the Queen.

Once Queen M'Lu decided that the atmosphere was right, Guardian sounded the chime and the meeting officially began.

"This meeting was called for several reasons. The reasons came about from a rune cast one of the neophytes had laid yesterday." She held up her hand feeling the group's next question. "Rest assured, the dark one from Rixon galaxy has not landed, however, what he sent here is causing more problems. A brief summary, since some of you have not attended the last few meetings...

"The foreign soldiers sent by this dark one has formed an alliance with fringe groups on the other continents. They have named this union the Black Alliance. Since this alliance has formed, damage to the lands, and peoples have increased two-fold on *all* continents." The Queen wondered if any of them would catch her use of the word 'all', meant to include Allint. "The members of this Black Alliance are growing. They are composed of ex-members of Malagro's disgraced secret police, the Red Guard force that served under Ladmire's rule of Vashaba, and people that have found a cause that supports their abuses of other's rights. If this damage they are doing to the physical and psyche of Arnica is not halted soon, I foresee this dark energy causing chaos planet-wide in a direction that will take us back to our earlier errs, when wars and illnesses were a normal way of life."

She paused, easily reading the members resentment to the disruption in their personal routines. They avoided thinking of global problems and the responsibilities their residence on Allint inferred. It was as if they had forgotten about the sacred energy of *Itachi* that was moving them all to a paradigm shift on all levels, leaving nothing untouched on the planet.

"I see no reason..." H'ya started to interrupt, as was his habit, but he couldn't miss the look from Guardian, once again silencing him with fear.

"WE looked further into this off-world disturbance, and WE saw that there shall be more visitors from Rixon in the near future." The Queen looked in askance at the Sacred Jester whom signaled he had something to say.

"My Queen, no one on Allint has foreseen any of this, other than the ship that hovers above us. Are you sure this *trainee* is not just calling attention to herself?"

Queen M'Lu resisted the impulse to roll her eyes.

"Would anyone on Allint know, Ji'am? The Kul has not had a meeting attended by more than twenty-four for the last few errs. According to the rules of assembly, it takes fifty to have a meaningful exchange."

A'Nka raised his hand. Having received a nod, rose to speak. "If anyone had seen anything pertinent or of importance an emergency meeting would have been called into session, my Queen. With all of Allint able to see, why attend regular meetings just to hear what you already know?"

The Queen refrained from pointing out that SHE had called an emergency meeting and only twelve of them had shown up, and her meeting had higher authority than the Kul, the Council of Seers. Instead, she continued her focus on getting her people back to the basics.

"To share insight, to discuss, learn, verify information, clarify what you have learned, reexamine held beliefs, and most importantly...to guide one and all in proper intent and action. This is what community on Allint is about. No one is perfect and there is the tendency to linger when not encouraged to move on."

The reasons were what could be found in a child's book titled *Guidelines for Compassionate Living* that every child on Allint received on their fifth birthday. It was a slight annoyance to Queen M'Lu that these esteemed council members had forgotten something that they should be emulating daily as a community.

"Learning is an ongoing process, and sharing information is a part of that process. It helps bring to light something odd or different. Diversity is honored as a learning tool. That is what working in groups ensures. It is a cornerstone of living in community. It is what living on this continent of Allint is about." She stopped short of pointing out that the fifty-member requirement was necessary to invoke the spirit of the Seer into their gathering to aid understanding. M'Lu reminded herself that she was still learning about being a leader, and the first lesson was patience with herself and others.

"My Queen, just when are these visitors arriving?" Ji'am asked.

"I have no exact time."

"Harrumph! You don't need to lecture us on Drusu living! When these Rixon commoners arrive, they will do as they should; clean up what originated in their backyard." H'ya waved a hand of inconsequence. He refused to look at Guardian. "We have our own business to attend to."

"Our Queen." Ji'am hastily stepped in, feeling the groups rising anger at H'ya's antics. "As of yet, we have not been asked by any inhabitant on any of the continents to assist in their problems, so we should, perhaps, wait longer before interfering."

The Queen struggled not to laugh at the members' collective reactions at the idea of interacting with *shonae*, commoners.

"WE need to find out what is going on beyond our planet to cause visitors to arrive here to disrupt our land and the lifestyle of Arnica."

Ji'am spread his arms out, "There are inhabitants on Arnica that do not honor her as we, but it does not give us a reason to interfere with their business. Meddling has in the past done more harm to all involved, then good." He hesitated and then continued. "Let the commoners deal with these off-worlders and when they come to us, we will see if it is within our moral obligation to assist."

"When the planet is threatened, WE will intervene no matter what stage of development the problem is in. When someone or something new is about this planet, WE will satisfy OUR curiosity and investigate it."

You're meddling! When I'm your husband that will change, H'ya haughtily and angrily thought, ignoring the fact that everyone in the council could read his thoughts as if he were speaking aloud.

The common courtesy to restrain such treads of thoughts was taught to all the inhabitants of Allint from childhood. His sister placed a hand over her mouth, stunned at the abusive tone and mistaken belief of power he had over the High Priestess and Queen.

The Queen, however, ignored him and continued, "In the temple's Seer's Pool I recognized one as seer and one as ...Kiuzi." Her lower lip, painted in bright red, curled up into a smile.

"Kiuzi!"

"Seer!"

Chaos erupted in thoughts and voices.

<be at peace> Queen M'Lu sent love to all in the room. "Hold your judgment until you know these people. Act as the enlightened spiritual beings that you are." Her voice held no rebuke or sharp reprimand. It was delivered as a gentle reminder and the sheepish expressions on the majority of the group who were generations older than the child queen, bespoke of their acceptance of her authority.

"A seer! A hag more than likely. So common," H'ya said. "We are the only ones to decide who will become Kiuzi on this planet." H'ya slammed his hand on the table. "You are being too bold to be giving these unseen visitors such honor! When I'm..."

"Be silent, little brother! You are the one being too rude. Your behavior is shameful even for shonae." V'Sasa, his older sister, looked aghast. "You need a cold dose of reality and a week at the ashram on Aegean instead of spending time in lavish comfort doing nothing but bragging with other idiots about what is not to be."

"He has a point about the Kiuzi. We..." L'marta began in defense of his friend.

"**We!**" B'Reah's voice boomed, breaking a rule to not interrupt a speaker. "We do not appoint Kiuzi. It is the Queen's right and her duty to support and see to their training." He effectively silenced the young Dwarf who promptly sat back in his chair frightened. "We aren't going to fall into such a seductive trap of taking on duties we don't have the depth for. It's taken us generations to undo the harm the previous misguided council caused." The elderly B'Reah shook his head in consternation. "We are only now enjoying the normal rhythm of the seasons from the last mistake."

The Queen, Guardian, and Sacred Jester exchanged looks. B'Reah expressed one of the reasons the group did not want to involve themselves with commoner's affairs. The collective feeling was that they were not strong enough to resist the temptation of overstepping their power. However, not all the clans felt this way, which was one reason why the emergency session was called. The Queen pursed her lips, knowing that this fear would have to be overcome in order for them to grow as a community to become mentors and teachers.

"I agree. If we don't have the discipline to follow daily the codes of behavior for Drusu living, then it's all the more important that we guard against our arrogance in dealings with those that aren't Drusian's." C'Opre directed a glare at L'marta and then at H'ya.

C'Opre continued, "Awareness of how power can and does corrupt led the ancient leaders, the Sha'Kar, to set up safeguards to protect their followers from themselves. One of these safeguards is the Kiuzi, and the other is the *Guidelines for Living Drusu*. It is one of the oldest works on Drusu, a spiritual way of life. You both should check out a copy for yourselves if you don't have one. And *we* all should give it another read."

"Well said," the group applauded C'Opre.

<be at peace> Queen M'Lu blessed. She stood up and the others rose as courtesy dictated. She waved them to sit down. "Aside from informing you of a disturbing reading, I have called you here to inform you of changes that are being made immediately."

"What do you mean *you* are making changes?" H'ya slapped both his hands on the table angrily, "By what right? You are but a child!"

Suddenly the room broke into angry rebuttals, voices shouting over others.

"*You*, H'ya, are the child...bringing a child's arrogance not even a good nanny would put up with to this meeting!" A'Nka rebuked heatedly.

"Ignorance! Nothing but a commoner! Throw him out!"

"How can he possibly live on Allint with such unconstraint?"

"H'ya! Be still, you ignorant fool!"

"Who is your teacher? He should be removed from any teaching position!"

"H'ya, you are full of gas! A two-week fast and complete body cleansing at the Pools of Chrevas is what you need!" It was B'Reah's favorite response to anyone that said something disagreeable to him. Two weeks at the Pools would take most a full season to recover.

H'ya was startled by all the voices rebuking him. "I will not be silent!" His young body was drawn up with indignant ire. "It is my clan right and her...her..."

All could feel his difficulty to declare himself her consort and even that was not made official. It was a reading at his presentation in the temple, which had yet to be acknowledged by the royal family.

He gulped his anger and frustration and finished, "and as her elder. M'Lu has dragged us here for no other preposterous reason than to dribble accusations at us about our Drusian practices as if she knows better." He raised his chin in outrage and clenched

his fists, not wanting to show weakness. "You are going mad like your mother!" he added further, his tone taking that of a child who is prone to mimic his elders.

The outrage in the room rose quickly, taking the form of a dark cloud. Guardian raised her staff, breaking the disruptive energy. The staff absorbed it and down through its shaft, it dissipated harmlessly into the floor.

<this is not the way of drusu> Queen M'Lu sent out to them all.

All but H'ya looked embarrassed.

The Queen resumed. "H'ya, your energy is so low that if Guardian were not protecting you, you would not be able to maintain a presence here. You have failed the first test I have placed before you. And by your present behavior, cousin," she paused but a moment, "you have failed the second." She nodded to the members that were standing looking shocked with the drama that was unfolding. "Everyone, but H'ya, please be seated.

"Serious charges are being brought against you, H'ya." She gestured Guardian to come forward. "As you know by the rules of the council, you must hear them out before you refute them."

Guardian moved to the left of the Queen.

H'ya would have sat back down had not an invisible hand held him in place, further enraging him.

"Be witness, all that are present! Witness! Charges and judgment will be brought forth," Guardian announced in a forceful voice, and then struck the floor eleven times with her staff. The thunk sent vibrations along the floor felt by those physically present.

The commander of the Kiuzy stepped out of the shadows to the right side of the Queen as the Guardian thumped her staff.

The members looked at each other surprised. L'marta was worried about his friend and tried to send supportive energy to him but found himself silenced.

"Charges are being brought against H'ya. The charges are as follows..." the Guardian paused until the anxious energy of the members subsided, "seditious actions against Arnica, Allint, and the way of Drusu. What have you found in your investigations Commander of the Kiuzy?"

"Evidence has been found that the accused *has* committed actions on all three counts." Commander O'Malley had not been given much time to gather the evidence but once it was known what to look for, it was insulting to his intelligence on how easy it was to find evidence of his actions. It aroused his suspicions that perhaps it was meant to be found, which confirmed his belief that there was a group focusing on undermining the House of Gei by bringing the family down, one by one. It was disturbing to the Kiuzi, for this had to be an inside job.

"Proceed with what you found," Guardian said.

"H'ya has been conspiring with confederates of the Black Alliance to disrupt the ley lines on Arnica and invade the Holy Grounds of the Sha'Kar. By these actions, and his present behavior in this meeting, the charges have been confirmed. I recommend he not to return to Allint for his own safety."

The others at the table were astounded at the charges. The Sha'Kar are saints to the followers of Drusu, and to some, given the status akin to gods. H'ya working with the Black Alliance? This they found difficult to believe, but then his present behaviors shamed them as Drusians.

A Drusian on Allint gone rogue. The significance of that possibility was frightening.

"Will you allow yourself to be tested for the accuracy and details of these charges, H'ya?" the Guardian asked.

"How dare you!"

Waves of H'ya's anger beat against the shielding around him, causing him to be nauseous, and escalated his dull headache into a stabbing pain. He knew if he concentrated, he could diminish it, yet he felt too weakened in strength to bring his mind to it.

Guardian tipped her staff after a few moments of no reply from H'ya. A shaft of light reflected from the prism of the large white jewel, touching the shell of energy that surrounded him, getting his attention.

"H'ya, since you have not opened yourself to be examined, it shall be done against your will." Guardian of the Council hit her staff once on the floor, and another jewel in the staff sparked and the first part of the protective wall around H'ya's thoughts dropped.

Another thump and another partition dropped. The thumps continued until H'ya's thoughts, wishes, and plans were revealed. The staff was aglow as it kept a steady flow of energy between the participants and the subject of their examination.

The Queen sat quietly holding a sense of calm in the room.

When the group was finished with their examination, Guardian rapped the floor eight times to announce the Queen's judgment.

"What you have been planning, H'ya is to bring chaos upon this planet for personal gain. One of the most grievous consequences of your goal would have been genocide to those on Allint." She wanted to say more, to see if she could get him to understand the depths to which he would have wounded the collective psyche of Arnica, but he was lost in his anger. The Queen signaled Guardian to continue.

"H'ya, from this day forward, you shall wander the continents as *shonae* until restitution has been met," Guardian read. "You shall know of nothing beyond what your fingers touch. With only another's eyes can you see again. Friendless until you become a friend. Voiceless until others are heard. Your family shall not contact you and you shall not contact anyone on Albason or those you had called friend. Do you accept these conditions for restitution?"

"Of course not! I won't be treated like a commoner. Shonae," he spat out in derision. "I'll sequester myself within the walls of...of...of the Ju'n cloister in Albason...and study with my teacher Ju'n T'La to raise my energy." H'ya wrapped his cloak about him, holding his trembling body safe in its folds, trying hard not to break down and cry.

"H'ya, why do you choose to return to those that have failed you?" his sister cried.

"You cannot make me leave. It's my birthright to live on Allint!"

"You can no longer physically reside on Allint," the Queen pointed out. "You obviously are a soul that is not ready for the role and responsibilities of what you mistakenly refer to as 'privilege of birth.'"

"The Ju'n will not let you!"

"You don't seem to grasp the reality of your situation. At your present level you can't step on Allint. You will become ash in a matter of moments and the process is painful as your cells are charged with energy they cannot withstand. For your own sake, I

will not allow it, my cousin," she told him firmly, knowing she was taking his free choice from him. Raising her voice, she announced, "WE are the Justice Maker. Justice shall be served until recompense is met. WE will remove the burden of this imagined duty from you until you are properly prepared." In his present state she realized he didn't understand that she gave him a chance to return.

"She cannot take away my birthright!" H'ya cried at the others. "She's....she's ...just a girl. She can't do this. She is to be my wife. She can't tell me what to do. It's not fair." He glanced frantically about him for an ally. Never in his pampered life had he felt panic at this level before.

Guardian rapped her staff ten times on the stone floor, the full count of the wheel of life as H'ya was half carried toward the door by Commander O'Malley, where two Kiuzi guards appeared to escort him out.

Guardian rapped the stones five times and then sounded bells no one could see, clearing the air, and bringing a different mood into the room.

The Queen was sitting quietly in her chair, her hands held in a peaceful mudra pose while the two stones denoting her status were glowing a soft green.

"The Queen shall pronounce judgment on the inhabitants of Allint!" Guardian announced.

Queen M'Lu rose from her seat, gesturing to the others to return to their seats. She gazed around the table studying each individual and sending out reassurance. She enfolded her hands in front of her as she rested her gaze on the second to the youngest member who was shivering in his chair.

"During the times of the continental wars," she began softly, "Allint was the first continent that succumbed to toxic contaminations that left over three fourths of the land unlivable. Allint at that time supported a noble race of beings called the Sha'Kar and those that wished to live among them. They were a peaceful group of people. They were noble in that they honored all living things as sacred and practiced what they called the Compassionate Way of Life, yet they were the first to be attacked by their warring neighbors. As the wars became more intense with no one safe from violence, illness, and despair, Allint was forgotten, hidden behind a veil of mists.

"Through the efforts of the surviving Sha'Kar and their followers, the continent recovered, and became transformed as did all life that lived on Allint's continent." Her eyes studied the young Dwarf, as his fear gave way to interest.

"When the warring factions' leaders reached a point where world annihilation was inevitable, the citizens called out to the Sha'Kar for help. The Sha'Kar felt their hearts' desire and gave conditions that first had to be met before they would intercede.

"A reasonable person would think the leaders would clutch at the peace branch to save themselves, their loved ones, and what was left of their lands, however, they had other goals. These selfish ones boasted they were the only ones that spoke to the divine, and only they knew the answers. They preached fixed destiny, elitism, savagery to those that did not conform, and a horrible death to those they counted as their enemy. Any citizen that stood up to them was killed or brutalized. These false prophets and speakers were collectively silenced by their peers to allow the Sha'Kar to help.

"It took many, many generations, more than Elf, Dwarf or XMasnians care to remember, to undo the poisons within and without Arnica, and her life forms. What was this energy they drew upon to create the changes? A community of love.

"All beings, not just those that practice Drusu, but all creatures, spirits and unnamed entities on this planet have a purpose. All things are sacred. It is the basic tenant of the Compassionate Way of Life. It's what our communion on Allint is about."

The Queen gazed around the table. "Just as there are many on Allint who are fervent Drusian's, there are also many inhabitants who have become lax in living as a Drusu community. Our whole purpose to Drusu living is to enable the planet to move through Itachi, to fifth density, from there to sixth. With enough of us keeping harmonious thoughts, the entire planet with all its life forms will move into a higher dimension. We must refocus our life practices to support our communal living on Allint."

Her lips curled up into a smile, humor reflected in her eyes.

"WE are reaffirming the rules and guidelines for all committees and organizations on Allint to strengthen our community. All leadership positions have rituals and tests. These will be followed without exclusion. All meetings and examinations shall be open for public viewing, as they were intended."

She had received enough messages from serious practioners of Drusu that the clans had been making their rituals closed to nonclan members, giving the sacred rituals a feeling of elitism. Now is the time to take action on this misguided practice.

The Queen held up her hand to stop any further conversation.

"I am sure you all are aware that in the guidelines each initiate must journey to the other continents to test her or his understanding of that level Drusu before moving to the next level." The Queen felt a ripple in the group's energy...anticipation. Much better than trepidation.

"WE are changing the basic method of journey for the beginning initiate for the time being. Instead of traveling alone or in a loose group of friends, it will be a group composed of three Drusu travelers and two Kiuzi trainees. The trainees will be one from the 7th level and one from the 9th level. By the new moon WE will have picked the first twenty-two groups, by the full moon the next twenty-two groups will be posted, and so on. WE are not saying that anyone who wishes to travel now cannot. WE suggest, whoever wishes to go now, to confer with a monk or spiritual teacher to assist in pinpointing what needs to be worked on. By the next meeting WE shall also have selected members to make up a full Kul Council and Supreme Council."

The room was vibrating with discomfort.

"WE, Queen M'Lu from the Royal House of Gei and High Priestess of the Beloved, have judged the inhabitants of Allint and have reaffirmed the mandate for **all** who wish to live as a Drusu community and for *any* who wish to reside in community on Allint."

"So, it will be done." Guardian's staff rapped five times on the stone floor. "In seven days, all present shall *physically* attend the Queen's palace in the throne room, where the declarations and the names of the first groups of travelers shall be announced. It is your duty to notify those that you represent on this council. The Council of Elders will be notified of this council's business by the honorable Ju'n S'Bo, as he has always been kind enough to do. This Supreme Council of Allint has come to an end by Queen M'Lu's order."

"May your hearts be enshrined in love," Priestess M'Lu blessed.

When everyone left but Sacred Jester and Guardian, the young Queen leaned back in her chair and regarded the two. "Come on, Ji'am it's not all that bad."

She wished her ceremonial regalia to disappear and the pantaloons and silk blouse returned.

"H'ya didn't even hear mindspeak," Ji'am said. He snapped his fingers and his jester uniform disappeared, with his usual daily wear.

Guardian's staff and guardian regalia disappeared and she was clothed once more in her daily wear.

"After he has adjusted to his new life away from those that spent a considerable amount of resources and energy to mislead him, he will raise to the level he has the potential to be," M'Lu said.

"His soul will have great depth of understanding on the frailties of succumbing to the trappings of power," Ji'am said.

"His soul has chosen this path of experiencing in one life-time selfishness and selflessness. Through this path he will be able to reach those considered lost," C'Lea said.

"As for Allint, there are enough inhabitants that have every intention of Allint remaining the spiritual community of this planet," M'Lu said with confidence.

M'Lu rose from her chair and went to stand at one of the windows, watching fat white puffy clouds move across the bright blue sky.

"What about the off-world soldiers?" Ja'im asked. "Their thoughts are like clashes of angry symbols in my skull."

"They are like a siren calling to those who cannot withstand the changing energy on Arnica, marking them with an easily seen scar on their 2nd body of energy," C'Lea said.

"And these are the ones WE will identify and assist," M'Lu said.

"Why are these two female strangers special?" C'Lea asked.

"They are accompanied by two Sha'Kars," M'Lu said calmly.

"Sha'Kars!" two voices said in unison.

M'Lu smiled at their excited expressions. "I cannot see any more than that."

"Once they are on Arnica, all on Allint will know of their presence!" Ji'am said.

"And most of Arnica. Their energy is quite distinctive," C'Lea said.

"Yes. It will cause a stirring on Arnica," M'Lu smiled. The wind moved the beads on the sides of her skullcap, tickling her cheeks. Casually she removed the head covering, enjoying the wind ruffling her hair. The Queen took a deep breath, appreciating the taste of the snow from the mountains and the chill it carried.

"The *trembling* is a fearful yet wondrous stirring in all life on all dimensions that lie close to Arnica. By opening the heart all can share in the experience. For those that fear abandonment in the chaos they are creating, they will lash out, and strike anyone that approaches them in compassion and aid. These souls shall mercifully move on. The trembling shall build into a wonderful boom, and within the sound new life *becomes* on Arnica," M'Lu said. "Ready yourselves to carry the sword of the Justice Maker and be not one to cover your eyes when your sword sets about the work of discernment. Be not righteous nor above anyone, for it will distance you from the moment."

She studied the two souls before her, seeing beyond physical and spiritual, looking long at what their burdens would be, and where she might be needed with a word or thought of encouragement, least they falter.

Ji'am nodded and bowed respectfully, "I'll see that those leaving the sacred land, due to the rising energy on restoring Allint not feel it is a disgrace nor does it have to be a permanent move. The monastery's will be busier than usual," he added with a smile.

When his footsteps were no longer heard on the stone steps C'Lea turned to her sister who returned to staring out at the snowcapped mountains on the island.

<we are facing an unfamiliar force that is threatening the lands of allint> M'Lu mind-thought to C'Lea.

<where do we begin to neutralize it>

M'Lu gave a slight nod at Commander O'Malley who had returned and took his usual position near the door.

"WE will reinforce the palace," she looked at O'Malley to let him know he was included in the conversation should he care to add something, "and then all things the royal household is responsible for, libraries, schools and other cultural displays. If the documentation and evidence of the life works of a civilization are destroyed it becomes a great wounding to the citizens' psyche."

"This is one of the lessons in all children of the realm's classes. To destroy the spirit of a group, undermine its culture, its myths, and heroes through misinformation, over expectation, deceit, and lies. Destroy its artworks, and ignore, subdue, or kill those that show talent. Divide and conquer by introducing a system where there are those that will always be looked down upon. Make it where few can rise above the mundane drudgery of their birth without a violent revolution. Make it where self-hate becomes an art that is honored, and pride decried as a vice. Make it where love becomes conditional, and elusive. And learning centers become burdened in rules and memorization with little time given to creativity, fun, and exchanging ideas," C'Lea listed. "Even if the citizens of Arnica were able to rise above Allint's destruction, it would take many lifetimes to undo the damage it would cause to all of Arnica."

"Yes." M'Lu took a seat at the table, resting her elbows on the table and chin in her hands, "I am suspicious, my beloved Lea, that a disruptive and ghastly energy is at work on Allint and that it is the cause of mother's condition."

C'Lea stood silent, but the eyes in her cap glittered as if a silent sentry was awakened. "Mother is possessed?" she asked slowly. "I don't feel it."

"Mother is a good *container*. In my meditations early this morning, I was taken to Father's grave on Teore." M'Lu extended her hands toward C'Lea. C'Lea took a seat and linked her fingers with M'Lu's.

"Walk with me, sister."

C'Lea's thoughts merged with her sister's and effortlessly, M'Lu took them to the gravesite of their father, a replay of the vision M'Lu had.

C'Lea gasped when she felt a malevolent energy near the grave and near their mother who had fallen asleep, leaning against her consort's gravestone with a book in her lap. Their mother visited the site once a week and read aloud something from her deceased consort's favorite books. A dark shadow descended on her unprotected form and the Queen had awakened with a cry. Both girls remembered that day well. Their mother had arrived back from her customary visit...changed...and withdrew to her room as if ill.

Both pulled back.

"What is it?"

M'Lu turned to O'Malley. "Since you did so much of the foot work on affirming what we discovered in the other realms, please brief Guardian, Commander."

"It is my honor to do so. This entity is something the first group of off-world colonists brought with them. Now it is what the black soldiers are feeding through their actions and thoughts. Not all these foreigners worship this thing but there are enough to sustain it, and now with the dark soldiers' actions its power is growing stronger. It has left various polluted resting spots on the 3rd continent and has one on Allint that the Ju'n has provided it."

"But mother..." C'Lea looked from one to the other worried.

"It does not command her, Lea." M'Lu made a blessing sign before continuing. "I believe she is containing it. We must find a way to get it out of her."

"Banishment ritual." Mentally C'Lea went over one that she knew to be especially powerful, hoping whatever had taken over her mother would be driven out.

"This creature is not from here and is not bound by what the spirits of this planet are bound by," Commander O'Malley explained.

"Therefore, not frightened by the same curses," M'Lu added, with a grin, knowing they didn't practice curses. "I don't want to loosen it to roam unrestricted."

"Can we communicate with it or with mother?"

"I don't want to communicate with it, and I dare not with mother. If she opens to us it may let that thing in too."

"Then we must get someone that can."

"The Sha'kar the two women have brought with them will have the solution."

"Why not ours?"

"Because they are in meditation on the 5th density, keeping the path cleared for us. I don't wish to disturb them unless it's utterly necessary."

"Nor I," Commander O'Malley agreed.

"What if they don't help us?"

"Then we will have the entire continent of Allint to pray for guidance. Right now, Allint needs to become rededicated in her inhabitants' heart. A regiment of monks on the outer islands in the ashrams that are uncontaminated are already at work cleaning the ley lines on Allint, and whatever surrounding islands that are contaminated. They will

monitor the cleansing to make sure it rises at a rate that will not scorch those that are reluctant to leave and unwisely remain."

"When you make your announcements in the Queen's Hall, some may challenge your proclamations."

M'Lu smiled. "Following the meeting in the Queen's Hall, WE have sent royal invitations for twenty-two learned peoples from the various continents to meet for a common purpose. They will recertify what makes a good teacher, with the monks from Heloise, whose reputation is indisputable, giving their input, and WE shall also contribute." She grinned mischievously. "The best part of all this is that this gathering will be done in public and anyone that wishes to partake may. This shall be a carnival atmosphere. WE will have satires, plays, and clowns to poke at all self-delusions and pompous displays. It will not be limited to Allintan's performing, so there shall be some very good satires. WE have sent a message to the I'un clan to have it held in Chinland in the city the Ju'n had commandeered from them and contaminated enough to have lowered the energy so any commoner can visit. That will certainly get a message across to the peoples of Allint."

"And to those that wish to invade Allint. Mother would say you are throwing down the proverbial gauntlet. Gauntlet. Just what it is we are throwing down?" she asked Commander O'Malley.

"A warrior's glove, Guardian," he said.

"Why does a warrior throw down a glove?"

"It's an indication a warrior wishes to challenge another."

"I used it correctly then." C'Lea looked pleased. "It is exactly what you are doing, M'Lu. Assure me you are not taking on more than what you can handle. As you said, Commander O'Malley is quite stretched himself."

"WE know how to delegate, and WE know when to let things develop on their own," M'Lu said. "WE have determined what off-world technology to render unusable on Arnica and what will remain as it is to be used for better or for worse. There are lessons that will benefit some on Arnica and the off-worlders in the long-run though the lessons will be harsh. During the time that WE are in Chinland, you must remain at mother's side."

That is when this dark one will make a consorted effort with the Ju'n to slay mother, thinking she is alone."

"Kill her!"

"This entity needs mother's power. I feel it wishes to claim her physical body and some of her worldly power. Have courage sister. That will not happen."

"I hope you're right. How will you combat a whole clan and this thing? They know you."

"They do not know ME. And they do not know you...or mother. They have tried. I have sensed them trying to enter my dreamtime when I sleep outside of the palace. I have sent them on wild chases through the woods, believing that it was my dream they were in. And WE are not alone."

C'Lea stared hard at her sister. "That is why you told me not to sleep anywhere but, in the palace, and at our farmhouse and to always have five Kiuzu guards with me."

"WE did not know at the time who had the arrogance to attempt to invade OUR dreams. WE realized it had to be a group because no one person on this planet is strong enough to penetrate OUR barriers, whether WE are asleep or awake. They are foolish in their disdain of OUR energy. They hold onto their male pride as an old man to his flaccid member as he gazes at what he could have been."

It was a phrase their mother often used when referring to T'La and his remarks regarding the all-female Royal Household. The three laughed.

"Mother's method of handling this entity shows us that it is containable, and that she does not wish to do it harm, but it takes all her energy and attention."

"Sometimes, I think they are very ignorant, bordering on stupid," C'Lea said exasperated.

"They are not so stupid to have thought of this and it has been planned very well," Commander O'Malley cautioned.

"What they did not anticipate were the off-worlders sending anyone to remove the dark soldiers, their prize weapon of distraction. They also did not believe WE would figure out that mother is not demented but rather holding this entity. Though the Ju'n are not the only one's involved, they are responsible for the contamination of the ley line beneath Allint. WE can feel their influence. There are also scattered pockets on the 3rd

continent that have their feel. They have been practicing for a long time before they tried it on Allint. It has been these contaminated pockets that the off-world colonists have settled around and where the black soldiers set up their fortress."

"How have they been able to hide this from us, from the monks, from anyone? And how are they managing to set up a stronghold in the sacred cavern?" C'Lea asked.

"Off-world technology," Commander O'Malley said.

"It seems we are piloting a boat on a stormy sea, and we have to keep pausing in bailing out the water to see what direction we're heading." C'Lea looked into her sister's eyes. She realized that though she identified her as her sister, Queen, and High Priestess, and though she thought she was someone familiar to her, M'Lu was more than the roles she filled, living in more than one dimension and assimilating information that as Guardian, she knew of only a small amount. The eyes that stared back at her were more than pools of power. They were the readers of the signposts to get Arnica to the next point in it's enlightened development.

C'Lea smiled at her sister, feeling centered again. "I feel that there is so much more to learn. I just wish mother was here to give her words of guidance and assurance."

"And to think we both were thinking, before mother changed, that she should let us have more responsibilities."

Both laughed at themselves and silently sent blessings to their mother.

"How did an entire clan become corrupted without any of us noticing? This took a lot of planning and setting the atmosphere for it to not be noticed – long before the off-worlders brought their weapons," C'Lea said.

"Yes. Now that WE have parted the right veil, WE can see many plots and petty retaliations that have fed this harmful energy. It has been covered by distractions, like the increasing incidents of seemingly random violence, nonsensical destruction of property, and the taking of life on the other continents. Everyone with different reasons and issues are responsible. Unhappy spirits and waifs from generations past have been at work here as well. They found a way in through the energy around the gates linking planets; thus, their entrance from their planets to ours. This destructive energy has a foreign entity guiding it that WE cannot fathom. WE must practice Justice Making. WE fight, yes, but on OUR terms, with empathy and justice for those that are hurt." M'Lu appraised her

older sister and best friend. "We are lucky Mother trained us both for our positions so early in our development. It makes me believe she knew of this thing's coming, and this was the way she chose to handle it."

"Then we shall," C'Lea said softly.

"Let's prepare with a cleansing ritual. The monks have started the preparation. Be has assigned himself and his grandmother, Mi, as our guardians for this experience." M'Lu smiled at her sister. "We shall walk from this temple truly as translucent as the alabaster jar on auntie's table."

Commander O'Malley quietly followed the two sisters to the baths, deep in his own thoughts of the disturbing increase of violence on their beloved planet, Arnica.

* * *

H'ya was
and two of his
waiting at the docks.
unfamiliar heaviness
there was deafness
he had one time
annoyed he had been



escorted by the Commander
warriors to a boat that was
H'ya was not himself. An
weighed him down and
from things around him that
heard. The memory of how
at the buzzing of an insect

happy at it's work was angrily brushed aside. The silence of the plants he brushed by was met with more anger that he no longer could hear their humming to the ground that gave it nourishment and the air that played a part in their growing.

The Kiuzi were to deliver H'ya to the small village Sha that sprung up around the temple Reatrate. Queen M'Lu determined this was where H'ya was to begin his life of restitution.

Chapter 2



The carnival in Chinland was overflowing with visitors on its second day of shows and open discussions. The Queen was in council with the twenty-one heads of the clans who had requested an audience to speak with her.

There would have been twenty-two, but it was the Ju'n clan the others wished to discuss, so they were excluded amid dramatic objections and most shocking of all, threats from the Caladia's clan leader, Ju'n D'Ede.

A'un K'Zar, from the mountainous lands in central Allint, Buckestar, was the clan leader to Catalls and chosen as the speaker. B'un J'Saf, from the foothills and mountains in Maidenslands was attended by his four nieces that were training as leaders amongst the scattered urls. They were Benitians who, like the Micas, wandered as nomads, but unlike the Micas, loved the mountains instead of the open plains. The Centaurs were represented by their clan leader C'un M'Iso from the farming community in Hutsvilee. D'un L'Mat from the northern state of Breetmound was clan leader for the species that was part Coripus and Zanzars. Clan leader E'un J'Ara from Tulose on the Northern coast represented Malalise. F'un D'Jon from Lankershire, a state on the Eastern shores was clan leader to the mixed species of Human and Maligro. G'un B'Jam, the clan leader to the Elfs, was from the land called Finhorn covered mostly by forests and deep rivers and had two of the highest waterfalls on the continent. H'un A'Kade was from the farming regions in the central lands and was newly elected clan leader to the mix Micas and Human. I'un R'Sey from the western state that ran along the entire coastline, Chinland, was seated on a tall mound of cushions. As the host to the other species, she sat higher than everyone but the Queen. She was a Heliodrop.

The chair for Clan leader Ju'n D'Ede of the species Caladia was empty.

K'un L'Ora clan leader to the Cowashian, produced some of the most loved artists. They lived in the desert where few cared to experience. L'un E' Loo, clan leader of the Humans was assisted to his seat by his wife who gave him last minute instructions no doubt, which he took with seriousness, each touching in a caring way as they parted. M'un E'lle, the youngest clan leader was Coripus, a species that would rather do business in the dark. The noble N'un H'ana of the Centaurs, secretary for this meeting tossed his

tail as he waited impatiently for the members to take their seats. Clan leader O'un N'Emo of the species Masnians was dusting his seat as if he had something to clean off. P'un N'ella, species Gustian greeted his neighbors then proceeded to greet each member, with a slight bow who returned his greeting their own way. Q'un A'Vian, a Breatharian, was holding onto his staff tapping it impatiently. R'un K'Anda clan leader of the Dwarfs carefully brushed his long beard under the table before he took a long deep drink of the water before him. Most of his clan lived inside of the mountains in caves and tunnels, some natural and some they created. K'Anda's arrival was well looked for by Queen M'Lu. When she and her sister were younger, he had entertained them with wonderful tales from his species memory of exploits on other planets. S'un H'Elm, his clan, forest people as much as the Elves, was from the species Pan. The Queen had never heard of a Pan that didn't play the flute with a hypnotic lure to dance, to quiet a restive mind, or to invoke anger and fear. They were a powerful enemy to anger. T'un L'Ean, from the royal line, was Zanzar as the Queen. Since the Sha'Kar, her species found the higher realms of spirituality easier than most to attain and fell the hardest when they went rogue. Next to Clan leader L'Ean was Clan leader U'un H'Anzu. Most of his clan was scattered about the continent in rocky areas. Gnomes liked the rocky areas, because few did. They also settled in grasslands, near bridges that covered slow moving streams. They could grow anything anywhere and were sought after by those having any problems growing herbs and flowers. V'un C'Luna, species Maligro, was the last to be seated. She pulled her elegant robes close to her and nodded to K'Zar that she was ready. Though she was the elder of her clan, she took an active role in teaching the young, and not just of her clan. Everyone suspected one of her students made her late to the meeting, and none harbored resentment.

A'un K'Zar rapped the table five times with his great knuckles. He had no need of anything more solid. "This meeting, with the Queen's blessings and consent, will begin. It is closed to anyone else that attempts to enter this sacred circle."

"Aruuuunnn!" the group growled, screeched and hummed, combining their energies to close the circle. The Queen's blessing followed, silent on one level but heartfelt on another. They all knew when she had finished the blessing.

"I want to start this meeting by stating what we all have noticed!" A'un K'Zar started gruffly, not using mindspeak since it did not carry the emotion of anger as well as he wanted to. "This place is a black spot on our honor and integrity as...."

"Don't drag it out, just say it!" E'un J'Ara shouted at him outraged. "It's been contaminated! Commoners can visit it without any side effects, and I don't mean to put down the honorable teachers you have summoned, my Queen..."

The Queen nodded for him to go on.

"Let me handle this, Honorable E'un J'Ara," A'un K'Zar interrupted. "We need to do something about this."

"And clean it up," I'un R'Sey, the hostess spoke quietly.

The others nodded.

"We all feel the touch of the Ju'n in this and for that, we have banned them from this meeting until we reach an agreement on what to do with them," A'un K'Zar spoke.

"The whole clan!" N'un H'ana the centaur said, stamping his feet and snapping his tail in agitation, causing those around him to move their seats out of reach of the swishing tail. "The whole clan has fallen! It does not bode well for any of us that should have noticed something amiss in traveling across their lands or touching a ley line."

"Who would want to travel across their lands? When was the last time they opened their doors to a weary traveler or offered a ride anywhere? They always say they are busy. Even their young are very unDrusian," L'un E' Loo mentioned. Others nodded in a mixture of morose and resentment.

L'un E'Loo raised a limb to be noticed by the Queen. "We have all heard your announcements and we all agree that we have been lax in living the compassionate way in communion with each other. I have sent the elders of my clan out to all our villages to help those who need encouragement and reminders, on all continents we reside on that we are a community. As telepathic beings there should be no separation in our hearts no matter what level of life one walks."

The others nodded and affirmed what L'un E'Loo said with applauding. The Queen held up a hand. The noise halted abruptly.

"I would like to reiterate an important point that honorable E'Loo has made. Those on Allint need to dissolve separation of people by species and clan. I read in the

early times of Allint that villages were composed of mixtures of species, and clan separation was something that was more of the norm on the other continents. Now it's reversed. I believe our behaviors have encouraged separatism from each other, and disdain for those we refer to as commoners. In shonae villages, towns and farmlands, they do not live segregated as a species or clans as much as we on Allint do. I have also overheard that mixed species that do not fulfill some type of member total are not recognized as clans...such as the Elf and Human mix or the..." she stopped, having got the point across.

"Do you mean we are to have no more clan elders?" R'un K'Anda of the Dwarfs rumbled.

"It would be a milestone," she admitted with a big smile. "How do you elect those to represent you now?"

V'un C'Luna laughed. "Whoever can best me in a contest of Tori'unmp!"

"Not many will want to fight with you!" V'un C'Luna the pan retorted. "I'll pipe you to sleep!"

The others laughed, for he was the chief piper of his clan.

"WE see this contamination of Allint done by some very influential entities many of whom are members of the Ju'n clan. However, it is to be treated following the Way of Drusu," she reminded them. "So, how do you propose the handling of this problem?"

The group looked at each other but offered nothing, knowing their Queen had more to say.

"As High Priestess, my burden upon you all is to be Justice Makers. I will leave you all to work out what is right for members who have stumbled. When the moon is at its zenith tonight, I will return to hear what you all have to say." Each member and their retainers felt she looked into their hearts.

"My heart to yours," she blessed.

* * *

C'Lea paced the courtyard watching her mother as she played in the water. As Guardian of the teachings of Drusu, she researched all philosophical ideas that were not Drusu, which meant she lived that teachings way of life during her study. It was her responsibility to know various belief systems in order to empathize with the people on

Arnica. It was from one of these old beliefs that she understood what her mother was holding. Additional help from her spirit guides, and the spirits of her ancestors, were summoned to give her mother further support in holding this 'appalling' creature. The monks projected a bubble of protection around the courtyard to prevent anything from entering or leaving, from any direction.

The hairs on her arm stood up as another type of energy attempted to separate from her mother's. It was dark and bulbous. Then her mother turned to the entity and exerted her will to pull it back toward her. Where the creature had loosened itself, the flowers in the garden near the Queen Mother wilted. C'Lea concentrated on her mother, sending waves of love and strength. The creature, perhaps not finding a way out, returned to her mother. Once again, her mother sat down and resumed her drawing of circular patterns in the dirt, adding water from a small can and studying the way the water wound around the spiral pattern.

C'Lea waited.

One of the monks came hurrying toward her. "It has been held. We have succeeded. We know of it now."

C'Lea looked back at her mother and nodded.

He was disappointed that they couldn't do more.

"Let her out of the bubble. Some fresh air will do us all some good."

* * *

Ten days later Commander O'Malley was waiting for Queen M'Lu to finish with her early morning business.

"Come, Commander. So, what did I interrupt you from this time?"

"Your humble servant left his unworthy troops in the middle of a dressing down. I'm sure they feel gratitude that I was called away by our beloved Queen."

Queen M'Lu laughed. He was referring to the new recruits from the other continents. Recruits chosen for training showed talents in manipulating the unseen. When the Queen Mother was still ruler, she, her consort, and *her* commander thought it best for these young souls to be taught the moral foundation of a Kiuzi warrior.

Kiuzi are warriors of the highest caliber of warfare training, some rising from the mundane duties to spirit realms. The commander and his staff weeded out those not able

to rise in the training ranks. Those that fail do not leave humiliated but rather skilled and trained in something they can make a living at.

"How do they look?"

"A few good hopefuls in this bunch. Most seem to be just looking for job training. We found a few that were spies for the dark soldiers... easily spotted."

"How did your Kiuzi take your orders that the trainees are to accompany the traveling students?"

"Very well, my Queen."

Her raised eyebrows encouraged him to elaborate.

"I did not feel any inquiries. Kiuzi obey their Queen's wishes without question. As for the trainees, they showed a great deal of enthusiasm for the opportunity. They want to emulate and live the life of Kiuzi amongst the commoners." He chuckled with a deep and rumbling sound. "Their pride at mimicking a Kiuzi is going to bring them rude awakenings as they shall find it isn't as easy as they think when they are surrounded by others that don't live with Kiuzi values. As for the 8th and 10th levels, they are restless, but they are not yet Kiuzi. This is good for their training."

"Of course," she remarked dryly. "I have two more jobs that need your immediate attention."

The commander's left eyebrow rose with the right pulled low. He purposely did that to make the Queen laugh, taking delight in reminding the young girl that life did not need to be so tedious and serious.

"The visitor that is a Kiuzi warrior." She studied her commander to see if he resented her announcement that the off-worlder was a Kiuzi. There was only curiosity.

He nodded for her to go on.

"How do you feel about training her to our ways?"

"Why, my Queen?"

The Queen knew he would do it because she had instructed him to, but she could feel his need to know why it was important to deviate from tradition. "She is every bit of a Kiuzi – but one from the old days. Remember the tales of the old warriors?"

The commander nodded. The Queen was alluding to the times when the original Kiuzi were made up of people who were more involved in material matters than their

Drusu Masters. They were dedicated to protecting the masters, and if it meant giving their physical life up to prevent a master from becoming contaminated with something on the mundane world, then they would do so willingly.

That included taking another's life.

Nowadays, the Kiuzi were dedicated to the Queen and under her direction and rules. By her direction they were to learn all matters of warfare, both on the physical realm and spirit. Their task was to not seek violence to defeat the enemy, but to find another way. The House of Gei's motto was "Know your enemy as well as you know yourself, and show both, discernment and empathy."

The Queen scratched the tip of her nose, a sign to the commander that she found the situation amusing. "Like her bondmate, WE must keep her safe until she is needed to fulfill her destiny with the dark soldiers. But she must be a full Kiuzi warrior or Arnica will suffer from her instinctual reactions. She has visited many different planets as a soldier, living a very hard life, always at war...*taking lives* for political reasons, and suffering for it."

The commander nodded with understanding. "Family gatherings have many recounting stories of life shortly after the 2nd war. There were many warriors that were in battle for so long they didn't know how to be among non-warriors. They lusted for the taste of blood and violence. We lost many members to this darkness."

"You understand very well," she said.

"What of her mate?"

The Queen's lips curled up into a smile. "Her mate is like autumn's leaves, green eyes and orange hair. They both hear mindspeak and the Kiuzi warrior's bondmate practices the compassionate way."

"So, not just a Seer. Good thing you didn't mention that at the meeting. Her mate being a Kiuzi warrior was bad enough."

The Queen giggled as a young girl would, and then continued in a more serious note. "Do you have a warrior to introduce her to OUR ways?"

Their eyes met with understanding.

"You don't know where and when they will appear?"

"The veil will not be parted to show me. Something is protecting them. I do know they will arrive separately and at different locations, on the same continent. When they are on Arnica, I will be able to sense more. Remember that each is accompanied by a Sha'Kar, so be most careful, my commander."

"I would like to see just what stuff these off-worlders have to call themselves warriors."

"Commander O'Malley, you should be careful what you ask for. If they are accompanied by Sha'Kar, they are also being mentored by them. My second request." The Queen paused, "Ju'n L'Gro is mentoring one of the trainee groups."

"Yes, a small detachment from the 10th level." His tone indicated he wasn't in favor of the arrangement yet hadn't worked out how to change the situation.

"Were you aware that L'Gro trained for the Sacred Jester's role since he was a child?" The commander shook his head. "It takes incredible skill to tap into minds without being detected. It is a sacred role that requires a person to be above personal agendas. He failed the first test."

Commander O'Malley lifted an eyebrow. "It must be a well-guarded secret. Not good for someone who studied all his life for the position. His family must also have been affected."

"The Ju'n elders believe they can teach anyone to fill any sacred position."

"Your majesty, I had thought that these positions are announced by the Oracle at the infant's presentation in the temple."

"Yes. After L'Gro's failed his testing he traveled. When he returned five errs later he trained to be master teacher for Kiuzi trainees at 10th level, again challenging the established structure."

"The final level one needs to pass to become Kiuzi," the Commander affirmed looking thoughtful. "After studying jester tricks, and then five years of wandering the other continents, no doubt practicing his skills on the unwary, that leaves him with more skills in manipulating minds than I would care to have for someone I have not cleared. I don't suppose you would happen to know who his mentor was for his trip."

"His father."

"Ju'n L'Setti. He no longer lives on Allint." By the commander's tone, he was happy he did not have to waste his time with L'Setti's constant demands for meetings on matters that were of other's responsibilities.

"He no longer lives. He died a few months after L'Gro's return to Allint." The Queen made a blessing sign and whispered the blessing on a soul that had passed over a threshold.

"I was away when he took over the task of training the group he has. Odd that his father should die. He wasn't old."

"The leader of the clan at the time was Ju'n Shapa and his explanation was that L'Setti was on a spiritual retreat and became entranced while sitting on the edge of the cliff and fell."

"You don't believe that entirely?"

"He was taking a hallucinogen and believed he could fly."

The commander's eyes opened wide. "Did clan leader Ju'n Sha say why he was tripping?"

"He didn't say he was tripping. It was through my own investigations that I found he was reverting to the old days of using hallucinogens."

"So..." The commander shifted uneasily. "Just what was your majesty's second request?"

She pursed her lips, trying not to smile. "I want you to step up the training of the group L'Gro has dishonestly taken to be trained on the Ju'n's island. Keep them off balance while beginning their reeducation. Most of all, keep them from any contact with L'Gro. He has been ordered to appear before the new magistrate of teachers to prove his worthiness to mentor Kiuzi trainees. I believe he will make an attempt to claim the trainees as soldiers for his clan, thinking they can have their own facsimiles of Kiuzi warriors."

"Not possible," her commander objected.

"Yes. Only through the final sacred ritual created so many lifetimes ago, make a Kiuzi warrior. The Ju'n leaders fail to understand that sacred fire. However, they have stolen away a 10th level, rather than starting at the lower ranks, so they are mistakenly believing in their powers of persuasion over rituals to give them their own warriors that

can power the sacred crystals in a warrior's tools. I don't want them to be pawns used for cannon fodder." The young queen looked up at her commander frowning. "Did I use that term correctly?"

The commander nodded, grinning. "Yes, my Queen. An old military term, but still used by the rank and file. It is very apt for this situation. Well, this is an assignment that I shall relish. That group calls themselves Stalking Greou. I think it's time they go on their *singu* and meet with this spirit guide of theirs. I have just the leader for the *singu*. Group leader Maori. He and his troop, the Blue Mumbua, are assigned to work with the traveling monks. I will combine the two groups for their *singu*."

"A *singu*. That indeed is stepping up their lessons." She was quiet for a few moments, then nodded. "Group Leader Maori is a good pick for leader."

"I suspect the Blue Mumbua have met their spirit guides already," the commander shared, barely suppressing his pleasure. "Their close involvement with the monks has escalated their training. Two days ago, the monk Falore, their guide, has requested they be tested early for Kiuzi status. I gave them clearance to visit the caves to select their crystals with Falore acting as their guide. I will send the two to the dark lands of Dlecore."

"Dlecore? You are certainly going to have a seasoned group if they survive that experience." She smiled then. "Dlecore will be a further test in Blue Mumbua's leadership abilities by how they interact with the Stalking Greou group." She pursed her lips and nodded at her commander's choice. "Those of the Stalking Greou that pass through this trial..." she left the rest unsaid.

The commander bowed to her, honored at her acknowledgement of his plan.

Queen M'Lu smiled. "At the level they are, they shouldn't fail, regardless of L'Gro's influence. But if some should, everyone learns something from their mistakes. For them, select new mentors from Ittisu's school."

Commander O'Malley looked doubtful.

"You think they are too isolated in their monastery to know how to interact with people with real problems," she spoke for him. "It is a handy belief to use to OUR advantage. The Black Alliance and their supporters do not feel threatened when they are used as provo judges, and that illusion is maintained with the restitutions they met out."

Restitutions that are humorous leaves everyone involved satisfied at the outcome. The Sacred Jester is their mentor." She smiled when the commander looked further surprised. "When some of them are used as mentors to the 10th level trainee, the Black Alliance agents will believe they are naïve and not up to the task, and therefore will not be so vigilant with monitoring their mentoring or *singu*. As for the Ju'n clan. I foresee they will have other worries as their leaders face the consequences of the path they had taken. The ones that are not part of the conspiracy will be able to go on with their lives without dishonor. It will be OUR wish. "

"They have eyes and ears in Kiuzi business," O'Malley started heatedly, seeing the image of Ju'n sympathizers in his regiment that the Queen had projected to him.

"It is a few misguided captains." Her invisible touch on his forehead reminded him to be present and inner calmness was restored immediately. "You have ten that are working for the Ju'n, each with good intentions. It is the erroneous proverbial ancient belief that the results justify the means. They feel WE are not handling the Black Alliance with enough force and that set them up for L'Gro's manipulations. If they knew they were part of the network of agencies that the Black Alliance was using, they would be horrified."

Commander O'Malley frowned, for it did appear that he was not vigilant with those under his command.

"We all learn as we go. It has been a long time that we have had to fight the enemy within our camp. A rotation of duty would be a simple resolution. The captains at the monasteries can be replaced with those that have been influenced by the Ju'n. I understand it will mean whole families being resettled and many will feel put out."

Commander O'Malley made a noise of agreement.

"Under the proper tutelage they will all adjust. As with the effort to undermine H'ya it is part of the larger plan to undermine the Queen's guards."

"Removing support, isolating the Royal family," he agreed. "It is the basic attack plan. We all should have seen this. It is a learning experience I shall be sure to impress upon the troops." He bowed to her. "I'll see to all this business...and a cleansing under the monk Sonwan's guidance for all of us," he reported gruffly.

"Oh, my. You certainly do want to make amends. Please, not on my account," she teased as she watched a slow blush creep up the commander's neck. "Send out the Queen's Guard to investigate the continents. Don't wait for the transfers to be completed. It is important to see what the regiments they oversaw do. When they get back their new captains will have settled in with their families and ready to concentrate on getting acquainted with their troops. I'm sure there will be different priorities they need to focus on."

"Yes. Protocols they have forgotten My Queen; however, if I send away those that I trust, who will protect you and the Palace?"

"WE will take care of that. You worry that some may have found it preferable to live off Allint?" the Queen asked.

"Maybe not the captains, but family members. I will see that the transition is monitored closely so there is assistance given where it is necessary."

"Not too much assistance. Without struggle, there is nothing learned."

The commander bowed and left.

Chapter 3

As the airship dropped lower, continuing its descent into the first city where a group of Kiuzi would be deployed, Commander O'Malley knew by the quietness in the troop plane that they were uneasy about something. He had yet to tell them anything. He didn't want to chance a spy feeling their excitement.

"Kenta."

The officer rose from his seat and leaned in to hear his commander.

"Yes, Commander?"

"The saplings and oak tree are in danger," he murmured.

Kenta's expression didn't change, but with a new purpose he moved back with the others. When all the groups were deployed O'Malley knew nothing could stop the Golden Monkey Squad from returning to the Palace without even a Drusian knowing of their presence. They had been trained by the best, the Queen Mother, before her strange illness. They had been on a routine training mission on another continent when the Queen Mother had been infected. It wasn't their pride or shame for not being present when the Queen Mother was stricken that gave them heavy hearts, for they knew there were lessons to be learned. The heavy hearts were because the Queen Mother needed to face her darkest hours alone. Their assignment to return to protecting the Queen Mother was their greatest joy, affirming that her walk in darkness may nearly be at end.

O'Malley's eyes gleamed in the darkness about his upcoming side trip. He had not visited his parent's yurt since rising to the rank of commander of the Queen's guard. Who better would know of the goings on on all continents but his wandering tribe?

In his mind he could see the aul set up in a valley. Smoke rising from the scattered yurts, and small groups of people moving about their daily work. He pictured the children descending upon him, riding aggressively on their mounts at the presence of a stranger in their midst, mimicking the warriors they would grow to be.

He would be a stranger.

He had not visited the aul since his grandmother's death. She had sent him a vision of her impending death, calling him to her before she passed into the next realm. He had brought the sacred fan she had asked him to hold for her. The feathers in the fan

were from her sacred animal's plumage. It was to be presented to the next high priestess. For her own reasons, she had entrusted it with him for seven errs.

The feathered fan had been given to Celene, granddaughter to the widow Elda. Elda was his grandmother's helper and close friend since childhood. Celene became assistant to the priestess when Elda became too old.

The image of Celene evoked feelings with the commander that he had thought would have faded after all these years. She braided her hair unlike any in the clan, causing her to be viewed as an outsider. His grandmother interpreted this individuality as a necessary characteristic for being a high priestess and so her training began at the young age of five.

O'Malley loved Celene the first day he set eyes on her and knew then that he would never love another. Celene would not take a husband and being that she was not a vision of physical beauty to most eyes, her decision did not cause a stir. Who she loved, O'Malley didn't know, nor cared to. Since it was new moon, he knew she would not be at the camp. For the priestess it was a time of prayers and meditation, which required fasting and isolation.

Stepping out of the airship, he nodded to his pilot who handed him his travel pack.

"Commander, don't let the back-draft spin you." Captain Ernai smiled at the uplifted eyebrow of his commander.

"If I get any back-draft, I'll send you on a tail spin you won't forget," he returned in mock indignation. He slung his pack, settling it comfortably between his shoulder blades, and started his ground eating lope toward the first hill rise. The url was two slopes over; however, he was sure the url guards had spotted the airship, noted the insignia, and word of his arrival to his parents had already been made. He, who had not ridden for at least an er, would be sore the next day if his father sent him a mount to ride into their camp.

His eyes lifted as he came abreast the first tree and stopped at the sight of the tall woman. If it was Celene, she had changed.

Both nodded to each other and then the tall woman gestured in the direction she wanted him to go. He shook his head, no. He could feel the approach of horses shaking

the ground under his feet, and when he looked toward their direction the woman disappeared.

Intrigues.

The horses were pulled to a stop, dust rising in the air.

"Ho! Stranger! State your clan!"

"Kiuzi!" he shouted back at the small figure that tried to sound fierce.

"And what is Kiuzi?" a deeper voice asked disdainfully.

O'Malley smiled to himself and let the challenges go on until finally his father and two younger cousins, who he was sure felt honored at being allowed to come for the meeting, stepped into view leading an extra mount. However, he had already decided he wasn't going to ride.

He examined his father's weathered face in the mid-afternoon light. His face appeared old, but he walked as an agile warrior, and was not favoring his left leg as he did the last time he had visited.

"My father, I greet you, and ask for the courtesy of sharing the warmth of your family and cover of your yurt if there is room." He bowed slightly.

"Humph! You don't have a tent in that pack on your back?"

"I do. However, it's not big enough to fit my father, whom I'm sure will like to spend the night telling tales of the tribe to his long absent son, and for his wife and family who would like to make sure he's telling stories with some truth to them."

Hakon slapped his son on the shoulder and laughed. "Come then! The campfires are burning, though not as much as your mother's curiosity. She stayed behind to make sure your favorite foods would be ready; otherwise she would have ridden out here herself." His voice was full of pride, both for his son and his absent wife.

Hakon seemed to know that his tall son preferred walking and strolled beside him handing him the reins of the extra horse to lead. Hakon waved his hands at the young boy and girl. "They are from Namid's aul. Amalia and Taro. He wishes them to be Kiuzi warriors and hoped I could get them in on your next draft."

The two men exchanged personal news as they climbed the hill into the forest. O'Malley's childhood knowledge of forest ways was still fresh as familiar sounds and smells linked to plant and animal life that formed an ecosystem in the thriving forest

community. As they moved out of the forest O'Malley could see the messenger flash a signal to the top of the next hill of their approach. O'Malley frowned. It was too obvious.

His father noted his son's expression. "Payton, your mother's sister's son, has taken it upon himself to train the youth on the art of defense."

"Mette? What is his experience?" O'Malley could not remember Mette being interested in anything outside of his immediate family.

"None," his father answered with a smirk. "Mette has read, however, and spoke with various visitors that have passed through."

"What happened to Ozark or Melosa?"

"We don't know." His father's voice took on a deeper tone.

"What?" O'Malley's voice dropped low and the tenseness of the question raised the hairs on the back of the old man's neck.

"They disappeared. First one, then the other. We sent out hunting parties but found nothing. Not a trace. No marks. Horse and rider...gone." His father made a sign to ward off evil.

"What does the priestess say?" he asked, suddenly remembering the orange haired woman that greeted him at the edge of the forest.

"At first Celene counseled us to stay in pairs, just as we have always done, and not to go off with any strangers. Now, she counsels we travel in groups of five or more. About those missing, she says they are behind a veil she cannot see past; however, they are still alive but, in another dimension, or time line. They must need their skills badly to take them from us. May their needs be taken care of quickly and their return be in the best of health as when they were borrowed."

"Have any of the other urls reported this same problem? And when did this happen?"

"It was about two errs ago that I noticed at the family gatherings, that people of importance were missing. But nothing is said about it as if speaking of it will bring the same fate to them. Bahh. They are like children hiding beneath their blankets as if a monster will not know they are there. They shiver so hard under their cover they will be seen."

O'Malley's lips thinned at hearing his father's frustration with the clan leaders. "Is Celene still in retreat?"

His father glanced at him and smiled. "Yes. She told us of your coming, so we were waiting for you. Young Surl noticed the air approach and sounded the call. He won the third pick of a mount from the spring deliveries."

O'Malley didn't bother to ask for details on who he was referring to. After all these years of being absent, he wouldn't know who was added to his father's tribe. Tradition was the men who married went to live with his wife's family. The boys by then should have a string of ponies and skills to bring to his new family unit. If he and his wife so desired, they could start their own url, with others who wished to join them. This prevented camps from expanding so large to make their nomadic life cumbersome. The number of nomadic tribes and members were limited to how much the land they wandered over could absorb their way of life. He was aware that on Allint groups of his people existed, but he had yet to meet them. His duties and theirs seemed to keep them apart.

"Ten groups of families moved to the 3rd continent to start their own urls," his father mentioned as they started up the last hill. "It's not often that amount of space opens up. Land Management closed a large area due to a contamination by some off-world visitors killing everything in the area, so they opened up another area to keep the population at a steady count."

"Padma. Yes. On the east side there is open land." His dispatches had said nothing about anyone from his clan settling there but mention of clan and age group seldom were mentioned in reports unless there was trouble, and then one would only have to focus on the trouble spot and know.

"They drew straws for sites. Eight will not have it as nice, however, they willingly agreed on the areas they were assigned. The Council of Land Management sent over some people to speak with them on what to expect, rules of behavior, and gave them two errs to see if they can make a go of it."

"When was this?"

"Two errs ago. We felt three of the ten groups die. They were slain." His old voice quivered with anger.

They reached the top of the hill and both stopped for a moment, looking down at the family url with the thirteen yurts giving plenty of space between its neighbors in case of fire or raiders. Raiders were a thing of the past but from what his father had just said, maybe the habit was still good to practice.



"Who did such a thing?"

"The priestess said they were dressed in black." He turned to look into his son's face. The face of a serious chubby cheeked kid was long gone. Now it was unreadable, and unfamiliar. He couldn't even read in the air around him what he could be thinking. Hakon decided it was because of his training, after all, his son was the Queen's own commander. He smiled with pride.

O'Malley nodded and kept his thoughts stilled, knowing it was moments of expressed grief or anger that a telepathic spy could learn more about his or her prey. It suddenly dawned on him that this was why the queen had insisted he also go out and gather information. For all that the queen could see and hear, others' versions were just as important to her, knowing that everyone had a built-in prejudice no matter how schooled they were in being objective. Even she, the wisest person he knew, guarded against her prejudices. He shook his head with all these thoughts. When he was away from Allint he found his thoughts wandered too easily.

"How did the others escape?"

"The attackers failed to kill their priestesses first."

"So, the others were prepared. Was there a reason for the attacks?"

"We have sent an emissary to the Council of Arnica. One moon ago they reported they will bring it to the Queen of Allint." He raised an elaborately braided eyebrow, implying that that was why he thought his son was here.

The Queen had been quite busy lately, but she would not have kept this from him if she knew about it, or...was his being here her response?

This would be like the Queen Mother, sending a student into a situation where his next lesson could be learned. So, like mother, like daughter? Well, that wasn't important. What was important was what did this mean?

"Just where did these attacks occur?"

Horses were headed their way, making the ground tremble under their feet. By the plumage on the leading pony it was his mother who led the charge.

"Does she not ride like a young warrior?"

O'Malley smiled and could feel tears prickling his lids. Both his parents were voted as leaders of the url, but his mother had pushed his father forward, liking the idea of him having to face the daily business while she worked behind the scenes. Getting so much more done, was her way of putting it. Their herds were healthy, their potters and weavers were known for their unique designs, and the young metal worker that joined them was proving a good teacher to even the older members that wanted to try their hand in it. Being Kiuzi commander, he heard news from all the continents, and one messenger made sure she supplied information of his parents.

But they had not said anything of the killings on Padma. Had the travelers, Gi and Talara not heard?

His mother swung off her pony and flung herself into his arms hugging him and crying. "You have not visited us during the celebrations of Urga. It's for family gatherings. Come, come. I have your favorite sweet things for you." She pulled on his sleeve and slipped an arm through his father's pulling him along too. It was as if he were a youth again.

The others tended to the ponies, trying to control the dancing hooves that picked up the excitement of his mother.

The night was long for O'Malley. His parents were disturbed by what the other url chiefs were reporting, and not reporting, and intended on getting answers from him, since they were not getting anything from the Council of Arnica.

Priestess Celene would see him before he left, a young messenger informed him before he lay down for a few hours of troubled sleep.

* * *

To the left the sun was rising over the flat steppes. To the right, where the forest begins, O'Malley knew Celene would appear with her basket and ceremonial bag. His eyes didn't waver from one tree as he sipped tea and ignored the children that were showing off their skills hoping he would take notice. He also ignored proud parents as they called encouragement to their children, hoping their cries of praise would move his

eyes toward the child who was working hard at a skill they were just learning. A flutter caught his eye.

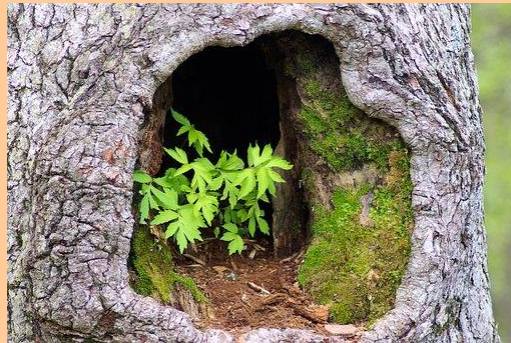
Rising quickly, he moved toward the tree, remembering that people alone disappeared. However, he didn't intend on moving into the trees out of sight of the villagers. Quietly he stood in front of the tree he had been staring at. Up close, it didn't look any different than its neighbor, yet he felt it was different. He nearly laughed aloud when his eyes found an old carved heart with his parent's names in it. Of course. That was why the tree stood out to him. His mother and father, whenever he walked alone with one or the other, would tell a different story on how their names ended up on the tree trunk, and only after their wedding was the heart carved, encircling the two names within its womb.

A sound further in the woods caught his attention. Looking back at the camp, he could see elders and their children taking a break from their labors. Smiling, he took another step into the wood. He heard a yell. Then a stick whizzed by his head. If it was not for a small hand grabbing his and pulling frantically, he would have succumbed to the spell of the net that dropped.

He was pushed down to crawl into a naturally hollowed out old tree trunk where a young Caladia followed him in.

"What is wrong with you? Didn't you take the warnings of your clan elders seriously!"

Had it been another time, the sight of this youth admonishing him would have made O'Malley laugh.



"How do you know what the clan elders spoke to me of?" he countered while pulling his long legs to his chest to give the pacing Caladia room.

"It's not the point! You should know better!" the small voice spoke low but the emotion behind what it was enough to make O'Malley rethink.

"It wasn't a smart thing to do," he admitted to himself and his young rescuer.

"Tell me why you ignored the warnings," the small voice compelled.

O'Malley found himself telling the youth that even though he knew it was not wise, curiosity drew him to see what was in the woods.

"Very good Citri," a melodious voice praised. Just then the space expanded and Celene joined O'Malley and the youth.

"Jack O'Malley, you should at least have worn an amulet," Celene admonished with a smile.

O'Malley nodded feeling justifiably embarrassed. "Celene. I wow the clan, and as usual, fall flat on my face in front of you." Then he laughed with her at their childhood memories. "So...is what I nearly fell prey to, part of the others' disappearance?"

"We believe so. Citri and her group are from an ashram in the wilds. They have been seeing disturbances in the time line, which they have firmed up, but they were curious at what it left behind. Citri was curious enough to set out alone to investigate. I found her wandering through the forest, tapping into energy pockets that mysteriously appear then disappear. We have been comparing notes and have decided that due to changing energy patterns on Arnica, phenomena we have not experienced before is occurring in what could be random patterns, though, I'm sure there is some sort of intelligence behind the occurrences."

"Where are these people disappearing to?"

"Another time line or dimension or just," snapping her fingers, "nowhere."

"You mean, nowhere *we* know about," O'Malley clarified.

"Exactly."

"The elders may not buy that. I don't buy it," O'Malley stated flatly. "Why only leaders or people that are specialists in their fields?"

"You have only heard of them, but there have been others. All were in a short distance of the woods and all were alone, even if for a moment. It's occurring on three continents that I know of...Allint I cannot see."

"What are you intending to do?"

"Find a way to get everyone back. I don't sense anything malicious behind the disappearances, just curiosity. The same feeling it invoked in you."

"My journey back to Allint shall be longer than I intended," he said softly, more to himself.

"I do not advise you hunting this phenomenon out, Jack O'Malley. It's best to pass on the information to your Queen and let those she feels are better equipped to investigate it."

"And you? You don't fear it?"

"Fear? No. Curiosity. Yes. But not to the point of being drawn into its sticky web."

O'Malley rubbed his forehead irritably. He suspected the queen was aware of this.

"She doesn't know everything that is going on," she said, easily reading his thoughts. "She is mortal and though a powerful soul with great wisdom, she knows her limitations and knows that one soul cannot manage Arnica's growth at this crucial time. She has a vast network of assistants who have responsibilities that demand the dedication of a Kiuzi."

O'Malley laughed, knowing it was a jibe. It did give him some comfort that others were supportive of his queen, however, it also caused him to realize that there was a lot of things he didn't know about on Arnica.

"I will take care not to get too close to forests, though it will be rather difficult not to travel through Dissync Woods."

"I will send word ahead and the Elfs of Dissync will make sure you are not waylaid." Celene turned to her young assistant and whatever communication passed between them, was not shared with O'Malley but the sudden disappearance of the two and his sudden appearance outside of his parent's yurt told him the conversation with Celene was finished. He had a lot to think about and a lot to look for on his trip back to Allint. His first stop would be at one of the temples so he could check in with Queen M'Lu. He had some questions for her and didn't trust sending unguarded thoughts her way.

Chapter 4

Horiku was 7th level trainee, not high enough to warrant any special consideration but she was a very good camp cook, and scavenger if they needed food. That meant the various 8th and 9th level trainee troops asked her along when they went on missions among the commoners. Three times she accompanied the arrogant Stalking Greou troop, that expected more than what they were willing to pay the food vendors, as if being a Kiuzi trainee warranted free food. They had to make a living, she had directed her thought to their mentor. That ended them asking her along as their cook, which she didn't mind at all. For being 10th level trainees under a Ju'n teacher she expected more from them. What renewed her faith in the 10th level trainees was being asked five times to accompany the Blue Mumbua troop, who worked beside the monks. They were the most fun and enjoyed joking with her. Stealth was the Blue Mumbua's forte, and Horiku took advantage of her time with them to learn firsthand this skill.

Horiku, once known as Emma White, was of Human-Elf mix. A child of colonists who were killed by a mob when she was five. A Ju'n family rescued her and hid her away in the forest until her care was given over to a wandering band of gypsy nomads. She was lucky that the old man that took her in was only interested in using her youth to keep him alive. She learned how to scavenge, steal, hunt, bargain, and wear many faces. Commander O'Malley had caught her picking his pocket. Since then Horiku has been thanking her lucky stars.

Horiku was a fast learner, rising in the trainee ranks quickly. Kiuzi fascinated her. Honor meant many things to many people, changing with circumstances, but was constant for Kiuzi warriors. Though she had made light of it, she wanted to be Kiuzi. A common soldier works for someone whose morals and dealings were usually convoluted with politics. It gave her a headache just thinking of it. Horiku smiled as she thought of Kiuzi warriors. Most were unpretentious, laughed a lot, and were very mysterious. Just the group she would like to belong to.

Horiku half listened to the steam from her water pot, letting her mind quiet to the rhythm of the night rain against her windows. The pot signaled it was ready with the beginning of a whistle. She focused on each body part and its position as she leaned to lift

the pot from the fire, and then on how her body felt as it leaned back. With a steady hand, water was poured over the leaves in her cup. Appreciation of the steamed scent that rose from the first cup, and then the second cup was experienced. Though she was drinking alone, it was customary to fill an extra cup for an unexpected guest, most notably, in spirit form, as Drusu teachers sometimes projected their forms to visit with their trainees. She had not experienced the honor, nor did she care one way or the other. Her pleasure was derived in the ritual for its sake.

Horiku once asked her teacher why she filled hers first, and not her guest. He answered that if she smelled the tea was bad, indicating she did not choose good leaves, she could then correct the error before serving her guest. However, Lorna said it was to prove to one's guest that the pot of tea was not poisoned. She liked Lorna's explanation better.

Her hand remained steady when her bowed eyes spotted a cloaked leg, sitting before the guest teacup. She even stifled the mental self-congratulations when she continued on as if she knew this guest was there all along. In the ceremony, as with the life of Kiuzi, thoughts are stilled. Focus is on movement and breath. Horiku completed the ritual, bowing to her Master, Commander O'Malley. After they had finished their tea, she tidied up the area, still withholding all her thoughts. He left just as quietly as he came. That was one of the gifts Drusu Masters imparted on the Kiuzi warrior; to move into areas unheard and unnoticed until the warrior wanted his or her presence to be known.

Twenty mins later she was in the dojo, working out with her partner on hand holds. She was proud of herself that she finally learned to avoid getting into a position where such a hold could be locked on her. She was the youngest in her group, though due to her height, she fit in easy. Horiku earned a reputation for not being easy to fool or capture.

"Horiku!" the dojo master called.

Horiku ignored the call as her partner sought to take advantage of the distraction. Instead, her partner, Maki, landed on her back.

Thump!

"Oh, are you hurt, Maki? I will try next time not to drop you so hard. Please, forgive me." Horiku bowed to her partner, surprised that even the smirk that would normally have been on her face was missing. She was changing, she thought surprised.

After they exchanged bows, closing the bout, Horiku looked to see who it was that had rudely interrupted her. Maori was at the front of the dojo. He was the Blue Mumbua's troop leader. It was rumored he would be leading two 10th level trainee troops on their final test, a vision quest. And what caused her a good laugh was the other group was the difficult Stalking Greou.

Singu.

He beckoned to her.

"I wish they would ask me to go with them on their business in the cities," Maki whispered.

"Careful, you may get your wish and find out it's not as you thought it would be. No master to pull you out of trouble," one of the others warned her.

"What're you complaining about? You're on the list for the seventh group of travelers," another whispered.

"I want some short excursions before then, to get use to road life," Maki mumbled.

"Squad Leader Maori, you have something for me to do?"

"Yes. Blue Mumbua is moving out in the early light and needs a good cook." He leaned a little toward her and added in a low voice, "One that can make trail food taste like it should be edible."

"I would be honored to cook for Blue Mumbua, Squad Leader Maori." She bowed, with wrists crossed over her heart.

"When the sun touches the Pleadees Mountain tip...at the Temple of Ilo, tomorrow." He bowed and left.

Her heart was pounding. To meet at the temple meant that something big was planned, and it was 10th level! Her favorite troop. He didn't mention the Stalking Greou so maybe the rumor wasn't true.

Horiku hoped it was not for their vision quest. She wasn't ready to meet any strange beings she couldn't see. Do they have cooks on vision quests? No. They only take water. Well, that thought was a relief.

* * *

It was still dark out when Horiku gave one more look at her room. It appeared as if it were vacant. She had few personal belongings. Her travel pack was stuffed with fresh herbs and healing powders, and three sets of clothing. Her wrist cuffs with crystals charged were packed on top. They were a precious gift from a monk she never learned her name or saw again. She touched her sacred bag to be sure it was secured. Gently the door was closed to her quarters and soundlessly she moved down the dimly lit corridor.

At the dock's others were just arriving from the mainland, Allint. She chose a single seated kayak, wanting to go to the temple by water rather than the path through the forest. Smoothly she paddled across the cold waters. She could see fish leaping up to grab an insect, and the occasional bird that swooped in and had it for breakfast. Witnessing such things filled her with a profound sense of understanding the rhythm of life in its various manifestations.

Her trip ended too soon. As she pulled her kayak up onto the shore, she found there were others neatly beached. The temple area looked busier than usual. Since Queen M'Lu's reinstating the Drusu codes of living there was a renewed interest in taking up the attire of the traveler without being asked. It kept many of the lower ranks of Kiuzi trainees busy escorting the travelers into lands uncharted to the inhabitants of Allint and protecting them from such attackers as the Black Alliance.

She bowed politely to those that acknowledged her, and gave a morning greeting, moving slowly to a corner where she could watch the goings on.

<go to the fourth column of the temple>

Horiku continued to look around in a natural manner, noting who was observing her and who was not, then moved further back into the shadows, blending in with the walls of the Temple.

The fourth column was the thirteenth if you counted them from the entrance to the front. However, if the person was from the Temple, it would be counted from the High

Priestesses chair, when she attended the high rituals. Horiku knew this because she liked riddles, and this was one of the ones a 10th level trainee gave to another.

The Temple was deserted, which was not surprising. Personal morning rituals among the monks had started. She knew them well. It was what beginning warriors practiced. How dreary it was until a young monk had explained the meanings behind the movements, and how it quieted the mind. Now, she found comfort and absolute peace in the rituals.

"Step forward, young warrior."

Horiku's heart started to pound rapidly. She knew the voice, though, only from a hall, and to be called a warrior by such a person was a great honor that left her speechless.

After a space of time went by, she finally felt a light touch on her forehead and then the Guardian brushed past in apparition form, leaving her with raised hairs on her arms from the energy. Commander O'Malley stepped out of the shadows and gestured for Horiku to follow him. Elated, Horiku followed her sponsor and hero.



The steps were a spiral up into the high tower. Horiku knew if she weren't in good shape her legs would cramp halfway up. At the top she was given a moment to breathe. A chime sounded and then she moved into the hall beside her commander. Eleven Drusians, a Tjarin, and seven warriors not all Kiuzi, were gathered. The Queen was in an ornately crafted chair at the head of the table and the Guardian sat to her left.

The Guardian waved her forward. "You may sit, Horiku."

Horiku promptly seated herself in the chair indicated for her.

"Horiku, do you remember your childhood?" Queen M'Lu asked.

"Not much, my Queen." It was not that she didn't remember; it was that that life mattered little to her now, so she chose not to waste time remembering it.

"It is important that you do. WE have a mission for you, should you choose to take it."

"Merely ask and I will gladly do your bidding, my Queen."

The Queen studied Horiku thoughtfully, admiring her tenacity and courage to get as high as she did in the trainee ranks for her age. Her teachers felt she should be in a higher rank but held her back to be sure she absorbed each level. To avoid boredom, they sent her on assignments with the higher ranks, hoping she would take the initiative and pick up what she could from them. She didn't disappoint them, even with her interactions with the Stalking Greou. Now was a time when she would be given a task to prove her worthiness to move from trainee to Kiuzi warrior, first level. The youngest in ten generations. Few students were given this opportunity and those that received it never spoke of it. It was an initiation designed not just by the High Priestess and monks, but also by the Tajarins, as a test to see if she would be moved to another branch of Kiuzi warrior training.

General Aroi, who had a permanent residence with the Tajarins on the 3rd continent, Padma, oversaw the protection of all spiritual teachers on Arnica with the exception of the Queen and High Priestess of Allint. His present attention was on the Black Soldiers that were too near the Sha'Kar's place of meditation.

Queen M'Lu, Guardian C'Lea, Commander O'Malley and the elder monk Hamaru, had recommended Horiku to General Aroi as a candidate. This was to be Horiku's first test, unchaperoned, to see how she handled herself with foreigners, violence, and unfamiliar experiences. To begin her own initiation, she needed to return to the village that ended her parents' lives and make peace with her memories.

The guardian spirits of the Kiuzi were called to witness and set up situations for Horiku to become involved in so she could learn and be stretched in her lessons. Whether she made it or not, Horiku's soul would learn valuable lessons.

"You don't mind going back into the streets where your parents set up a home and died?" the Queen asked.

"I have no opinion of where I am sent by your desires, my Queen. This humble one has pledged her unworthy self to your bidding."

"Yes, yes. And you have learned words and rituals that go with it," she responded with humor.

Curiously and openly, Horiku studied the young queen, trained for her position while still in her mother's womb, or so the rumors said.

"My Queen?"

"Trauma. In all your studies, you have not been taught about trauma. How to handle death, sorrow, violence, and the pain of watching someone you love unjustly slain before you. A difficult lesson for a telepath. It is one of the lessons of the 10th level."

Horiku looked around the table at the rest of the Drusians surprised. "My parents taught me the art of sorrow and handling the unjust killing of a loved one. It is through crying."

"This is all they have taught you of this experience?" one of the elders asked.

Drusu children were protected from the knowledge of the death of loved ones that met with a violent end at the hands of another until they were older and able to grasp it on several levels. Drusu children had trained psychic abilities that commoners didn't, which out of control, could harm innocent people besides themselves, with thoughts of retribution and profound depression.

Horiku mentally watched as an event in her life played out, and how her parents taught her to face her anger when a pet of hers had been intentionally killed by a neighborhood child.

"It's not just crying," she elaborated, "it also involves rituals to be performed on the anniversary of their passing and remembering good moments when they were alive. One never really loses someone if they are remembered." She admitted this with guilt, for she didn't really remember much of her parents and their violent deaths. Memories of them never came up, until now.

"So, you will be able to return to your birthplace and face those that caused your loved ones to die without retribution, even in thought?"

Horiku searched within, looking for any animosity she may harbor, or fear she had of going back to the town. She found only emptiness.

"No, my Queen."

"And so, WE judge that you are speaking the truth as you know it."

The others disappeared.

"Come here, Horiku," the Queen commanded. She had seen deep within the young woman, deeper than Horiku could see within herself, and there she found unresolved issues with the death of her family, and other issues from her childhood.

Horiku stood up and walked to the other side of the table, closer to the Queen's chair, feeling not just the nape hairs rising but also the hairs on her arms.

"It is the energy from the ley lines. You are sensitive. Stronger than most trainees," the Queen explained.

Horiku nodded, her own suspicions verified.

"You should be proud. You have worked hard, and you have not abused anyone, nor unfairly held your mastering of skills over those with lesser abilities. You are making yourself into a noble warrior, Horiku. You must remember to acknowledge your abilities, and not think it selfishness or being vain. You will certainly meet others more skilled, and challenges you would rather not deal with, but it is what hones a warrior to be a greater person. When you feel you have nothing more to learn, then you know that you have reached the greatest challenge. The next step then becomes to find a mentor for the next level."

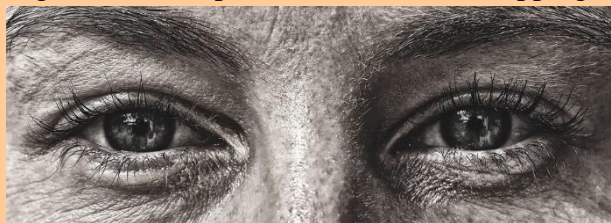
No matter how much younger than her the queen appeared, Horiku felt absolute respect and love for her. The power that radiated from the queen was not something to do with domination but something so pure and clean it filled her heart, causing her to yearn to be able to open to more, yet hurting because she couldn't.

"The job you are being examined for requires an honorable person. You must be willing to let go of distractions, and private agendas. It requires you to dedicate yourself for a greater purpose than self-serving dallies."

Horiku blinked a few times, and then decided to be bold. "My Queen, please, just say what you would have me do."

The queen rose from her chair. In a corner was a bowl on a carved pedestal made of black obsidian. The queen drew her hand above the water, and an image appeared.

Both watched as a dark-haired woman sat on a thick tree limb, watching something below her. Then her dark eyes moved to look directly at them, as if she could see the two watching her. Horiku prided herself in not stepping back.



"Who is she?"

"On her own world she is a warrior."

Horiku looked up at the Queen startled. "You want *me* to teach her Kiuzi ways?"

The Queen smiled. "Yes, and you to learn about her." The image in the water faded. "You must get to her before the Black Alliance soldiers do. She is headed to Ringlett."

Horiku nodded bewildered. She was confused by the request and the sudden welling up of unpleasant feelings. Moments ago, she really thought she had little feelings for the inhabitants of Ringlett. Why did staring in the waters release these memories?

"Sometimes we bury unpleasant issues very deep, and when we least want them to appear...they do. The vibration in this tower is disintegrating some of those walls you erected around feelings you found unpleasant to deal with. You can process the feelings, or you can deny them. If you deny them, they then will merely go underground, and when you can least afford them to, they will overwhelm you."

"I see." She did see. This was going to be a test of her honor. Would she succumb to the temptation of flaunting her new status among these townspeople or would she quietly enter and exit? "In my unworthy state, I will humbly follow the honor of Kiuzi, though I am but a trainee. And I will not dishonor the trust you have in me, my Queen."

My first mission! She leaked in her excitement.

The Queen laughed.

"I am gifting you with your first sword of truth."

The commander reentered the room with a scabbard and a sword in its sheath.

"Do you feel you know the laws of using the sword?" The Queen asked.

"Yes," she whispered reverently.

"Use it wisely on this mission," the commander told her. "You already have the bracelets so here is the sword to match them."

He helped her fit the scabbard on and had her test pulling the sword from her back and from her waist at different positions until it was comfortable. Then he handed her the cuffs she had in her bag, that would make the sword something more than a sharp instrument of crystal. The sword and cuffs were the most important part of a Kiuzu

warriors' uniform.



The cuffs fit around her wrists like living things and just having them on she could feel the energy of the sword as if it came active. Horiku was excited thinking of the honor and advancement she was receiving and just to guide an off-worlnder in the ways of a Kiuzi warrior. She was sure she still had a lot to learn.

* * *

Horiku was seven days on the road. She was dressed in the sexless garb of a traveler that easily covered her sword. At every secluded stop she practiced using the crystal bracelets and then the sword, putting what she had seen and heard into actuality so anything that called for their use would not be thoughtless reactions. The bracelets to most people were like any bracelet with stones, but she kept the sleeves over them in case the rumors of raiding parties on unprotected travelers were true. The chance of using them was slight, as her hands and chobos were her weapons of choice if she couldn't avoid fighting. Resorting to use Kiuzu tools would be drawing attention to herself and she didn't feel comfortable to be identified as Kiuzu warrior yet. Her puzzling over why she had been given the cuffs before she reached the higher degrees would take up too much of her attention, so she had instead, decided to



just focus on her mission. It wasn't like she had her classmates to worry at her for her promotion. Master Ken liked to say, "Everything becomes known in its own time."

In the last five villages she heard the same stories of a stranger that cleaned local gamblers out but was only interested in food and rest, dropping the rest of her winnings in the alms box. The off-worlder gained the reputation for being a *bitizan*, a successful gambler with few peers. The dark-haired warrior was more than six days ahead of her, so rather than spend time to purchase a meal or rest during the noon-time, she pushed on, heading for the nearest airfield.

Horiku paid for a flight to Ringlett. She would be three days ahead of the expected arrival of the warrior. The off-world woman's questions in the villages were on finding the path up to the Rhi pass. She laughed to herself. No one knew where the path was. It was purposely hidden from the uninitiated, and if they did know, they would certainly not tell that to a stranger, especially since most could feel she was an off-worlder.

It was dusk when the plane settled on the landing pad. Horiku clambered out with one other aged traveler. As a child she knew him as the mayor of Ringlett, however, she overheard a conversation he had with another passenger that he was a trader looking for buyers in neighboring towns for strawberry pots his small kiln put out.



Horiku walked through an unfamiliar section of the town to where she used to live. Run down homes intermixed with just the outline of the foundations of buildings that once were there, were scattered along a street. The sidewalk was littered with potholes and trash. Horiku found the ruins of what had been their home.

Emma woke to shouting from outside the house. Thuds against the walls of her room shook the house. It was dark and she became frightened.

"Ma! Da!" There was no response. "I'm scared," she whimpered. A familiar figure came bustling into her room.

"I'm here Emmie," her mother cooed to her.

Emma wrapped her small arms around her mother's neck and held on as she was carried out of her room.

"Ma, why is there a fire in our house?" Her voice quivered with the fear she felt shaking her mother's body.

Da was standing at the back door looking out through the drapes.

"Come quickly. I see no one."

"Be silent, Emmie." It was her mother's last verbal warning.

As her mother ran with her, Emma could see behind them their house suddenly ignited in an explosion of sparks and fire.

"There they are!" Jacobi, the nine-year-old shouted.

Emma's eyes opened wide as a rock hit her mother's shoulder and then more came their way. Emma would have knocked them away but her arms were wrapped tightly around her mother lest she be dropped. She couldn't differentiate between the frantic beating of her heart and her mother's, but she knew when one of them suddenly stopped.

Horiku stood very still, as the smell of fear mixed with the heat of the fire that burned her nostrils, brought her childhood trauma back to her. Her parents had a business selling pottery and seeds, which was considerably profitable compared to another family's business. Where there should have been no bitterness or jealousy, the other family created it.

Horiku's resentment and bitterness threatened to overwhelm her. The heavy weight of her mother's body that fell over hers was now suffocating her. She didn't know what had happened to her father.

Horiku didn't realize she had walked the entire width of the town, until she was standing face to face with a man dressed as a constable.

Jacobi.

He had his baton out ready to use. Horiku pulled herself together quickly, thinking how easy it would be to fell him with one hit or kick, and how painful she could make it.

Would it repay what he and the rest of the town citizens had done to her family? Her mentors and parents had taught her that revenge only fed the darker side of one's passions. Was he worth the energy required to sustain her anger? Her peripheral vision

picked up the dark spirits and waifs that fed off that type of energy. She knew if she looked closer, she would be able to see a city full of the dark entities. From them she could feel an intense desire to consume her.

"You're dressed as a traveler," he sneered. "So, you don't know our rules here." He sniffed at her and spat on the ground. "You're a female. As a woman you must cover yourself at all times. Tempting good men to evil thoughts." He spat again, closer to her feet. "We don't take to trouble makers." He slapped the club into his palm, not so much as a warning but as suppressed excitement in wanting an excuse to use it.

"Is that so, Jacobi of the Tre family? Let me ask you this, what do you do with people that kill innocents?"

His expression hardened. Jacobi was a very large person even for his species, and for Horiku, who was a Human-Elf female with both the height and slimness of the two species, he was twice her size.

"You have less than a quamt to run that-a-way, or I'll chase you out, and you won't like the way I do it."

"Oh, shut up, Jacobi!" she mimicked his mother.

Fear contorted his face. He shouted for reinforcements as he drew his club up to strike. Horiku realized she was baiting him. Not a Kiuzi thing to do. Silently she prayed for forgiveness, then stepped back to a less threatening position.

"I'm not a danger to you, Jacobi," she reassured him in a softer voice. Horiku glanced around, daring to take her eyes off his glowering ones. She knew he would strike her and say she had resisted. That was how he was as a child. Horiku grimaced to herself. The town had always had its mean people and now those mean people seemed to be running the town.

As he lunged at her, she simply shifted her weight, letting his momentum take him to the ground. From the ground Jacobi blew his whistle frantically.

"And why, Jacobi, are you calling for help? There is no trouble from me." She turned to face him and the four burly men that thudded to a halt at his side.

"Ahh, Ringlett, what have you become? A town of bullies?" she asked softly. And then regretted her judgment. A Kiuzi warrior did not judge but assessed the situation and did what could be done in a quiet manner.

One of the men drew out an illegal taser gun. It was a painful nerve paralyzer.

"Now what do you have there? she asked.

"You're breaking the town rules by not covering your sinful self."

She shook her head, surprised they didn't recognize her. "I am dressed as a traveler. It is the custom on Arnica. And sinful? That is not a word in Drusu practice."

"Who do you think you are to tell us what to do? We don't follow no Queen's rules!" Halighe stated menacingly. He was another bully from her childhood.

"So, what they say about Ringlett is true. It has become as dark as it is unwholesome."

"Get the witch!"

It was easy to side step and use their weight to have them stumble over themselves. It was Jahamid that broke the game up. He wore the mayor's hat and carried a cane, the two emblems of the mayor's office. He came rushing up to see what the yelling was about. It looked like he was interrupted from a meal.

"Break it up!" Jahamid shouted angrily.

The five men got up but didn't lower their clubs. Halighe kept his nerve gun ready.

"Isn't that gun illegal, Mayor Jahamid?"

The mayor looked at Halighe, then back at Horiku. "We could jail you for not following our town's laws," he warned her.

"And I being the only one that could testify *you* have an illegal weapon would not be proved because I would be killed escaping."

"We don't kill. It's against the Queen's Rules."

"Halighe just said you don't follow the Queen's Rules which are Arnica's rules. You do kill. You run people you don't like out past the town markers, then stone them to death just so you can say it didn't happen in your town."

"What do you want?" Jahamid demanded.

"We'll take care of her," Jacobi boasted, moving with the others to surround her.

"You have already condemned your town to death. Look around you. Can't you see what your behavior is doing? Look at the dark spirits and waifs that fill this town."

"We didn't ask you to visit us! Get out! Now!" Jahamid shook his cane, then turned to the others, motioning for them to step back from her.

"I will stay at the traveler's hut. See that you don't create any mischief. Queen M'Lu will know."

They all looked around them as if expecting her to appear. However, Horiku knew they would never be able to see her. They had sunken so low, she doubted they could even see what was wandering in their town with them. Perhaps they had become too comfortable with the dark energy.

Before she turned to go, she stepped up to Halighe before any of them could move and took the stunner out of his hands. She was five feet down the street before the others responded.

"Let her be," she heard Jahamid's voice tell the men. "She'll get hers soon enough."

She laughed to herself. He was going to claim she had brought the weapon in town herself. During her childhood, there were seven boys that were just plain mean. All the younger kids knew them and tried their very best to avoid them. Repeated complaints to their parents didn't change the harassing. If they were of one species, she would have thought it was a species problem. Perhaps the bad energy had already settled in Ringlett and her kind parents didn't recognize it.

She walked into the traveler's lodge and decided against staying. The place was in shambles. The roof had more holes in it than the windows without coverings. There were



no rules of behavior posted, which meant anyone visiting would and could be arrested. She jogged to the landing pad, looking for the pilot who was a previous Kiuzy trainee. He had his level and trainee status proudly displayed over his cockpit door. It was to

prove he was dependable and trustworthy. The other passengers were still seated in their seats reading and waiting until the ship was serviced. It appeared service was slow.

"Hello." He nodded politely to Horiku. "Didn't stay long."

"I'm not leaving. I want you to take something to the authorities for me." She pulled out the taser gun, which he quickly and discreetly hid under his cloak.

"Where did you get that?"

"One of the village constables. I thought I would remove the temptation."

"You're Kiuzi, aren't ch'a?" he asked softly.

Horiku smiled.

"I thought so. That's why I didn't think you needed to be warned about this town. I usually don't deliver here, but the regular pilot is on vacation. I'm glad I did make the run, just to see a Kiuzi bring justice. But, let me warn you. I heard talk over the waves that there's a group of rogue warriors headed this way. I think one of them once lived here."

"I'll keep that in mind. Steady wind under your wings, pilot."

Instead of the dilapidated visitors lodge she decided to sleep in the forest. She had not done that in a long time...alone. Besides, she had to think about her behavior. It was very unKiuzi and didn't make her look good on her first assignment.

Shaking her head in disgust, she moved into the woods searching for a place she knew as a child. What she found was a hide-away just big enough for a child.

Looking around her, trees were felled and laying haphazardly.



They had been chopped down indiscriminately and left. It didn't make sense to her why someone would fell the trees and not use them. She could see plants used as healing herbs pulled out and tossed aside as if weeds. In the dim lighting she could see their healing properties glow, though some weaker than others, depending upon how long they had been pulled. Some she gathered for her herb pouch, whispering a prayer of thanksgiving.

As the sun, dropped below the horizon, most of the forest became shrouded in darkness. She gave a soft call in Curilee language, signaling she was a friend, looking for a safe place to sleep. Their chitter greeted her as friend, and their mental images directed her to a safe space. They were small tree creatures that moved around in the dark and were very handy to have as lookouts, since they were also messengers the Queen looked to for keeping her informed of the health of their forest. They didn't like Ringlett citizens in their territory, day or night, and by what she had seen, she could see why.

Before she went to sleep, she blessed all who had been guiding her on this mission and then to the happy memories of her childhood, dissolving her anger and her longing for her parents. Before her eyes closed, the spirits of her parents appeared, kissing her cheeks as they had always done when they put her to bed.

Chapter 5

Tukuli's head rose from the rough reed mat as the smell of food seeped through his dream world.

"Who goes there?" he croaked. A hacking cough shook his weak body.

The voice of a child piped up, "It's only I, friend. I have brought your last meal for the day. It's best you eat this one and not toss it out as not to your liking because your fast will be long before your next meal."

Tukuli struggled to sit up. He barely understood the language but recognized the voice. His body and mind felt ravaged from his own fury at waking up and finding his diminished capacities were not a nightmare. He indeed was in the mute world of the commoners. His screams of rage had left him hoarse for days. He was sightless and could not interpret thoughts that would have foregone learning the commoners' language. He was bruised from bumping into things that didn't move and hurt for days.

"Why...no food?" His tongue had a hard time wrapping around the words he just recently learned. He had not done well in his language classes. Why should it be mandatory since knowing what another thought was common on Allint? But the Queen Mother, his mother's second cousin, insisted they all learn to speak the languages of the various species that populated Arnica and not rely on telepathy Arnica citizens shared. A waste of time for someone of his class, he had thought disdainfully. But he was no longer part of that class. He was thrown out...like a criminal!

Guiltily, he reminded himself, he was a criminal. He was furious with himself for getting involved in something as ugly as a plan that could end so many lives. He didn't understand how he could have been so clouded in his judgment. Now he was an outcast. But it didn't dim his anger at his cousin. She went too far when she exiled him.

A warm bowl was placed in one hand and a spoon in the other. Sniffing for the scent of what was in the bowl, he again was reminded that his senses were gone. Not only could he not feel the properties of the objects in his hand, but he also couldn't smell or taste what he was eating.

"It is customary to fast on the fifth day of the week from sundown to sunset of the next day," the young voice broke through his angry thoughts.

"Who is this fast for?" he whispered hoarsely between mouthfuls. He was hungry. It was as if he had not eaten in days. The boy seemed to easily understand his poor attempts to use his language. It irritated him that he could not understand the boy as easily.

"For the cleansing of the body."

He lifted his head in surprise. "What? Not for a god or something more profound?"

The young boy laughed. "Of course. Aren't we all temples of the Beloved?"

"Psaw!" But Tukuli didn't want to risk insulting his benefactor too much. Finished with his meal, he laid the bowl down.

"It's time for your bathing," the boy prompted.

Tukuli rose with the boy's assistance. His legs were shaky. He was still physically weak. He wondered what else that witch of a cousin had done to him. His anger had him trembling so much that the boy could not hold his weight, and both tumbled to the hard floor.



Chapter 6

The Caladia elder slammed the flat of his hand on the table. "You are stupid!"

"Honorable father," his son tried again to explain, "you don't understand..."

"What is there to understand? You've been kicked out of school again. Get out of my sight. Go! Begone with you. I will pay for your ticket for you to go back to cling to your mother's apron."

The young boy blanched at the insult and glanced quickly at the others. No one looked at him. Some had the same glazed look as his father when he first saw him this morning. Something had gone wrong with this group's business, otherwise, his father would have let his latest fiasco go by as youthful pranks.

Whatever had happened had been enough to call him and his cousins who had been on a hike in the Kennald Mountains back immediately. He had not been able to find out what had really angered his father, but he had noticed on their return trek, there were more Drusians in traveler garb than he had ever seen on the road.

Jac left the room discouraged with his father's usual lack of understanding. He was only suspended for a week, not a life-time. The suspensions were always waived when his father paid the penalty so why was he now being persnickety about it all? He claimed it was not the money and often times he would brag to his friends that he was notoriously wild in his younger days. Like father like son, was his refrain to his friends.

Well, until his father got over this, he would work with Hisopi. He was learning pottery from the blind Coripus. His father didn't know, nor really seemed to care that he really wanted to be an artist with work good enough to be displayed in the Queen's Hall. His father wanted him to finish college and get a prestigious job in Isor. It was a city whose wealth and never sleeping society boasted greatness to anyone that succeeded in landing a job within its walls. The college he was attending had student placement in Isor's local businesses, but someone like Jac, who spent more time playing than studying, knew it was not going to happen for him.

Jac stopped at the entrance to the Hotel, letting his eyes get accustomed to the brightness of the afternoon sun. A Gustian youth, dressed in the livery of the hotel's messenger service brushed by him. He was twice Jac's size and Jac had to side step

quickly. That was when he saw Ju'n L'Ta talking heatedly with a hooded stranger. Ju'n L'Ta was to be the next Caladia clan leader on Allint. He wondered what was going on.

Deciding to find out he hurried across the street and found a seat where he could read L'Ta's lips. He wondered what his father would pay for this information he intended to gather.

"Uhh, let me have ahhh...ginlish. Up easy," he told the waitress glibly.

"Not on your life or my job, Jac," she responded, and waited for something more appropriate to be ordered.

Jac would have moved on to the seductive game with her because that's what was expected among his rowdy group, but a chance to make some points with his father was more important. "Then a mint tea...and a trade clip," he added thinking he could also do with a cover for him being here. He watched the thin form of the waitress nearly disappear as she moved smoothly between customers. He noted she didn't come near Ju'n L'Ta's table even though it was part of her service area.

"That's not the arrangement. That will not do at all," L'Ta lips spoke. "No, no. That will not do at all. We had an agreement and you will not go back on it now. There is nothing wrong. It is usual for the Queen to make proclamations. We will just have to concentrate on the other continents."

The figure in the robe leaned further away from L'Ta as if not interested in what L'Ta was saying.

"Well you tell your boss that that is our deal. We are a powerful force on this planet and will not tolerate this deceit and display of bad behavior."

Whatever the stranger said, L'Ta rose abruptly and left the café. The way he walked Jac knew he was beside himself with anger. Jac was surprised he did not singe the stranger or knock him across the street with his powers. Jac shook his head. He was aware that he really knew nothing of Drusian magic. His cousins and he had no real interest in the spiritual life. They were too busy with the pleasures of the flesh and spending their parent's money.

"Here you are," the waitress announced.

"Oh, yeah." He pulled out his identification and handed it to the waitress.

She frowned at her charge device. "Your father has closed your account."

Jac jumped up and grabbed the device, not believing her. Sure enough. In bold red it said account closed and his father's name.

"Of all the..." Embarrassed he pulled out his change purse. He paid for the drink but waved away the viewer.

"Hey, Jac!" Lomoc called from across the square. He ran across the road, deftly missing two Centaurs pulling their produce cart to the public market two blocks up.

Lomoc threw himself into the chair next to Jac, looked around them in a furtive way and then whispered. "Did you hear the news?"

"That my dad cut me off?" Jac muttered disgustedly. In a couple of days maybe sooner, his father would reopen the account, however it meant he couldn't go partying for a few days because his friends didn't loan credits out. You either had it or not. He prided himself that his friends were wealthy, however, on those days when his father wished to punish him, he found they were stingy.

"Again? I think I know why your father is so touchy lately." Lomoc looked around again and then leaned forward. "It's what happened on Allint.

"What? That Ju'n L'Ta is here?" Jac returned smugly.

"He is? Then...what they say is true." Lomoc looked stricken.

"What are **they** saying?" Jac asked alarmed that he was missing something important. He quickly looked around as Lomoc did, though, he wasn't sure just what Lomoc was looking for. Jac noted that the stranger was still seated.

"All Caladia. There are no more of us left on Allint," he stuttered, nearly in tears.

"What? Don't joke about things like that!"

"It's true, Jac," Lomac whispered distressed.

"Why? I don't understand. It can't be." He searched his memory for bits of information he had overheard on clan business. Nothing hinted at the Caladia leaving Allint. All Caladians?

"Depending on who tells the story," Lomac leaned back to take another quick look around them and then leaned again close to Jac. "from LeMarian at the club he said only our clan was caught contaminating the ley lines on Allint so they could remain in their valley without having to be Drusian. Je's version is that Ju'n L'Ta challenged the leadership of Queen M'Lu."

Jac would have laughed at Je's version but this was serious. He knew how his species was about bragging and claiming authority when they didn't have knowledge enough to be an authority. He had the same impulses; however, his father beat him if he heard him brag on things that didn't agree with his father's version of things. His father didn't tolerate challenges to his role as head of household and being an authority on everything. Did the Holy Ones still have that problem? It was a disappointing thing to hear because he didn't want to be an empty braggart for the rest of his life. He really wanted to accomplish something important that even the Queen would appreciate.

"So, who do you believe?" Jac asked.

"I don't know. What I do know is that I've been ordered to return home. No more schooling for me. No more chasing the girls. I'll be stuck with the likes of the farmers' daughters." Lomac looked as forlorn as his voice sounded. "Father and mother are worried I'll associate with *those* people that have been disgraced."

"At least your parents like you. I don't want to go home." Jac wondered what he was going to do when Lomac left. Usually when his father cut him off Lomac was the only one that would lend him funds until his father loosened the purse strings on his account. It was scary to think that if the news was true about all Caladians leaving Allint, then he would be sharing his room with cousins he never knew until they found their own place to stay. He wondered if many of them would take to the streets and hawk magic tricks. He shook his head at the image.

"For two days you can be a traveler. But don't forget to follow the rules," Lomac warned.

The five friends had tried to use the way-houses along the Goolong trail last season as a brothel. The caretakers' brand of punishment was embarrassing for the boys, cleaning out the chambers and weeding the garden outside in the bright yellow garment of a repentant. When they returned to classes everyone had heard of their failed exploit. There was no female at the academy that would speak to them, which was why they went mountain climbing on a day off.

"If I stay in any of them, it's going to have to be three days out. Everyone knows us around Glacon. This news doesn't make sense." Then he remembered what he

overheard between the stranger and L'Ta. He was now wishing he heard what the stranger had to say.

"Well, I have to go and pack my bags. I have to be out by this afternoon. Do you want to go with me to the train station?" Lomac asked.

Jac's attention, however, was on the stranger who was now standing in the shadows and he knew who he was speaking with. "Uhh, yeah. Sure. I'll meet you in the...look, maybe not. I have to check and see what father wants. He's really angry about my suspension."

Lomoc shook his head. "You always get in trouble when your ears wiggle like that."

"I'm already in trouble so it doesn't matter. Make sure you send me a message when you get home. Maybe I'll stop by and we can swap stories...charm the local girls..." He was up and moving quickly down the street, keeping the stranger in sight.

Lomac shook his head and frowned. Life was going to be boring without his usual group of friends around.

Jac had followed the stranger but lost him at the Eatery Shop. Tired he headed back to the hotel. Stopping short in the hotel lobby he sucked in his breath to control his temper. Jac couldn't mistake his bags, since next to them were his father's. He was standing alone next to the bags, looking more than irritated.

"Father, you would never believe who I..."

"It's about time! Pick up your bags. You're going home. You there!" he shouted at one of the baggage handlers five times his size. He gestured to Jac's bags and handed him a tip and Jac's ticket. "See that his bags get to the station and on the right transport."

Silently, Jac cursed. He didn't want to go home. It was boring. Then he remembered that maybe he could talk his mother into letting him go to Trinimop. The winter fair should be starting about now. Surely, she had something to sell there and knew of a cousin or two that would be going.

"Where are you going, father?"

"None of your business! Get off with you! See that you don't give your mother trouble, or I'll send your worthless self to your cousin's farm. Maybe he can get some honest work from you."

Jac suppressed his response. His father was really angry. This time, maybe he did take it too far. His social science project was a parody of the college hierarchy. He kept his eyes lowered to the floor to hide his sudden desire to laugh at his joke. Well, he certainly left a name for himself.

While waiting for his flight out he noticed the stranger getting on another craft. Jac quickly exchanged his ticket, and without his bags, rushed into the aircraft before the door was shut. He found a place to sit near the back. Unfortunately, he couldn't see the stranger.

* * *

Jac was shaken awake.

"Young man, you've reached the end of your ticket," a steward informed him.

Jac awoke startled, looking around him. The craft was empty.

He gazed out of the window. "Where are we anyway?"

"Clmora. Not too far from the forests if you want to disappear," the steward told him as he encouraged him to move out with a shooing gesture.

Jac had never heard of Clmora. He felt in his pockets for his purse. It was flat and empty of funds, as he well knew.

"Is there a traveler's lodge around here?"

"No. There's a temple about half a day one way and a lodge the other way. You'll be walking in the dark either way before you get there. Best not to travel alone, though staying the night in the terminal could be as dangerous. There are groups from the Black Alliance that like to rob anyone in the terminal at night."

When Jac walked into the terminal he found armed militia pacing around. Obviously, they took the raids seriously. He stopped when he saw the stranger sitting on a bench studying the militia. Jac slid behind a column and wondered what to do now. He looked into the window that was before him and he nearly jumped when he caught the reflection of the stranger. The stranger slid off his chair and moved out the door, looking this way and that, again seeming to note where the militia was stationed.

"Bit of a nosey guy, wouldn't you say?" a soft voice asked him.

He turned to look up into the face of a young woman standing behind him. She was beautiful in her militia uniform, ears pricked forward and hairs around her chin quivering with inquisitiveness. He nodded.

"He was on the same flight as you."

He nodded again, unable to speak; not a familiar experience for him.

"Can you talk?"

He nodded vigorously, feeling foolish but still doing it. "I...I'm Jac." He smiled, not knowing what else to say.

"Where did you pick up your flight from?"

"Abernite." He then gave her his best smirk and pulled his shorter form as tall as he could. "I was on a break from college." Abernite was a rich resort next to the university so he thought it would impress the young militia soldier.

"Well, you're a long way from any college city and Abernite-type lodgings. This is all farmland and no traveler lodges nearby since we're a long way from any popular road. Are you expecting someone to pick you up?"

That brought him back to reality. Maybe he could say he got on the wrong flight. That wouldn't be putting him in a good light with her because the truth was silly.

But he never got a chance to say anything more. She turned to respond to a hail. The soldier nodded to someone that was out of sight and then turned back to him. "We're expecting a raid here tonight. You're highly suspicious and like the cloaked fellow that just left, we plan on making sure you aren't up to mischief." She saluted when a uniformed Elf joined her.

"He gave his name as Jac. He picked up the flight in Abernite." She saluted again and left Jac to the Elf.

"Do you have business here?"

"Well...look...I...it was just a spur of the moment type of decision. I saw this guy and was curious and followed him."

"What made you curious about him?"

Jac rubbed his face tiredly. His neck hurt looking up at the Elf. "In a food bar in Abernite he was with a Caladia Holy One and they had a disagreement."

"Who was he speaking with?"

"Ju'n L'Ta."

There was silence for a few moments and then the Elf gestured to a couch.

"Tell me exactly what you saw," he ordered in a soft compelling voice.

Jac woke to yelling and clashing of heavy objects. He thought maybe he left his viewer on and flapped his hands around to shut it off, falling to the floor entangled in a blanket. Rolling into a sitting position, he saw men dressed in black and red uniforms trying to break into the terminal. Frightened he crawled to hide behind a post. One of the militias was sprawled unconscious near him, his club clutched in his hand. Taking a deep breath for courage, Jac crawled over to the body and pulled the three fingers loose. It was small enough for him to use; however, he had never seriously fought anyone with one of these. He only dueled with wooden sticks, and it was for sport. Standing up he looked around for someone to help. He spied the young militia woman fighting off two soldiers that were taking an unfair advantage to Jac's way of thinking. He rushed over to assist her but didn't get far. He ran head long into the stranger that was swinging his club to attack the Elf. Both became entangled, and the Elf continued his progress to help the young woman. Jac gallantly struggled with the larger stranger whom he reached only his waist, surprised that his adversary was not fighting well, and then realized that the stranger was being immobilized with a law enforcement restraint. Jac stepped back to let his target collapse, then looked around for someone that needed aid. He saw another militia member down and about to be beaten so he sprinted toward the person ready to use his body as a weight to knock the attacker off balance.

* * *

The Elf examined the bandaged head of the young Caladia while waiting for him to come back to consciousness. The healer was on her way. Light gray eyes blinked open. The monks had also been notified that they had prisoners for them to reeducate.

"Jac, you were very brave for a college lad."

Jac groaned at the aches and pain. "No one ever said being brave hurt so much."

"We like to keep that out of the stories," the Elf told him smiling. "No, don't rise yet. The healer has arrived and is starting on those that need immediate attention."

"Oh. Well, that's okay. I don't think I could sit up anyway."

"Stay awake. You have a head injury. Emaila, keep Jac company. Don't let him sleep."

The Dwarf moved over to stand next to the couch Jac was on and looked him over. "Heh. Took him head on, didya?" He shook his head in amusement. "I can see myself getting away with that but a young Caladia like you..." He chuckled in amusement. "That is something."

"I can't remember what happened," Jac complained.

"You ran right into his fist." The Dwarf showed him how the fist gripping the club hit him right in the forehead. "You did well young one. They were not expecting us to be skilled nor for us to be more concerned with their capture than killing. Killing!" he growled angrily. "It's against the Queen's Rules. They'll be spending time in the monks' cells being brought to their senses."

"Just what do the monks do with killers?"

"Banish their darkness with kindness," he laughed, and then added somberly. "I really don't know. I've seen a few of the previous members of the red shirts back on the streets changed. Embarrassed about their crimes. They seemed like they were interested in doing restitution. But these foreign black clad soldiers...I've not heard what becomes of them. It's the Queen's worry." The Dwarf looked up as the healer stepped near him.

"Well, it's nice to see a Caladia doing something noble," she teased gently as she lifted the bandage from his head, to look at it.

Jac blushed because he knew Caladia were not known as the most honest group of beings on Arnica. Bragging about near brushes with calamity was more a Caladia's way than actually getting involved physically. It was not in their species makeup...or so it was believed by everyone, including Caladians.

"Is it true that the Caladia have left Allint?" she asked as she worked on rebandaging his head.

"I don't really know. It was a rumor when I heard it this morning."

She shook her head sadly. "The Queen will see that whatever mess they're in is straighten out. She's always fair and more. Okay, then, let me see the arm."

"So," she began after she had finished with her inspection, "what do you intend on doing?"

Jac shrugged his shoulders. "I guess I'll be a traveler for a while. Can't hurt my future." He was too embarrassed to mention he had no funds.

She nodded. "It would do you good, provided you follow the rules of travel."

The Elf rejoined the two of them. "So, how's our young helper doing?"

"Good. In a week he'll be fit to travel."

The Elf nodded. "You can stay at my farm until you're feeling better. I hear you want to be a traveler for a while. Do you know what the requirements are?"

"I hear anyone can be, provided the rules are followed." He squinted up at the Elf.

"There's a lot of Drusian travelers of late, since the Queen's mandate. It'll make the Black Alliance think twice about attacking the small groups. Doesn't help the single or pairs of travelers though. You should think about looking for four others to join up with."

* * *

Two weeks later, Jac was traveling alone to his first travel lodge, jumpy at even the sound of wind in the nearby trees. He avoided the places the worrisome spirits may be. He heard plenty about them from other students. Spirits usually were not harmful, but since the Black Alliance entities that normally a child with the right spell could keep from harming them, were roaming to do mischief.

He was hoping to meet up with others along the road who would want a larger party. So far, the three groups he met, were traveling in the opposite direction, and didn't want another person in their party. They were too somber anyway.

In payment for Jac's help, Clmora supplied him with the proper attire for a traveler and pack with a change of clothes. Not much for someone used to having more than he could use. He thought about going home, but having to hear his father's insults, and his mother nagging him to find something to do pushed him to think harder on being a potter's apprentice. He had no idea how the apprentice system worked, but once he was in the city, he would find out.

Jac tossed his pack onto the unmade cot. The travelers lodge outside of Posthups was small but well stocked with clean linens and a working video on the rules. Most towns had the same rules, but for the few that were strict on usage, it paid to be careful.

Misbehaving once and experiencing the punishment, gave him enough incentive to follow the rules.

This lodge asked the usual; some time spent weeding the lodge's garden plot and clean up inside if needed. However, the interior was already cleaned and the garden, from what he could see, was already weeded. Then he looked in the laundry basket and groaned. The last three groups obviously didn't like doing the laundry.

He was too busy dumping the linen into the washing machine to notice someone approach.

* * *

In a haze, Jac was aware of being jostled against another. Then awareness of the strong smell of excrement and urine made him gag. It was humiliating when he realized it was his. He was bound securely to the inside of a cart. When his eyes became adjusted to the dark interior, he saw the cart was full. From what he could tell, he was the only Caladia.

The trip could have gone on for days. All he knew was there was no food or water given to them. The door that held them never opened.

By the time the cart stopped moving, he was too weak to notice anything. He was hauled out of the cart and shoved into a cage. The dish that was shoved under his cell door looked like liquid soap and smelled just like it. His empty stomach heaved and for a day he resisted sipping it. When he did venture a shaking hand to dip a finger into the stuff to wipe across his lips, his fingers burned from contact. In anger he shoved the bowl out onto the floor. Exhausted and starved he blearily stared out of his cage trying to focus on where he was. He could hear cries of pain and see other cages lining a wall with a Gustian dressed in strange attire busily working at a long desk. He would look up occasionally when moaning or whimpering stopped. Then shuffle over to the cage, study the occupant, taking notes or muttering to whoever was there.

It was too soon when the Gustian stood in front of his cage.

"Hmm. Male, two inches shorter than an adult Caladia. Well, let's see if I can add ten inches to you. That would be something." He laughed callously as he walked away.

Jac decided he was going to die from starvation.

His capturer, reading Jac's resolution to die, had two mechanical beings restrain him while he injected him. After that, Jac lived in constant agony. His body burned from inside and ached without relief. He became another moan among the many.

Chapter 7

Alexandra's heart beat frantically. Terrified, she could only watch as her lover sank to the floor. The same pain that filled her lover, Jina Gari, burned through her nerves as she collapsed helpless to the deck. If her vocal cords were not frozen, she would have screamed in agony. Her temporary escape was a loss of consciousness. Her eyes moved rapidly under her closed lids, as she relived the frightening event at Merker's Outpost.

Alexandra was aware of being infused with a drug and its immediate effect calmed her. Happier dreams made its way to her sleeping self.

The sentient life form, a Sha'Kar from Merker's Outpost, was the first to be aware of the change in *Trojan Horse's* systems. The space ship's process of waking the two bioforms in the sleep pods commenced. Inactive muscles needed to be stimulated and brought into shape. Toxins were flushed from bodies, and subliminal recordings on information for mental health were started. In another area of the ship's database, reports of its journey were being catalogued and prepared for the ship's captain to peruse when she was ready.

At the end of the week, two lids to the sleep pods popped open, and the room's lighting raised from darkness to a soft glow. The occupants took a few minutes, blinking at the light, and letting the last effects of the subliminal recording drift off.

They both felt physically sick.

Slowly, Commander Lady Alexandra Harriet Montran of the Centurion Corps of Collective Space, rose from her bed of three hundred and seventy-seven days. She stretched tentatively, not sure how her body would respond to movement after the long length of inactivity. Until this trip, she had never traveled in a sleep pod, and at the moment had reservations of doing it again.

Alexandra looked over at Lt. Megan Vanstar, a Shield Maiden from the House of Athena. She was testing her legs by shakily walking across the cool storage bay, with one hand firmly planted on the bulkhead for balance. By the strained look on the lieutenant's face, she was not doing too well. Her jaw was set so tight Alexandra thought her teeth must hurt. If she was trying to impress her, she wished she wouldn't.

"Glad to see you made it," Alexandra greeted her hoarsely.

"Ditto, Commander," Vanstar croaked. She swallowed a few times before resuming her unsteady walk. "Bloody moon, " she said. "You're going to have to knock me out before I get in one of those pods again."

Alexandra silently agreed with her sentiment. Alexandra's thoughts turned to her lifemate, Colonel Jina Gari Zohra, also a Shield Maiden from the House of Athena, and a member of a select group within the Shield called Hekate's Inner Circle. She wondered how she was faring and where she was on her long journey to the same planet they were headed to. Arnica.

According to the ship's tactical database, their destination was to the outlaw, Alan Fermin's fortress on Arnica. It was in another quadrant, outside of familiar space; a part of space the Collective and GCFC powers had not spread their enforceable influence over yet. Meaning, they were on their own.

Alexandra felt the Sha'Kar's presence.

"Welcome," Evenstar thought to Alexandra.

"Greetings, Evenstar. Was your journey interesting?"

"It was."

Images of planets the private yacht passed, and a pleased feeling at what Evanstar felt, filled Alexandra. Evanstar found some of the star patterns familiar.

"Why have you come, Evanstar?" she asked the Sha'Kar.

"Commander?"

Alexandra turned to look at Vanstar.

"Shall we check out the bridge and make sure we have edible food?" Vanstar asked.

"Yes. And get a list of all points of contact the ship made while we were sleeping."

* * *

After an hour of checking the systems Alexandra felt it safe to satisfy their hunger with what the ship produced. They drank their nutrition, while looking out at the stars,

taking a moment to relax.



"Our orders on the surface are simple," Alexandra broke the silence. "Find the colonists and neutralize, *within* the planet's accepted rules, whatever damage they caused. How much information do we have on Arnica?"

Vanstar tapped a screen for information. "This is *Emperor's Last Chances'* report on the inhabitants."

An image of Arnica flashed on their screens. Quietly they read the information under the pictures and studied the dress and species that they would be meeting up with.

"Looks like we'll fit in. They have enough of a species mix for us to not stand out as foreigners," Alexandra said. "They don't tolerate killing of any living creature or harming another."

"Every society has bullies. What do you do if someone is beating you up?" Vanstar's voice sounded annoyed.

"The weapons displayed, swords and knives are listed as against the rules for using against another. Even clubs have rules for use. Crystals appear to be the choice of protection. According to *Emperor's* captain, our weapons are useless on this planet."

"Are you intending on dropping by at some corner market and buying a bag of crystals?" Vanstar mocked.

Alexandra was going to explain how a crystal handler channeled energy but decided to let Vanstar figure it out. From what the *Emperor's* crew wrote about those that

did use the crystals, it was similar to the Hemalans on Budma. It was a planet that practiced nonviolence, located in Collective space. She doubted a military minded person like Vanstar would find the information on the warriors of Budma noteworthy.

"We're both proficient enough in hand-to-hand, if it comes to that. We don't want to make the same mistake as the *Emperor's* crew that alienated the officials on Arnica. We won't be traveling with a full compliment of soldiers behind us, so we'll mind the rules like good visiting tourists should."

A beep and another star map came up, as they moved into a new space sector.

"Any messages?" Alexandra asked.

"No communiqués from anyone, Commander."

"What about Alan's ship's security, is it blocking them?"

They should have something coming in during their year of sleep.

"No, Ma'am."

"How about message beacons from *The Emperor's Last Chance*?"

"Nothing, Commander."

"Bring up what Alan has on his castle."



The image of what the castle looked like and the plans, with exits and dungeons marked came up on their monitor. There were a lot of hidden rooms as well. What

was he expecting? A rebellion among his soldiers or the populace outside his gates?

"There's no shuttle in *Trojan's* cargo bay so I'm guessing he planned to land in his compound."

"It would be to our advantage if there was more clearing around the ship when we land in the courtyard," Vanstar said. "If it were possible to land outside of the compound..."

"Then the soldiers would know something was wrong. They've had years to figure out what weapons work best here. We'll be dropping into an unknown," Alexandra warned.

"Our troop..." she hesitated.

"You mean the Black Rose?"

"Right. They trained in the same arena as many of Alan's metrasoldiers. They're one species, Ranjans or that's what Captain Miller called them."

"From Ranja 7F4. Outside of the main travel route in GCFC's sector."

"Yes."

"They've had a few years or so to adapt and protect the castle from outside attack and I won't doubt whoever he has in charge, has been figuring out ways to use the soldiers against Alan, and Alan, being rightly paranoid, would do something that would prevent whomever he left in charge of his castle not able to turn against him."

"Probably has a control-box, just like he had with me." Vanstar paused, then shook her head. "It wouldn't be a hand or wrist control. We looked over this ship before we got in the pods and didn't find anything that looked like a controller. I can tell you for sure, Commander, he wouldn't leave a military person running his operation this far out of his immediate reach," Vanstar said with conviction.

"No. He wouldn't. Too risky." Alexandra studied the image of the castle that slowly rotated. "Once in the courtyard we can head into the castle, and out an exit along the wall. He's got enough. His walls from the outside will be well defended and I think he has monitors on the inside of the castle to keep an eye on his army. We'll program the ship to emit a signal to disrupt the monitors as we move from the ship to inside the castle. Bring up the details on the mote."

Alexandra felt the Sha'Kar's presence. Evanstar gave her a strong feeling of elation which Alexandra thought was because the end to their journey was near. She wondered what Evanstar did for almost a year of nowhere but the ship to travel on. Alexandra smiled from Evanstar's amusement at her lack of imagination in what an entity of no form could and could not do.

The holographic image of the mote had wisps of scary creatures moving about, demonstrating the protection he had set up.

"A dream box from Alterier. These dots here must be tracking it's placements."

Alexandra glanced at the monitor as their ship beacons a signal into space. Both women waited.

"No return signal," Vanstar said.

Alexandra keyed in a command. "Maybe the yacht is looking for a particular identifier. There's our answer. Anything not on the list is ignored."

"*Emperors Last Chance* isn't on this list."

"Because she's not on GCFC's ship registry list."

"Why's that, Commander?"

"She wasn't built in any registered GCSC shipyard. For someone that had been so obsessive in his planning it's amazing how this slipped by."

"Once we exit the castle, do we head to the one colonist group still intact, Commander?"

"It's a bad sign when colonists don't assimilate with the locals. Too bad the colonists don't have a..." Alexandra broke off and looked at Vanstar. By the widening of her eyes Alexandra guessed she had the same idea. "It would be following the company culture."

"Mind controlling biochips," Vanstar said with loathing.

Alexandra knew it was too fresh in Vanstar's mind to have erected any barriers against her own invasion of self by Alan Fermin's implanting a chip in her.

"It seems like yesterday," Alexandra said.

"Yes." Embarrassed at her show of weakness, Vanstar started another system check.

Alexandra understood Vanstar's fear and self recriminations, but didn't pursue it, though she knew she would have to deal with it soon, or she would implode.

Silently she laughed at herself. It was true for herself as well. Whatever Alan had planned for her would have by far been worse, since Vanstar's life was not as valuable to Alan as her. She never could understand why he became obsessed with her since she had not met him until her third year at the Military Academy. She stared down at the monitor that blinked with Icons. For a few moments nothing registered as she made an effort to let go of dwelling on Alan's madness.

"It would be logical to assume that a company that deals in the manufacture of metrapeople would also insert a behavioral biochip in it's colonists, that also serves as a locator. I wonder just what their agenda is," Alexandra mused.

"Taking over a planet?" Vanstar suggested, sounding doubtful.

Alexandra shook her head perplexed. "With a dozen settlements? Even if they were military, they would have to have something that would give them a very big advantage." Her thoughts returned to her admiral and why she thought only three women could clean up whatever mess the colonists may have caused. What happened to *Emperors Last Chance*? Was keeping track of Alan's metrasoldiers all they could handle? And a bigger question of why Arnica is so important crossed her mind again.

Alexandra picked up the image of an energy corridor from Evanstar.



"A star portal like on Merkers? Of course. All planets have direct links to other planets. Do they cross space sectors?"

She received an affirmative from Evanstar. She also picked up that there was a link between Merker's Outpost and Arnica. However, Evanstar's image was of a corridor not stable. This added information gave Alexandra an idea that there was more importance to their assignment on Arnica than they were given.

"Commander, would you mind if I take a break?" Vanstar asked.

"No. It's not like we can do anything worthwhile up here. We need to start physical workouts. However, we'll start slowly, if you don't mind."

Vanstar looked relieved at the offer. "That's where I was heading. There's enough room in the cargo bay for getting back in shape."

Alexandra introduced Vanstar to Chi Gung, Tai Chi exercises, and yoga stretches. It was ideal until they had some stamina back. Vanstar didn't object.

* * *

"Incoming message," the ship's computer announced five days later.

Both women were precariously balanced in a judo stance as each was trying to toss the other when the message came in. They sprinted to the bridge. While Vanstar ran security scans on the ship hailing them, Alexandra watched the communication's progress as it was filtered for any subliminal message or virus Alan feared another ship may transmit to him.

"Computer, bypass 2nd level security scrub," she ordered, impatient to see who was hailing them.

Vanstar brought up the exterior camera with a large warship filling their screen. She quickly adjusted the view to a less threatening magnification.

"Unidentified ship, identify your registry and purpose!" a deep voice ordered.

Vanstar ran a security check on the voice. A name and face appeared on their screen. "It's *Emperor's Last Chance*, Commander." Vanstar glanced at Alexandra, waiting for her order.

"If you identify yourself, we will return the compliment," Alexandra said.

There was a moment of silence. "Lady Harriet, if it is you, would you care to mention a thing or two that identifies you to me?"

"Mack, I can say some pretty awkward things about you and Hadrie as kids, but I would rather spare you the embarrassment. It would be much easier to turn on your view screen so we can see each other."

The figure that appeared on their monitor was that of a man much older than what Alexandra remembered. For a moment, she wondered if her brother looked as old, for she hadn't seen an IT, Image Transfer, of him for many years.

Standing next to Mack Mcarn was a man she had not met personally but who had a mixed review of credentials in GCFC space, Rear Admiral Mora. She wondered how the admiral got the prestigious commission to travel beyond known borders with not the best of record.

Brigadier General Mack Mcarn stared into the steady green malachite eyes of a stranger. The voice was vaguely familiar. The RTI on the ship's screen was that of a mature woman. He had last seen Harriet, daughter to the late Awenita of the Isles, when Harriet was fifteen stan years. Her family was vacationing on the lakes at Valowenda and he was invited to join them. He had finished his first tour of duty and was between deployments. She had a year more to go in her schooling at Breadon, an exclusive school with a no-nonsense curriculum. His close friend since childhood was Hadrie, her cousin. Her parents died in a boating accident when she was an infant of three stan years, and Lady Laura, Hadrie's mother, adopted her sister's children - Harriet and a younger brother Acar. Acar, he remembered, had died in a suspicious accident. Hadrie had oftentimes remarked that Harriet felt more like his real sister than cousin. He was troubled when she

had enlisted in the military academy. He felt she should have returned to her shamanistic studies.

Mack Mcarn found the person returning his gaze was more animated than the computer image of her in a Spartan captain's uniform with her left side covered in battle ribbons. It was taken a few weeks before her last deployment which caused her to lose her faith in the GCFC's military command, resign her commission, and leave GCFC space. She left behind a stink that cleaned out the majority of the corrupted central military command center of officers and staff. It was enough to give those not caught, second thoughts about abusing their authority on the rank and file. He knew of a few that escaped the cleanup but were on a close watch list like Rear Admiral Mora.

So, this is Lady Harriet grown up. He resisted the impulse to stroke his bearded chin or scratch it in perplexity. What was she doing here?

Bright orange hair curled about her face in damp ringlets, with the longer strands tied behind her head. She didn't wear the traditional clan tattoo across her cheek.

After Captain Lady Harriet resigned her commission and left GCFC space, few knew what she did for the next seven or eight years. He suspected Hadrie knew. He wouldn't let her disappear, especially not after her experience as a prisoner of war.

His eyes moved to the woman that was at her side. She also wore a workout uniform, clinging damp to her body, with a forehead tie to keep her hair out of her face. Apparently, they had interrupted their workout. That was good. It meant they fared well on their recovery from sleep. He recognized Megan as an operative for Naboth's Vine. He felt somewhat relieved that Lady Harriet had not come alone. But why was she here? Hadrie would be having a fit if he knew she was this far from home...and in a ship that was showing registry to the outlaw Alan Fermin. Alan was responsible for an attack on Lady Harriet that nearly killed her when she was still a cadet.

She certainly had a run of ill luck for a while, he thought regretfully. He bowed slightly. "Lady Harriet."

"If you want to be formal, General, I go by Commander Alexandra Harriet Montran of the Collective's Centurion flag ship, *Ziggy*. Rear Admiral JoCastao is my Commanding Officer."

Her intention was to inform the two officers on *Emperors* that she was not subject to their orders. Alexandra shot a glance toward Vanstar and raised an eyebrow in her direction. "Brigadier General Mack Mcarn and Rear Admiral Mora. Greetings Admiral, I didn't mean to ignore you. This is Lt. Meagan Vanstar from the Sisterhood, who has been given temporary assignment to me." She saw tensing around both men's mouth. They got her message, and they didn't like it. Officers that wanted to control their arena of military action, she thought.

"Lady Harriet," Mcarn started again, "perhaps you can tell me why you are in a ship registered to the Fermins, and so far from home?"

"It *was* Alan's ship, and though we are the only two on it, it's stuck on autopilot heading for his fortress or so the computer says. We can't disengage its program nor leave this ship. If you interfere with its flight path, it will self-destruct with us aboard."

"Well, since you're heading there, you need to know he's got an army that's barracked there. Eight months ago, we mounted a major attack on the castle stronghold when a large number left for their mountain hideaway. We got inside and sacked the place before they returned. We intended to leave them with nothing from our part of the galaxy but the walls. Most weapons we have don't work on this planet anyway. They have since reinforced their security. His soldiers wear black clothing. The locals call them the Dark Soldiers. They've formed a working relationship with outlawed groups on the planet. This partnership is called the Black Alliance. At present, the soldiers are moving from the castle fortress to one inside of a mountain, better defended, and more difficult to pinpoint exits. We've been keeping an eye on them while we wait for Alan's arrival, and hope for reinforcements for our forces. We've lost a large number of crew from military skirmishes and an illness we can't find a cure for."

"What are the symptoms of this illness?"

"Upset stomachs, headaches, mass hallucinations, and some fall into a deep sleep. The only thing we can do is put them in SPs until we get home to a better equipped infirmary."

Vanstar glanced at Commander Montran.

This complicates our job, they thought.

"How many dead?" Alexandra asked.

"No one died. But what good are our forces if they hallucinate or fall into a sleeping trance?" Admiral Mora demanded. "I'd rather them die in a decent skirmish than fall asleep seeing no action!"

An awkward silence fell between the two ships as Alexandra figured out what the problem was between *Emperors* and the authorities on Arnica. The expression on Mack's face confirmed her appraisal.

"Would you want in the castle, General?"

"Yes, if you can give us access. If you have plans of the castle too would be helpful. Our scans don't work on this planet. Our orders are to capture and secure Alan Fermin's army, and remove whatever items they brought. We've half our assignment completed. The sooner we can clean up this lot, the faster we can return home. It's been a long two years."

"Lieutenant, can you transmit them the plans of the castle?"

Vanstar moved her hands over the control panel to select and send; however, a bleep sounded. "No go, Commander. Security."

"Alright, General, Admiral, there you have it. We did find a dozen places marked as exits but we can only manage to open one, so we've chosen the one that's thirty-four degrees out to 4-0-4. We'll signal when we have the door opened."

"You'll be coming on the other side of the planet in two minutes. The DS will track you from an array we have yet to locate," the admiral said. "The planet authorities will also be aware of your presence. We haven't learned much about their technology, except that nothing we have works. The various life forms on the planet will look similar to what we have on our side of the galaxy, but don't let looks fool you. There is something different about them..."

Something different about everyone on that planet, his unspoken thought was.

"As soon as you're secured planet-side, we'll bring you both aboard. It's best to keep your stay on the planet short and interaction with the population as brief as possible," the admiral spoke with authority, which to Alexandra was a wasted effort. He had no authority over her or her assigned mission.

"Evanstar, did you catch that message?"

"He is upset with what he cannot control."

"I believe he thought about my message and decided to bring me into line. I have my own orders and it doesn't involve getting caught up in his issues that have alienated his crew with the natives."

Alexandra could feel Vanstar's amusement at the power play. It was a relief they both would be saved that fate. As long as she made the decisions, she was not going to be drawn back into GCFC politics.

"I don't like the idea of you being dropped in there, but we don't have a choice," General Mcarn said.

Alexandra felt like rolling her eyes. He was treating her as if she were a child which firmed up her resolve to not reconnect with them once they were planetside. "Now Mack, do I look suicidal to you?" she asked softly.

"Milady, I don't know why you're out here with only one soldier to protect you. At face value I would say yes." General Mcarn's image and transmission abruptly stopped.

They were under surveillance by the Black Soldier's satellite. *Trojan Horse* established a communication link with someone on the planet in code. Ship diagnostics began as the customary docking reports were prepared so any needed repairs would be identified. Bots were released for cleaning, and air purifiers blew out scented air.

"Since our technology doesn't work on this planet wipe out anything that will prove to help Alan's soldiers," Alexandra said to Vanstar. "See if you can dump information on the planet the probe picked up into the handhelds. They're small enough to hide and they aren't weapons. Disable the ship but not so that should we need a backup ship *Trojan Horse* is out of the question. We have enough time, so I'm going to grab a quick shower, and change, but not into local costume yet. I don't want *Emperor's* troops to know yet that we've other orders."

Vanstar's hands moved over the controls and found there were no safeties that blocked transfer of information to the HRs Alan had on the ship.

Thirty minutes later they met back on the command deck with their travel packs. Alexandra tapped in a command for a view of their destination. A screen came up of their landing site. It was night with lights shining in the courtyard with lines of soldiers in black uniforms waiting.

"A platoon. I wish we knew exactly how many he sent here, or how many are left," Alexandra said.

"It's not in the database, Commander."

"We still have the advantage."

The ship maneuvered into a landing position, then settled on its struts. The two were already squeezed into a side storage unit that could be used to exit directly below the ship. The thrusters shut down, and the lighting in the ship changed. Both women wore goggles that adapted to the light or lack of.

"Now." Alexandra wanted to escape before the noise of the ship died out, and the dust it created settled.

Vanstar rolled out and flattened to the ground. The glow from the bright lights shining into the compound shadowed their side of the ship. However, it was not dark enough to prevent a guard, had one been posted, to see them.

Alexandra's contact with the ground had her body shivering with the sudden energy that vibrated through her body. She crawled out from under the belly of the ship and leaning against the bulkhead she studied the ramparts that should have had guards posted. Standing she could feel an energy wave push her against the ship. It was like an energizer, clearing her senses and heightening her sensitivity to everything around her. Evanstar supported her.

<it is the energy of this planet though muted>

Alexandra shook her head to clear it then refocused on what was around them. At first, she thought she was seeing things than realized what was around her was real...sort of.

<they are the unhappy dead and other beings that are trapped within these walls>

"Clear," Vanstar whispered.

Vanstar's voice called her back to their mission. Alexandra tapped her shoulder and Vanstar rose, sliding along the side of the ship, watching for any soldier that may come around to their side. Alexandra made a dash into the closest darkened entrance inside of the castle with Vanstar on her heels. Dark apparitions were everywhere, parting to let them pass as they moved deeper into the darkness. Footsteps in front of them forced them to detour down a staircase.

There was an overpowering stench that wafted over them. Alexandra turned to Vanstar and signed to her. It smelled like an occupied dungeon. Images from her own experience as a POW crowded her thoughts. She swallowed a few times, willing her stomach not to retch and her present surroundings not to recede.

<be at peace> Evanstar's touch to her mind calmed her. <do not reach out to whatever you find in this structure>

"I will not leave until those in the cells are freed."

Vanstar looked at her and gave her an affirmative nod and a hand signal she understood and agreed.

They moved further into the fortress, using the HRs to guide them to where they could access the passageways behind the rooms. In old castles the passageways were primarily used by the cleaning crew to access the rooms without running into hall traffic. Castle corridors were busy from early morning to sundown.

Removing her goggles to get another view of what was around them, Alexandra blinked a few times at the formless energy in front of her. It was Evanstar. Turning her head to the side she could see other dark shadows moving around, not all with malevolent intent.

<they once roamed this planet as solids but now they are homeless with a foreign energy calling to them: do not touch them>

Alexandra held her breath for a moment as a new sensation vibrated up her legs. A ley line that felt like it was working its way to returning to its natural flow trembled. An earthquake was in the making, she thought.

<it is being reawakened>

"Commander, we need to move on," Vanstar reminded her. Vanstar turned for a moment to listen.

<a small creature of no consequence>

They resumed their search. To both their relief nothing challenged their passage.

"A door," Vanstar whispered relieved.

Alexandra could feel Vanstar's discomfort from all the unseen activity around them. She sent a protection spell her way.

Vanstar cautiously released the door latch. Shapes moved to the door through a swirling florescent mist. The figures were dressed in the familiar chameleon clothing of CFSG ground troops.

A short dark-haired man stepped forward; his face covered in camouflage grease wearing NVGs. He was stopped suddenly with Vanstar wrapping an arm around his neck and using his body to block the doorway. She checked his badge and then released him.

The young man stepped to the side and nodded at Lt. Vanstar as if giving her approval then turned to Alexandra. "I'm Lt. Ruben Mcarn, Lady Alexandra."

"We need to be quick while we still have the opportunity," Alexandra said.

He turned to watch his group that was filling up the tunnel quietly.

Alexandra tapped Vanstar on the shoulder and signed to her to lead.

Lt. Vanstar led with Alexandra behind her, and Lt. Mcarn followed with his group. At each doorway that led into the castle's living space, two soldiers peeled off.

They slowed as voices coming from somewhere ahead of them were raised in anger.

<they cannot open the door to the ship that holds their master: the one who has the key is away>

Alexandra motioned to Mcarn. She pulled out her reader showing him a layout of the castle. She then marked where the Alan's troops were.

Lt. Mcarn nodded. He gave hand signals to his group and the remaining soldiers moved forward.

Alexandra pointing to the diagram that she marked as where she was headed. Lt. Mcarn took a deep breath about to argue when Alexandra handed him her HR and moved off.

At the staircase to the cells, Vanstar once more took the lead. The repugnant smell got worse as they moved down. The lighting was just enough to see shadows. Alexandra knew from her own experience, that a muted light kept on all the time, disorientated prisoners, and furthered the mental breakdown of the will. Small confined rooms, stifling air quality where shallow breaths were practiced, and the smell of waste matter also counted in breaking down a person.

Thin light beams swept the area.

Vanstar studied it for a few minutes then turned to Alexandra. She motioned that she would go and see what was in the cells. Alexandra hesitated, wanting to do it herself, but deciding quickly Vanstar was better qualified. She also picked up on why Vanstar chose to go, saving her the experience of revisiting a place that would surely give her nightmares. Alexandra nodded, grateful.

Vanstar moved off into the darkness, while Alexandra monitored her post by laying a palm on the wall of the building. The Sha'Kar's form overlapped hers, giving Alexandra a more intense reading of what energy was touching the walls.

<you must leave this area>

The sound of fighting came echoing down the passageway. Alexandra went to see what was keeping Vanstar. Peering in one of the cells that was opened, Alexandra hesitated, fighting the images of her past that overlapped with the present. Again, Evanstar intervened.

"I thought I had rid myself of these flashbacks."

Vanstar started at Alexandra's presence. "Helgas moon, Commander!"

"We've got to get out of here." Alexandra sized the group up and determined the three men could make it on their own. Vanstar was carrying a woman that looked the worst for wear.

"Is this the lot?"

"Yes, Commander."

Alexandra led them to the guards' room at the top of the stairs. She was not expecting anyone to be there. The door opened easily. Scanning the room quickly she noted an empty weapons rack, table with an unfinished game, food on the table, and empty bunks against the wall. It didn't appear to be booby-trapped.

"Clear," she whispered to Vanstar.

From the floor plans of the building, there was a passage behind the weapons rack that led to where they had let Mcarn and his soldiers in.

Vanstar laid her burden on one of the cots and went to inspect the cabinet alongside of the weapons rack. The prisoners helped themselves to the food on the table.

Inside the cabinet were well cared for swords, knives, and spears. There were no weapons from their side of the Galaxy.

"Lady Alexandra?" a soft voice called.

Alexandra reached through the crack of the door and dragged a startled soldier into the room. She was too young to have seen much action.

"You are living dangerously, soldier," Alexandra said, frightened for the soldier's sake.

"Commander," the woman gulped as she straightened her uniform. "Cpl. Wetfoot, reporting. Lt. Mcarn is looking for you. DS reinforcements are arriving, we need to vacate the premises..." She stopped when she caught sight of the prisoners. "You!" Her voice indicated it was not a pleasant discovery, but more of an accusation.

One of the men snorted in aversion. So, it wasn't a shared admiration reunion.

"Let's get out of here. Time for hellos later." Alexandra lifted the injured woman to give Vanstar a rest.

"Lead on Lt. Vanstar," she ordered.

A door clicked open, after checking the darkened corridor, Vanstar gestured to the others to enter. They all had to duck as they moved into an anteroom. While the three soldiers had NV goggles the three men used the sides of the corridor to guide them. As they turned the corner to their exit a loud boom rolled down the tunnel. Instinctively, the three women flattened out on the tunnel floor, pulling their rescued prisoners with them. The building shook and the air that whooshed above them had heat to it.

"Holy Virgins!" Wetfoot whispered. "That's one of their fireballs."

"What's a fireball?" Vanstar asked.

"A breakable container filled with flammable material. Stick a wick in the container and light it, give it a toss, and you have a fireball."

Vanstar found the door and opened it a crack. She quickly closed it shut. "Looks like a patrol and not from our side. What do you suggest, Commander?"

Alexandra eased her burden onto the floor. "Let's wait a while and let things settle down a bit. It'll give us a chance to see to these people's injuries."

The three soldiers promptly pulled medikits from their packs.

While they rested, Alexandra remembered the tunnels behind the rooms in the clan castles. Meant to be used by the cleaning staff during the daytime, at night they became places for lovers not wanting to be seen, children wanting to pull a prank, and not

very good spies prowling around. If the head housekeeper was good, night usage of the servants' passageway was kept to official business. All clan children spent a season working with the cleaning crew in the house and one season with the outside staff. She found both jobs were hard work but entertaining since she was paired with a cousin who found it difficult to stay out of mischief. Lady Evaline. She was the first person Alexandra had fallen in love with. Eva was everything she was afraid to be. Bold, brave and so smart in getting out of the trouble she created. Hadrie had told her that she married and joined the foresters. Eva was not anything like JG, Jina Gari. With Eva, there was no mystery, no passion about righting wrongs, and no interest in being involved with a sensitive that did not finish her training. Alexandra wondered why in her youth, she couldn't be bold and brave but instead followed one who could. Maybe that was why she decided to join the military academy. Or, maybe it was just to get away from clan expectations.

Three stan hours later Evanstar nudged Alexandra awake.

<solids are inspecting the tunnels>

Alexandra slipped her goggles on. The prisoners they rescued were leaning against the walls, sleeping. She looked toward Cpl. Wetfoot who was standing guard.

"Corporal?" she whispered.

The dark figure moved cautiously toward her, stepping over the sleeping men's legs.

"Wake the others. Trouble in twos, heading our way."

"I'm awake," Vanstar's voice whispered from the other side of Alexandra.

With everyone huddled around her Alexandra began, "We're going to cross the moat. There's no water in it but there are holographic images that are meant to terrify you."

The three men shuttered as if they had personal experience with it already.

<i can permanently shut down the origin of the harmful energy for you: it will deplete me of energy and will require me to ride with you until you can find an energy well: i can guide you to the place>

<i will carry you gladly>

Vanstar opened the door and the three looked for patrols. Alexandra lifted the goggles from her face for another perception.

"We're going to go right into that area there," Alexandra signaled with her hand.

Vanstar turned back toward the tunnel. They all could hear footsteps heading toward them.

"I'm leading this one, Lt. Vanstar."

Vanstar nodded uneasily. She lifted the sleeping woman. They had given her a sleeping herb so that she would not cry out in pain. Cpl. Wetfoot took the tail end. Alexandra stepped out of the building, staying low to the ground. The solid ground changed suddenly with loose gravel sliding under her feet nearly taking her over the edge of the moat. Unnatural shapes moved around in the shallow pit that ran around the castle walls, tinged with colors that caused headaches and stomachs to retch. There was no water as the original design called for, but that was to their advantage. Swimming in a dirty moat wasn't anywhere on her to do list. She moved toward the space that was darker than the rest of the area, weaving in and out when she spotted some colors from the ground that looked foreign to the planet.

Alexandra halted, turning to the others to see how they were doing. Cpl. Wetfoot, the three prisoners and Vanstar had grim looks on their faces. Alexandra turned back to the cloud and watched the roiling of black and gray energy parted to either side of them giving them a cleared way. Her connection with Evanstar wavered. The dark shadowy forms that kept a distance from them while Evanstar was vibrant, now came crowding around them. Alexandra recited protection spells she learned as a youth and after a few moments the dark shadows moved back.

Lt. Mcarn along with some of his soldiers came hurrying to them once they were out of the moat.

"Lady Alexandra, you must keep moving. The DS are going to start launching poison gas from catapults. Our troop shuttle is over to the left where you can wait for us. Who do you have with you?"

Alexandra sensed he was not happy about the prisoners being with them. His discreet hand signal to Cpl. Wetfoot was not missed by Alexandra or Vanstar. Her order

was to remain with them. Alexandra accepted the new addition without telling him he would be losing a soldier for a few days or maybe weeks.

"We freed them from the dungeon. We'll be escorting them back to their village," she told him.

"Lady..." he began.

"Commander Montran from the Collective, to you, lieutenant," Vanstar reminded him.

He hesitated. The sound of canisters being released from mounts decided for him. They could hear the whistle increase as the canister got closer. "Cpl Wetfoot will serve as your guide. Corporal take the left road. You'll see the outline of a spire. That road is clear of debris," he said quickly, then added, "The admiral will want to be kept informed of your status, Commander. We're not welcomed on this planet."

* * *

Alexandra set a fast pace to where Evanstar directed her, taking roads that looped around fields. Sometimes she cut across them when a road or path went in the wrong direction. They had been traveling for three star hours, with few breaks. There were many ghostly forms they passed at crossroads and some followed them until they were back on the road. Alexandra believed she was the only one that saw them. Birds and bugs feasted on fruits and vegetables that grew in abundance in fields. Sporadically, they came upon turnouts along the road where equipment was clustered and clean cool water pooled. Alexandra wondered where everyone was, and made sure Vanstar, Wetfoot and her were vigilant during their rests.

The men traveling with them were more concerned with the ghostly forms that trailed them and offered little in the way of conversation. The spirit forms seemed to enjoy annoying the men with their nearness. Sooner or later she was going to have to make a decision about what to do with these four.

As they moved on Alexandra's attention became more focused on the guardians of each area they passed through. She noticed that it did not take much of her concentration to bring to sight their apparition nor to communicate with them. They were given free passage with a warning to stay to the road. Some gave her additional information of

whose land she was passing over and all of them alluded to the image of a young girl that was overseer of the planet. Alexandra had yet to get a name.

* * *

Alexandra sat in the high seat of a harvester, taking pleasure in her heightened senses. This was their first real break and rather than be around the men whose energy she found disagreeable, she took the lookout post the furthest from them.

An angry curse and then rough laughter broke the peacefulness around the area. She pushed the men's disruption further away from her awareness and focused on the various spirit entities that were everywhere.

Another string of curses had her turning to the noise. One of the men was picking himself up. His back showed stains from the fruit on the ground. The other two men were walking down the rows of grapes, pulling the small fruit off and tossing it at each other. A short ghostly figure was darting between the men, tripping one up. Annoyed with the men Alexandra felt a sense of justice when the other two slipped and fell.

Alexandra glanced at the woman whom Wetfoot was attending. The bruises around her face had faded. She still had a slight limp. The few cuts on the men had disappeared completely. Alexandra looked at her HR, which had become ineffective. She had recalibrated the device a few times but each time it recovered more functions were lost.

"Commander?" Lt. Vanstar called.

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"Cpl. Wetfoot said if we keep going this way, we're going to be entering the Holy Grounds protected by the *Salukis*. It's away from these colonists' colony. Are we going any place special?"

"What are *Salukis*?" Alexandra asked.

"Warriors that protect the Holy Grounds." Vanstar's lips turned up at the mention of *warrior*.

"What happens if we enter this sacred land?"

"We fall under a barrage of little pointy darts. Looks like not everyone practices the do no harm, Commander. Cpl. Wetfoot said the darts won't go through *our* equipment, but we need to cover exposed skin."

"She knows this by her own experience?"

"Yes, Ma'am. One of those guys," she nodded to where the men were throwing fruit at each other, "led a hunting party from *Emperors* there."

"What were they hunting?" she asked suspiciously.

"Fresh meat to eat."

"That's against the planets law."

Vanstar nodded. "He encouraged them to keep moving since the darts wouldn't penetrate their armor. Jer led them to a group of small animals running around playing. The hunters shot them all, excited they had enough meat for two weeks of no ship rations. The planet's emissary was shocked and informed the ambassador, admiral and general that was a sentient family. One of the many species of the planet. That's one of the many reasons why *Emperor's* crew is not welcomed on Arnica. Various parties under the admiral's command that spent time planetside repeatedly ignored the locals' directions on where they could go and couldn't. Only the soldiers under the general's command followed the rules, which is why Cpl. Wetfoot's platoon has more privilege to come planetside, and only after clearing it with the planet's emissary. She said *they* know when a group or individual that has been banned from their planet attempts to land and the shuttle is unable to move from the ship's cargo bay. Freaky, no?"

"Scary for the natives they're supposed to be helping," Alexandra said.

So far, none of the spirits that she communicated with had not prevented her from following Evanstar's directions on where to take her. Alexandra reviewed her options and decided Evanstar was priority. "I'm going on. They can make their own way back to their colony with you and the corporal protecting them, or you all can come along with me."

Vanstar studied the land that was before them. "May I ask the reason for the deviation from our assignment, Commander?"

"A detour for another pressing matter."

Vanstar pursed her lips in thought. "You aren't going anywhere without me, Commander. Besides, it's not like *they're* going to disappear. They're nosey about what were up to."

Alexandra nearly laughed aloud. Vanstar was hoping it was a detour that would take them to Jina Gari, a comrade and close friend. She was grateful Vanstar didn't ask

further about the detour. Colors whirled around her indicating something was aggravating her.

"Something else need saying, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, Commander. It's this planet. It's not that illness the Admiral mentioned," she hurriedly said, "but this place reminds me a lot of walking around a battlefield at night."

Alexandra didn't expect that from Vanstar. Before she could comment Vanstar went on hurriedly, "Have you noticed those three guys when we're on the trail? They keep looking around furtively, jumping, and rubbing their arms like someone was touching them. I'm not saying I see anything or think anything is touching me, but I do feel like we're being watched." *"And I don't like them one bit,"* she thought.

"Intuition can be as handy as a pocket knife in a soldier's kit."

"Since you've mentioned it. What's going on with the *Emperor's* crew," Vanstar said. "is there's another reason the admiral put a stop from his crew from visiting planetside and not just the troublemakers. Crewmembers that were planetside from a day to a week either became psychic about things, or they got sick, so sick that they were moved into sleep pods."

Of course, she knew that to become tuned to a planet, eating produce from its soil quickened the process. But she had not eaten anything from the planet and the moment she had landed in the castle courtyard she felt charged and not just energy wise. What she used to have to quiet herself and focus to see or hear, she now could do by wanting to see or hear something on other levels. Her head turned to a bird that soared over them. Just by focusing on it, she picked up its desire for a twig to build a nest.

Turning her attention back to Vanstar she wondered how Vanstar was handling the increased energy that would enhance her senses that she deemed psychic and unwanted.

"That's what's different about Arnica," Alexandra thought.

Alexandra beamed when Vanstar nodded as if she had heard her and went on, "According to the corporal, there's some religious personnel aboard that find this planet offensive and how people are changed if they spend too much time here. They've been harassing those that were identified as being psychic. It's split the crew into warring

parties, I mean doing nasty stuff to each other. Sounds like divide and conqueror, Commander. It doesn't make sense considering that more than half of the species on the ship are telepathic."

"That does explain a lot. Divide and conquer. There are some people that aren't telepathic and are jealous of those that are. I would imagine those that had a bit of prejudice became frightened when their senses too, became heightened. Without a mentor they would find it scary, however, every ship has medical personnel that can deal with that." She became quiet as she thought of her own feeling of being overwhelmed when she touched the surface of the planet, and if it had not been for Evanstar she would have been emotionally off centered.

"But not why Mcarn hasn't been able to put a lid on it. He's been around sensitives and shamans throughout his life. I don't know much of the Admiral, only that he has some disciplinary marks on his record for being prejudice and abusing his authority over his command. I'm surprised he got this assignment. What's your take on this planet besides being creepy?"

"I hope that psychic thing isn't catchy."

Alexandra grinned at her. "So, what do the men say about being followed?"

"They're a superstitious lot. Muttering fools' curses and the like."

"As long as we don't violate anything, like breaking, cutting, or removing something without a silent thank you to the spirit that protects the places we're passing through, I don't see us having problems. I just wish those three men would show some respect to the fields we're going through."

Alexandra liked the feel of the planet. Aside from the disturbing energy the men gave off, Arnica was a pleasant experience.

"You see the spirits?" Vanstar's aghast look quickly turned to a grimace. "Sorry, Commander." *"Of course, you do."*

"I can see and feel them. To me, it's just like on any other planet, Vanstar." *"Only I don't need to try to see and hear what's happening around me."*

"Other planets aren't *this* creepy." *"Just, don't tell me what you're seeing, even if it's going over a cliff."*

Alexandra smiled. She wasn't sure what bothered Vanstar more, acting as an aide to a sensitive or being followed by things she couldn't see...or maybe she could see them and that was what bothered her.

"Well, let's see if they want to go back to their village on their own." Alexandra hopped down from her seat.

"Greetings," she nodded at the colonists. "You're originally from GCFC space?"

"Yeah," he said. "My name's Amonic, this is Jer, and Sys'mara ..." Amonic barely moved his head in the direction of the woman, "E'l." His voice and body language changed with his mentioning of E'l, as if she were of little consequence. He kept his thoughts to himself but the colors around him changed to a darker color almost black. She had avoided speaking with them at earlier stops due to the energy the men were putting out and now it was difficult to be near them. Originally, she had thought it was from them being prisoners, but now she was certain it was how they were.

"This is Lt. Vanstar, Cpl. Wetfoot, and I'm Commander Alexandra. So, what happened?" Alexandra purposely left the question ambiguous to see what the colonists would offer.

"We were minding our own business and got picked up on a raid," Jer said, bluntly. The men offered no more information.

"I'm going into the Holy Grounds. You can come along or return to your village. Do you feel you need an escort back to your village?"

Jer snorted in disbelief, looking at his companions, then in contempt at Alexandra.

"We'll come along," Amonic answered. "We'll make sure you don't get bothered by any of the natives," he sneered.

If he spat on the ground after the word native, Alexandra would not have been surprised. It was an all together different emotional tone than what he showed toward E'l.

Alexandra glanced at E'l. Her eyes were closed as if she were napping. Alexandra could see she had a healthier glow than their first stop. When she looked at the men, her suspicion was that they were up to something menacing.

"So, what's dangerous about the darts?" Alexandra asked.

None of the men volunteered an answer. It was disconcerting having them stare at her with undisguised dislike.

"The tips are coated with solanaceae, Commander," Cpl. Wetfoot said, ignoring the men's glare at her when she answered.

Alexandra chuckled.

"Commander?" Vanstar asked.

"It's used as an aphrodisiac on Rouen. There's hundreds of different species that are sensitive to it and the same amount immune."

"So, is it going to be a problem of waking up with our hands pleasuring ourselves, because no one else is going to be touching me without my permission?" Vanstar asked, glaring at the men when they snickered.

"No. However, if potent enough, it will put us to sleep. If we had some betel pepper, that will neutralize the effects of the herb."

"What does this pepper look like?" Amonic asked, sullenly, but interested.

"What difference does it make, Amonic?" Jer demanded. "You're not a farmer and neither are we."

Ignoring Jer, Alexandra told Amonic, "On Rouen, it's about this long, green with orange spots, and grows on a vine usually in forest areas wrapped about tree trunks. But, if solanaceae grows around here, the betel pepper may also. People usually get the two seeds mixed up because they're similar. It's when they're a few days above ground you can see the difference in the leaves. One is flat and the other curled."

"Could be anywhere. But we'll give it a try." Amonic gave the men a stern look. "Won't we?"

The men gave him a sullen look but nodded under his hard stare.

"Okay. Let's move out," Alexandra said. She signed to Vanstar that she wanted to speak with Wetfoot so Vanstar dropped back to cover their flank and assist E'l.

"Have you heard of any problems with the colonists and the local government?" she asked in a language she knew the colonists wouldn't understand.

"There's some small groups that resist any mixing with the planet's populace, like this group."

"What happened?"

The corporal shook her head, looking at the commander with a wry smile. "You know the brass isn't going to tell us grungies anything unless they think we need to know."

"So, what do you know?"

"The emissary of this planet visited each colonist's group giving them an incentive to integrate into their society. These colonists didn't want to give up their ways, and told the representatives to shove off. When officials put pressure on them, the colonist used weapons of mass destruction to black-mail the representatives to leave them alone." She gestured to the south of them. "Their demonstration of it's destruction was still evident when we arrived. They wiped out an entire city, Commander. Poisoned every living creature in that area. I understand there was no retribution. They just isolated the colonists. The admiral ordered the scientists aboard *Emperors* to undo the damage to the land, but I understand he didn't ask the local authorities before doing it. The mantes aboard said he wanted to impress them of our power with our technology. The admiral got bent out of shape when the locals told him not to mess with their planet again unless asked by *the* Queen. He and some others see this as a backward planet that should be awed at our advanced technology. That's when we began to notice none of our technology worked planet side and any weapon on board is nonfunctional. If a shuttle tries to launch without permission from the planet's emissary it won't move."

So, it was just as JoCastao suspected, Alexandra thought. This breach of the colonizing laws and coalition membership had the possibility of fracturing future relationships between the two galaxies. Surely someone knew the admiral had the tendency to do things his way without paying attention to the consequences. It was in his record. How did he get this important job when he wasn't qualified? This was why she left her military life on that side of the galaxy.

"So, this planet is nonviolent. We got that message," Alexandra said.

"More so than you can imagine. Arnicans have different ideas on..." Wetfoot glanced at the commander amused, "well, take speaking and thinking ill of someone, it's considered discourteous. You see, Commander, the majority of people on this planet see thoughts as images. They see the energy of all living things especially in sound, like their music. All Arnicans are telepathic and know if you're lying or not. That is where the

admiral and ambassador made the gross mistake when talking to the planet's emissary. They knew these people are telepathic but didn't hide their contempt or feelings of superiority for the natives. No violence and no weapons yet every time the admiral sent a part of his crew planetside, they were armed. The general thinks the ambassador has his own agenda and is trying to establish more colonies with some of the admiral's crew staying behind when *Emperors* leaves the planet's orbit. The admiral is typical of the old military where the one with the largest arsenal and can cause the most damage is the boss. He's really bent out of shape because none of our technology works on the planet and on his ship."

"So, whoever was in the committee that sent *Emperor* here knowingly chose officers that would be at odds on how to go about making first contact. Whoever that is or if it's more than one, wants *Emperor* to fail in performing its primary missions, that is to remove the colonists that are not peacefully blending in with the inhabitants including the metrasoldiers and to establish friendly relations with the planet's governments."

"That's the whole of it."

"How is it that you're comfortable here?"

"Both sides of my family are mantas. Doesn't always bode well for a soldier, but I've been lucky with my commanding officers and crewmates, Commander."

When Alexandra was a child, she learned early on that some species were paranoid about empaths, or anyone that dealt in things that they couldn't see, like Lt. Vanstar. Alexandra had believed that in a military whose membership was composed of over a thousand planets, the corps would be composed of so many different species that differences and adapting would be a norm; however, some individuals in high places, advanced their prejudices.

It was several hours before nightfall when Alexandra brought the small group to a halt under the shelter of a large old tree. Everyone was exhausted. The guardian of the area had graciously showed her this area. Alexandra could see wood sylphs hovering about, watching over their domain. Occasionally, the men would glance over their shoulders uneasily. Alexandra wondered what they feared since the sylphs were not threatening, only concerned. She was puzzled why the men after being on the planet for so long didn't see the life moving around them clearer than she did. Her own sight of

them was getting sharper and by Lt. Vanstar, she too was seeing them enough to know where not to sit or walk. Cpl. Wetfoot was alert to everything going around them, acting as a guardian to E'l to prevent the men from getting near her. She would ask her later why she was protecting E'l from the men.

While the others set about erecting a shelter the men insisted on having, Alexandra and Amonic looked for edibles. She took the opportunity of grubbing to feel out what the planet offered in nourishment. What she chose to add to their meal was guided by a small sylph. It shimmered near each plant indicating what was good to eat. Amonic was more intent on searching for one particular herb that Alexandra knew to be too bitter for her taste buds. The sylph did not indicate it as a choice for their meal. For someone that had insisted they knew nothing about plant life, he did know how and where to find that particular plant.

It was dusk when everyone found a place around the cookpit to eat. The cooking gear came from three military packs, making it a lot easier to create a tasty soup from the vegetables they had found. Alexandra, Vanstar and Wetfoot were the only ones that had eating utensils, but the others didn't mind. The men noisily slurped their soup and complained that it would taste better with meat. Burps and belches followed. E'l drank her soup quietly and sat as far from them as possible.

The night went by without incident. The next morning, Wetfoot attended E'l's injuries, which all but disappeared. But for the bruising on her leg, her broken bones had knitted. Alexandra thought her slower healing was because of malnutrition. E'l remained passive, still not speaking or offering any sign of communication. Alexandra would have thought the men were ignoring her completely if she hadn't noticed that one man was always within hearing distance.

On the third day of their march, Alexandra knew they were being followed. There was no feel of danger from their silent stalker, so she kept on, however, she did make sure Vanstar and Wetfoot were aware. Alexandra sensed only curiosity from their tails, so she made sure neither soldier took it upon themselves to deviate off the path to investigate further.

It was growing dark when Alexandra received an image of a cave surrounded by thick brush. She changed direction, climbing over boulders and finally stopped in front of a cave opening.



"We'll spend the night in here."

"We've moved into the highlands. It will be near freezing once the sun is down," Cpl. Wetfoot said.

"We'll need wood for a fire then. Take nothing that is not already dead and, on the ground," she reminded Cpl. Wetfoot.

The Corporal nodded and left with Sys'mara tailing her.

"A fire! If not the smoke, then the smell of burning wood will draw the Salukis' warriors down on us. We've been lucky so far," Amonic said angrily.

"We've been followed since we crossed the river," Alexandra said. "Right now, they're just curious."

Vanstar was in the cave giving it a security check. "Looks like it'll be safe enough. Can't see any bioforms that might drop on us."

The interior sparkled as soon as one of the colonists came in with a torch he had fashioned.

"Water too. Seems like we have just about everything here." Vanstar removed her goggles.

Alexandra moved to the edge of the underground river to study the water that disappeared into the side of the cave wall. She knelt at the edge and shined her torch to see what could be on the other side of the wall. There was nothing more than what her goggles showed. Dipping a hand into the cold water, the spirit of the cave was awakened. She gave her prayers of homage, feeling the tingle of connection.

Sounds from behind her reminded her preparations for their meal was underway. Vanstar was digging a shallow pit. Alexandra assisted, encircling the pit with stones, setting aside two flat rocks to add to the coals later.

"Is this what you were looking for, Commander?" Wetfoot and Jer entered the cave with handfuls of pepper.

"Sure is. We'll save it for tomorrow. No sense in eating it tonight and having dreams that drive us to distraction." Alexandra accepted the handful of leaves and peppers from Wetfoot. For a moment, she thought she felt something from the woman ...discomfort or annoyance.

"I thought it was a counteraction to the solanaceae?"

The tone of the question broke her concentration. "It is. But eating it without the solanaceae has the same effect as a pinch of solanaceae," she replied.

Wetfoot had left the cave, looking like she needed space. Alexandra went to join her. Wetfoot was leaning back against the rock face, looking at the stars.

"Commander," she greeted softly. "That cluster there." Wetfoot pointed to the left of Alexandra. "If you want to find your way back to the castle, it will be four-0-niner F on your HR." She gave a short laugh, "Provided your's still works. The locals call it the Vixen. See the swash of stars that make it look like a bushy tail?"

"To me, it looks more like a monkey scratching another monkey's back." Alexandra was never good at finding recognizable creatures in star patterns. "Think I may need to borrow the *Trojan Horse* again?"

"Arnican storytellers are speaking of a planetary event, an evolution of consciousness. They say that's why there's an eruption of bad behavior among some of

their citizens who fear they aren't ready, and the arrival of off-worlders is acerbating this fear of the impending changes."

Alexandra relaxed against the stone and looked at the dark silhouette of the corporal. "Storytellers? How did you hear that? Not from anyone on *Emperors* and not from these colonists."

"No." The smile in her voice was unmistakable. "Before the admiral got a twisted tail about the Arnicans and curtailed our visits planetside my squad was on recon in a small village, mingling in with the locals with no problem. I heard this woman speaking in a language I understood, which amazed me, so I stopped to listen. It was a teaching story about the change, *Itech*. Itech is a planet wide movement of raising the consciousness on all levels. For the souls that can't rise to the next level, they will perish in their present form to reincarnate on a more appropriate planet. Those that can withstand the rise in vibration move up. You'll notice soon enough, that many on this planet exists in the 4th dimension while we, the visitors, live in the 3rd. I'm guessing you've been seeing and feeling things your lieutenant can't see or those colonists. That means you're in the 4th dimension already. It also means, your body as it ingests the foods from here, will start to see more of the population. For example, back at the farm, the farm workers were watching the colonists damage their harvest. The guardians of the field came over to stop the men from their reckless disregard."

"Where were they? I was up on the tractor and saw no one."

"When you're moving into fourth dimension, forms are seen more of as an outline..." In the dark she studied the profile of Commander Alexandra for a few moments.

Alexandra nodded she understood. She grinned.

"You need to be careful around those men. They call themselves the Hands of Retribution. Anyone, male or female that attempts to escape from *their* village is hunted down. They bring the offending member back to the village for retribution, and not in very good shape. They are firmly entrenched in the 3rd dimension and even if they can't see the majority of the citizens on this planet, they know they're there and do all they can to bring them grief."

"So, who are they hunting?"

"E'l. She's the holder of the village hearthstone or heartstone, depending on who tells it. It's the only position of power a woman can hold in their village. Have you wondered why she hasn't said anything? They cut the vocal cords of all females. They're merely chattels for the boys and men folk."

"They sound like the Boyots," Alexandra remarked.

"That's exactly who they are. The last of their group, I hope."

"Commander?"

The two women turned to look at Vanstar standing on a rise. Behind her they could see the outline of a colonist against the sky.

"Dinner's just about ready."

"Thanks, Lieutenant. Have you told this to Lt. Vanstar?"

"No, Commander. I don't want the men to overhear me. They can be brutal with their thoughts and I'm not really up to a fight on that low level."

Vanstar's eyes became slits at hearing this last bit. "Commander?"

"She'll tell you when you two are not near any of the men, but remember the Boyots?"

"Damn their souls!" she swore softly. "Yeah. Some of the colonists follow that sanctimonious barf?" She got a nod from the two women. "I thought that religion died out. So, they sent some of their disciples over here, did they?" To Vanstar things now made sense and strengthened her resolve to keep the three men at a distance as well under close watch. To them, anything was okay to do to nonbelievers, who was anyone that disagreed with them including members of their own faction.

The group sat around the fire, with the men noticeably sitting grouped together. Wetfoot handed around the food and Sys'mara took three servings and added seeds to the food, then handed them to the two men, keeping one. The tubers, herbs and berries, had been mixed into a sweet tasting paste, using the tough squash skin for a dish. It made it easy to use fingers for scooping out the tasty mix.

"How can you eat that stuff?" Lt. Vanstar asked Amonic as he liberally sprinkled more of the bitter tasting seeds on his meal.

"You develop a taste for it. You want to try it?"

"No thanks. I can smell it all the way over here. It stinks."

"You stay here long enough; you'll be adding it to your..."

"If she doesn't want it, she doesn't want it. More for us," Jer told Amonic crankily. Jer glared at Vanstar and then went back to his meal.

Alexandra noticed that Wetfoot was not adding it to her food and the dish she handed E'l was also without seeds. E'l took a space that was away from them all.

Before they settled for the night, Alexandra, Wetfoot and Vanstar made biscuits of the legumes and added chopped bits of the small pepper to it. They laid them over the flat rocks that sat on top of the embers to make them nice and crispy. It would make it easier to eat while on the march.

Alexandra prepared for sleep, blessing and protecting her sleeping space.

While the others settled down for sleep, Jer and Vanstar took the first watch. He was not looking too pleased, but they had drawn lots and somehow, Vanstar managed to pull duty with him. Alexandra suspected that the lieutenant pulled a slight of hand to get the two on the same watch.

Snapping sparks from the fire floated up, winking out before they reached any great height in the cavern. Alexandra couldn't sleep. Lying on the ground intensified her connection with the planet. Rolling on her back she went over in her mind what she had learned from the HR before it became useless.

Arnicans elected members from three of the four continents to a general council. These members discussed the business of the planet. Allint, the first continent was ruled by a hereditary ruler, Queen M'Lu. She was considered the highest authority on the planet. All inhabitants of the planet went to her if they had a serious decision and needed council or arbitration to an argument. Anyone that wished to have an audience with her merely contacted one of the monks at the many monasteries she maintained. She imagined an emissary from the monastery answered the questions in the monarch's name. She wondered how she could go about contacting this queen to ask her about the colonists. With that thought, she fell asleep.

Evanstar woke Alexandra just before dawn.

<it is time>

Alexandra rolled to her side and rose. Stretching and looking about her, she noted the others were still sleeping...with the exception of Vanstar whose eyes opened at her movement. Alexandra believed E'l was awake also.

Her dreams had been busy with receiving information on the planet as though she were listening to a subliminal tape. The planet was a virtual garden of delight to those that were sensitive. From her dream, she gathered the longer a person ingested foods from the planet and lived here, the more enhanced ones psychic abilities became. She wondered how those that didn't have psychic abilities felt living here, and what ingesting the seeds the colonists gathered was doing to their own sensitivities. Just then, a movement pulled her attention away from her private reflections.

The spirit of the cave moved from the water and filled the cavern. Pulling her legs into a *sukhasana* pose, she closed her eyes and concentrated on her heart chakra, letting her energy radiate out into the cave. She offered the spirit her heartfelt thanks for letting them stay safely within its space, and what it had offered to her in her dreamtime. The spirit magnified her love and sent it back to Alexandra.

When Alexandra opened her eyes, the others were awakening with groans and mutterings. She understood how difficult it was to wake up in a pleasant mood after sleeping on a hard ground.

Vanstar nodded to Alexandra when everyone was ready to move out. They would be eating the fruit they had gathered along their way while traveling. There was no argument from the colonists at the inconvenience; in fact, they seemed to want to leave quickly.

Vanstar stayed close behind her commander, not comfortable with the commander's growing detachment from the group, and not happy with the colonists. She also was irritated with the conversation she had with Jer. He admitted with pride that his village was part of the Boyot cult.

Alexandra could feel the change of energy as each new guardian of an area touched her. To each she sent a thank you for allowing them to pass through their territory safely.

Before the sun rose to mark noon, Alexandra held up her hand, which was repeated quickly by Vanstar. Turning her head to one side, to get a better view of what

her senses were showing her, Alexandra stood taller, straightening the kink out of her back. There was no form to this guardian, as with the others. The guardian honored those that were up ahead, for they paid homage to it, but it also felt since Alexandra honored it, she owed her a warning.

"Let's try some of the betel pepper, shall we?" she said to Vanstar. Vanstar nodded.

"Trouble?" Wetfoot asked as she munched the crispy snack, that was passed around. She grimaced as she bit into a chunk of the pepper.

"My guess is about a furlough up this trail."

"Why not take another way and go around them?" Vanstar asked, shifting her pack.

"There are various guardians that protect this sacred land. This trail is what they have provided for visitors to travel over."

"So, we eat these things and just let them attack us?" Sys'mara asked unbelievably.

"We cannot justifiably attack someone whose land we are traversing. The herb they have on the darts will not kill. We need to run like a shaker tarta was after us." Alexandra studied everyone. "Anyone not able to run?"

The others shook their heads.

"How do you know that stuff will not kill us?" Jer demanded.

"This is a lousy time for you to decide to make noise about it," Vanstar muttered.

"There is always a first," Alexandra admitted, refraining from smiling.

"It's only an aphrodisiac," Vanstar spoke bluntly, taking a liking to the alarm that showed in the men's eyes. To followers of Boyot, Vanstar knew that sex was a male-controlled activity and for them to take a drug where they would lose control of themselves was unacceptable and wasn't surprised that they would find it frightening.

"Don't know what a shaker tarta is but, we can well guess you mean to run as fast as we can," Amonic replied, looking at Jer meaningfully.

"Good. Follow the trail and don't deviate. Lt. Vanstar will be up front and will clear the path. I'll be in the back with Cpl. Wetfoot making sure no one is left behind."

Vanstar shook her head. "Commander, Cpl. Wetfoot and Amonic can clear the road ahead. I think it's better if I stay behind with you."

"Alright," she agreed rather than argue that anywhere on the line was going to be vulnerable to darts. She waved the group to move on and noticed that E'l filed in front of her and Vanstar behind her. Cpl. Wetfoot set a fast pace which the group easily maintained. Alexandra knew it wouldn't last long so they would have to find a resting place soon after they outran their trackers. They would only go as far as the rocky place the guardian showed her.

There was a curve in the trail and on each side was a slope with heavy brush. It was an easy spot for an ambush.

"Alright everyone, let's pick up our pace," Wetfoot passed down the line.

Alexandra felt movement around her. She heard a plant cry when a part of it's leaf was crushed under a shifting foot. A pebble was dislodged, as someone moved into a better position. Then the air stirred as a fast-steady projectile moved into her space. Alexandra's reflexes took over and her hand swatted the first dart away. Darts flew like a black cloud of insects, but surprisingly enough, none were seriously aimed at the group as they ran. Alexandra grabbed the thin figure of E'l around the waist with one arm as she collapsed, roughly moving her onto her shoulder. Her pace slowed considerably as she didn't want to get her sick. Vanstar stayed close on her heels.

"Corporal, over this way," Alexandra panted, pointing at a faint animal trail. They came to a river that ran along the side of a mountain cliff and nestled comfortably between two paths. It was the opening to the grotto Evanstar had pictured for her.

"Okay, spread out and find a rock to use as protection." Alexandra laid E'l against one of the rocks near Wetfoot. Her eyes were open and from what Alexandra could tell, she was just tired.

Turning to face the grotto Alexandra let the energy of the place and Evanstar who was becoming more active guide her. She moved to the side of the cliff, just off to the left of the grotto. The change in energy was perceptible the moment she stepped over an unseen threshold. Alexandra stopped as she felt Evanstar's weight leave her. She backed up, not feeling right to remain. This was not a place for the uninvited. Meanwhile, the

others were tired, and she needed to find a safe place for them until Evanstar let her know what she wanted to do next.

She saw the apparition of the guardian point out a dark spot up the cliff.



They all climbed unhindered to where the guardian had shown Alexandra. The dark spot in the cliff face was the entrance into a winding tunnel.

Vanstar glanced back at Alexandra suspiciously not knowing how she knew about the place, and then studied the walls of the tunnel. Jer touched the smooth wall and the subtle lighting in the tunnel dimmed. The men stopped their progress, maybe to rethink their decision to continue, but the four women walked wearily around them. The tunnel ended, opening into a great cavern. The small group halted to stare at the walls decorated with endless lines and patterns. Here also, the lighting was subtle, and its origin untraceable. A small figure that came only to Alexandra's waist approached them. It bowed slightly and faced Alexandra.

"Travelers, welcome. Please follow me and I will show you where you can freshen up before dinner."

The men were shown to one side of a hall and the women to another. When the group rejoined refreshed, their guide led them into a dining area where their food was already being prepared on side boards.

"When you have finished your meal, the Madrad will see you. Peace be unto you all."

"I can't believe we're actually here! These are the Tajarins," Amonic explained softly with suppressed excitement. "Did you hear them? They talk in your head. They know your thoughts."

Alexandra looked at Wetfoot for clarification.

"They're considered the spiritual guardians of the Sacred Caverns on the Holy Grounds. The Salukis provide protection of the lands on the outside and the Tajarins keep the inside of the caverns sacred. But, I don't believe these are actually the Tajarins. More than likely initiates."

"They're Tajarins. I've never known any foreigner to get this far," Jer said, *"without an invitation,"* he thought to himself.

"Who said we didn't have an invitation?" Vanstar grumbled, glancing Alexandra's way suspiciously.

They all found a place to sit at the table. Wetfoot bowed her head to the Tamarin that handed her a tray of food. Alexandra and Vanstar followed suit. When everyone had their food the Tajarins bowed and left the room.

"You act like you've been here before," Vanstar remarked to Wetfoot as she dipped her fork in her vegetable dish.

"No. But I've heard shamans from everywhere on this planet seek their council. This is also one of the sacred learning centers of the People that one doesn't have to be on the Drusu path to attend," she explained. "I was elected representative of my squad so learning the culture and rules was a necessity."

Amonic leaned close to her, "Some say Drusian's are tested here for their ascent into Buddhahood."

"What is this Buddhahood?" Vanstar asked between chewing.

"It's the final step into..." Amonic stopped embarrassed, looking at the other men but they were too busy eating. He returned to his food.

"It's a level above sainthood," Wetfoot continued. "Originally Drusu meant the way of compassion. In time, Drusu came to mean the inhabitants of Allint where everyone lives the Drusu way. Queen M'Lu is both High Priestess and guardian of Allint,

which all the governments on Arnica respect as the spiritual voice of this planet and in a sense, the Queen of Arnica."

"How come you know so much?" Vanstar interrupted.

"We've been here a year, Lieutenant. Wouldn't you want to know about the people where you're stationed at?"

"And the Tajarin are everyone's teacher?" Alexandra asked.

"The Queen is mortal," Wetfoot continued, "and cannot possibly be everywhere and be responsible for everything. So, the Tajarins, who don't have any mundane worries, hold the knowledge of what is sainthood, Buddhahood, and any level above that. They're so uninvolved with politics that they were given guardianship over the sanctuary of the Sha'Kar."

"Sha'Kar?" Alexandra's heart stopped for a moment. All her training to shield herself and be careful of her thoughts threatened to overwhelm her. <why>

"Yes. They're the enlightened beings that came before the Tajarin. They're the professed original teachers of Drusu. They attained a level above Buddhahood, which means they no longer reside in dross matter. When the Sha'Kar were ready to move into a higher level of spirituality or of being, they chose a place that radiated a special type of energy to enhance their meditation. They had assured their followers that they would return to further illuminate and teach when they had reached a perfect state. Some people make the mistake of thinking them a species, but it's a spiritual state, not the physical form you're born as. When any of the spiritual beings appear to you, it's in a form that you can accept."

"That's why these black soldiers are hated so much. They're rooting in *their* sacred mountain near the sanctuary of *their* saints..." Jer sniffed disdainfully, chewing noisily he swallowed and added, "We've never seen a Sha'Kar...nor any other supposed sacred person and we've traveled to a lot of places."

"Monks," Amonic disagreed. "They're everywhere acting like they're something important. They're just messengers for other messengers."

"So, you three believe that it's just local myth," Vanstar stated bluntly.

"They're children's stories nothing more." Amonic intentionally mocked the native's beliefs.

"What are the planet's authorities doing about the soldiers?" Vanstar asked.

"What would we know about *their* business? Our business is with these soldier's that have a death list of names. They've taken out some of our people. It's a waste of time asking for help from the natives since all they're going to do is lock them in some monastery. What kind of justice is that when they killed one of ours? We've been asking for help from your ship since it arrived," he nodded toward Wetfoot. A sneer crossed his face. "A lot of good any of your lot is."

"Why a monastery?" Vanstar asked curious.

Jer snorted disgustedly. "They don't take a life. Their great warriors, the Kiuzi, the greatest warrior class of this planet everyone says, would more than likely use their great talents to track you down and turn you over to the monks. Some warriors. You have the fire power that can knock them off the face of this damn planet. What's keeping you from blowing them away?"

"You know why," Wetfoot said. "Our weapons are toxic to the planet's atmosphere. And most importantly this is not our planet to do as we wish. And secondly, why kill holy people when their message is peace. It's you, the foreigners that are causing the problems to the natives."

"Rubbish!" Jer slapped his hand on the table, then grabbed a fruit and bit into it angrily.

Alexandra studied him and then the two other men's pensive faces. E'l had no expression. She was intent on eating.

"Killing is not my business, and as Cpl. Wetfoot pointed out, we're guests here."

"So why are you here at all?" Amonic demanded.

Their hosts chose that time to walk in, bringing desert, and bowls of scented water with small towels for each person. The men apparently didn't wish to speak in front of their hosts.

Alexandra ate lightly, preoccupied with rearranging her priorities.

What am I going to do with this lot of colonists? Go check out their village first or contact the Queen of Arnica. She grinned to herself when she remembered a proverb her grandfather liked to quote, *A visitor always presents herself to the head of the house*

before walking through the garden, least the dog be loosened. In her grandfather's case it was the vineyards whose wine he was interested in.

Turning slightly, she acknowledged the Elf that bowed slightly to her.

"The Madrid can see you at this time."

Alexandra waved Vanstar to remain. As Alexandra followed the Elf her eyes studied the art on the walls, feeling as if she was walking through an initiatory tunnel. The designs were meant to induce further the initiates contemplation and vibration to reach the level of awareness needed to learn the lesson before them.

The meeting hall was expansive with crystal columns as a backdrop. An elder sat in a chair surrounded by cushions. Two large pillars were on either side of her, carved to look like tree trunks. Carved limbs disappeared into the ceiling, as they were part of the same stone as the cavern's wall, however the color of the ceiling and pillar were different stone.

The elder nodded toward Alexandra. Alexandra could feel energy of a different type emanating from the figure. Peaceful and serene, she waited for Alexandra to approach her. This was a holy person. Alexandra was gestured to a pillow in front of the elder. Along the wall were other figures she could not make out clearly, standing quietly.

This is a holy place.

Once Alexandra settled, a soft touch asked for admittance into her thoughts.

<yes>

It felt like her visitor was looking around. There was no judgment, no reaction, only curiosity.

<friend what is it you seek in our holy lands> the Madrad asked.

<a friend in need of renewal guided me here: i was concerned of her health and ask for forgiveness if i have broken any rules by not visiting with a representative of arnica first>

<we see what is in your heart: visitors that do not work to disrupt our sacred spaces or break the life flow of our lands are welcomed: your friend's arrival has been anticipated: we are honored to receive a sha'kar to this sacred space>

At the thought of disruptive visitors Alexandra got the image of soldiers dressed in dark clothing. The emotional feeling she received was not from the Madrid but the

result of the energy the soldiers as a group gave off. It was unsettling the areas they entered.

<is there something I can do for you about the soldiers> Alexandra asked.

<did you send these soldiers here>

<no>

Alexandra received the impression the subject was considered closed.

<your business is with queen m'lu: may i pass on what it is you are here to see her about>

<i have been sent to assist with any problems you have with the colonists that have come from my side of the galaxy>

<those that have chosen not to become part of our peaceful community are disruptive to our ecosystems: they are feeding a power one group of colonists had brought and if it should gain enough followers, it shall bring a destructive force into the planet: it does not honor life rather it embraces a form of existence that stagnates the soul with fear>

<that's what I felt on my arrival in the castle>

<yes>

Alexandra thought of the soldiers in the mountain, the colonists, and seeing the Queen. She also wondered how long it would take Evanstar to replenish her energy.

<there are many distractions and deceptions on your path>

Alexandra smiled ruefully.

<do you wish to include these colonists with you on your journey>

Was the Madrid saying that returning the colonists to their village was what she should do next? Just the thought of entering their village gave her chills. Females with no voice, their voices cut at birth, moved her to a deep anger that she was sure she would not be able to suppress when she tried to negotiate something with them and those they shared the planet with.

<i would feel better knowing that they are within my sight and not up to mischief> Alexandra said.

<we will think upon this: sleep undisturbed for the night under our protection: we shall speak again in the morning: may your dreams guide you to enlightened decisions companion of sha'kar>

Alexandra bowed to the Madrid and rose from her pillow. Her group was waiting in another room where they had been led sometime during her session with the Madrid. The tension in the room was noticeable.

"What did they have to say," Amonic demanded, appearing to be nervous about something.

"Yeah, what's going on? You selling us out?" Jer echoed.

"It was a private conversation, and no one is being sold out. I asked for a guide..."

"You're a fool!" Sys'mara hissed angrily. "You don't ask for favors here. There's a price to pay!"

Turning to Cpl. Wetfoot she asked in another language, "Is their village near here?"

"I don't know, Commander. Either the natives or the colonists have been able to keep us from locating their village. Some of us think it's the locals through thought. Though, we can't figure out why they would do that since it would make more sense if we knew where so we can remove these creeps off their planet."

Alexandra nodded and then switched back to a language they all could understand. "The Tjarin leader is giving us a safe sleepover. Tomorrow I will speak again with their leader."

Nervously, Sys'mara looked at the others. "Just know that you're the one asking and the one that pays whatever the consequences."

Wetfoot glanced at the commander. "Are you going to be posting a guard? If not, I would like to get in some workout time before going to bed. One of the attendants told me they have a place I can use."

Vanstar looked at Alexandra expectantly.

"A guard isn't necessary." Alexandra almost added she would like a workout too but instead she gave a nod to Vanstar. She would take this time alone to get a better feel for E'l. She signed to Vanstar not to leave Wetfoot alone. The lieutenant signed back that she understood, and added she was not happy with leaving her unattended.

"I'm hitting the sack. I'm tired," she said out loud for the benefit of the others.

The men wanted to watch the two women work out but the Tarjans firmly escorted them to their own sleeping area and posted a guard outside the door when Jer objected to their segregation as isolation and against Drusen principals.

There were a dozen cots in the room the two women were shown to. Four were made up and their backpacks were sitting near the door. E'l seemed unconcerned with any of the business so far and settled on one of the prepared cots, falling to sleep quickly.

Alexandra sat cross-legged on her cot, deciding to meditate before sleeping. She hadn't had a chance to do that for almost a stan year, unless sleeping in a pod can be likened to meditating, but she doubted that. She couldn't remember anything of her year long trip not even lessons she may have had while in a dream state.

Quiet, Alexandra. Just let go. Breathe.

As her thoughts stilled, she could feel an awareness around her. It was a gentle power that infused a sense of peace and extraordinary energy to her inner core. Suddenly, the looked-for presence was there.

<geri: my heart and love: you are here>

Her heart expanded. Tears accumulated behind her lids. Something gently held her back from making a stronger contact as if warning her to say no more. But already she knew that Jina Geri, Colonel Zohra, her soulmate and lover, had arrived! Opening her eyes, she blinked the tears away. It was now only a matter of time before they would be reunited. Tired, she crawled under the covers, falling asleep quickly with a smile on her lips.

The wise woman was right. Her dreams were busy.

Chapter 8

The Sha'Kar moved through the corridors of the large coalition ship. It had been contemplating the stars when something had changed the usual hum of the ship's systems. The life form moved to the sleeping bioforms in the hibernation chambers. Four had more life than the others. It could feel the solids within waking up.

The pods that opened were Captain Onry, Captain Malchi, Commander Dahe, and Lady Dell. The Sha'Kar knew her well.

"Aiee!" exhaled the captain of the coalition ship, *Catching Butterflies*. His hands gripped the sides of the pod as he swung his muscular legs over the edge of the sleeping pod, careful not to snag a dew claw. He swayed slightly. "I hate these damn things, and I hate being wakened suddenly. Baahhh." He hacked then sipped the refreshment the medibot presented him.

Captain Malchi, head of the ground security forces, felt listless and reluctant to rise. She hated space travel, which was why she was with the infantry. She could hear the small alarm going off, notifying them that this was not the wake-up call because they had arrived at their destination. The next hiss was a stimulant and her bios changed instantaneously. She swung her bare feet out of the pod and moved to the console near the Captain's sleep pod for a quick summation of why the four were awakened early.



"A ship. By the readings it's Colonel Zohra's ship, *Rouster. Butterfly*, this is Captain Malchi, seven blue seven, bring us about on an intercept course, and hold over the ship until it stabilizes, then bring it into the cargo bay o seven beta, and store it close to the outside doors. This is to be considered 'under wraps'." This was Captain Malchi's primary assignment. The second would start once they landed on Arnica.

"*Butterfly*, this is Captain Onry, dog seven," he turned to grin at Captain Malchi, "as Captain Malchi commanded, under wraps."

"Nothing like waking up to an easy job." Captain Malchi was happy to get out of the sleep pod.

"I would have worried had we not found her before we arrived at Arnica. While we're up and waiting for the *Rouster* to come aboard, let's run the ship's logs and see what's been going on, and get some clothes on. It's cold!" Captain Onry burred.

The others nodded and quickly opened the nearby lockers for their uniforms.

"Three more months to go," Lady Dell noted as she snapped her collar in place. "We've traveled two months and caught up with her after she traveled four months."

"Good timing. Look at the diags. Her life support system in the ship is damaged, according to these readings. She's lucky she's in the pod, or so I hope. Commander Dahe, that's your job. Get the bots or the people you need to get her ship's life support fixed."

"Sir, once she's aboard the *Butterfly* why worry?"

"Because we're in uncharted territory, and I don't want any crippled ships within my authority when it's not necessary."

"Aye, sir. But that will mean we need to get other systems online. If we do that, we might as well wake the rest of the crew."

Captain Onry smiled catching what his commander of engineering was leading up to. "Now that is a thought worth thinking more on."

He had argued with the coalition league against putting everyone in freeze for the five-month trip but some of the members managed to convince the majority it was necessary for many reasons. The primary was that the boredom among the diversified crew would cause problems and added that if *Catching Butterflies* ran into any anomalies or trouble, the Captain may be tempted to go off course, therefore sidetracking from their primary assignment. The second was how else were they going to know if all the pods were in working order. The Captain felt the reasons were weak and was therefore suspicious of it, but he was under orders...until an immediate danger to the ship, his crew and the mission could be determined, then he became the sole determiner of the mission, captain of his ship.

He resumed his scanning of the ship's logs finding that there were contacts with other ships along their way. Their progress was being monitored.

"The target ship has been captured and secured in hanger o seven beta. Scanning has been completed. Repair bots activated. Passenger is secured and alive," *Catching Butterflies'* voice reported.

"Let's go take a look, shall we? *Butterfly*, please activate life support from here to there."

The four rode the elevator to level seven silently. The captain led the way into the large cargo bay that was filled with new war birds, the Night Fliers, and the larger Wart Hogs. The ship they were looking for was nearest the cargo bay door. Bots were already attending it.

"What in Helga's moon happened?" Captain Malchi asked as her eyes swept over the damaged hull.

"Looks like there was a fight and she's lucky to have escaped. Let's go see what shape the pod is in. Download the *Rouster's* logs. I want to know how this happened."

They all moved into the damaged yacht spreading out to check the interior hull and finally meeting in the cargo bay of the cruiser. Nothing on the interior was damaged due to the double hull reinforcement that the Belton Deluxe model was known for. The pod and its content were safe.

"Should I activate the wake-up sequence?" Lady Dell asked.

"Not unless we have to. The medic alert doesn't show any injuries. Let's get on with the repairs so we can get back to *Butterflies* logs. I saw some disturbing readings that I want to check out closer. Captain Malchi, for safety's sake, wakeup a squad of your group. Lady Dell do you think you can choose maybe a dozen of your scientists to wake? Three months isn't too long for them to ride this out."

They all nodded. Like the captain, they were against the five-month trip in the sleeping pods. Commander Dahe supervised the bots while waiting for ten other engineers he had activated to join him. The captain and the others hurried back to the consoles they activated.

"Looks like trouble," the captain mumbled irritated. "Lady Dell, what have you come up with?"

The tall figure turned slightly. "'Trouble' is what I read too. There's a new ship that just slid into view, keeping off the port bow, in the shadow of the first. Their weapons are hot. I don't think they know exactly who we are, so they're keeping some distance. Distance that if we didn't have this new equipment on board, we wouldn't be seeing them. How do you think they see us?"

"When we find out just where they're from, maybe we can answer that. Keep an eye on them."

"That's all?"

The alarm from the ship's tactical systems notified them a third ship had arrived. Now the unidentified armed vessels were considered a threat.

"Wake the crew."

"Aye, Sir." Captain Malchi pushed the all hands activation, which also brought life support systems ship-wide online. "Since our systems are showing more life, those ships may decide to do something with their armaments," Captain Malchi mentioned.

"I thought of that, captain. Activate the bots for the fighter ships. We might as well get some of our ships up and ready to run hot. Besides, we need to keep everyone busy for the next three months. Now I feel alive."

Captain Malchi laughed. "Yep. The only reason why the Bedians had any say in us being in freeze was because they invested a lot of credits to building this craft, and they're afraid we may break something before we get back with all the data they have this ship collecting."

"I heard a few scientists thought most of the species on this ship would not be able to take this new speed and one of the side effects was we would go off and kill each other."

They all laughed. There were so many possible justifications as to why they had to go into freeze that everyone started to make up some really far fetched reasons.

"They do prefer gadgets and computers to people, I'll grant you that. Alright, first group is moving to their assigned posts, next sequence is going. Sir, do you want me to send a status memo to their boards? It will save them from worrying why we've woken them early," Captain Malchi asked.

"Go ahead, Captain. Come-on then. I want to get to my bridge!"

Captain Malchi met some of her staff as they moved along the corridors. They nodded knowing their order of duties: secure the *Rouster* and *Catching Butterflies*, and then resume training until they were needed. Captain Malchi stopped Lt. Visu, her second.

"*Rouster's* presence is not for public knowledge."

"We'll see to it, Captain," she answered softly.

"All hands. *Catching Butterflies* has begun evasive maneuvers. Two hostile ships approaching dead astern. Weapons hot!" the ship's computer announced.

"Security teams take your posts!" Captain Malchi sprinted for the elevator, catching up with Captain Onry, and some of his bridge officers that had joined him. The clanging of the alarm began, and lights flashed red throughout the ship.

"*Butterfly*, don't allow any flyer to mount up unless the pilot has been cleared! And no one jettisons without my order! No exceptions, *Butterfly*!" Captain Onry ordered, knowing the pilots would push themselves when they still may be unclear from the long sleep.

On the bridge, consoles were alight. *Butterfly* was already initiating safety measures until her life forms could take over.

Captain Onry scanned his console while Captain Malchi read the status from the security console until the ship's security officer arrived. The elevator swished open as the primary bridge crew took their places. They were all looking clear eyed and calm. Captain Onry was proud of his alpha team. He picked them himself. His first officer, Lady Milu sat down, and immediately began to scan the three ships.

"Captain?" she called quietly.

He strode over to her side, hating to sit down when they were in battle mode.

"One of the ships is a registered freighter from our part of space. A bit far from home. However, the design does not match the registration."

"A wolf in sheep's clothing?"

"Hard to say. I believe they are curious about us. They are rushing us to see what we're made of. We *are* a new class ship, unfamiliar to any legal ship lists as of yet, and we have not identified ourselves when they hailed us two stan hours ago."

"*Butterfly*, why didn't you return hail?"

"Protocol dictates: avoid all contact with unidentified and identified ships that could be potential trouble," the computer returned.

"What is defined as 'trouble'?" the captain demanded.

"Any contact that will distract or delay arrival to the primary mission's destination."

Lady Milu groaned, "Those idiots programmed their ridiculous beliefs in the ship's program. They will get us killed for sure."

"That was not in the ship's protocol when I had reviewed the data banks before we went into the sleep pods. I don't like this. *Butterfly*, when was the last time you were uploaded?"

"Four stan weeks, following lift off."

"How did they do it?" the captain was incredulous. "How did they get past our safeties?"

"I don't know. The quick solution is to dump everything and reload her original program."

"Get Lt. Parker on it now." He sat down in his seat disgusted. "Blessings to Lord DeMonte for snagging him and his team at the last minute." He looked around the bridge and his crew working at their stations.

Lady Milu nodded and spoke quietly in her throat comm. When finished she nodded to Captain Onry. "I'm grateful the lieutenant suggested we carry a backup of *Butterfly's* original files in a separate system pac. Otherwise we would never know if it was tampered with until we needed it," she said to the grim looking captain; however, she knew that was his game face and behind his furred forehead a lot was being planned. "I've run a diag of that pac and no one has been near it since we all signed off on her lockdown."

"Good. Let's not activate anything more that may escalate our present situation. I want to make sure we're not going to play into someone's hands." Captain Onry gave her a brief smile that showed his white canines.

"Should we stand down?" she asked.

"Go to yellow alert," he said.

"Aye, Captain."

Captain Malchi moved from the console when Lt. Commander Beka, *Butterfly's* security officer, took his post. She walked over to Captain Onry to let him know she was moving off to attend to her own assignment.

The bridge lights switched from red to yellow.

"Captain?" she asked as she moved to block the helmsman's view of the captain.

"Someone uploaded an additional program into *Butterfly's* databanks. We're having Lt. Parker and his team look into it. Until we know just what changes were made, I don't want to escalate anything."

"Good idea. I'll let my people know. According to the doctor, everyone made it fine, or he hasn't gotten any word otherwise. All SPs are emptied. Quite a feat in such a short time."

"It wasn't necessary for us to be in the pods. My suspicious nature tells me that something went on while we were asleep. I know she's your assignment, but my suggestion is that you activate Colonel Zohra's sleep pod if you haven't already. I guess it's too late to keep her presence from the rest of the crew?"

"Her presence is secured. There are a lot of people that would love to meet her, and I thought it would be better on her nerves and ours, to not let that happen. And you're right. She would be royally pissed if we kept her in a sleeping pod when those around her were in danger. You know how a Black Rose soldier gets about being left out of the fun."

The Captain nodded and grinned. "Once a Black Rose, always a Black Rose." He wanted to meet her too, but for another reason. In her off-duty hours she earned a reputation at the House of Aphrodite in the Cave as the Dark Mistress. He shifted uncomfortably in his chair as a sexual rush gave him shivers, raising the ruff at the back of his neck. This was no time for sexual fantasies.

"I get your point. Bring her up-to-date with what's happening," he told her. He looked over at his second in command, "Lady Milu, let's resume course, but at maximum speed. Let's make up some time and leave them in the dust."

"Sir," Lady Milu returned, "perhaps we should just maintain course at three gees until we leave those ships behind. Any faster would..."

"Helgas bloody moon. We can just suck them up or leave them rocking in our slip stream instead we have to fake it. You're right of course. They won't know three is *Butterflies* cruise speed."

"Aye, Captain. Ensign Tre, back to our original course, three gees. Engage, Ensign."

"I'll be in my ready room. In 30 stan minutes have the other officers meet in the war room. I want a report on all systems and groups. Commander Beka, I wish to see you, now."

"Yes, Captain."

"Aye, Captain." Lady Milu knew the officers were already preparing for the meeting. She tapped in the meeting time, sending it to all officers' consoles. She noted one cargo bay was locked down and only a few people were allowed in. She was hoping the engineers were good at keeping their mouths shut. She was curious herself to meet this soldier that on her off-time, made an unusual reputation for herself in a house of pleasure. Smiling she turned her thoughts to her duties.

The Sha'Kar watched as a small ship outside of *Catching Butterflies* was drawn into the larger ship's hanger. Curious it went to investigate. Small bots were moving about the ship repairing damage that had been done to the exterior. When the solids arrived and entered the ship, the Sha'Kar followed. The solids made an inspection of the bioform within the sleep pod. The Sha'Kar touched the sleeping person's thoughts. They were of war strategies, memories of a childhood, and often times, her mate.

"Colonel Jina Gari Delorita Zohra, lifemate to Commander Lady Alexandra Harriet Montran, I have been waiting for you."

However, the bioform was heavily sedated, binding the spirit to the solid form so it was not able to wander or respond to mindtalk.

The Sha'Kar rested on the sleeping pod out of the way of the solids that were pulling out panels and reinstalling new boards. The thoughts of the solids were not so stressful since they were focused on their tasks, giving the Sha'Kar a reprieve from the awakened thoughts of the multitude of solids on the ship that were creating a discordant clash where it had once been quiet. It was tiring to close it all out.

JG's first moments of awareness were agonizingly similar to waking up after a drunken fest with her Black Rose troop. However, she reminded herself, she had promised herself after surviving the second such escapade to NOT do it again. So, her memories sought another similarity and came up with the time she accepted a dare from

another soldier who thought he was tougher to see who would reach the bottom of a 200 foot drop down a waterfall on Zeda Fumr in a barrel.

"Helga's bloody moon, I know I can do it...and stone sober too," she muttered to herself.

The barrel was small, made smaller with the padding she insisted on having to protect her head and shoulders. It was an exhilarating experience to drop for minutes, hit the water, and hear the rushing water all around her with only room to breathe, then another drop. The splash down just about did her in. But she was tough, and she survived. However, she couldn't collect on the bet. Her opponent's barrel got stuck between the rocks just before the fall and before anyone could get to him, a feat in itself, he drowned. Another soldier wasting his life on noncombat related challenges.

Her eyes moved behind closed lids as she relived other adventures. Moving closer to consciousness she realized her eyes were feeling scratchy, adding something else to her list of hurts. She sighed heavily bringing in new air deep into her lungs, laden with drugs to wake her body and clear her thoughts. When the drugs hit her system, she realized she not only was far from home but she was alone...and that she had lost Alexandra after finding her.

A small puff of air circulated in the small space she was in, leaving a cool blanket of moisture on her exposed skin, giving immediate relief to her blinking eyes, and easing the headache. The light gradually increased. Breathing in deeply once more, the body aches receded, and her mind cleared. The sleep pod lid released, rising gradually. JG noticed a familiar olive-green pant leg near the pod. Impatiently she waited as the lid lifted higher revealing a woman in a captain's uniform from her Sister guild house. However, the face was a surprise.

"Lieutenant Malchi...Captain! What in Helga's moon has been happening, Bian?" her voice croaked. "How long have I been in this thing?"

"Hello, Colonel Zohra," she drawled as she handed her a liquid dispenser. "We're about three months from our destination, Arnica. You've been traveling for about four stan months before we caught up with you. We've been in space for about two months ourselves. We're aboard *Catching Butterflies*, that new class MP ship the Argonauts have been working on for the Collective. She's faster, bigger, and has a lot of advanced

goodies in weaponry and science. And...I got myself a promotion by volunteering to head the security team to apprehend Alan's metrasoldiers."

JG snorted, knowing that was not an easy task. They were implanted with a biochip that would kill them if they were captured. It was Alan Fermin's method of preventing any of his soldiers from deserting, as if they could.

"Anything else I need to know?" Experimentally she moved her limbs and then weakly swung out of the pod with the captain's assistance. Her intuition for danger was telling her that there was a reason Bian Malchi was waking her.

"*Butterfly* activated four of us out of our pods early. She was programmed to locate you, bring you aboard, and wake up key officers to make certain you were okay."

"However..." she prodded.

Malchi nodded with a grin. "The first problem, Captain Onry found in the ship's logs disturbing contacts with other ships that have been keeping track of our progress. The second problem, *Butterfly* got excited because three ships running hot got too close to be friendly. So far, no shots across our bow. One of them is registered as a freighter but doesn't have the body for it. The captain also found that someone had downloaded something into *Butterfly's* databanks while we were in our sleep pods."

"If it takes five months in this war ship to get to Arnica, why in Helga's moon are you in sleep pods? Blasted civilians' idea, I'll bet. So, what's my part in all of this?"

"Well, first off, your presence is not for crew knowledge."

"Anonymity has its advantages." JG's lips curled into a smile. "Do you want me to check the ship out on the sly? Or, perhaps, raid the food stores and leave crumbs about?"

"We don't need a snipe hunt to keep fit. You've been inactive too long, JG." They both shared a laugh, then Bian added, "It's an order from high up. No reason given."

JG nodded. She spent nearly her entire military life in covert assignments where reasons were not given for orders handed down and did not take offense at this one. Besides, she had her own orders, and so far, Bian made no mention of them being changed. That in itself was a relief because if her destination had been changed, she would demand a reason and decide whether disobeying orders would be her next course of action. Working covert operations for such a long time gave her little contact with superior officers and more faith in operating under her own instincts.

Her eyes moved to look about her, wondering what it was going to be like hibernating in the yacht.

"So, how do you like your new toy?" Bian's eyes rested where JG's came to a stop.

"What is it, besides a small space vessel?" JG moved away from the sleep pod to look over a newer and sleeker craft that was in *Rouster's* freight bay.

"It's the new shuttle design, made for multipurpose flights. Carries two easily or depending on the species, five, if you want a crowd. Very maneuverable and has some armaments that will put a dent in a larger craft. It can be remotely called for; has nutritional foods for most known species for about a year if you don't eat much, and last but not least, it's yours to play with."

"I'm testing it?"

"You'll be the first to try it out in RT. It's designed for private yachts like *Rouster* instead of having to use the life pod for shuttle work where space is limited."

"Yes. I wasn't looking forward to landing on Arnica stuffed in a life pod."

"Just in case we get sidetracked, and have to drop out of the stream, we'll slide *Rouster* out so you can go before us to rendezvous with *Emperor's Last Chance*. As soon as you hail them, a coded communiqué from Captain Onre will give General Mcarn information on the situation here, and back home. Between you and me, the envoy on *Emperor's* and a small group of agents for a private interest group, the DeLans, infiltrated the crew of *Emperor* with the intention of not allowing anyone but their representative to deal with the authorities on Arnica. The envoy sabotaged the chance of any meaningful dialogue between *Emperors* and the authorities on Arnica as well as compromised the crew's neutrality by fermenting dissension among the various groups within the crew. A seized document from a DeLan courier outlined their intention to take over Arnica through destabilizing the world and having their embedded agents take over. What further doomed that intended good intentions was Admiral Mora being appointed captain. We can only hope the shared command of *Emperors* with General Mcarn will limit the admiral's aggressive approach to diplomacy. From our last communication with Mcarn, the admiral tried his hand at making nice with the natives after the envoy was refused any more contact and failed. The admiral, as his usual attitude with planets he feels he's

superior to, has been told by Mcarn in no uncertain terms that he will be removed from his post if he does another stupid thing like he did. I guess, we're going to have to show them the right way to do things. I hope Mcarn survives."

"Helgas moon. I've heard of Captain Mora. A squadron of the Black Rose was sent to clean up a mess his orders created on civilians. On his orders a flight of seven fighters destroyed two villages to show consequence of not following the GCFCs orders to release a few GCFC soldiers that went on a drunk fest in their town. As for the DeLans. We should have finished that job on Starl and then sterilized the whole DeLan family or even better sent the Black Rose to clean them out. So, what are they doing? Taking over the *Emperor* and using her weapons to blackmail the planet?"

"Too late for regrets regarding that family. They stored their family DNA to ensure their line doesn't die out," Bian said. "Besides, the DeLan family is too entrenched in bedroom politics to eliminate their gene contamination completely. One of *Catching Butterflies*' missions is to round up the envoy and his friends and make sure they are secured for transportation back to Committee space on a SEC ship. General Mcarn has been identifying everyone and who he misses the Koan will find. *Butterflies* will also assist *Emperor* with the completion of her assignments. What else *Butterflies* has to do I'm not privy to, but my assignment is to work with the local authorities to remove the MS. There's another SEC ship just for them in this cargo bay. No. I don't know what they plan on doing with Mora. Maybe demote him to an ensign so he can start fresh, so-to-speak or maybe he'll resign to some cushy job with a company job on some remote colony."

"Don't wish him on anyone, not without a psychtech doing a check. Some people can be rehabilitated and some need to be rehomed on a planet that's better suited to handle his disposition."

JG nodded, pleased that the metrasoldiers would not be housed on a ship with a civilian crew. If by fluke the soldiers escaped, it would be better for all that it was aboard a SEC ship. They were one directional with no stops planned, or life support other than to the sleep chambers. If attacked, they had no defense shields or safeties for the occupants. SEC ships were secured ships for the transportation of dangerous persons. Because all the

life forms were in sleep chambers, the speed of the ship was faster than conventional ships. However, no telling what political climate the prisoners would be returning to.

"Your mother told me that you were on a much-needed vacation and I was not to enlist your help." Bian's voice brought her back to the present.

"When mother says something like that, she's up to something," JG grumbled.

"Maybe she just knows you too well." Bian grinned, "And your penchant for finding trouble."

"Not me, but if it happens to be where I am, I'm not one to back down. So, what is different about this group on *Catching Butterflies*?" *Politics has to be stirring the personnel placement on this ship too*, she thought.

"You have half the crew that are shamans, empaths, telepaths, monks and whatevers. The rest of the crew are familiar and comfortable working around these mantes. Half the crew is civilian working in specialized fields...so specialized that it's not talked about." Bian looked around them to make sure no one else was around.

"Someone on Arnica telepathically contacted the monks of Hela. Communication over three space sectors in an instant. That my friend, is the big reason why this handpicked crew was formed. There isn't anyone here that hasn't been put through a fine sieve and studied the culture we are heading to. I downloaded the information into your data base. The only group that's a pain to get around...is the koan, but I'm sure you'll find a way. They're the psychic bureaucrats of one group. Always got to have them along."

"How did you get here then?" JG joked.

"Your mother volunteered me, but I would have pulled every string I have to get the assignment. Lucky for me that I know some influential people." She grinned at the pale face in front of her. "My order," she continued seriously, deciding JG needed rest so she moved on, "is to meet with a Commander O'Malley on an island called Ilo and work out a plan to remove the MS according to *their* rules. Your mother said your assignment is to find Lady Alexandra Montran and assist her in dealing with the colonists the DeLan family sent out here. Colonel, you really need to study up on this culture. It's...different. That's why what the DeLan family has done is criminal, and they'll be taken before the galaxy court. They sent four colonies that were made up of the outlawed group, the

Boyot. The authorities on Arnica and the Coalition asked that Commander Montran, Lady Alexandra, handle the colonist problem since she's an empath."

"What has that got to do with anything?" JG was suddenly getting an uncomfortable feeling about Arnica and the crew of *Catching Butterflies*. "Read the briefing," she reminded herself out loud.

"Right you are, Colonel." Bian smiled. "But in a capsule, the planet authorities are very sensitive to how outlaws are handled." She turned at the beep. Looking down at the sensor attached to the hull it now read the tensile strength was back to normal. "Ahh. Good the repairs are finished. Your ship has been upgraded so that even Alan won't recognize her. There was some hull damage on the exterior, which was repaired. A coat of silitrion was added so the hull won't over heat at the higher speeds your engine has been upgraded to."

JG noticeably perked up. Rubbing her hands in anticipation, she asked, "Just how fast can she go?"

"You can travel eight gees for maybe a day without you or the ship running into trouble; cruise speed is six, up from the normal four gee." She nodded smiling at JG's soft whistle of appreciation. "We've also changed the encryptions to your system, so you won't have to worry about Alan's tampering. While you were waking up, I noticed the SP had been set for Alan's bios."

"No wonder I feel like I've been out drinking all night. We set it for my bios before I left. When the ship was hit it must have caused the pod to return to its backup."

"Yeah. You're lucky life pods have a tamper proof biopreserve otherwise if he was another species that was really different, you'd be growing some interesting body parts."

"Not funny. And that's gutter gossip. There is no life pod that does biochanges, otherwise the underground market to change outlaws' appearances would be cheaper. Alright, so after I familiarize myself with the new stuff on this yacht, and study the planet's OP, what do you intend I do here for three months in *Butterfly's* belly?"

Her stomach was queasy at the thought of anything that Alan was plugged into would be running through her. It made her feel as edgy as a green soldier just before a

drop into the badlands. What she wanted to do was workout to get rid of the pent-up anxiety, but her stomach was too unsettled.

"Well, I'll be sure to send a few of my people over so you can beat them up. I wouldn't mind a go at some hand-to-hand myself." She smiled into the dark eyes of her superior. "But right now, Jina Gari, I'll give you a break and let you get your land legs back. You look pretty pale. Do you want me to send the medic over?"

JG shook her head then placed a hand on her forehead. "No. No. I'll be fine."

"Bloody moon, JG, you're really lucky," she muttered. "Come-on. I got some stuff you need to go over, since you refuse to rest." Bian Malchi helped her friend to the bridge of the luxury yacht.

JG looked at the schematic Bian called up. Silently she was cursing because she couldn't focus very well on the holographic image of *Catching Butterflies*. It took a lot of will power to concentrate on what Bian was saying.

"Should we have to drop out of the *slick slip*, your ship will be on autopilot, and it will move out of the docking bay to right here."

JG leaned closer to the hologram. "That's in front of a cannon."

"Yeah," Bian smirked.

"You're planning on shooting me out the damn thing!"

Bian Malchi looked at her in mock surprise. "Why JG, you've learned to read minds? You'll need it where you're going. It works like a catapult. See; you're the shot, and we're the barrel; we shoot you forward with an empty charge as we drop back. It will break you from our suck when we drop down to cruise speed and hide you from the other ships."

"I know how a catapult works, Malchi, and I know that's what this is." She waved her hand in apology, "Sorry. I don't mean to be so belligerent. So...who's behind the button, just so I know who to haunt if anything goes wrong?"

"Me. Do you think I would trust anyone else? Helgas moon tides, if anything happened to you now, Major General Aglauros would have my new promotion and then my head...provided she contains herself long enough to pull my bars off."

That brought a weak smile to JG's face. "Did you load any new games?"

"Of course! You'll like the new holographic Kung Fu fighting master. It packs a wallop when it gets a hit in, and also mixes various fighting techniques so you have to be adaptive and...it fights dirty. Just the thing to keep you on your toes." Bian clapped her on the shoulder and gave her a hug that was returned. "May the Fates bring you what you need most," she whispered in JG's ear. "Maybe we'll meet again on Arnica."

"Maybe. May you have many happy and long memories of your long command."

Bian nodded and left the bridge. Bian wondered if she should tell JG about the Sha'Kar that was in her ship.

Naw, let her figure it out. Give her something to do. After all it was her and Lady Alexandra that brought the Sha'Kars out of their city.

"Alright. I know you're here," JG mumbled after the captain left.

"Yes, you do."

"Isn't this a long way from home for you?" She was wishing everyone would leave her alone for a while so she could get sick without an audience.

"As it is for you."

"I'm chasing down a friend."

"I too am chasing down a friend."

"Really?" Her physical discomfort quickly subsided at this bit of hopeful information. "This friend didn't happen to hop aboard a ship with my friend, did it?" The colonel looked around to make sure no one was around to notice she was talking to herself.

"Yes."

There was a heavy pause, which JG could actually feel as if there was great sorrow coming from the apparition.

"Then we'll go find our friends together," she said softly. She gave an uncharacteristic sigh, thinking about their situation. "I sure hope they stay out of trouble that they can't get themselves out of."

"Yes."

"Do you know about the planet Arnica?"

"I know stories of many planets. My ancestors colonized planets in many galaxies."

"You had ships?"

"We traveled through portals."

"Like the one on Merker's Outpost?"

"Yes."

She thought about the potential for traveling across galaxies without needing star ships. However, not all portals had guardians to keep them stable and free access to anyone that could step across the threshold safely. Her thoughts went to Alexandra and how amusing it would be to be on Arnica before her. Taking a deep breath, she felt happier than she had when she first started this journey. She was only three months from her destination. Then she only had to locate Alexandra, which shouldn't be too difficult, and finish up their assignment. The ship should be able to find her DNA pattern within a few hours.

"Okay, let's see what's so special about this planet."

* * * *

The second day of JG's captivity she felt stronger and in a better mental disposition. When she was at her best physical conditioning, she was the happiest, or that was the way it had been in her past, and though she was not at that point, she was able to take on the Kung Fu Master on the 15th level for two hours before becoming shaky. Not bad according to the medibot that gave her a one-week recovery period to get back to full strength. Captain Bian Malchi sent memos throughout her watch, letting her know what was going on outside her prison.

Catching Butterflies was playing mind games with a new ship that took the place of the other three that were left behind. They were far from the Eckron sector and were now sailing through the unexplored Getty sector. The scientists were ecstatic at the information *Catching Butterflies* was collecting.

Her communication with the Sha'Kar was getting smoother as she learned to move between alpha and beta thought levels. From the information on Arnica, it was the type of culture she would expect in a monastery. Violence, both mental and physical was abandoned by the majority of the planet, until the DeLan's illegal sending of colony ships, with the intention of using deadly means to get what they wanted. From the evidence presented, they were aware that Arnica was a nonviolent society.

As she mopped her brow and sipped a beverage after her workout, she moved her thoughts off political worries and potential military campaigns to more pleasant things, her lifemate.

Rouster's systems powering up woke a napping JG who was slumped in the pilot's comfortable chair.

"What the..."

She leaned forward to read the console, as the ship, under autopilot, lifted smoothly out of *Catching Butterflies'* docking bay.

"The ship following has become aggressive," the Sha'Kar informed her.

"Get ready, sister," Captain Malchi's voice whispered over her console speaker.

"Ready or not, here we come," JG muttered as she tapped a 'receive'. *"You ready, my friend?"*

"Yes."

The Sha'Kar was as excited as JG. The small ship's outer shielding adjusted to the high speed send off, but JG felt out of sorts.

"I hope this is not how I'm going to feel for the rest of the travel... or I'm gonna need some meds."

"Perhaps I can help."

Pop!

JG slid out of the chair bonelessly.

"What is happening to me?"

"I am assisting in the expansion of your awareness, to what is beyond the boundaries of what you know as 'self'."

"Gaawds. I thought..."

Her attention went to a brightness that was neither here nor there but part of, yet not even describable in that context. It and she just existed. From there, she was propelled into a dust cloud and shot out at the other end. It was like living through a super nova, yet somehow not having her own existence influenced by the explosive and implosive events.

A consciousness...a living thing of great love gently guided her back into her ship where she could see her body lying comfortably on the deck.

Her drop back into her body happened so suddenly she was disorientated. A heaviness of limbs evoked fear that she was paralyzed. JG's eyes fluttered open and she was surprised as she stared at the ceiling of the ship, that it looked so... normal.

"What happened?" She shook her head a little when her thoughts sounded unfamiliar.

"You've been out and about. I had modified you so that you would not be as limited as you were."

"Modified." Curious she blinked but felt no different. Part of her remembered that her half-sister, Lady Varina Chaney had modified her...when Alan Fermin was modifying Megan. Varina's method was to have a chip implanted in her brain to control her behavior and whatever else she had programmed the chip to do to her. Yet, she didn't feel threatened by the Sha'Kar's 'modification'.

"There is a section in the top rear area of your brain that when stimulated properly can take you into my realm of existence, however, I merely tuned it for you to be able to move easier in this dimension."

Slowly, JG rolled to her side, and using the pilot's seat for assistance, rose to her feet. Her legs felt shakier than when she had gotten out of the sleep pod but not nauseous. That was a relief. She looked around her, trying to see if there was a change in her environment. Everything looked strange...blurry with colors ranging into shades she had no names for. Her eyes rested on the chronometer. Blinking a few times, she leaned closer and read it again.

"Computer, how long has it been since we left *Catching Butterflies*? she hoarsely asked.

"In Standard Space time for travel in the Eckron sector, two months, three weeks, and one hour. Time measurement for Getty sector is unknown."

"Helgas moon," she croaked, collapsing in her chair. She looked down at her hands to see if they were trembling or showing any signs from not taking in nourishment for three months. They seemed to glow, and a blurry green was around them. She passed her hand in front of her eyes, and then rubbed her temple weakly.

"You have not suffered from any harm. Better for you than in the biopod where not only your bio form is injected with harmful chemicals but also your spirit is imprisoned."

*"I'm grateful at not having to get back in there... she hesitated as she remembered the difference between her waking on *Catching Butterflies* and now. On *Butterflies*, she had no recollection of dreams or thoughts when in the sleep pod and now...she had memories but nothing to translate the experiences to.*

Her stomach growled.

"Right now, I could eat a very big dish of ortra but...I think liquids for a while will be a better idea." It hurt her throat to speak. "Where are we?"

"The ship you are to meet is a week of your time out of range."

"Good. I need some time to get back to fighting strength."

Unsteadily, she made her way to the galley. Her vision was still blurry. With difficulty, she programmed her first liquid meal, and then collapsed in a comfortable chair. Closing her eyes for a few moments, she tried to re-experience what she thought she ...dreamed? She was frustrated that she couldn't find a way to explain it to herself. She wasn't worried about explaining it to someone else. She had no intention of talking about this to anyone else. Who would believe her?

Alexandra.

Alexandra. How would I tell you about this...trip? I can't even relate it to anything I've ever done.

"Would you ask entities that live in the water for directions on dry land?" the Sha'Kar asked.

The Sha'Kar's amused response had JG chuckling. *"Ahh. One of those trick questions we hated in the academy. If a rain drop falls onto a leaf, drips onto a rock, rolls into a river, that empties into the ocean, wouldn't each thing it touched have a bit of it as they of it?"*

"By my way of thinking, the drop of water is part of the whole. Its level of consciousness of 'self' is what determines its understanding of things beyond its physical limitations." JG gave a short laugh at what she had said. She surprised herself at her reply. "It's all a bit heady for me. Give me an assignment and a time frame and I'll get it

done." JG slapped her forehead in mock horror. "I used to make fun of Alexandra when she explained that dreams were for more than resting...that besides attending spiritual lessons from her masters she also traveled and communicated with life she would not recognize in her waking state. I guess that would cover your form of life. You call yourselves Sha'Kar...is that your species?"

"It is not a species identification but a level of consciousness. Perhaps you should rest."

"I feel weak." She felt a deep longing for Alexandra. Alexandra would feel more comfortable with things like this. I'm just a soldier...

She rubbed her face tiredly. No, I guess I'm not the soldier I used to be. Not something the Black Rose would recognize.

Being used as an exterminator of problem citizens was no longer something, she believed herself capable of doing. She wondered if she would ever be able to take part in an operation that believed collateral damage was part of the equation.

I sure hope what we did was worth the sacrifice for everyone involved. Isn't it said that it's the intention that matters? I'm being maudlin. I need some meds. All this mental stuff must be side effects of...of...Ahh. No drugs this time around...maybe lack of nutrients.

The Sha'Kar moved in front of her. JG felt her body shift from something that felt like pressure, guiding her to sit and grab her legs and then breathe shallow breaths. For about a stan hour JG breathed and felt the tightness in her stomach increase and then lessen. Finally, JG was guided to lay flat on her back where she promptly fell asleep.

"Recapitulation. It is our first lesson in becoming a Sha'Kar, though, it is merely the beginning."

"What?" JG's waking mind groggily picked up on what may have been a continuing conversation, but she couldn't remember what had been said previously.

"Forgiveness of yourself and those that you felt you have harmed."

A great sadness filled JG as she remembered the many people that died at her hands while she was acting as an undercover agent for Naboth's Vine. Naboth's goal was to bring down a criminal cartel and their agents in government posts. Did the end justify the means? Abruptly JG rose, needing physical movement to work off her guilt.

JG was practicing moves with the Kung Fu Master's program at level ten trying to keep her mind on the hologram that had hit her five times in the same spot. She was getting pretty grim and tight lipped at what she was going to do with it when she felt the Sha'Kar near her.

"Something happening?"

"Company."

JG was disgusted with her progress and welcomed the intrusion. She had only been practicing for two hours and she was dripping sweat and shaking with exertion. Seven months of inactivity had affected her fast muscle twitch, and three months without nutritional supplements she felt contributed to her weakness. After a week she felt she should be able to work two to three hours of drills without this much sweat. Her only consolation was the breathing lessons the Sha'Kar had her practice were similar to what Alexandra practiced, giving her something of Alexandra's world.

"Incoming message," the ship's computer dutifully alerted her as she took a seat while wiping her face. She took a few deep breaths and then touched the receive icon.

"Greetings, Colonel Zohra."

"Greetings, Rear Admiral Mora and Brigadier General Mcarn," JG nodded to the two men, tucking the towel between the chair and her leg.

"Lady Alexandra and her bodyguard, Lt. Vanstar, told us to expect you."

"Bodyguard? Should I be worried? Why do they look anxious?"

"They left a stan week ago with one of my soldiers to return some injured colonists to their village," General Mcarn continued.

"She had mentioned that there might be reinforcements arriving with you." Admiral Mora's worry was evident.

He should be. JG read his record while she was isolated in *Rouster* and wondered how he could still be in command of any military vessel.

JG shifted slightly in her chair. She was startled that senses she normally used for combat were on hyper vigilance. There was more tension on the *Emperor's* bridge than should be for a ship not under attack.

"Admiral...General. The ship is *Catching Butterflies*. She's not too far behind me. She had to drop down to 3 gees to see what mischief a ship firing on her was up to." JG grinned, and signed, "Transmitting 'FYEO'."

"Noted" the general acknowledged, signing back.

"How many soldiers?" the Admiral asked sounding desperate.

Four things happened simultaneously.

JG felt danger around her.

"*We must go!*" from the Sha'Kar in no uncertain terms.

The screen suddenly went blank and *Rouster* abruptly veered off course and started evasive maneuvers without her input.

JG clung to the chair's arms as the ship careened sideways and then did some impressive maneuvers that she had programmed earlier, mostly out of boredom.

JG's stomach did flip-flops. The liquid she had ingested was churning and would soon decorate her environment if the wild flying didn't stop. Suddenly the ship's systems went dark and came to a standstill.

"*We are now on the other side of the planet. Perhaps it is better this way. I sensed something not friendly was directed toward you from that ship,*" the Sha'Kar said.

"*From those two on the bridge?*"

"*Someone else on the bridge. You felt it too.*"

JG was not ready yet to admit that her perceptions were heightened, but the Sha'Kar was right. She knew, not felt, but *knew* that something was not right. That was why she used sign language instead of voice.

Besides her pounding heart, JG could hear the ship's hull settling after the violent maneuvers. Her stomach was grateful. She moved her fingertips over the touch screen. From the dim glow of the control panel, she accessed the ship's log messages.

"A ship identifying itself as *Trojan Horse* did not receive a response from *Rouster*, so it sent a signal to a satellite defense array. Since it's standard practice for a war ship to clear the area of armaments, I'll make a guess that *Emperor's* missed this one...or I hope only one. Anyway, we have been identified as the enemy," JG translated for the Sha'Kar. "Hmm. This is good. *Trojan Horse* made it safely to the planet. Now, all

we have to do is figure out the location of its passengers. The Bio tracer on Alexandra and Vanstar should give us that information."

The encrypted message from *Catching Butterflies* had been sent. That was all she was given instructions to do. She wanted to avoid being caught up in *Emperor's* political problems, especially since that was *Butterflies'* assignment. Being so close to finding Alexandra was making her edgy. While the ship's system searched for the location of Alexandra and Megan and a hiding place for itself, JG went through what she had previously packed for groundside duty, more out of nervousness than efficiency.

After two hours the console bleeped. JG studied the results.

"From these scans, *Trojan Horse* is here, and Alexandra and Vanstar's bio readings were last shown here. It's a long way." She pulled up a topographical map of the area thinking Alexandra had gone underground. "At least the two are together," she muttered as she moved her finger along their plotted path.

"These are a series of mountain ranges," she explained to the Sha'Kar's apparition. "These thin lines are underground tunnels. See these breaks? It can mean various things, like a collapsed tunnel, the depth is too great for the computer to register, or the makeup of the minerals in the mountain prevent a good scan. Another disadvantage is that the scans can't show life forms beyond a certain depth. They are underground, that's my guess. Hmm. A lot of exits. Too many possibilities of where they'll end up."

"Their destination would be useful to know."

JG smiled at the uncharacteristic chagrin in the Sha'Kar's tone.

"From my experience even if we knew, finding them would still take time. Landing on an unfamiliar planet brings up a lot of surprises. You end up adapting as you go. Even planned vacations have surprises."

"Like your lifemate. That is how she ended up on Merker's Outpost."

"Good thing for me...good thing for her. No telling how long it would have been before we got a chance to see each other had that not occurred."

"There are many alternative realities and they have both your life patterns played out. In some you met earlier, some not yet. But in all you both travel to Arnica, and in the same sequence. She first and then you."

"I bet that woman in whatever life attracts trouble."

"I thought you liked danger."

"I can handle it. I've been trained to live it. Bloody Black Rose troop created it if it wasn't there, just so they could keep sharp. As much as I like the idea that I'm not with them anymore, I do miss the trouble we got in." She shook her head grinning. "Oh joy. I think I'm an adrenalin junkie."

The Sha'Kar agreed.

A red dot appeared on the screen. "Hmm. No life signs we have to worry about here, in this lake. We'll land on this side of the mountain then, and in this lake. There are small villages scattered about here, within a week's travel of each other. Plenty of life signs. I'm sure with Alexandra's hair coloring she would be remembered, unless there's plenty of orange haired people or maybe she had to hide herself," she muttered more to herself than the hovering Sha'Kar.

"If the spirit of the planet is willing...it will let me know where we need to go."

"Let's hope that's so. These energy lines across the planet's surface..."

"The planet's lifelines. My friend will have touched one, and then we will know."

JG left the bridge and began preparing the ship for her departure. She would hide the ship in a large asteroid belt the ship's sensors found and have it shielded as part of the debris. Every pirate ship known to space travel did the same; however, they didn't have the new energy emitter that could hide the ship's presence from known energy probes as long as it was powered down; another device that was added while she was aboard *Catching Butterflies*.

"Okay. Got my equipment for camping, warm clothing, cool clothing, and whatever comes between. I love these new kits. The Black Rose had top of the line stuff, but this, I've never seen some of this stuff. Not only compact but light. Look at this. What the...oh. A tent. That's coming with me." She hummed happily, as she closed her pack and headed for the small shuttle. "Let's hit the ground running."

The ride to the planet's surface in the shuttle named *Yanaba*, was smooth and full of surprises in what readouts it offered and the fact that it ran silent. It certainly offered new headaches for the law enforcement agencies.

The shuttle's system scanned the drop spot for anything that might be scanning the *Yanaba*. It gave JG a holographic picture of the landing, as well as RT views of the area

she was heading. Then, just before she dropped into the water, the system readings of the place went blank.

"Helgas bloody moon. What happened?" A quick diagnostic showed no problems. "Of all the times to shut down." Irritated at the inconvenience, she smacked the side of the console. "What damn civilian would program a ship to shut off its scanners before landing? Helga's moon, I sure hope my contact with *Butterflies* or *Emperor's* didn't leave *Rouster* open to sabotage."

She promised herself to mention this to Captain Malchi next time she saw her.

Once the ship settled on the bottom of the lake, the life support went into low maintenance. With her equipment pack on her back, she slid into the tube exiting the ship. The underwater suit kept her warm and dry as she slowly rose to the surface. Directing her attention to the darkness surrounding her, she suddenly realized she was not alone. She could actually feel something around her that had feelings...feelings she could not identify with.

<it is the spirit of the water here: it encompasses all the life in this water hold>

<you sound different: i sound different and feel different too>

<its the planet>

<is it causing me to feel this around me: i've never felt this before>

JG reached out to touch a small water creature. The contact gave her an intimate connection to its life force. She smiled behind her mask. Her thoughts turned to Alexandra and how this type of connection was normal for her. This shared ability gave her a warm feeling...until it occurred to her that Alexandra was an empath and she was a soldier. An incongruous mix, she had once thought. Now she was going to have to rethink that prejudice.

Looking up, the surface of the water was an arm's reach away. Before breaking surface, she moved expertly toward the land's edge, barely causing a ripple. Eyes peering out of the water scanned the area for any life. Not seeing anything moving, she pulled herself onto the bank. Even touching the grass was an interesting sensation. Her gloved hand lifted the mask from her face. She wrinkled her nose at the smells that assaulted her.

<there is nothing but small creatures around> the Sha'Kar informed her amused.

<are you sure: it stinks to say nothing of the bumps all over my arms and legs: something is not right about this place> she said.

Peering over the mud bank, she tried to blot out the strong smells. Satisfied there was nothing to give her presence away, and at the Sha'Kar's encouragement, she tested the muddy embankment with more weight. Readjusting the pack on her back, she crawled out from the reeds and onto solid ground, noting she was in a garden. Silhouettes of vines draped over a fence were bare and gnarled with age. The stone lined paths were all that gave an orderly appearance to an otherwise deserted looking moon lit area. JG glanced where she felt the Sha'Kar would be and could see a vague distortion in the air near her.

The moon's light was suddenly cut off. The rush of a cold wind blew into her upturned face and cold drops began to fall. Other than her face, her underwater gear was keeping her warm and dry. She moved closer to the building, stopping at the foot of the stairs, looking for anything that would be a trip or trap. She could see nothing that would sound an alarm. All she could hear around her was the now heavy rainfall.

<my tribe once visited here>

<how can you tell>

<energy>

JG felt tingling shivers run up and down her arms when both feet were on the steps of the porch. A strong gust of wind pushed her forward out of the weather, and further onto the porch. Behind her, waves of rain washed across the open garden, flattening any fragile plant that might be standing, and drumming on the porch roof. It created a din, so any nearby noises were masked. However, she could hear the clanking of wooden wind chimes further down the darkened porch. She shook her arms out, trying to get rid of a crawling feeling.

<your body will adjust>

<it feels like i've been magnetized>

When she was three strides from the front door it swung opened. Peering inside the dimly lit room, her breath caught, and without another thought, she entered.

"Gods," she whispered.

The room appeared to be a meeting hall without furniture. Statues bigger than life held up the ceiling, glowing from an unknown soft light source. As she walked down the hall, looking this way and that, she felt as if the statues were watching her. At the end of the hall there was a pool of water fed by a trickle from the wall. The wall spout looked like a conical seashell. She turned and studied the room lined with the formable posts. It had the feeling of a place of...

<prayers and songs of blessings are uttered here> the Sha'Kar agreed. <it has always been a place of peace even when turbulence surrounded it>

JG could feel something similar to awe coming from the Sha'Kar. Not daring to shine a light, she studied the illumined statues. "Different species," she said softly. I recognize some of them. Human, Elf, Dwarf, Centaur, Bormealian, but not those seven. Do you recognize any of them?

<the one on the end: it is a shamedian: i have not seen one since i was a child>

"I won't ask how long ago that was...probably before my mother's time," she noted, only to flinch when her voice echoed, mixing with the ominous rumblings from the weather outside.

<longer than that>

She inspected rooms, cupboards, and stairways. Someone visited regularly enough to keep it clean and stocked with fresh supplies. The doors and windows were properly sealed against the weather, though not locked from entry. Only the fact that it had many rooms with private quarters, and belongings neatly stored in closets, told her it was not deserted. Various sleep areas similar to most guest quarters on military bases had four beds per quarter. The footlocker at the foot of each bed contained fresh smelling linens and pillows. Toilet and bathing facilities were next door. Whatever this place was, it was hospice to more than one species ranging from very large to very small.

Tired, she decided that until either daylight or better weather prevailed, she was going nowhere. Removing her underwater clothing, she folded it into a small package and stored it in her backpack. From her pack, she pulled out appropriate travel wear and laid it across the neighboring bed for quick access. For nightwear, she wore dark clothing in case she needed to make a quick escape.

Sleep came quickly.

* * *

Returning to consciousness was gradual, not like she was used to. First the sounds... muffled rumbles of thunder, rolling away and returning as if going up and down valleys; then the smell of wet foliage, mud, bruised blossoms, and rain. She liked this weather, though not to be out in it for long.

Colorful images out of her childhood played across her mind's eye. Young residents in the dorms at the Sister's house on Prime IV on rainy days, surrounded the older warriors who told stories as they sat close to the fireplace. And then a few hours later, dressed for mock battles, they slopped through the mud and cold to see who would capture the most weapons. Those days' battles did not mean death or maiming but rather bruised egos and lost rights to desert for a day.

Suddenly JG sat up, remembering where she was.

<you rested well> the Sha'Kar informed her.

Looking around quickly she noted it was still dark. However, the walls around her were discernable and the longer she stared, the more she could see the features of the doorway.

<i slept too well>

<you are in no danger here: it is protected by the energy that you feel>

<did you rest> JG asked curious.

<i had peaceful moments when you stopped thinking so much>

"I fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pad," she objected in mock indignation.

<your sleep was noisy with thoughts and images>

While she used the shower facilities, she could hear the rain outside the window.

<the morning creatures have not moved out of their protection yet>

Stepping out of the shower she toweled dried her hair then paused to listen to the wind blowing hard against the building.

<i'm not all that eager to be going out in that weather myself> She glanced out a window. The rain was coming down at a slant.

JG headed for the section with the kitchen, carrying her food preparations with her. Though the kitchen cabinets were stocked with food she didn't want to take anything

unless she was offered. JG rubbed her arms between bites. The energy in this area was especially strong.

<this place could energize an entire retirement home: why would they have the eating area the most energized: for the food> JG asked curious.

<this location once had greater power running through it: it has diminished>

<diminished: you could have fooled me: it's like drinking too many cups of hatti java>

Finished with her meal, she returned to her cot. Repacking was done quickly, and efficiently, learned from years of military deployments done at a moment's notice. Restlessly, she moved back through the building and squatted near the open doorway. Using her new abilities, she reached out to sense the building's surroundings. Peacefulness settled in her. JG wondered if that was from the power that was still emanating from what she was now calling a monastery.

Images of the land in her mind's eye moved rapidly forward and then in a circular pattern around the grounds, just as if she was physically making a security sweep of the perimeter. She spotted creatures huddled under protection from the weather. Pausing near a boulder, she studied a large wild cat that was calmly reclining. It reminded her of a leopard. It stared directly at her, as if it could see her. This was the closest she had ever been to a live one. Not only were they carnivorous but tended to be territorial. Its mouth opened in a big yawn, revealing sharp teeth, and then she felt herself quickly returning to her body unharmed. Rising to her feet, she stretched her legs out and moved to another doorway.

<you did better at returning> the Sha'Kar noted.

<i've never been able to project myself out as much as i did now: is that part of your tuning>

<this place is enhancing those changes: with proper intent it shall continue>

JG regarded the outline of the Sha'Kar, looking for further elaboration.

<when you experience your self in other dimensions you experience the mindtalk of that dimension>

<is it permanent: what is happening to me>

<you are becoming: i will help you differentiate the solid world from the soft world so you do not jump over something that you can pass through>

JG laughed aloud. "Jumping over logs that aren't there. Talking to beings that only I can see." She took one last look out at the rain. There was no desire to move out in bad weather especially when her accommodations were not only comfortable, but she could take this time to work on rebuilding her stamina. The wind increased its velocity, howling through the surrounding trees and pushing the dampness and her further into the temple. On her first recon through the building she had found a dojo, a workout arena.

The door opened as she approached it and lights blinked on. It was long and wide with the usual fighting staffs and swords neatly stored along one wall. It was the glassed cabinets that had her attention. There were dozens of wrist bands laden with stones on each shelf. JG couldn't figure out how to open the cabinet to look at one closer.

An image of how to use one came to her as she rested her fingertips on a door. She withdrew her hand in surprise.

<yes: channeling energy through the stones by a skilled person can heal or disarm>

<the general didn't even hint about this: are they weapons>

<they are used to heal or disarm>

Not something JG was interested in. Glancing back at the floor, she could see workout dummies of various shapes and sizes were scattered in one area. Pads on the ground were in another area. In the center of the hall was a long-cleared area, marked by a different color flooring that ended at the far wall with targets. Now with more time to study it, it occurred to her that it did not seem right to have this type of dojo in a peaceful place.

"I thought Arnica's citizens don't practice violence," she muttered puzzled.

<this is a place of peace> the Sha'Kar assured her.

JG walked down the room, daring to touch some of the weapons. <probably like the monks of hela then: they know how to protect themselves from physical aggression but that's all that it's used for>

She found arrows stored in neat circular racks. Pulling one out she found the ends were blunt. The bows were of different models and sizes, reflecting the various species they were crafted for.

<doesn't matter that these are blunted: they are still capable of killing: do you think they have taken up the art of weaponry because of the colonists>

<perhaps there are a few of their own that they need to protect themselves from>

JG remembered Alan's metrasoldiers and their fighting techniques that were meant to kill or maim. <well i guess that's why captain malchi is headed here so they don't have to sacrifice their beliefs in fighting violence with violence: i hate to think what's going to happen if other violent visitors land here though> "I mean, what are they going to do? Send telepathic messages to the planet of origin to come get their citizens? They have to learn how to handle their own problems. This..." a rising panic made its way to her consciousness in the form of physical pain.

<stop>

JG bent over as if something hit her in the chest. She fell to the floor and rolled on her back panting. Closing her eyes, JG concentrated on her breathing to escape from the painful grip that held her heart tight.

"What happened?" she whispered hoarsely, when she was able to speak.

<you are on overload: you need to move and breathe to release the energy you are building up in your cells: discharging it without direction causes it to escalate negative patterns that are discordant to this environment>

JG looked along the wall again. "Oh. So maybe there's more to this room than the obvious. They work off their stress. Bloody moon," she muttered, rolling to her feet.

She began her workout, starting with the breath exercises the Sha'Kar had taught her, feeling better by the time she moved into the more vigorous kata movements. After two hours of sweating through her routines she moved to weaponry practice. She borrowed different weapons from the racks to practice skills she had not used in years. Three hours later she broke off satisfied with her physical agility. There were definite advantages to the energy of the place. It gave her more vigor than she knew she should be experiencing. A shower and a nap were her rewards.

JG opened one eye and then the other, looking around startled. The interior of the dorm was gray as the weak afternoon light filtered in through the doorway. Small birds were chirping and other sounds from the wildlife around the building told her it was no longer raining. As she rose from the cot the room lighting came up. Looking above her, she could see the ceiling revealing a blue cloudless sky.

"Now the lights work. Nice view."

The doors that slid open when someone approached them, the room temperature that adjusted when she worked out, and the water temperature that was just right, gave her clues that Arnica was not technologically backwards, as the reports *Emperors Last Chance* assumed were.

She pulled on her footwear, and threw a cloak over her shoulders, picking up her pack on her way out. Standing in the entrance, she looked out over a well-manicured yard undamaged by the rain. She followed the covered porch to a covered gate. Past the cultivated land was the edge of a forest. She closed her eyes and sought to extend her senses, as she had done this morning, just to see if it was all a dream.

The cry of a monkey type animal attracted her attention. A berry was snatched from its hand by a bigger member of its species. Effortlessly she reached up for another berry and handed it to the smaller one. The feel of it's touch was so real, she rubbed her fingers together, feeling the dust from the fruit after it was taken from her. She moved on, higher into the treetops, searching for someone.

Alexandra! <alexandra> Alexandra!

<geri my heart and my love: you are here>

Her heart filled with love and the feeling was returned, bringing tears to her eyes as she held onto the feeling. <yes> she thought blissfully.

Suddenly the feeling changed.

"You must hurry to the Island of Albason. I will meet you there. Talk to no one!"

JG looked around her anxiously. "What...what happened?" She slapped her thigh in exasperation. "How in Helgas moon do I find Albason if I talk to no one. That makes absolutely no sense."

The Sha'Kar who had left to investigate something returned quickly. <you are uncomfortable>

JG peered up at the late afternoon sky. Dark clouds were moving as if pushed along by an unseen hand. Sniffing the air, she noted it was still heavy with the smell of rain, wet dirt, and fauna.

"It was Alexandra. I know that was her...at first...then it changed. Someone got between us." Impatiently she gestured at the sky. "I don't know what the weather patterns are like here. But according to one of their practices, they have respite shelters scattered along the public roads, and public campsites for travelers. I have a tent that can keep out the weather, plenty of supplies if I feel I need to stick to the campsites. I think staying away from the public until I get a feel for them is best."

JG took a deep breath, letting go of the heaviness that she had not realized was weighting her down. For a few moments, she let the peacefulness of the place resettle her.

<its amazing what i feel and sense> *Is this what an empath feels? Is this how Alexandra sees things around her?* <what causes a place to lose its power>

<conflict>

Ahh.

Suddenly, feeling an urgent need to start her search for her lifemate, JG returned to where she left her belongings, lifted her bag and slung it over her shoulders. Over the bag she pulled her cloak. She turned to the barely discernable shape near her shoulder.

<i never asked you your name: it's rather embarrassing>

<i have none but you may call me onogla>

JG rubbed her forehead where a slight headache was occurring, probably from so much of this unfamiliar energy. <on o gla to my sisters would be used to refer to one going on a quest>

<yes>

<oh> JG laughed. <so we are>

The two visitors left their shelter, taking a well-tended path into the forest. The forest path connected to a roadway. One traveler passed her a short time later, whom she nodded at, giving the hand signal that travelers used to wish the other good will. Other than that, all she saw were vehicles that moved a foot above the ground without wheels or driver. If she jogged, she would be able to keep up with one to see just what it was about,

however, she had something more important to do. She could be a tourist later when Alexandra and she had more time for themselves.

Aside from the one traveler, she saw no one else. Where the main road was veering off to the right, away from the mountains, a smaller one branched off to the left. Stepping onto the dirt path was like stepping into a coliseum during an event. Sounds, colors, scents, feelings of nearness, pushed at her and nearly overwhelmed her.

<what's happening>

<you are experiencing the second level of awakening: now you must learn to filter>

For the next few hours the Sha'Kar helped her decide what to filter out and how to use what she did focus on. Those few hours were exhausting and required a break. JG chose a particular rock to sit on taking comfort in its energy. Pulling out her canteen she sipped the cool water, letting her awareness of its properties dim. She needed to focus on priorities. It was less strenuous than being aware of all the 'noise' that was going on around her.

Finding Alexandra is the end goal. Primary goal is information on a path to take up to the mountain. I can also gather information from the locals about the colonists and figure out just where Alexandra may be headed or is already at. The general said she was returning colonists to their village...but the map showing colonists' settlements and where Alexandra's bios was last seen are a long distance apart. What is she up to?

JG turned to see Onogla's colorless form beside her. She was seeing more of its form lately and something told her it was not due to her enhanced sensitivity.

"Onogla, if you become more solid does that mean you are no longer a Sha'Kar?"

<yes: before the sha'kar experience my species was shamedian>

"Something to do with vibration of the cells that make up all matter. Wait a minute. That means the more I call you Onogla the more grounded you become into a solid form. Why would you do that? How would you find your...you think your friend is a shamedian now?"

<the decision i made to take this journey sets up a different vibration to my consciousness allowing you to communicate with me and to see me: this type of journey

the sha'kar are not familiar with: those that have done so have not returned to say what came to pass: therefore i have taken up this quest: i am following my friend>

"Why did your friend take up this journey?"

<my friend had awoken from a deep meditation before your arrival on mer and spoke of foreign things that i and others felt were not what a sha'kar of good standing would endeavor to do: my friend ceased to speak to anyone of any further meditations but we all knew her ruminations continued: after her departure some of the keepers admitted that they too were having such visions: i decided that i had let a soul that has come to mean much to me go on a quest without my support and for both our sakes i must undo the harm i have caused our energies: all of these things i speak to you of are unlike a sha'kar but are the right things to do>

"So, you are moving back to shamedian?"

<there are some sha'kars that believe that: i believe it is moving into another level of existence: they have frozen their soul's growth at being in sha'kar and to move anywhere or experience anything other than that which they sanction is considered antithetical to the sha'kar group consciousness>

JG grinned. "I had a professor who said that the collective unconscious of all things will move toward self-actualization regardless of anyone's efforts to stifle it. The same professor spoke of the hundred and one monkey theory too, so it can work both ways."

These were not the thoughts of a soldier, JG reminded herself. However, she did remember at one time in the cave, as SMjr JG of the Black Rose, when her hand was raised to whip a sub that unrelated thoughts crossed her mind. The Cave was a house of pleasure for doms and subs, where sometimes she had moments of enlightenment. An amazing place for such things to happen. Suddenly JG was back to the present.

<we have company> they both thought.

JG stepped behind a tree. Looking up she decided a top view of her area would be invaluable.

<well, tree, i hope you don't mind me climbing you>

<it does not> two thoughts echoed.

JG nearly lost her grip on the branch. <i heard the tree>

<yes: it is aware of our friends>

She would have continued the mindtalk if not for a group of uniformed men moving toward her position. Soldiers. She grabbed a branch from another tree that was within fingertip distance and steadying herself, hopped over. She nimbly moved from tree to tree until she was shadowing the soldiers to their left. This was the first sign of an army for nonviolent Arnica, and she was very curious.

<they know about you and your friend's arrival>

<maybe i should have checked in with the immigration officials> she joked.

<this group is not from the official ruling party of arnica: they are a faction that causes disruption to the peaceful coexistence of the majority: some of these people are aligned with the one who tried to destroy mer>

Merker's Outpost? He's here? How did he get away from the authorities I left him in custody with? The shock of this news momentarily had JG grabbing for a tree branch, feeling off balance. The idea that somehow Alan, the person that was responsible for stalking Alexandra had escaped shook Jina Gari to her core.

<steady: calm yourself: it's not him: his soldiers formed an alliance with outlaws of this planet>

JG's frantic mind struggled to control her emotions. Her arms wrapped tightly around a tree branch for solidity. Her breathing automatically adjusted to the rhythm the Sha'Kar taught her to center herself. She rubbed her forehead ruefully. On a deeper level she reminded herself to focus on a task to keep from worrying about Alexandra. Any little thing was upsetting her. It was interfering with her assignment. She nearly laughed aloud at that. Alexandra was her assignment. Turning her attention to the immediate, JG's eyes narrowed. Some of the soldiers dressed in red were slashing branches and bushes in their way, ignoring the path another group of them was following. They all looked tired as if they had been at a quick march for days.

<you mentioned that they know about alexandra and i: what about you and your friend>

There was a noticeable hesitation.

<they sense you have brought something that will prevent them from achieving their plan>

<sha'kar>

<no: a power they wish to possess: if it were sha'kar i don't know how we would help: we do not involve ourselves in solid's matters>

JG gave a silent laugh and she could feel the Sha'Kar's amusement.

<if i can hear the tree and other things why can't i hear them too>

<deeper level of thought>

The two followed the soldiers back to the temple they had spent the night in. The soldiers had avoided the main road, which added to her curiosity about their mission. JG worried they would find her ship. However, they didn't enter onto the temple's grounds. The men formed a crescent around the temple instead. Four men huddled around the bottom step, which led up to the closed front double doors of the fence.

<what's going on, my friend: i can feel uncertainty>

<fear of trespassing>

What her companion pictured for her was a young girl, slim, translucent, and wearing a large medallion on her flat chest.

<who is she>

<that is one image of how she wishes to present herself to visitors of arnica: she oversees the protection of temples and monasteries>

<that is queen m'lu:> she asked excitedly. <the one that summoned catching butterflies here>

<yes: she protects the temples with purified energy: you felt the power of the energy last night: these soldiers aren't able to endure the experience: it would make ashes of their solid form>

<thanks for the warning: wait a moment...that temple was at a low energy level you said>

<from what it had been at one time>

<so i probably would not be able to go into a temple that is higher in energy>

<your energy level is rising: to sustain or raise it you cannot take another's life without just cause: you also must not entertain thoughts that will lower your energy such as unjustified anger, hate, and other dross emotions>

<what will happen if i kill someone>

The Sha'Kar picked up JG's thoughts of Alexandra.

<your lifemate is very sensitive: however, she didn't suffer for taking a life: she suffered in compassion for his spiritual self: she enabled him to deal with the burdens he carried for his misdeeds in this life before he crossed to the next threshold>

"Lord Chaney was not an honorable man. He killed and caused others to suffer without so much as a thought of anyone else but himself. And...Alexandra didn't intend on killing him. It was an accident."

The sudden rush of emotion nauseated JG. Her temper escalated so quickly it took her by surprise. A small pop in her ears forced her to hold onto a branch until she could regain her equilibrium.

<your feelings have connected you to an entity that feeds off such displays of anger: if you spend too much time in this state, we will not be able to communicate>

The soldiers started to move out of the area, causing JG to be distracted, but she was helpless to do anything more than watch, as she clung to her branch, feeling disorientated. This was happening too often for her not to wonder if there were two sides to this coin of heightened sensitivity.

<if you don't become calm you will also be discovered by the soldiers>

"Just how am I supposed to feel about a murderer or a...a...helgas moon!"

<anger is from fear: fear is from feeling threatened>

The Sha'Kar's amused response had her wanting to smack her hand on the tree in frustration. "You sound like a zen master," she muttered to herself as she felt her world spin. In that moment she lost her footing but managed to keep her arms wrapped around the branch. She dangled high above a thorny bush. Through all this, she remembered to hum, or breathe as the Sha'Kar had been teaching her, restoring her equilibrium and stopping her world from spinning.

Feeling slightly better, JG loosened her grip on the branch, then patted the tree trunk. Moving her head slowly around, she listened for any unnatural sounds, easily picking up muted curses to her left. By the noise they were making as they set up camp, JG guessed they were not Alan's soldiers. Metrasoldiers were disciplined and professional. Peering through the tree branches, she watched the soldiers, easily picking out which were the metrasoldiers and which were local soldiers, and not just by the dark

red uniform tunics and the black uniforms but by the separation of the groups. One was quietly eating, while on the other side of the camp were the local soldiers laughing and carrying on as if they had nothing to fear. JG was curious about the working relationship between the two groups, remembering from her own experience that the metrasoldiers mercilessly tormented soldiers they considered inferior. JG had trained with some of them at Lord Chaney's private training ground. That was when she was a covert operator in the persona of MSgt. JG, a grim-faced noncom in the Black Rose troop.

Alan Fermin was proud of his metrasoldiers. They were composed of warriors kidnapped from planets closed to visits from space traveling planets. The closed planets were considered too violent and self-serving to be traveling through space. From these warring primitive planets, smugglers kidnapped warriors and sold them to the metralabs where they were turned into living robots with deadly skills that were outlawed in the two galaxy powers space. The impact was rebel groups incorporated the brutality thus taking the two large galaxy organizations, the Collective and the GCFC, or the Committee as it was shortened to, steps backward in their unilateral outlawing of violence, killing, and slavery.

Alan Fermin, a sociopathic killer, had money and influence to buy his own army, and for a while his dream of owning his own planet was unstoppable.

JG shifted her position on her tree, withdrawing her focus on the group. She could feel something, and that something was moving toward the group. Whatever it was, felt dangerous. The sudden appearance of an officer in the camp, wearing the black clothing of the MS brought both groups of soldiers to their feet quickly. One of the local soldiers looked uncomfortable but he and an MS walked a distance from the group with the newcomer. The conversation was brief. Then the officer was gone.

<she has transportation waiting at the road> the Sha'Kar offered.

<doesn't feel like a female>

<she> the Sha'Kar reaffirmed.

The drizzle started a few stan hours later. By the muttering from the soldiers huddled beneath their shelters, they were miserable.

<there is a town not too far from here: i can see the lights: why aren't they heading there> JG asked.

<they are outlaws>

JG took a deep breath and held it for a few moments and then released it. She rubbed her forehead. A dark dread filled her. There was a pop, but it was from far away. She breathed in and then out; each time she let the air out she pictured darkness leaving her. And then another pop. With it came the strong smell of the earth, vegetation, and connection with other small creatures.

<what happened>

<the dark energy is trying to move into you>

<how do I stop it>

<breathe as you are doing: love yourself>

The Sha'Kar, for its own reason, had changed her. Doing what it insisted a Sha'Kar does not do, interfere with solids' business. And the change was so profound. Who she was on Merker's Outpost was not the same person that awakened on *Rouster*. She was altered by her experience of places she had no idea existed. Her responsibilities changed with her expanded awareness. Connecting with all sorts of creatures and life forms she didn't recognize, meant on some level she was now morally obligated to consider their welfare in whatever action she took. There was so much to worry about, including where she was placing her foot, where she sat down, and where she dumped her waste. Not a practical way to live. How can anyone live this way? JG unconsciously rubbed her forehead. Now she was worrying about where she landed her ship. Maybe she dropped onto some poor creature that made its home... She sighed exhausted.

<all this mental work tires me out: i feel like i'm running up hill>

<with more practice you will be able to do it with less puffing and less worry>

<there is something happening on this planet, isn't there>

<yes: its collective unconscious is being fought for: it has been in harmony for many generations with a minority vibrating off key: the soldiers from another planet brought with them something that enhances the power of those that vibrate off-key>

<a weapon: if everything on this planet is sensitive to thoughts than all it would take is a group of colonists that hate>

<that is what this outlaw faction is working towards>

It sounds so simplistic. If that's all it takes to destabilize this planet than their nonviolent stance isn't on solid ground, she thought. So, what kind of weapon could the MS have. It would have to be something that strengthens this kind of energy.

SWR.

JG nodded to herself. *A sound wave resonator makes sense. So where are they keeping them? And more importantly...what's my part in all of this?*

Helping Alexandra is my priority, she reminded herself. But she was here and within view were a group of soldiers that she could gather some information on.... such as, how well do the locals work as a team with the MS when in a battle situation. From experience she knew the MS worked well as a unit, and were cruel, and contemptuous of anyone not of their group. But this was not the case here. The MS were displaying a different mindset. It worried her. How much were they left to their own volition? And who was their leader? She had never met a female MS. Alan preferred male soldiers since he had a psychotic urge to brutally beat females to death.

<do you have a plan> the Sha'Kar asked interrupting her thoughts.

JG looked up at the dark sky and felt the heavy mist coat her face. She pulled the hood of her coat further over her head.

<yes: it requires some physical exercise>

Her clothing helped her blend in with the foliage as she crept up on the night guard.

<now this is right up my alley>

<this one is not very friendly>

JG grabbed the soldier from behind and was surprised when he responded just as quickly, throwing her off him. She managed to stifle his call to his friends but a call from a nearby sentry alerted him when he didn't get a return hail.

<they picked up on his thoughts>

<i forgot: helgas moon>

The alerted guard attempted to sneak up on JG, but she heard his approach. She tapped him on the shoulder, smoothly removing his sword from its scabbard at the same time. After losing his knife to her too, he tried to keep a distance between them while calling for reinforcements. JG found herself encircled by red and black dressed warriors.

They all had their long swords drawn, pointed in her direction. In the pale light of the moon, they glinted nastily.

<they look too happy about this confrontation>

<someone has told them you are a great warrior: they wish to test you>

<it seems we all want to know about each other: well, let's see just how good they are: hopefully i won't get cut with their blades>

As they tightened the ring around her, she turned slowly looking for someone who looked like a real threat. She reached out and could feel the group's energy. It was something Alexandra let her experience on Merker's Outpost, only this time, she initiated it. The group's energy was edgy and dark. There was a difference between the metrasoldiers and the others. The natives were angry for varying reasons, mostly disgruntled with their own lives. They were town bullies that grew up and still wanted to be bullies. The metrasoldiers were just angry.

She tossed the stolen knife at the black dressed soldier that was hanging back, letting the local soldier in front of him block his view. She laughed when the red soldier thought it was for him and nimbly moved aside not taking his eyes off her. It should have hit the soldier behind him in the thigh. That type of wound would be serious enough to take him out of action for a few days, unless they had a medikit.

Not waiting to see if the knife hit its mark, JG flipped out and over the heads of the two lines of soldiers. She kicked the legs out from the MS that turned to face her, grabbed a wrist, breaking it, while using his sword to stab his companion in the thigh. She kept moving in the familiar dance of a fighter, knowing instinctively that this group was not used to fighting as a team. The local soldiers scattered in panic, interfering with the MS. Her intention was to test and frustrate. This MS group was not at all like the soldiers Alan had pitted against the Black Rose.

When she felt she had learned enough, she took the first opportunity to flee, armed with a staff, back into the forest. She retrieved her pack and went to find a place to spend the night. She found a tree to climb and moved away from the angry survivors. There weren't many soldiers without knife wounds, many inflicted by their own side. She would see how fast they mended; another bit of information that would come in handy.

<they are licking their wounds>

JG chuckled. <that's an interesting phrase>

She hopped down from the tree to visit a small stream. Her water bag needed replenishing.

<it is what they are thinking>

<sounds like they aren't happy with themselves: soldiers are the same everywhere: if their pride is hurt they'll want to take revenge>

She trusted her feeling that the water was fit for drinkability and filled her water bag. As the water flowed over her hands, she listened to the soft glugging as the water sucked into the bag. Suddenly JG straightened up.

<the spirit of the river confirmed our friends are in the mountain> the Sha'Kar informed her.

<i heard that: i actually heard it: i'm getting better at this>

She remembered to give thanks to the spirit that briefly touched her hands, again thinking that her view of Alexandra and her abilities was certainly changing. There was also some trepidation. It meant methods she normally would use to defend herself had to change...and were changing. She grinned to herself. Like for example, harassing the soldiers but not taking any lives. Stealing a staff instead of a sword and knife. The next challenge would be having to face these soldiers again, better prepared because they knew more about her as she did of them.

She tied herself to the tree on an uncomfortable perch and settled for a nap.

* * *

The next morning in the outskirts of a village a child was tending his herd. Every planet had animal herders. She was amazed when the child readily answered all her questions, until she felt the Sha'Kar's amusement.

<i take it you did a bit of manipulation there>

<you can also do it: the creatures on this planet can read minds and sense no danger from you>

<i thought just the people read minds>

<the child and the lower level of creatures it is tending>

<those fuzzy things can read my mind: great: and i was touchy about alexandra reading mine>

<perhaps that is too broad a definition: they feel your intentions>

<i get it: like creatures on other planets can sense whether...>

She could feel the Sha'Kar's disagreement with her understanding.

<here thoughts on the first level are heard as if a conversation to some species but to these lower level creatures they have no use for some of what other species think: they simply use what is of interest to them such as food, love, and danger>

The child indicated to her the fastest way of getting funds was to gamble. JG admired his quick assessment that she would be good at gaming, but then maybe that was one of her first level thoughts. He was even kind enough to show her some of the games; give her the rules and point her in the direction of where a game might be in play. If the youth was an example of the culture, she wondered what were the problems Mcarn was having in cleaning up Alan's mess.

Sitting through her first game, she worried that her thoughts would give away her strategy; however, that wasn't the case. She won a handful of the local coins and collected information from the group she was playing. A part of her was suspicious that maybe they were letting her win. It was too easy.

* * *

At the end of a week on Arnica she was no closer to finding Alexandra. Besides not discovering a path that led up the mountain, she was stopped by impenetrable underbrush and an indescribable something else. The soldiers that were dogging her tracks she would occasionally drop behind and observe their behavior trying to pick up something from them. However, she wasn't as good as the Sha'Kar in listening in on their deeper thoughts. The female MS didn't visit the group while she was watching them, but the Sha'Kar reported she visited daily. JG played with the idea of kidnapping her, but practicality overruled her impulse.

JG found spending nights in the monasteries had two advantages. She felt invigorated the next day and peaceful. Her outbursts of negative emotions seldom overtook her as her filtering skills got better. With the exception of the first temple, the rest of the monasteries she approached had a monk at the gate waving her in as if she was expected. Though no one spoke to her, there was always a bed waiting her, with food and

privacy. She assumed they practiced silence, and therefore never asked about a path up the mountain. She had been hoping to see how they practiced with their weapons, but the dojo was always empty when she entered.

With the Sha'Kar's teaching, she learned to disappear in another's mind to keep from being detected. Such as with the soldiers that were surrounding her last rest stop. However, even with this new trick, she was getting predictable. Not good for a soldier on the run.

<there is a well of energy i wish to inspect: continue on your journey for where i am going will take you weeks to reach should you follow: my friend visited it weeks ago>

<okay: i think i got the hang of this planet's ways now: do you know how long you will be gone>

<no: nor what i will find>

JG smiled ruefully. She had always been a loner that struggled to be sociable around others. Now after being in companionship with the Sha'Kar for over three months, she was feeling almost lost at the thought of being alone again.

<when you opened yourself to the energy of your lifemate you opened yourself to other forms of heart relationships: it is merely another step in your progress to becoming>

<becoming> she asked looking toward the Sha'Kar. <you're not turning me into a shaman, or some initiate of a religious life are you>

<i will not turn you into anything you are not already>

"Look, I like being a warrior. Under most conditions, I can abide by not killing, but I won't give up being a warrior. I like the competition, the winning, and sometimes the losing, if the competition is worth it."

<i do not intend nor care to change you into something you are not nor desire to be: i am here to find a friend>

JG took a deep breath, momentarily unsettled by fear that was being used to put distance between the Sha'Kar and herself. She glanced at the Sha'Kar whose form was nearly impossible to see, but she knew where the Sha'Kar was. Humming she sought to drive the intense feeling out, and suddenly it left.

<whatever has been following you can attach to you by an emotional marker it has on you; you are getting better at warding it off, but you must work harder at not allowing it to find you: it can hear your thoughts: mindspeak it cannot hear: i must go and see what interested my friend at this well: guard your thoughts for as you can see if you open yourself it will influence your feelings: keep practicing what i have shown you and you will be able to ward off such distractions and influences>

JG nodded. Her jaw clenched in determination to not let her feelings of loss from the Sha'Kar leaving to be expressed in thoughts.

<if you stick to this trail there is another temple along this way: it is better that you spend the night during your dreamtime in temples where you can be protected while i am gone: one thing i would like to warn you about>

She nodded.

<not all warriors you run across are the enemy: and not all that mindspeak or hear your thoughts are threats: some will be helpers>

<you sound like you're saying good bye: i take it your friend has left alexandra>

<i don't know for sure: things feel different here so i can't see clearly: like you i am a visitor and as of yet the spirit of the planet has not opened up wholly to my inquires>

<i will take your warnings seriously: good journey, then, my friend> JG turned and started through the brush. <how will we find each other>

<find a ley line and i will sense you>

* * *

JG sat on a flat portion of temple roof in a lotus position. One of the monks had indicated to her that it was an ideal place for her to do her meditation exercises. She was startled that a monk spoke, but he said nothing else and didn't stay long enough for her to ask anything else, so to the roof she headed. After she meditated, she tried the breathing exercises the Sha'Kar had been showing her, breathing in and out, and standing in the horse stance and slowly moved her arms out, and then breathing in, she moved to another

position. They were positions she once had seen Alexandra do before she started her morning stretches. Once finished, she could feel her feet and hands tingle.

Staring out into the darkness she chose one particular entity that caught her attention. For the last week of travel, she had been separating this one entity from everything else that was bombarding her. It was the large cat she had seen on her second day on the planet. Her admiration for its stealth and hunting abilities brought her in



sudden contact with it.

:Where are you from?:

The touch from the creature vibrated her primal feelings and a multisensory connection to the life around her.

A grin curled JG's lips, and she willingly replayed the images of her air approach to Arnica, only in reverse. Showing the many stars and planets back to her own planet where she spent her childhood. It was not interested in this. It was interested in her athletic training to compete in the galactic sports arena. The leopard gave a low growl in its throat in appreciation of the competitive energy JG felt when she was in the arena with the crowds roaring enthusiastically.

:I am Nameer, protector of my mother's territory: The leopard's eyes showed intelligence and then as it moved its gaze out through the forest, she saw through his eyes the life that existed in the forest. Nameer also showed her soldiers dressed in black

clothing, burning, and poisoning the environment they passed through. The creature asked her if she knew of these off-world soldiers.

"I have fought them. There is a group from my world that is here to neutralize them and remove them from your planet."

The leopard showed her another group settled in a valley that was polluting the cat's land as well as hunting them for sport.

"Colonists!" JG realized that she growled in unison with the cat at the destruction the colonists were perpetrating against the wildlife in their surroundings.

:You will help me remove them from our lands?:

JG hesitated. The colonists were Alexandra's assignment and she was to assist her...but she wanted to first connect with Alexandra before seeing what these colonists were up to.

:Your mate? I will help you find her. Will you help us to get rid of these hunters?:

JG silently sighed. The memory of her comments to the Sha'Kar that she was a warrior first was already coming back to haunt her. Even though it was made in a sudden emotional outburst she could feel an energy that was constantly pulling at her to accomplish something aside from meeting up with Alexandra.

"I will help you. But first...I need to know that my mate is safe."

Nameer was amused.

"I want to let her know of this change in my destination."

There was a sudden break in their communication. JG was momentarily disorientated causing her to nearly topple off the roof. Something, like a force field prevented her fall.

<you have done well friend of sha'kar>

The sound in her head was not familiar but it reminded her of Onogla.

<who are you> JG asked surprised.

The image of the young girl the Sha'Kar had pictured appeared in her mind's eye.

<queen m'lu: protector of the temples that you have been taking refuge in since you and the sha'kar have arrived: nameer's mother's pride is also under my protection and is my worry>

Through the connection, in a flash, JG saw more than what a conversation would have revealed. <you are the one that summoned us> JG thought in excitement. It was like being surrounded in a soft bubble of.... JG felt frustrated that she couldn't explain what she was feeling. Within the bubble the feeling was vibrant, warm and filling. It was so comforting she nearly forgot her concerns. JG struggled to pay attention instead of simply losing herself in the connection.

<it doesn't sound well for her> JG finally managed to think.

<the people who are desecrating the lands are not from arnica and feel they can do as they wish: they use genocide as their means of getting their way>

In JG's mind appeared the images of life forms dying from something the colonists used.

<biological warfare: it's forbidden to use where we come from> JG struggled with her anger.

<nameer has asked for your assistance: will you give it to him if you know your lifemate is well>

<you know where she is>

<i know where all those who came from your galaxy are>

JG was hesitant. She wanted to see Alexandra and to touch her.

<it is not time for you two to meet like that: she must finish her darazza as you must go through your singu>

<what is darazza and singu> JG asked.

<both are rites of passage into a higher level of one's calling>

<why is hers different>

<your mate is walking the way of dro: you are walking the way of the warrior>

The fact that this person she felt a deep regard for acknowledged her desire to remain a warrior touched her deeply. Tears gathered under her lids and she wiped at them not wholly cognizant.

<you and your bondmate are guests of mine and under my protection: you both can seek shelter in my temples: all followers of drosu and all kiuzi will assist you should you need it>

<i thank you, queen m'lu: how can you assure me that alexandra is well>

<in all my temples is a pool of water: you may look in it and see your bondmate>
<you are very generous: and what do you ask of me for this gift> JG said.
<my gifts have no price but if you wish to please me learn the way of a kiuzi warrior>

<what do I have to do to learn this way>
<i will send a young warrior to you that is going through her initiation: it is wise to have a companion during this time: nameer's request is still unanswered>

<i will help>
<the young warrior is many days from you but it is on the way to nameer's mother's land: you cannot take a life to solve a problem when go through singu and still be under my protection: it is not that i forbid it but i would not be able to touch you without hurting you>

JG flashed on Alexandra and how she became sick from the after affects of unintentionally taking another life. The compassion she received from the Queen took her off guard.

<we shall watch over her>

Queen M'Lu did not explain herself nor could JG decipher the feeling. However, in that moment, JG knew she was more traumatized by Alexandra's experience than Alexandra was.

<only contact her in my temples: there no one can interfere with your connection>

<i understand> JG was amazed at the clarity of everything when she was in communion with the Queen. However, the moment the connection dropped her awareness dropped a few levels. She thought there would be a feeling of loss and a profound longing to reconnect with the peacefulness, however there was none. JG wondered how that could be.

That night JG dreamed of Alexandra. They embraced, touched as if it would be a long time until the next time and cried their dismay when they parted.

* * *

JG was looking around her from a tree branch when she spotted someone moving as if hunted. Nameer growled softly in his throat. He was sprawled over a limb across from the tree next to hers. His ears flickered back and forth and then he swung his great head toward her.

:He is being herded by a group of men:



She too could smell his sweat, hear his worry and feel his excitement. She sensed he wasn't too concerned about being hunted. Men of various species, some dressed in black and some in red, were in a fan-out search, but far behind him. A Catalls was in the center of the search line. Every now and again he would drop to the ground, sniffing to assure they were still on his trail. As the Catalls shifted so did the line.

"Alan's soldiers! I haven't seen this many before. Why would they be looking for him?"

Nameer rose from his limb and moved with JG, tailing the hunted. She laughed to herself when he gave his hunters the slip several times, making the trackers look silly, and very angry. Except one soldier. He traveled, like she and Nameer, in the trees. And very quietly. She spotted him scaling a tree and then lost him. She made sure he was in her sights before she moved. Every time he touched a tree she was on, she could feel his energy. The tree shivered as if in distaste and Nameer's hackles stood up. He was not dressed as a metrasoldier...he was not dressed as anyone that she had met so far.

The hunted gave the hunters the slip once again, doubling back through a river that was too strong for any of the other species to cross, including the elusive tracker that stayed a distance from the whole group.

Nameer showed JG another way over the powerful river. If it was possible for a cat to smile, Nameer was wearing a wide one.

Their quarry led them two days later to the outskirts of a pitifully kept village. The man spent a long length of time studying the few residents that moved about. JG thought maybe the town was on its last leg of existence. There were many untilled fields and fences were down or leaning as if ready to fall. Even the road looked unkempt. This was unlike any of the other villages she had passed through.

At noon he left his roost in the tree, only to duck back into the cover of trees as an aircraft arrived. It was as silent as a glider with only its shadow on the land below giving its arrival away. It settled on the landing pad near a building where two people came out to welcome it. An older man and a young figure, dressed in a traveler's cloak, alighted. The pilot watched as workers moved around his plane. The other passengers remained inside. By the pilot's actions, JG wondered if he worried someone on the ground crew would rob his passengers. It happened often enough on isolated space stops.

Her target moved around the village, unseen, following the traveler's progress. JG was curious about the youthful figure that kept cloaked. When confronted by a hostile local the figure pulled back the hood of the cloak. A young female. JG's target cursed under his breath. The young girl was soon surrounded by men larger than her, but she easily put the group in their place.

She was torn between following the young woman or her original target when they went in different directions.

:I will follow the prey. You follow the warrior.:

JG climbed higher into a tree to get a better view of the town. She knew the hunted man was not going to leave town until he finished whatever business he had here.

Movement in the forest around her was telegraphed to her via a small furry creature that chattered a message that had others echoing it. The small creatures reappeared after Nameer had left. Then suddenly all went silent. JG felt the young woman may be in danger and decided to get closer. JG followed her feeling better when

she headed back into the forest where the brambles were thick and made it difficult for most trackers to follow. From atop her branch, JG watched as she settled for the night.

* * *

Horiku slept until dawn. Her dreams had been disturbing. Though she didn't wake up, she wished she had. She relived her parents stoning. After their attackers left one of her parent's neighbors came back and tried to bury her parents honorably. That was when they found she was still alive, though unconscious. They secretly cared for her until a group of nomad traders, often referred to as gypsies, came through. They made arrangements for one of the gypsy traders to care for her.

In her travels with the gypsies she ran across the Ju'n family again. They were old when they had saved her and were even older when she saw them in their new town. They had left Ringlett shortly after she did and made their way into the city where other members of their clan were. Horiku shook her head to rid herself of the last clinging fog of her dream and the heavy feeling it gave her.

Dripping foliage attested to how heavy the night fog was. Now only a blanket of gray covered the forest floor, hiding everything below her ankles. Horiku was curious at what was happening around town, so she clambered into a tree on the outer parameter of the village to peer through the leaves, grateful to get out of the wet grass. For a long time, she stared at the deserted streets, wondering if she had the strength to let the memories go...as well as the anger.

She felt torn between feeling bad for the residents and smug that they got what they deserved. Unconsciously she wiped away tears that trickled down her cheeks. Not all the people she knew as a child were bad.

The curalies in the neighboring tree started to jabber excitedly, warning that trouble was near. Peeking up through the tree foliage, she spotted fast approaching airships. The two ships swooped down into the town's open square and from the bellies of the planes swarmed soldiers dressed in black and another group dressed in dark red.

It looked like they came often for the mayor walked up to one of the soldiers as if he knew him. He was dressed in red wearing a very fancy sword on his back. Swords were banned weapons and were the choice weapons of the outlaws.

A snicker of disdain caught Horiku by surprise. Cupping her chin in her hand she reviewed her motives and the source of this discordant feeling. She was better than they were. So why did she need to disrespect them?

They didn't warrant respect, she thought fiercely, then felt as if she missed something important. One of the rules of Kiuzu behavior was to not look down on other's burdens or the paths they choose.

Horiku decided she had seen enough and would go meet the warrior she was expecting further away from this town. It would be better that she was kept from stopping here...but surely, she would hear from other towns that this was not a place to visit. So why did the Queen say she would come here? Crazy warrior. Would she take that as a challenge? A Kiuzi would. A Kiuzi would capture the rouge soldiers and turn them over to the monks.

Horiku laughed at herself. She clambered down from her perch and carefully made her way further away from the town. At nightfall she turned to see what the burning smell was about. A large plume of smoke was curling into the darkening night sky. Frightened, she headed back to Ringlett, afraid of what she would find.

It was difficult to move quickly at night, especially when the trail was in disrepair. She was surprised she arrived at the outskirts without a twisted ankle. The traveler's hut was a black spot on the ground. Timbers from other structures, a distance away, were snapping from hot embers that lit up like twinkling red spots in the night. She moved along the forest edge; grateful they didn't set the forest on fire too. There were no signs of life in the forest. Even the curialies were gone.

Harsh laughter came from inside the village. The planes the soldiers came in were gone. Straining her ears, she tried to locate the laughter. Was it something she dredged up from her past or was it happening?

She was about to step out of the forest cover and enter the town when a hand grabbed her by the shoulder and pushed her against the tree. Another hand covered her mouth firmly. She was effectively pinned. Dark clad soldiers moved past the tree they

were behind. The soldiers tromped into the town, past the smoldering buildings and out of sight behind the silhouettes of still standing buildings.

She was released and before she could look around, she knew she was alone. Who was looking out for her? Was it a Kiuzi warrior or...maybe the dark-haired warrior? Whoever it was may have saved her life.

Feeling an aversion to the town, Horiku started a slow jog away, thinking it best to put distance between it and her before she found a place to spend the night.

* * *

The next morning, she climbed to a treetop. A dark haze from where Ringlett once stood spoiled the clear morning sky. She was going to have to return to see just what mischief went on there. It was sure to attract the police from neighboring towns and everyone else within sight of it...and maybe the Queen's warrior.

With anticipation of finally meeting her quarry, she started back to Ringlett. In short time she reached the town, grateful for daylight and the ride she grabbed with some curiosity seekers. The place smelled of burnt wood and other things, but not of burnt bodies to Horiku's relief. She hopped off the back of the truck bed and joined the gathering sightseers. Official looking transport vehicles were onsite with uniformed police moving around blackened smoking ashes. A cleanup crew with shovels was dumping debris into a truck. No one wanted to turn the ashes under because of what they might find. A monk was walking with a woman wearing a commander's uniform. The commander appeared to be upset about something, and the monk was merely listening. Horiku tried to remember what temple was nearby.

"What happened?" she asked one of the young men watching the cleanup crew.

"Bandits and outlaws! One of their own deserted that gang that calls themselves the Black Alliance, so they burned down his town." The man spat on the ground and scratched his foot over the spit.

"Did they catch him?"

"Yep. And his family. Took 'em away someplace."

"Good riddens to them all. They damned the place with their awful behavior. The holy one is here to clean up the place, but he's going to need a lot more help," his companion retorted.

"Who's gonna want to live here, even if it's been cleansed?" another asked.

"The young and foolish that want to start a family and a new life," a wiser person answered.

Horiku waited until the clean-up crew left. The authorities had left earlier. She, along with others moved through the burnt village. They were looking for something of value and she, memories of a happier childhood, or she hoped that's what her memories would be. She found an older burnt foundation that could have been her home. Now she wasn't sure.

Was it haunted by her parents? Her breath caught. Back came the images of a terrorized child, herded along with her parents into the forest.

Unconscious of it at first, a hand rested on her shoulder. She buried her face in her hands and wept for the town, knowing that from that day long ago, there were many whose consciences were weighed down with knowledge of what they had done. A gloom had settled over the townspeople that never lifted. She knew they could have called for a monk to cleanse their town and help them pay restitution. She couldn't understand why they chose to live with the heaviness of guilt and watch everything they attempted wither and die.

The stranger spoke. Startled she looked up into the dark eyes of the warrior she had seen in the Seer's Dish.

"Do you have a place to stay for the night?" she asked again. Her accent was light, which surprised Horiku. The warrior could speak the common language.

"I...was just passing through." Horiku wiped her eyes on her sleeve, torn between memories and duty.

"I have some food and tea if you would like to share a morning respite."

Horiku didn't see any weapons or travel pack with her. She wondered if she had belongings. Horiku nodded to her. Readjusting her pack hidden under her cloak, she headed up the path into the woods with the stranger, glumly resisting the impulse to look back.

They left the trail and went deeper into the wooded area. Forest debris was thick and slippery from the retreating morning mist. The warrior walked lightly, her head and eyes always moving. Horiku barely noticed their arrival at a well-constructed camp. She was gently pushed onto a fallen log and handed a cup of hot tea. She didn't know how long the warrior tended to her. From time to time, the warrior would tell her stories...strange stories from another world. They were stories of loss and searching for vengeance, with each story showing it was not the answer.

"Compassion?" Horiku asked hoarsely. It was the first time she responded to JG. JG nodded.

Horiku studied the woman before her in detail. The warrior's hair was loosened and fell over her back on one side and over her chest on the other. Her clothing was that of a traveler, but she had a staff that looked well used lying near her. Horiku was curious how she came to have it. Calmly the woman collected her hair and bound it into a club. Horiku thought long hair on a warrior would be impractical. She studied the strong hands as one reached for her cup, while the other picked up a stick to poke at the fire. The stick did not appear to be a dangerous weapon, but then, anything could be used as a weapon by a skillful warrior. Because she didn't look like a warrior, she was dangerous. Kiuzi, when in travel mode, didn't look like Kiuzi. On the other hand, trainees...at this thought she managed a small smile.

"We need to break camp. The soldiers will be back. The one they're looking for, is still loose."

"The member that left them?"

She nodded. "He's been hiding in the forest. Chances are they will find him today and he will tell them he saw you, thinking they will spare his life."

"How do you know this?"

"I've been following him for four days now. He's been running like a hunted man. He watched you get off the plane and of your confrontation with the men in the village. Nice moves, by the way."

Horiku looked at her amazed. "You've been watching all of this?"

The warrior smiled as she cleaned up her camp, removing evidence of their presence.

The trainees that Horiku had gone out with were efficient like this warrior. As the warrior gave a last look around the area, she pointed to a rock she wanted Horiku to stand on. Then she proceeded to clear the area of footprints, including a very large print of a leopard. Horiku shivered at the thought that one of them had been here, and by the freshness of the print, only this morning. She couldn't remember leopards being in this area.

"You can travel with me for as long as you like or until I get you away from here safely," the warrior offered.

Horiku's eyebrows lifted in surprise. She could take care of herself...but then she thought of the soldiers that had recently visited the place. For some reason, she had no interest to fight, even if it were for her own life.

"Thank you," she bowed slightly.

They traveled quickly and when her footsteps became heavy, the warrior would stop and rest. Sometimes they would jog at a ground breaking pace and sometimes they would walk slowly. She wasn't sure just what the warrior was listening to, but she seemed to know what was going on around them. At one stop for rest, she pointed out things in their environment for her to notice. Horiku's admiration for the woman rose more than a few notches. The gypsy trader that had taught her didn't know some of the things this warrior knew, and this warrior wasn't from Arnica.

It was near dusk that the warrior found a rest spot. It was a public space with a clean fire pit, fresh wood stacked nearby and from the lack of smell, a cleaned waste facility.

When Horiku finished her toilet and was pulling her clothes back in place, she got a bad feeling that they were not alone. Hurriedly, she joined the Queen's warrior. The dark warrior was calmly stirring a pot of liquid over the fire with her staff leaning against a rock near her foot.

"We have company." The warrior's head tipped to the side just enough to catch her eyes. "They'll be more tired than you because they haven't taken as many breaks, but they are good fighters. You ready?"

Horiku nodded. "We must not kill even to defend ourselves," she explained quickly. She stood back to back with the warrior, waiting for the soldiers in bright red to burst into the clearing.

"Understood. Focus on breathing and movement," the warrior encouraged Horiku softly, "then stop thinking."

She wondered how the warrior knew she was feeling out of sorts.

The soldiers filed into their campsite, encircling them. Each woman set an imaginary line for the soldiers to cross.

"They have darts," the soft voice informed Horiku. "But they won't use them because one of their own may get hit. It would mean extra dead weight to carry until they wake up, so stay in a crowd."

Horiku could feel the warrior behind her prepare to move so she rolled forward, taking out the nearest soldier with a kick and disabling jab to his neck.

For a while they were preoccupied with staying in motion to avoid the dart throwers, blocking or knocking out as many soldiers as possible. Horiku didn't have time to watch the techniques of the tall warrior but she was aware that there were less warriors moving around her. The dark warrior used her hands and feet as Horiku. Horiku was hopeful this meant the warrior would be easy to assist learning the ways of a Kiuзу warrior, though the thought that she would be the one teaching her gave her a momentary pause. It would have been a painful lapse had there been any more soldiers standing.

The warrior moved efficiently through the fallen soldiers, stabbing them with their own darts. Horiku walked among the unconscious, verifying that they were not faking it, and removing their weapons. She removed a travel sack from two of the men and put their weapons in it. Next, she found a log in which to hide them under.

"Well, all in a warrior's day. Shall we finish our meal?" the warrior asked.

"We should leave before they wake."

The dark eyes regarded her with humor. "Not until I finish my dinner." She leaned forward and whispered. "Is it alright to exchange names now?"

Horiku smiled. The dark mood over her had dissipated. Perhaps the fight pulled her out of her morbid thoughts. "If you wish. I will teach you our ways, the ways of an honorable warrior, Kiuзи."

The stranger looked amused but returned Horiku's bow.

"My name is Horiku, Kiuzi trainee of the 7th level, aspiring to be an honorable Kiuzi, justice maker, and guardian to those that live Drusu, the compassionate life," she bowed to the dark warrior not taking her eyes off her.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Horiku, 7th level Kiuzi trainee. I am Jina Gari Zohra, a traveler. Friends call me JG or Jina Gari...you may also, since we shared kit, battle, and conversation."

Horiku tried to form the names on her tongue. "Jina Gari, JG, Zohra. I think Zohra is for battle and Jina Gari for a peaceful night around a campfire, JG for when we know each other longer."

JG turned to the food that was steaming in the boiling water, effectively hiding her smile. "Ahh. Do you also have a battle name?"

"Not until after my singu."

"A warrior's initiation, hmmm?" She glanced back at the young woman, noting some of the shock she had been under was wearing off.

"May I, Jina Gari?" Horiku gestured to the fire where their dinner was cooking. JG nodded.

Horiku began her guest's lessons, sitting properly and by starting the ritual of serving a meal, which she could see was ready to eat. She pulled out her own eating utensils, and rearranged Jina Gari's.

"What should I be doing?"

Horiku stood up and took a position at her side, emulating the posture of an equal receiving her meal. It had not even occurred to her to treat the warrior as anything less or more.

"I see. Do we talk during the meal?"

"Not normally. During eating a Kiuzi warrior silently thanks all that have contributed to the meal before her. There are thousands, sometimes too many to think of in the time given for a meal on the road, however, one never forgets to thank from where the food came from. I usually thank the guardians of the land, those that gathered it, those that delivered it, and whoever fixed it, and the Queen, because she provides Kiuzi with most of our needs...and trainees," she added, remembering that she was not Kiuzi yet.

"Alright."

"You can ask questions, since you are unfamiliar with our ways, Jina Gari."

JG smiled at the young woman, thinking that 'our' was not referring to the people in the villages she passed through, because some yammered, laughed, and shouted through-out dinner, which reminded her of most inns or public eating places she had visited on her own side of the galaxy.

"Tell me about your Queen."

Horiku nodded and chewed a few times, then swallowed her food. She looked into the fire as if thinking about the request.

"She is goddess incarnate." Horiku took another bite waiting for the warrior to respond to that announcement.

"Hm." JG waited, knowing Horiku was testing her, though she was not sure for what.

"She is mentor to Kiuzi warriors and to the followers of Drusu, the compassionate way of life. She is also high priestess and has the final say to all issues that affect Arnica."

"What does she have to say about these soldiers that are attacking travelers and towns?"

Horiku looked amazed and then laughed. "Jina Gari, this 7th level trainee is not even high enough to step upon the shores of Allint to know what they say in the Queen's halls. And the Queen most certainly would not discuss such serious matters with a trainee."

"Come-on, crumbs eventually fall to the floor," she encouraged.

"A Kiuzi warrior never gossips or converses on matters of the Queen. It is an honor code."

"You speak as if you were part of her honor guard."

"Honor guard?" She considered what that meant. "It is correct. Kiuzi are her guards, and it is with honor that Kiuzi serve the royal family of Gei."

"So, is that all you can tell me of your Queen?"

Horiku thought about it for a while and sighed. "I'm not sure what else there is to tell about her. She has been Queen for seven errs...." Horiku stopped abruptly, realizing

that perhaps she should not speak any more of the strange happenings that led to Queen M'Lu's early ascension to the throne.

"So is her council made up of family members...or is that not spoken about?"

"The Queen's lodge consists of the Guardian, the Sacred Jester, the Commander of the Kiuzi, and the Council. The Guardian assists Queen M'Lu in the protection of all sanctioned meetings, peoples, roads one takes, and watches over our sleeping journeys. She also acts as a judge in disputes that are brought before her." She paused as she thought about what she had said. "She assists the Queen in protecting Arnica," she summed up. Remembering the touch of guardian, she smiled. "She is C'Lea, Queen M'Lu's elder sister." A small sigh escaped her. Remembering where she was, she continued, "The Sacred Jester, Ji'am, acts as our collective unconscious manifested into sound, at official meetings, and works unseen in satirical arts and comedies. Sacred Jester shows us our shadow, unwanted parts of ourselves with humor, and sometimes with bluntness. The Kiuzi you know about and the Council is composed of inhabitants on Allint that meet to attend to the business of Allint, 1st Continent."

She watched the dark warrior, waiting for any more questions. However, JG had decided Horiku would not be able to tell her what she wanted to know which was how the Queen had affected her. Did everyone on Arnica feel the same way when the Queen communicated with them? The only thing she got from Horiku was she liked the queen's sister.

After finishing the rest of their meal in silence, Horiku assisted in clearing the area of any trace of their presence. The soldiers were still unconscious, and their companions that left them behind had not returned. JG pointed up a tree. "Tonight, we'll sleep where it's safe."

Horiku copied JG's stance with legs spread out and knees bent to leap up into the lower tree branches. It was not as easy as it looked and she had to be hauled up with the warrior's rope. The next lesson was how to walk on branches and move from tree to tree.

In the morning, Horiku was feeling stiff from sleeping tied to a limb and using muscles she had not used before. It took a lot of work to move through the trees and used different muscles than walking on the ground. Much to the displeasure of her grumbling stomach, the warrior wanted to leave their sleeping area before having a morning meal,

so they were on the move again. Grabbing the next branch Horiku wobbled and nearly fell from her precarious perch. The dark warrior swung lightly onto the limb above her and grabbed her collar, keeping her up. It was done so quickly, Horiku was sure her heart had only beaten once for all of that to have transpired.

The warrior silenced Horiku with a glance and pressed both of them against the tree trunk. At first, there were only the natural sounds of the wind moving through the trees with not even an occasional twitter from the curalies. Then a soft curse from below had Horiku slitting her eyes so that only her dark irises showed. Barely breathing, Horiku moved her eyes to watch soldiers move below them. There was over fifty fully armed men, some dressed in the black uniform of the off-world soldiers, moving almost silently in a sweeping pattern, covering a lot of ground as they searched for something or someone. They left bruised and battered vegetation behind them.

Even after they had passed the warrior held her close to the tree, unmoving. Unable to see, Horiku strained to pick up any unnatural noises about them. She felt a thump on the branch they were on. It seemed like a long time passed before the warrior relaxed.

She gestured to Horiku that they were going to follow the soldiers. As they moved along the limbs, Horiku got a lot of practice on the new skill. By nightfall, Horiku was not only able to balance easier on the branches, but to move through the thick foliage without too much evidence of her passage. It helped that she could move silently on the ground...when she was not tired.

"We'll spend the night there." JG gestured to the temple that was carved into the side of the mountain.

"Do you know what that building is?" Horiku asked curious.

"A place those that are chasing me don't go in."

Horiku was surprised the warrior could endure the high energy.

JG led the young woman up the slope onto the stone stairs quickly, keeping low so that they would not be easily seen. The soldiers had set up camp not far from the temple grounds. JG and Horiku entered through a small side door. It was dark but the warrior walked confidently into the interior, seemingly able to see in the dark. Horiku

was not that trusting, unable to see. She moved slowly with her hands stretched out before her.

"See that small line right there?" a barely audible voice whispered near her ear.

Horiku was proud of her reflexes in not showing her surprise at the sudden disappearances and reappearances of JG. She had a lot of practice being around the 9th and 10th level trainees that always liked to impress her with their antics on the road.

She stilled her thoughts, trying to see what was being pointed out to her.

"You are trying to see with your eyes," the soft voice explained.

Relaxing her eyes and letting her awareness shift, as Miyaki showed her so she could learn to move unseen, she found the room suddenly taking on tones of gray.

"Now, just imagine yourself...at the edge of where you can see."

Horiku felt a little disorientated and would have teetered over if a hand on her elbow did not hold her steady.

"No one's home. I guess we'll be alone tonight."

"It's the new moon. The monks are invited into the nearby villages, cities and towns, to cleanse buildings, fields, pets and the like. It's a two-day ritual and they usually don't return to the monastery until they are finished with their area," Horiku said.

In the dim lighting there were four cots. Horiku liked the energy in the traveler's sleeping area. The warrior tossed her pack on one of the cots and proceeded to pull out bedding and blankets from the footlocker. Horiku followed suit. They chose their beds on the opposite sides of the room, more as a defensive measure than for privacy.

JG listened as the young woman settled for the night. When she was certain she was asleep, she quietly rose from her pallet and left the room.

Chapter 9

Alexandra woke to her stomach growling, probably due to the smell of cooking food. Stretching she looked around her. Her three companions were still asleep and by the sound of their breathing, still deep in the dream realm. A bit of her own dream lingered. She didn't remember what it was about, but she knew it was a meaningful one. There was one particular dream she had the previous night that she remembered. Comfort from Jina Gari's arms that she had laid in left her in a considerably better mood. Irritation at the men was gone and her optimism of completing her mission was high. Then she thought of Vanstar.

Alexandra reached out and gave a respectful greeting to the spirit guardian of the cavern. As quietly as she could she left the sleeping area and found where the cave opened up into the main part of the cavern where they had eaten the previous night. Guards were posted outside the men's quarters.

Finished with her morning adulations she approached one of the attendants.

"Blessings and a goodmorn to you. Is there somewhere where I can exercise without disturbing anyone?"

The robed figure smiled and pointed to a passage. <it is easy to find: at the end of this passage>

<thankyou>

In the dim lighting, whose source she still could not locate, she saw elaborate carvings around doorways of rock and murals adorning the walls. The room at the end of the passage way was large and had a clean outdoor smell as if it was in the heart of a forest. She began her morning exercise with raising her qi. After about a stan hour, she switched to Tai Chi, moving slowly, concentrating on her balance, placement of her hands and smooth movement that generated energy as it was meant to. At the end of the exercise, she stood still waiting for her senses to ground. She was feeling disconnected but reluctant to break the overlapping vision. She was seeing the energy fields of everything around her.

"Commander."

The sound created a discord in her head. Resisting the impulse to shudder she turned to see Vanstar leaning against the wall. Alexandra could feel the soldier's usual discomfort at being around her but there was another feeling coupled with it. Sexual tension. Vanstar was sexually attracted to Wetfoot, however, Alexandra knew it was because Wetfoot was the only one around she would form a liaison with.

"Care for a work out partner?"

"Don't mind if I do. Any style in particular?"

"Cho?"

"A soldier's basic style." Alexandra's grin matched Vanstars. From their workouts on *Trojan Horse*, they had an idea of the others' weaknesses and strengths and expended a lot of energy attacking the other's weaknesses.

Both took their stances, bowed, and for a few hours pressed each other's skills, adding some personal moves from other disciplines to keep the other on her toes. By the end of their workout they were breathing heavily and sweating enough to know they had a good workout.

Vanstar laughed gustily as she held her side, the last place she was kicked. "I have again underestimated you, Commander Montran."

Alexandra sank to her knees tired. Vanstar's comment was loaded with unspoken messages and Alexandra did not feel either of them was up to facing what they were. They had other things to attend to than personal matters. "That worked up my appetite...but I think we need to freshen up first."

"Yeah." A relieved Vanstar replied, grateful that her commander let her slip of tongue go unchallenged.

A native was waiting for them when they finished. Fresh clothes were handed to each. "These are what our travelers wear. Until your own clothing is cleaned..." She bowed slightly and indicated where to dump their soiled clothing.

"Thank you." Alexandra bowed back. After cleaning out her pockets, she tossed them in the receptacle.

"Commander, does this mean we're staying a while?"

Alexandra shrugged her shoulders. "Let's wait and see. Maybe they have fast laundry service."

"Or see if we have anything hidden in our clothes," Vanstar muttered as she changed.

The two women looked at each other and nodded. It could very well be that too.

The others were already eating quietly. When the two entered a plate was prepared for them. Amonic didn't take his eyes off them as they began their meal.

"You've got new clothes." Amonic's voice was tinged in resentment.

"And so do you. Travelers clothing, isn't it?" Alexandra asked. "Good morning everyone."

"You had a morning workout." He nodded to one of the natives, "They wouldn't let us watch. You would think it was something special, like one of those dance routines practiced by the warrior class," he snorted derisively.

Vanstar looked up interested. "What kind of a routine is that?"

"Twirling weapons and jumping in the air..." He made a twirling motion of his eating utensil, dropping food on the floor.

"...and cutting your opponent's head off in one swipe," Jer snorted wolfishly.

Vanstar gave a short laugh. "Then you didn't miss anything with our exercises. Jumping in the air and cutting someone's head off is not my style."

"What is your style?" Jer asked a little too slyly.

"Keeping my Commander alive," Vanstar replied as she bit into the flat cake, looking disinterested. She chewed a bit then asked, "Why? Are the black soldiers and their friends' warriors?"

The men snickered.

"Not one in the whole lot of them," Wetfoot answered. "They use swords and knives, which are outlawed weapons, hand-to-hand combat, and they can set some mean trail traps. But nothing the common soldier can't handle."

"So what warrior class are *you* talking about?" Vanstar asked.

"The Malagro soldiers belonged to a secret warrior class and then there's the Kiuzi," Amonic supplied. He looked like he was going to spit after saying Kiuzi but stopped when his eyes spied one of their hosts. He turned his eyes back to Vanstar and stared at her hard as if he were trying to read her mind.

"Kiuzi?"

"The highest honor of a warrior is to be Kiuzi," Wetfoot explained with a grin. "Not like the Malagro soldiers at all. The Malagro and black soldiers that aren't from Arnica are in it for power over others."

"Do tell," Vanstar drawled.

Jer leaned forward. "You think you can take out a Kiuzi warrior?"

"We aren't here for making challenges," Alexandra said.

"There's plenty of black soldiers and Malagro *warriors* in the mountain," Jer tempted.

Alexandra rose from her seat to let Lt. Vanstar know she wanted the discussion to cease. It was easy to see he was baiting Vanstar and the energy she was putting out was that she was interested. When her Sha'Kar returned, she would have enough information on the colonists to know what to do next.

She went to the one of the natives waiting at the door, "Good morning. I would like to have a word with the elder I spoke with last night."

"Are you planning on leaving us here?" Jer demanded.

Alexandra turned toward him annoyed with his tone of voice. The colors swirling around him were going from one color to another, as if he were struggling between panic and menace.

"Until I speak with the elder, I don't have any plans."

Their host nodded. "The Diendow is ready when you are."

"Commander?" Vanstar rose to her feet quickly, noting that this native was not like the others. The figure was twice Vanstar's weight, was all muscle, had so much hair on its face she couldn't tell if it was friendly or not, and this one had wrist bands with embedded stones. What probably annoyed Vanstar most was that she hadn't noticed the warrior was at the doorway.

Amonic also rose, "I'll come along too."

Alexandra felt his interest peak in this soldier, as the other two men. "Why don't we all come along?" Alexandra looked up at the tall warrior in askance.

The warrior bowed respectfully not taking his eyes off her.

Alexandra glanced toward Vanstar and gave her a warning look. Standing closer to the warrior, Alexandra found this must be a Kiuzi warrior. There was the same feel as some of Jina Gari's sister warriors.

The group was led through a tunnel that opened to a city carved in the crystals and rock of the mountain. Their guide stopped in front of an entrance way to a room and waved Alexandra through.

<the Diendow has gathered to speak with you>"

Their guide studied the others as they filed into the room.

There was a group of twenty-two figures of various species sitting around a table with one seat available. Alexandra was shown to the vacant place. Her group was escorted to seats against the wall. The energy around the table was so profound, Alexandra could feel her heart open up. There was another type of energy and that was power.

Alexandra placed her hands flat on the wooden table, trying to ground the energy that would give a shaman great joy, but she wasn't a shaman. Empaths were not made of the same stuff.

<we understand the distinction>

A tall nearly translucent figure rose from one of the seats. From this person, she could feel absolutely nothing. The figure bowed to her politely.

"I am called Kaili Maipuga among the People. We will use your language to communicate, to make you feel comfortable. Your group will not hear this conversation, nor see what is occurring around this table. They can move about, but they will be limited in where they can go. Is that agreeable to you?"

Alexandra was going to say she had no right to speak for the others, but instead she said, "That is. Thank you. I am called Lady Alexandra Harriet Montran among my people on the planet Menoca, in a galaxy sector, we call Eckron, about one of our standard years from here. I am also a Commander on the flagship *Ziggy*...a police vessel that protects the citizens of the Collective territory in another galaxy sector, called Getty. I have offered my services to the wise woman I spoke with last night in finding a way to resolve problems that are arising from the colonists that had arrived many years ago from

another galaxy sector, that was at one time called Galactic Committee of Families and Communities."

"We know of them. And just what would that assistance be?" Kaili Maipuga asked.

"I wish to assist in the healing of what has been damaged."

Kaili Maipuga nodded. <you already have by bringing the sha'kar>

"Evanstar. How did you know?"

Kaili Maipuga bowed toward her respectfully. <no one that touches a bloodline of the planet can mistake the presence>

"I'm sure Evanstar is not here to get involved in violence."

<perhaps i can explain> Another figure nodded slightly and Kaili Maipuga nodded graciously.

"I am Tologa, Lady Alexandra. We believe, as you, that the Sha'Kar will not assist in anything that is violent or that which concerns the physical plane. The Sha'Kar are enlightened entities that are present but not seen by many because of their vibratory rate. However, their vibratory rate would change if they become more involved in dross matter or by someone naming it in the physical realm."

Alexandra drew back in her chair, wondering if he was telling her she was not to call the Sha'Kar by name. She held her thoughts on this, knowing that whatever Evanstar's business was, it was not any of theirs, and since they could read thoughts...

<tologa, please sit: you are overstepping yourself>

Tologa bowed to an apparition of a slight young girl that suddenly appeared just as Alexandra felt a warmth and joy touch her. The rest of the members all rose and bowed a greeting to her.

<i am queen m'lu of allint: my apologies for tologa's roughness: it is not our intention to interfere with your path or those of your companion the sha'kar unless our help is asked>

The apparition approached her until she stood before her. It was odd to see an apparition that defied the physics of solid mass and took up space where the table would be. The Queen waved to the others to be seated and gestured for Alexandra to also be seated.

<you have arrived at a precarious time for arnica and where testing of your virtuous metal will be encountered: nothing happens randomly but rather through relationships that we are not always able to see: it is a dynamical evolutionary scheme fired within the energy of chaos and both you and arnica's inhabitants are at a bifurcation point of this process>

She waited a moment to let Alexandra think of what she was saying.

"You are evolving as...like the Sha'Kar?" Alexandra asked slowly, not feeling she was getting the whole picture.

The young girl laughed happily. <not everyone on arnica wants to follow the path of the sha'kar: however, the consciousness of arnica, is sustained and rising to a higher density or enlightenment due to the citizens of arnica who are embodying the practice of compassion without declaring they are followers of the sha'kar: once enlightenment begins, there is no stopping it: a large group of beings may slow it down or delay it but there is no turning down the changing energy: those that fight it their body is breaking down as their cells are burning up: the sha'kar that once were on arnica have given up all forms of attachments to this dimension's world or the world of solid things in search of something so elusive they have not understood enough to return to enlighten the followers of drusu further: we have honored their request to keep their place of sacred internment free from disturbance so they aren't drawn prematurely back to this dimension>

"So, just what is this jump in evolution doing for arnica?"

<enlightenment changes the vibration of the enlightened being: all things are vibrational: the seen and unseen: for those living on arnica thoughts are seen as a vibration and whether everyone will admit it or not it affects everything around them: as arnica's vibration changes as does those that reside on her we all will cease to exist on third dimension>

Alexandra nodded, wondering how that would look if people on the same ship saw only three-dimensional images and others not. What will ship's instruments do?

<the sha'kar has told you about the travel tunnel>



Alexandra took a deep breath as the image of a portal, like the one on Merker's Outpost came to her. <yes: in a dream I saw it>

<it has been blocked so the unwise do not travel it: each travel tunnel vibrates to a certain level: because arnica is changing in vibration it is wise not to have anyone using the tunnel until the change is complete>

<so you blocked it> Alexandra concluded.

<no: the sha'kars did with the assistance of the spirit of the planet>

<then why can't they use it>

<the sha'kar have levels in development also: have you wondered about how you can travel about in your dreamtime to anywhere you wish, to sit at the feet of any spiritual teacher you wish, and then be back in your body when you wake with more knowledge than what you have received in a waking school> the young apparition smiled.

<well no not really: I understand dreamtime is used for lessons on another level: I also understand that not everyone remembers those lessons>

<our limited understanding of the reality of the sha'kar is that the dream state is similar to the dimension that the sha'kar travel in> Queen M'Lu said.

<ev...i mean the sha'kar that traveled with me did so because it wanted to protect me>

Alexandra could feel the group's curiosity at why a Sha'Kar had taken interest in a solid's business.

"Maybe she needed a new direction to continue her growth. You can only learn so much by meditating on your navel," Alexandra said before she realized what she had said and to whom. It was something that Gari had said to her when she was teaching her how to be still and meditate.

<that is exactly correct> Queen M'Lu said.

The others in the room were about to erupt into arguments but the Queen silenced them with an upraised hand. <we are not here to debate the sha'kar's spiritual developmental stages: we are here to make a decision on arnica's involvement in these colonists development>

<they are fighting you> Alexandra said.

<they are fighting themselves: their fear of leaving the known behind is giving support in the form of energy to another entity that does harm rather than good to their souls>

<and havoc to the energy balance on this planet: have you ever thought to send them back from where they came> Alexandra asked.

<they must choose to leave without direct pressure from us: just as they must ask for our help before we can intercede for them: there are two groups we have had to isolate due to their suicidal nature and the danger they posed to their innocent neighbors>

<i think I see where you are going with this...you want me to nudge them where you cannot:

<you are bound by the same rules as all arnicans: what you can do is offer a calming influence>

<that will take a long time> Alexandra said.

<not as long as you think: sometimes all it takes is a quiet voice in the darkness to lead the lost to a place where they can find their way>

<what about the black soldiers bothering the sha'kar's resting place?> Alexandra asked.

<that will take care of itself: even as we speak they are looking for another site not trusting their partners from arnica: the site they will move to we will allow your 'reinforcements' to gather them back up into your ships>

<i gathered you have not had an agreeable discussion with those aboard emperor's last chance>

<they, like the colonists deliver ultimatums and orders on how they will 'run their show' without considering it is contrary to our beliefs>

"No compromise," Alexandra muttered aloud.

<foreign military actions conducted on arnica will not transpire without full compliance of our rules: those on the ship from your side of the galaxy have too many participants with just as many personal issues making the situation worse: those on your ship we can influence directly for they have not become part of arnica>

"Wait a minute! I didn't tell you about the reinforcements and the admiral and general were only told recently...have they arrived yet?"

<there are other ways of knowing: no they have not arrived yet however your bondmate has: when you converse with her only do so in a temple or sacred area so you are not interfered with>

Alexandra could feel her face turn red at the thought of JG knowing the others also picked up on her thoughts. Alexandra refocused on the apparition of the Queen.

<so the meeting here is to see if i will choose to accompany these colonists back to their villages and...>

<not so involved as that: have you heard of morphogenic fields>

So far the thoughts Alexandra was picking up from the Queen were images and the image she received of morphogenesis was something she learned at an early age.

<i learned of it when i was child> she smiled wryly, < as best as a child can>

<a good time to be taught the idea before adult limitations hinder the acceptance of such concepts>

The people around the table nodded in agreement with the Queen.

<if these four can evolve all the other colonists and whoever else is bonded to them such as the other members of the black alliance, shall follow>

"It's the energy on this planet," Alexandra stated with conviction.

<which is part of all who reside on arnica and live off her bounty>

Alexandra nodded understanding more of what her dreams were about. <but the seeds they eat: it makes them feel out of sorts>

<a drug that dulls their senses: the availability will be ended soon and their journey will then began>

Alexandra nodded, knowing it was going to be something the colonists bring about themselves and not something the Queen arranged.

<why isn't the energy of those that follow your way help the unbelievers so they can move to a more harmonious life>

<they must be within a certain vibration scale: some born on arnica and from your part of the galaxy vibrate out of the range that would benefit from the larger majority's energy: to help them synchronize with the planet's change it is necessary to get a small group out of this off-key group to move to the correct vibration in order to stimulate a change in the rest>

But what about the rules of rebirth? Why...Alexandra's mind was trolling her past lessons on rebirth and how a soul chooses situations to be reborn in.

<a good lesson is not to take anything as a finality: there are rules and laws we follow but when a soul yearns to grow but cannot call out for help we will decide whether it is right to assist or not: we are the justice maker and the harbinger of comfort in its many forms>

For some reason Alexandra worried for the young girl, so slight yet shouldering a heavy responsibility. Harbinger of comfort was working both sides of the fence of justice. Alexandra felt the amusement of the entire room. Her face heated with the realization that she was assessing something she lacked knowledge on; thus, maybe insulting those in the room by implying the young woman didn't have the fortitude or strength of character to do as she stated. However, the young queen didn't seem bothered by her misjudging her capabilities in front of her supporters. Alexandra reminded herself that thoughts were the same as speech and she needed to think less on a readable level.

<abilities that few in your galaxy possess the commoners on arnica have: as your colonists have found, all beings including the wild beasts of the forest communicate in thought on alpha level as you refer to it: it can be frightening to realize that before you

say something those around you already know what you are going to say and why: many of those on the ship circling above arnica have become frightened because of this and wish to disrupt our evolution>

<but what happens to people that can't change for reasons outside of themselves>

Her thoughts went to Alan's soldiers.

<all that are on this planet are my concern and under my protection: even those that may seem evil or misguided are not without some merit or have a purpose that can be used for the benefit of all>

<the energy I felt in alan's castle...what is that>

<its something not from this side of the stars nor did your colonists start out with it: from what has been discerned it attached itself to the colonist ships as they passed through a star system>

<it was a long trip and those people in the pods would be easy subjects to prey on>

<some of the occupants of the forty ships forming a swarm, had a predisposition to the type of energy the entity was experiencing: it settled around those ships finding comfort in this familiarity: between the two species, a relationship was created>

Alexandra took a deep breath then nodded more to herself than those in the room.

<this energy or entity that is manifesting harmful vibrations you don't refer to it as an 'enemy' but rather something that needs to be steered toward a less destructive path>

Alexandra felt those sitting around the table's approval. She also felt she had agreed to something but didn't quite know what it was...yet.

<you understand arnica's position: good journey: my heart to your heart> the Queen nodded to her and then the others before leaving.

"We will assist you in your journey," Kaili Maipuga offered, after the Queen left.

"I will guide them," a soft voice spoke. The tall thin body rose from its chair bowing toward Alexandra, "if you wish a guide."

"I would appreciate your presence and guidance."

Kaili Maipuga nodded to the two, "Then it is so, Gi. Good journey."

The young guide turned to Alexandra. "Anyone that wishes to follow, is free to enter the tunnel of kismet with me."

Alexandra turned to the group sitting against the wall that was looking at her expectantly. She gathered whatever had prevented them from witnessing the business that had transpired was no longer present.

<it was for their protection: none of them would have been able to withstand the energy of the queen even in her apparition form>

"Why was I?"

Alexandra could feel the amusement of her new guide. <you know: you just have not connected it: on this journey you shall have enough time to figure it out>

"I'll take you to your village. Our path will be under the mountain," Gi told the men.

"Our village? Returning back to our villages right now isn't safe," Amonic objected.

"If there is a village to return to, " Sys'mara snorted.

"What about the soldiers...beating up on the poor nonviolent natives?" Jer asked.

"I'm leaving. Are you in or are you out?" Alexandra said.

The three men sighed and nodded.

"What does a sigh and a nod mean?"

"We'll tag along! Damn it to hell, woman!" Jer told her explosively. He jerked his thumb towards E'l, "Gotta drag her back anyways."

For a brief moment, Alexandra had a feeling they had no intention of taking her back. What their alternative was, made her almost sick.

E'l watched the group and nodded when Alexandra looked at her.

"That's the lot," Vanstar remarked.

"Let's get our gear together then."

Alexandra looked around the circle of people she would be leading. She slung her pack onto her back, pulled the straps tighter. Now, even E'l had a pack that their hosts had provided them with. In place of the bag of weapons Vanstar had been carrying they were all provided with walking staffs.

The men were taking a longer time, so Vanstar practiced working with her staff familiarizing herself with its balance and what movements she could do for self-defense with a pack on her back. Wetfoot gave her a few testing smacks with her staff, grinning when Vanstar shook her hand out from the vibration that shivered up her arm.

Alexandra spotted Gi as she exited the men's room with the men following her. The colonists looked grumpy.

Gi joined Alexandra. "I hope you don't mind, but I thought I should remind the men what the rules of proper behavior are on Arnica and the reasons behind them. I don't want any misunderstandings."

"So, whatever behavior they choose, it's with open eyes."

Gi nodded watching Alexandra as she studied the unhappy men who were pulling on packs and taking the walking sticks they were handed. The men looked awkward wearing the packs. Alexandra wondered how the men traveled if they weren't familiar with packs.

Chapter 10

The dark clad figure on the chair stirred as the apparition he had been expecting began to materialize.

"Well?!"

"We have not been able to locate either."

Alao slammed his fist on the chair's arm. "They are strangers! Easily recognized!" He threw back at the apparition his very words. Shakily his hand reached to rub his temple.

"We do have an herb for those headaches," the apparition informed him quietly.

Alao waved his hand in dismissal. Before Alan Fermin, his look-alike, rescued him from the slums on Velon, he experienced headaches, hallucinations, and incredible visions of the future with accurate outcomes. Alan had given him medication that would lessen the headaches without diminishing the visions. But he was now out of the medication and his body had not adapted to the herbs from Arnica.

"Your medication is too strong," he said finally, miserable to be sick and alone.

"The strength can be regulated."

Alao laughed softly to avoid sending a ribbon of pain through his head, and then wearily lifted his head to stare at the apparition, focusing on what he needed from this temporary partner. "What else do you have to report?"

"The Queen will suspect soon that something is not right on Allint."

"Then give her something to occupy her time so she doesn't notice. What about her mother, maybe her death will do it? Females get so wrapped up in sorrow and weeping. Didn't you say there's a one-year ritual that goes with a death?"

The form faded a bit then came back. "We cannot kill directly, especially someone from the royal family."

"You keep saying that! What is so difficult about taking a knife and slitting their throat?" Alao took pleasure in saying that, knowing it made his partner uncomfortable. Just how profoundly uncomfortable, Alao wasn't capable of knowing. And as much as Alao was using him, he was using Alao.

"The energy is almost low enough on one of the shores on Allint for commoners to step on. We will send someone then." The form hid his dislike that commoners would

set foot on Allint. He wondered if they would be able to kill the Queen Mother even now with her powers depleted. Of course, once the deed was done, the killer would have lowered his energy so low that immediate death from standing on Allint would occur, getting rid of the evidence conveniently.

"Hmm. Maybe we can use the same method we used on the brat's mother on her. Surely you have found her favorite spot where she lets her guard down by now?" His contempt was not masked.

"No. We have not."

"Do you think she suspects? She's just a child." He answered his own question quickly flicking his wrist disdainfully.

"No. Our healers have told her, her mother is suffering from a hereditary disease. She believes."

"Are you sure?" Alao's suspicious nature kicked in.

The figure was annoyed. "One person cannot hide from a group mind, much less from a Drusian trained to see into the dreams and desires of another - undetected."

"Of course," he smiled, looking disdainful, "my benefactor had dream workers in his employ." His demeanor changed as he realized that this could lead to something more. "They would delve into the dreams of those Alan wanted tormented and tamper with their dream images." Alao rubbed his hands. "I would love to be able to do that."

"When this is done, I will send you such a teacher."

"Really? Good! Good! Well, let me know when the kid and her mother are gone. Then we'll proceed to our next step."

A small surge along the Drusian's connection sent ripples through his image.

Alao grinned. "I see you haven't gotten your energy source stabilized."

"Have you any further business to discuss?"

Alao sat up in his chair, "Yes. What is this about getting this king of theirs out of jail? I have no intention of helping those soldiers release their leader...he's mad!"

The image again wavered. "You made the agreement with them. It's your problem." And then the image was gone.

"If I had known he was mad I would not have done it!" Alao's voice bounced back at him in the nearly empty cavern. Dejected, he looked about him. It was not as luxurious

as his rooms in the castle. But they had to leave in a hurry and there was only so much the soldiers were willing to haul up the mountain to form the new headquarters.

Alao was not a soldier. Nor had he gone to any schools that could teach him to lead. It was times like these that he valued Alan. The soldiers were programmed for his command. Alao had learned to ask his captain's opinion, but that was after he had caused the loss of half his troops and all their equipment. His second in command recommended he make a pack with others that were disgruntled with their governments. The black alliance would give strength to Alan's plan.

The temptation to release Alan out of his ship was there again. He wondered if any of the soldiers were aware that he had discovered Alan's key code. With it he locked the ship's exit doors down and cut the communication off so Alan was stuck inside his ship. The ship was still sitting in the castle's courtyard, but few of the soldiers were there. He was reassigning them to his new fortress. If Alan died in the ship, that would not be his fault. After all, he had an alternative; all he had to do was push the button to return to where he came from. He chuckled to himself, guessing Alan burned a lot of bridges before he left. *Too bad, idiot. You're mad too.*

The Allintian suggested the cave he was in now was an ideal place to set up his domain. Well protected militarily it was nearly in the center of the continent close to a strong ley line. Of course, he could not tap into it himself, and being near it gave him a bad feeling. The Allintian had provided an energy destabilizer to protect him, but he worried it would break and then what would happen to him?

Standing up abruptly, he went in search of his second in command, Captain Kensington. He wanted to find out if the captain had found another place they could set up their base of operation. He didn't trust the apparition. Next time the natives led their armies against his stronghold, this place would be deserted.

"Captain Kensington."

The Captain was leaning over a map of the area with three of his soldiers. He looked up and then waved the three away.

"Master Alao."

"I wish you would not call me that," he grumbled. "That is what one calls a child. It's *Sir* Alao. What have you found on our new home?"

He nodded in abeyance. "Forgive me. Sir Alao, Lieutenant Mae found an island about four days journey by air from here. The four air transports we captured will be able to take us and our equipment. From what that old seer said, that island will not disappear when all hell breaks loose. It's going to get larger. I've sent a troop out there to check it out." He waited patiently for his master to respond. He had no conscious opinion of his status as a drone, a metrasoldier.

Alao stared at the map, trying to understand what the topographical survey was showing. He was learning some things, but it was a struggle. The only thing his suspicious nature trusted was the metrasoldiers' loyalty to him.

"I don't trust that damn native," he muttered not intending to carry a conversation with his captain. The captain normally only responded when he spoke to him directly.

"What did that soldier from Hethran have to say?"

"He wants his soldiers to be more active in guarding the cavern exits."

"Ahh. Just as you expected." Alao's eyebrows lifted with respect for his captain.

"Did you let him have his way?"

"Not yet. We compromised. It's not good to let him have everything he wants too soon. He may then suspect he is actually doing our bidding."

"Good. Good. Let me know the earliest I can move to our new quarters. I don't like living in a cave, even if it's warm." *Especially when my comfort depends on someone else's machine.*

Chapter 11

Jina Gari was sitting in a temple tree branch with Nameer, looking over the fence at the valley below. It was the beginning of Nameer's mother's lands.

<horiku: you could not sleep> JG turned to face the young girl that was peering over the edge of the roof.

Her breath caught as she eyed the large cat that glanced at her and then turned his head back to peer where his home was.

"You can mindspeak," she pulled herself on the roof and watched the two sitting comfortably in the tree.

"We're wondering what is going on in the valley over there. There have been fires."

Horiku didn't attempt to join them in the tree, instead she crept along the roof, lying flat at its highest point. Moments of silence passed by as they studied the occasional light that leaped high.

:I will go hunting tonight.:

Gracefully, the large cat crept along a branch and leaped to the fence, balanced and jumped down to the other side. He disappeared into the darkness, but JG followed him in her connection.

Tirelessly the cat ran, leaped, and crept closer to where the fires were flaring. At one point, he lifted his head to sniff the air. It burned his eyes and nose.

"Nameer, come back quickly. Don't go any further. It's a poisonous gas. By tomorrow it will have settled. Then we will be..."

She lost her connection. JG slapped her leg in irritation. She was afraid for him.

"Is he alright?"

"I don't know. It's affected his senses."

"We must go and rescue him then."

JG shook her head. She wished she could. "The gas must settle, or we will be no better off." She sighed. She could taste the sulfur on her tongue. "Come on. Let's get some sleep. We're getting up early."

Horiku followed her, doubtful she would sleep. The warrior is bonded with the great cat! She has gone through singu and is a full Kiuzi warrior now!

However, in her dreams, the Queen informed her, otherwise. The warrior was still lacking in some qualities. As Horiku lay half-awake in the stillness before morning, she wondered what she could have possibly been thinking. She wasn't even a Kiuzi herself. She groaned at the ridiculousness of her thought.

"You going to lay there moaning or get up and get ready to travel?"

JG was standing in the doorframe, her wet hair the only thing covering her. Calmly she brought her long hair before her, blotting it dry. When she turned to her cot Horiku's eyes grew wide at the tattoo of a strange winged animal on her back.

"Is that creature something from your home planet?" Horiku asked curious.

"It is the emblem of my sister house. I noticed you don't have many tattooed people here."

"Tattoo? The body artwork of one's talisman? Some clans do, some warriors..." She suddenly smiled. "When it is time for my taking the Kiuzi oath, I will have my talisman marked on my body."

"Where will you have it done?"

She rolled up her arm and patted her shoulder. "That way, not everyone will see it."

JG nodded smiling. Alexandra had teased her that she would have a tattoo done wherever Gari would like it and of whatever image...if she learned to contort her body into various postures. It was a show of mastery over body flexibility and breathing. Since then, she practiced the different degrees of the stretches, working her way toward her goal. She had been thinking of just what she would have Alexandra tattoo on her body...and where, changing her mind many times. By the level of her progress, she still had plenty of time to think. Alexandra had also told her it caused the qi of the individual to vibrate on a level that many could not see, thus causing the person to disappear from most people's sight. That was an incentive too, but the tattoo was more interesting to think about.

By the time Horiku was bathed and ready, JG had her pack ready with food the monks always provided her and was waiting on the roof, mentally mapping out where they would go. She still had no solid connection to Nameer, but enough to tell her that he was still alive.

The air was choking thick with rot. Jina Gari had both of them wrap damp rags over their faces. She wore gloves and gave her extra pair to Horiku. They were careful where they stepped, avoiding pools of liquid that dripped from the dying foliage all around them.

Onogla, you told me I had to do something with these vengeful thoughts. I sure wish you could have given me more of a hint...because I am near to being in a murderous rage at whoever did this.

Horiku pulled at her arm. "Come, Jina Gari. Come. This way. You are too distracted to not see where you are going."

JG shook her head to clear it.

"You need to concentrate on what you can do to help Nameer. He must be stuck in this."

"I would climb that tree, but it looks like it's ready to topple," she mumbled, her thoughts still disjointed. "Come on then."

"You can touch him, not his mind. Picture what he looks like and let whatever image comes to your mind guide us." Horiku knew that from overhearing a Kiuzi telling another what to do if his spirit guide was injured. She was practicing different levels of telepathy, which would eventually allow her to mindspeak, and had not realized she was listening to others a great distance from her.

JG stood still in the middle of the rotting life. In her mind, she found Nameer, in a cage, dying from the gas. She blinked a few times and then started to move in the direction she felt Nameer's link was pulling her. She wasn't aware of the growl that rumbled in her throat or Horiku's scrambling to keep up with her.

"You must control yourself. You are too close to the animal spirit of your guardian. You must remember who you are." She tugged on Jina Gari's arm to follow her on a better path through the dying debris.

"This..." Horiku gestured to the damaged landscape, "is easier to repair than if you should sink to this level."

"People who do this will not understand the morals you or I live by."

"Your sinking to their level will also not bring this to an end."

"Then just what am I supposed to do to stop it?"

Horiku shook her head. That was something a Kiuzi warrior would know but not a 7th level trainee. "I can only guess; direct it to a solution."

"I have no solution only a desire to find Nameer. Then we'll see what this is all about."

Horiku nodded in understanding. "It's difficult to focus on something other than a heart issue. Perhaps your people would know."

"That's right. Mcarn will have the facilities to neutralize the stuff. Blasters! I cut communication off with them."

"But you mindspeak. You only need to imagine them and tell them what you need."

JG laughed. That sounded simple. She stopped and balanced on the rocky riverbed. She gazed around the area trying to figure out what to give General Mcarn for location. Sliding her pack off her back, she handed it to Horiku and then rummaged around before she found the emergency locator. She activated it and then input a message to him, reminding him to contact the planet authorities before doing something. Satisfied, she left it wedged between the rocks.

"Let's move on." JG reshouldered her pack.

"I see a road up there." Horiku pointed.

"Yeah. The beginning of it is back over that way...a switchback. I would rather climb up to it than risk a sprained ankle going over these rocks."

By late afternoon, they had made it to the road that led up the mountainside. It gave the appearance of being well traveled, and by the biowaste on the side of the road, recently.

"We're going to have to be careful. If someone should head this way, we have nowhere to hide but over the cliff side," JG explained. On the outside of her pack she attached a coil of rope for easy reach, just in case.

Pebbles dropped to their right from the switchback trail above them. A dust cloud was moving rapidly down.

"Get off this path." JG quickly took a look over the edge and spotted a small ledge. She jumped. Her legs felt a shudder in the soft lip of the cliff, but she was already

grabbing the rock outcroppings with her fingers. She climbed to the side of the small ledge to give Horiku room. Hanging with one hand she unattached the rope and began tying it to the old root that stubbornly refused to give up its grip into the mountain. When Horiku landed on the lip JG was secured and ready to grab Horiku if she needed help. Horiku's weight collapsed the lip and she started to fall. JG pushed off from her secured position and caught the young warrior's wrist as she managed to grab a small tree. She let Horiku's body stop swinging before she pulled her up.

"Don't move! They'll see movement."

There seemed to be more than one vehicle that rolled overhead, sending more rocks and a cloud of dust over the cliff. When the last vehicle passed JG pulled the dangling Horiku up beside her. "We have got to get off this cliff face."

When they reached the top, JG took a peek to make sure they were clear. "Oh, great," she whispered exasperatedly. "They have spybots patrolling the path."

Suddenly a long telescopic eye dropped just short of JG's shoulder. It turned this way and that and then disappeared.

"What was that?" Horiku asked startled.

"It's checking us out. It's either set to eliminate or capture trespassers. Very old technology. They travel in pairs. Oh bloody moon!"

JG had glanced up to see one watching her while its partner started down the side of the cliff to reach them. It had one appendage held out with something that looked like trouble. She looked back up at the one on the road.

"If they wanted us dead, they would have cut the rope. My guess is they want prisoners. I've got a feeling that is not a good thing."

"So, what do you suggest?"

JG smiled grimly. "Well, they look like they will not hurt us only..."

A shot of something white hit the back of JG's gloved hand.

<can you hear me> Horiku asked.

<barely: do you think you can pull the one above us down>

<I will attempt to do so>

Because they were workers programed to work in pairs, that was their weakness. If they could damage one, its partner will break off an attack to care for the first.

Both women moved along the cliff face attempting to split the duo. When they had put enough space between them, the one following JG abandoned her and assisted with Horiku's capture. Climbing onto the path JG ran to where the two spybots were maneuvering Horiku to a ledge, probably to neutralize her with a drug. She picked up a rock and gave a good toss at one of the bots, hitting one of the antenna eyes hard enough to damage it. Then she heaved a heavier rock, knocking the other so that it hung precariously over the cliff. She peered around quickly, not wanting to be too preoccupied to get ambushed. When she looked back down a bot with a damaged antenna was moving back up the cliff face toward her. She sat close to the edge of the path in a nonthreatening yoga pose.

A spybot leaped onto the path, weaving back and forth, expecting to be attacked. Its broken antenna banging as it moved, causing small sparks to fly. Then it stopped to switch programs from visual to infrared. That was when JG kicked it over the edge.

<jina gari>

<i'm here: are you okay>

<they have left>

JG peered over the ledge and gave Horiku a hand. She could see the bots holding onto one another as they slid in stops and starts down the cliff. The two women sprinted up the path to gain some distance.

"What if they follow us?" Horiku took a long pull of her water, when they stopped to catch their breath.

"We'll figure it out as we go. Nice work you did on the one after you." JG pulled out an energy bar the monks encouraged them to take and gulped some water from her liquid pouch.

"Rain, soon," Horiku mentioned, following Jina Gari's example and grabbing some nourishment.

JG looked up at the sky but didn't see anything that looked like a cloud. She sniffed the air and picked up a hint of a scent that reminded her of rain, but with it was the smell of dust and something else...rotting.

"We don't want to be on this path when it starts to rain," she advised.

Horiku nodded and rose.

Their climb was not far when they reached a dead end. However, the tracks on the trail continued into the rock face.

"Either those tracks are a trap, or they don't expect visitors to get this close. That means they may have something protecting this place more than those bots." JG slid her pack off and pulled out a small device to detect security weapons and energy bubbles. The light blinked it recognized the security and searched for the combination.

"Get ready. The interference will only cause a short disruption."

The rock face gave way to a large cavernous opening. Both women sprinted into the opening and stopped just inside. It would have been a spacious area had it not been for the work tables, storage shelves and cages filled with life. The room reeked of a mixture of uncleanliness and chemicals.

JG lit a torch and found the switch that activated the cave's lighting system. Looking closer, JG was sure this was used for research. She hoped it was where the toxic chemicals were created so she could shut it down. Notes were opened and neatly arranged on each table. Recording equipment was sitting nearby, waiting to be engaged.

Her link with Nameer was stronger in here, but still not enough to feel he was conscious. Without prompting, Horiku looked into the cages on one side of the area, while JG moved along the other side. All the occupants were sick. Nameer was near the back, lying on his side. Carefully, she released the catch and ran her analyzer over his body. She was able to synthesize an antidote from what was on the chemists table. While Nameer was recovering enough to travel, JG moved to the other cages. She repeated the same method of treatment for the others. Horiku went behind her giving them fresh water and uncontaminated food from bins.

When the others were recouping, JG sat with Nameer, checking his improved condition. She was worried about time. She was not sure what the spybots were up to.

"Horiku," she called softly.

"Jina Gari," she answered.

"We need to search for another way out of here. I hear water from somewhere, and the water in this pool is fresh..."

"I will look. There is an old Dwarf in one of the cages; he was on his Death Walk when he was captured."

"Death Walk?"

"He was on his ritual journey to the top of a mountain to mediate and fast until a vision of his death comes."

JG considered that as she stroked Nameer's coat. She felt the purr the same time her senses leaped into double focus. The smells in the cave became more disgusting. The large cat sneezed. She gave him as much water as he wanted and then waited for him to reconnect with her.

:Are we free or in a larger cage?:

"For now, in a larger cage. I'm waiting for Horiku. She went to see if there is another way out of here."

Nameer moved his sprawl to a reclining state and looked around him. JG looked with him seeing things in a different frame. Colors and sounds were mixed and then the whine that was getting to be nerve racking suddenly stopped.

JG pushed herself out of the cage and was on her feet running toward the cave entrance. Two spybots, one supported by the other entered. JG halted her run and pressed up against a cage, trying to appear nonthreatening. The undamaged bot deposited its mate in a space near the working table, extended an arm up to a switch and pushed it. Then it slid into its own stand and shut down.

JG cautiously moved to the two bots to get a closer look. They were older models whose parts weren't even worth cannibalizing for replacements in her part of the galaxy. However, they must perform a vital function here because a box near their stand was full of spare parts. She wondered how many had been shipped out with the colonists and how many were in working condition. Her eyes glanced around looking for more stands, finding six stacked in a corner. Moving up and down the rows of tables, she looked for anything that would pose as a threat to her. Turning back to the spybots, she knew she had to neutralize the pair.

Horiku came back nearly a half an hour later, finding JG bent over the workbench.

"There are underground passages throughout this mountain. Some we need to stay away from. They smell of something rotting. There are others that I don't know where they lead, but it could be to another surface outlet. I could feel a draft from them."

JG nodded, laying a tool down. She felt she damaged enough parts on the two bots that it would take a while to repair. She also deactivated the recorders and destroyed whatever stored information they had.

"Let's see which of the prisoners want to go and make an assessment of their condition. About the rotting smell, anything you recognize?"

"Yes. Like the poison outside."

"Storage for their supplies," she surmised. She looked around for something to seal the tunnels without blowing them up.

Horiku, touched her arm hesitantly. "Jina Gari, I know you have been leading us with great skill..."

"You want to take over the leadership for a while? Go ahead," JG encouraged with a grin.

"I meant the elder Dwarf. Dwarfs know underground tunnels. However, being that he is on his beiage, death walk, if the exit is too far, he may not be able to lead us all the way out of here."

"Nameer, do you know about Dwarfs?"

:They live all their lives with their pride in the mountains and when they are ready to die, they travel alone to the nearest mountain top to await the passing of their spirit.:

JG got up and approached the Dwarf. She had little experience in dealing with them, but what she did know was that they were a blunt spoken race.

"Honorable elder," she started. The old head turned to her. Black, dull eyes stared back at her. "I understand you were interrupted from your beiage."

"Yes," he wheezed. He pointed a gnarled finger at her. "You are the one they call 'Iron Fist'"

JG snorted in alarm. "Where did you hear that?" She was sure she did not 'leak' that memory.

"We have species memory. What one Dwarf encounters is known by all in that space where distance and time has no influence."

"So, if I cheat a Dwarf, everyone will know, huh?"

"Only if it has a profound effect on the Dwarf, otherwise it would be too burdensome for us all to remember each event in everyone's life."

"I didn't know what I did was all that important to a Dwarf."

"He was a young one, and the image you created as you stopped the miners and soldiers from starting a blood bath was quite emotional for this Dwarf. May I ask you to tell the story, just so I have a clear idea on just what really happened?"

JG looked embarrassed and then laughed. "Alright. I have something to ask of you too."

The old head nodded.

"You still want to go on with your initiation?"

He nodded.

"Will you allow us to follow you out? We will not interfere with your rite."

"You have chosen the word 'initiation' instead of death walk. Why?"

"My lifemate told me that life is fraught with many levels of initiation, physical death being one."

"A Drusu thought," the old Dwarf nodded. "You are Kiuzi. I noticed you and your apprentice speak with the great cat. He is your animal guardian?"

"He is a friend that asked me for help. Will you help us?"

The Dwarf nodded. "I have little strength left in my legs to make it to the top. You may have to carry me." He nodded to Horiku who came to stand next to JG.

"I will carry you for as long as I can to your mountain top," JG offered.

"A burden easily shared," Horiku bowed respectfully, then turned to Jina Gari.

"We must leave quickly. One of the women said the doctor that runs this lab shall be returning with supplies. He does not stay away for long."

"Alright then, gather the others together. Let's find some packs and food for our trip. The water carriers are on wheels. I already checked them, and they haven't been tampered with. Those small hand carts will be good to stack supplies and carry those that can't walk."

Horiku was quick and efficient in organizing the freed captives. Those that were too weak, such as the Dwarf, sat in a cart while the others feeling more able pulled, happy to be escaping. JG would have started a fire or placed a chemical bomb to destroy the lab but she didn't know what she would be releasing into the air.

"We'll take a break here," JG spoke softly.

The column gratefully stopped, dropping to the ground exactly where they stood. Nameer had padded ahead not wanting to be around the group. The group was frightened by his presence. He regained his strength quickly. From the information Horiku and JG had gathered most of these people could not remember for how long they had been tortured but it seemed to them for a long time.

While they rested, JG recounted her story privately to the Dwarf and Horiku spoke with a cranky Benitians who had refused medical treatment for his burns. Horiku joined Jina Gari at the water bucket.

"Do you think the Dwarf will make it?" JG asked softly.

Horiku looked at her strangely. "You can know this yourself just by touching him as you do Nameer."

JG looked uncomfortable. Now she knew how Alexandra felt. Just because Alexandra is an empath she assumed Alexandra knew what others were thinking or how they felt all the time.

"It is what everyone knows," Horiku explained. "It saves considerable time in relationships to not hide some feelings."

"What happens if the person's feelings aren't so nice?"

"You are referring to words as opposed to feelings. We are all sensitive to the energy of thoughts. For those that are not used to it, as yourself, you will continue to be off-balance until you learn to protect yourself from intentional negative thoughts."

JG shifted to look at her face on. "What are you talking about? Someone's thoughts aren't going to hurt me."

Horiku shook her head. "It has. When you were searching for Nameer."

"I..."

"You were feeling despair. You let it influence your actions and thoughts." Horiku studied her worried. It was such a basic lesson for inhabitants on Arnica, yet the Queen had told her in her dream that the off-world soldier didn't know how to fight despair except through avoidance. It wasn't the way of a Kiuzi warrior. She must acknowledge it, let it go, and move on. Didn't she just learn that?

"Despair? Was that what that was? Well, it took me off guard. I can handle it." JG felt herself slipping back into her defensive noncom soldier's role.

"How is that?" Horiku challenged.

"Listen...I've been through this before. I can't take time to sludge through that emotional dribble."

"You face the despair and see it for what it is and then you put it in its place," Horiku told her seriously.

"Put it in its place?"

"Despair is merely a tool. How it is used is determined by the person."

JG shrugged her shoulders and rose to her feet. She thought of Alexandra and her months spent in a prisoner of war camp, witnessing what was left of her troop tortured to death. What did she do with her despair? Then she remembered that her father was the one responsible for that betrayal.

"Let's get going!" she said too harshly and then quickly suppressed the anger that began to resurface, grimacing as her voice echoed in the tunnel. "Damn memories," she muttered as she picked up the handle to a cart.

She heard an echo from behind them but was too engrossed on what she felt in front of them. "Master Dwarf," she called softly to the figure on the cart near her.

"We must move quickly, before they seal their end," he told her in a fierce whisper.

JG noticed the tone of his voice. It sounded forced, as if his strength was barely enough to get the words out. A rumble began, growing quickly and coming toward them. The echoing in the tunnels magnified. Everyone froze in their steps.

"Turn the corner!" the Dwarf thought more than shouted. <don't forget your promise>

Bodies scrambled off the carts toward another branch in the tunnel. The Dwarf was assisted out of the cart by Horiku, while JG worried about their water. She tried to move another cart in front of one of the water carts, hoping it would spare it from whatever was coming down the tunnel.

"Helgas moon, I'm gonna regret this."

An energy wave picked up a cart and slammed it into JG, successfully pinning her against the tunnel wall.

<you understand the concept of energy however you do not use it: on arnica that is impractical>

<why do i have to learn all this stuff: once i leave here this will all be useless>

<do you not want to learn more of the warrior's craft>

<yes: it's not that: it's just that warriors from where i come from don't do these things so it's...just strange>

<they do use it: the term psyching the enemy out is an example>

<oh, yeah: i didn't think of it that way: like my mother moving without anyone seeing her until she wants to be seen: well, except Alexandra: she saw her: hmm: can i do that now>

<there are other more important things you need to learn than moving about unseen otherwise moving unseen would be pointless> she explained patiently.

<what do you mean>

<if you become negatively emotional you drop to a lower level and will be seen>

<i'm not emotional> Past 'emotional' moments from her life were replayed for her. <well, so i get a bit angry>

<for what purpose: if it does not serve the situation a wise warrior does not waste the energy: remember that on arnica a thought energized by feelings is heard by many: when such thoughts are purposely aimed to distract you, simply slide it to the side>

JG practiced mentally sidestepping until she got it down pat. As she was congratulating herself a flood of pain returned her to consciousness. Instinctively, she took shallow breathes to prevent herself from inhaling the thick dust in the air.

:My friend.: a relieved Nameer greeted her.

There was only darkness around her. Near her, someone was shifting weight off her then touched her leg.

What happened?

<jina gari> a relieved Horiku touched her. "Jina Gari?" she called out loud.

JG's verbal reply was a barely heard croak.

<can you speak on this level>

<what happened>

<the Dwarf didn't make it>

<anyone else>

<two are too injured to move right away though they may be faking it: we have no light to see>

She attempted to rise, nearly losing her balance. Her left leg was numb. Debris from the carts and their contents were scattered about. She plucked bits of something from her tunic. Hobbled on one leg, she negotiated her way in the dark over the debris. When she rounded the corner, the air that hit her was heavy with despair.

"What the hell is this?" she croaked and then coughed.

"The Dwarf led us to what some call the Well of Despair," Horiku explained softly. "Normally, those that visit here are already masters of handling this magnitude of emotion."

"Well of..." JG held her breath as she gathered her wits. The sensation in her leg was returning. She needed to find a way to get all of them out. Suddenly, she reached behind her and pulled open her pack. Fumbling around she found her light. She turned it on to give the group a sense of comfort.

Following an inspection of the survivors, JG found she had been the only one that had not made it into the protection of the next corridor. Horiku dressed her leg wounds and then suggested she take a nap while Nameer locate a water source. JG would have loved to go with him just to escape the heavy feeling that was depressing her, but she needed to keep the survivors calm and she admitted, she needed some rest in order to heal.

Nameer, unaffected by the energy bombarding the others was more interested in hunting in the tunnels. The more distance he put between the survivors and the one that had captured him the better he felt. He was also thirsty and hungry. His nose picked up small creatures in the tunnels, but first he needed water, then he would hunt before returning to the stranger he had bonded with.

<so what have you learned>

<about what>

<your singu>

<right now that is the furthest from my mind: we need to get out of here and i need to get these people back to safety: then i need to find alexandra>

<haven't you forgotten a recent promise>

<promise: master Dwarf>

"Jina Gari, Nameer has returned," Horiku told her softly.

:There is water in one of the tunnels.:

JG cleared her throat and opened her eyes into the strangely shadowed tunnel.

Horiku pressed a water gourd to her lips. Slowly she sipped her fill.

"Nameer, it is good to see you. Horiku, let's get everyone ready."

JG moved her leg experimentally. "Even in this place where hopelessness is so heavy, injuries are healed quickly," she muttered to no one in particular. She knew her wounds had been deep, and she should be at least limping, but... She shook her head and stiffly moved to take care of something she had promised to do.

From around the corner where the wreckage of the carts lay, JG set about selecting a plank to carry the body of the Dwarf.

"Why are you doing this? He led us here!" one of the survivors objected.

"It is a horrid place!" another agreed.

"If we had not taken this tunnel, chances are fewer of us would have survived the blowout," JG reminded them as she gingerly moved the Dwarf with Horiku's assistance onto the plank. She silently gave the soldier's lament to a fallen comrade as she tied his body in place. She realized he had been very weak and probably used his last strength to give the warning.

"You would not have been hurt if he had remained behind! He held us up!"

"You are not the one that will be carrying him," JG returned tersely.

"He is dead! His spirit will follow us...maybe cause us to die too!"

"When it's your time there is no out running the hound of death," she told him.

"Horiku, we will fill up at the water source that Nameer has found and then find a passage that takes us to the top of this mount. I see you have gathered what can be used to carry water. I made a promise to master Dwarf," she finished in a softer voice.

Horiku nodded and began to get the survivors to their feet. JG noticed that everyone seemed to have recovered from whatever physical ordeals they suffered in the cages, however, they all looked weary.

Nameer led them. Horiku held one end of the plank, while JG the other.

Chapter 12

Gi stopped at an underwater pool, giving everyone time to rest. The group collapsed with aching calves and heaving lungs, the last steep climb finally silencing even the men's thoughts. Lt. Vanstar and Cpl. Wetfoot settled near E'l at the edge of the pool where the three women were dangling their legs into the water, at Gi's suggestion. The men sat in their space, away from the water, pulling off their footwear and rummaging in their donated packs for something to relieve their sore feet.

Alexandra collapsed a little distance from the women, mentally collecting herself. She felt both physically and mentally exhausted. She realized why Gi had recommended the water as the essence of the water began its healing on her submerged legs. Gratefully she gave thanks to the spirit of the cavern and waters. A lethargy had been creeping over her which she had not realized until she connected with the water. She dragged a hand up to run through her hair, tangling with the long curly strands.

I have to cut this hair or bind it back. I also have to do something about the vibes from those colonists.

Their anger was dense. She was having difficulties finding the cause. She was sure that heaviness was wearing all of them down. Alexandra looked up at the Corporal who had put her boots back on and had her pack in place; like a soldier in unfamiliar territory, always ready for at a moment's notice to move. The Corporal dropped to her knees, blocking Alexandra's view of the men and theirs of her.

"The lamps are running low on energy, Commander," Cpl. Wetfoot reported in a low voice so it didn't echo in the low cavern.

"Yes. Our eyes will adjust to the darkness, unless you think there's something wrong with their night vision."

"It isn't all that dark, ma'am. If there was any problem with darkness, Gi would say something."

"Sometimes Corporal, when leading civilians, you let them have their way with the small things."

"What happens if it's too many small things?" she grumbled, and then continued, "Commander, I've been around this group of colonists for about a stan year. They don't

learn by past mistakes. This group repeats the same mistakes holding them to be sanctimonious truths."

"How many colonists have you met?"

"About a hundred agreed to see us. More than that are scattered around Arnica. They heard we were here and gathered at a coliseum in Galu on Octuple, the 4th continent, to find out what we were about. Major Hali and Envoy Boreon met with them. It went so bad the group requested that the local authorities protect them from *Emperor's Last Chance* and reported them hostile to Arnica. Through secret negotiations with the monk S'hamatase from Ilo and General Mcarn, Lt. Mcarn took a small group of special forces to remeet with about a hundred of them to find out what went wrong with Hali and Boreon's meeting and assure them we are here only to capture and take back the MS."

"What did Major Hali say to them?"

"He threatened them and their families back home if they didn't honor their contract with the colony company that sent them here. He and the envoy are company men for the DeLan family. Hali is an enforcer, a covert agent of theirs."

"Helgas moon," Alexandra muttered. "I thought the DeLan family name was now defacto in our neck of the galaxy."

"It was ruled unfair that the entire family be blamed for what a small group had done in their name. However, as we found out, they are going about business with the same disregard for galaxy law. Lt. Mcarn thinks that this is a major investment of theirs."

"So you've located two trouble makers. What are you doing with them?"

"And a few more of their agents. Most of them are in sleep. Someone is still stirring up trouble on the ship and tried a few times to get their friends out. Until we have the situation under control shipside, our visits planetside are limited."

"What about cabin fever?"

Cpl. Wetfoot shrugged her shoulders. "If anyone wants to visit, they go through the Captain and a review board. A local monk decides where they can go, for how long and of course, if they can go. It's not all that difficult to be down here. You just have to remember the rules; do no conscious harm in thought or deed."

"Well, the rules sound easy enough to practice, for the colonists too."

"Well, there's the problem, Commander. Some of the colonists were not nice people to begin with. That's why the general brought SF troops with him. About ten stan years ago, more than a dozen convicts were on their way to the prison colony on Hinterweild. The dozen worked for an outlawed group that were on the DeLans payroll. Somehow, their sleep pods were switched with legitimate colonists on their way to Arnica. It was a slick switch and well planned. So, we have this outlaw group and the religious fanatics, all sent here by the DeLans. It complicates our primary mission to gather the MS and clean up whatever mess they may have made."

"What a headache. So, I take it you're with special forces, the SF?"

Cpl. Wetfoot nodded. "Yes. Lord DeMonte did not trust Lt. Vanstar as your sole bodyguard so our lieutenant made sure someone would be accompanying you wherever you went." She smiled in the dim light.

Alexander took a deep breath and glanced toward Vanstar who appeared to be waiting. "I see."

"More than just that, Commander. Queen M'Lu made a special request for you to be allowed free travel, however, no one but a select twenty in the SF knows about it. The message was sent to Lt. Mcarn under FYEO. He was hoping to ask you about it before you left but..."

"Oh, joy." In the darkness Alexandra stared at the silhouetted figure of Wetfoot. "So this group of colonists are a key to a lot of people's plans and they're too stubborn to want to participate in anybody's but their own. The woman, E'l...is there a way for her to get her speech back?"

"Her voice was restored by our doc but she won't use it. I can't blame her. Every time she escaped from these people, they have always found her, and made each return more torturous. They cannot kill her or physically maim her other than take her voice because she carries the hearthstone, but they have been torturing others in her place and not always their own villagers."

"Hearthstone? You mentioned that before."

"It's a healing stone, among other things. The holder is the only one that really knows all it can do. E'l won't talk about it, but I think these men are trying to force her to use it as a weapon and she refuses."

Vanstar joined them. As if by prearrangement, the Corporal left to watch over E'l.

"Commander. Have you wondered if we're getting any closer to getting out of this place?" Vanstar scratched her leg and then her arm.

"Lieutenant, did you get bit by something?"

"No." In the dim light, Alexandra thought she was blushing. "I'm just...nervous. Us not doing anything but walking in the dark and those colonists. Their thoughts are driving me crazy and I don't exactly know how to shut them up."

"So, no giving back?" Alexandra asked, curious why she had changed her tactics.

Vanstar shrugged. "I was tempted, but that guide of ours, she suggested I try something else." She scratched her arm again.

"Bullies are frightened people who let their fear get the upper hand," Alexandra caught the annoyed look Vanstar gave her.

"Commander, just point me where the job needs to be done. Tell me what the rules of engagement are, and I'll get it done to the best of my ability."

"That's what it's about Vanstar, only, some people don't tune their receivers to the right frequency."

That earned Alexandra an irritated look.

Gi motioned that it was time to resume their journey. Alexandra noticed that Jer still had not readjusted his pack straps as she had recommended. He was stubbornly leaving them unevenly balanced, which was probably giving him a backache.

They moved through long tunnels that were both steep and winding, and up and down dark passages of stairs. They lost all track of time and only knew distance in sore muscles and thirst. After an undetermined amount of time, E'l's lamp flicked out, but Gi kept the group moving.

"What's going to happen when our lamps go out?" Jer demanded, his voice tinged with fear, echoing down the passageway.

"Your eyes will adjust," Alexandra told him.

"We're not dumb soldiers that just march until we fall over a cliff or we're dead, you know?"

"Neither are we, so you fell in with a good group. Unless you're trying to say you are tired and would like another rest." Alexandra thought about how much easier it was to

command military personnel when there was dissention in the ranks. She would have a face-to-face to get to the bottom of the soldier's problem before setting down rules. At this stage, it made no difference, Jer and the others still considered women not worth listening to.

"If that's all that is needed for us to stop," Sys'mara spoke up, "I'll say I'm tired and need a rest...a long one."

Alexandra lifted her blue light and flashed a light that bounced against the cave wall where the leaders could see it, though Alexandra was sure Gi knew everyone's condition. She could see Cpl. Wetfoot's figure coming toward her.

"Commander, Gi said there is an opening up ahead. We can set up camp there." Cpl. Wetfoot then headed back up the line. She seemed nervous about something and was constantly walking from the front to the back of the line as if afraid someone may be lost. Alexandra found that interesting since that was something she would expect more from Vanstar than Cpl. Wetfoot. That made her study Vanstar's back as she plodded on. She wasn't even snapping at the men to stop their complaining. Was she adapting?

The opening was a breeze way that connected four tunnels. Water could be heard off in the distance. Gi found a stash of logs and kindling. She pulled two cuts of wood out, much to the dissatisfaction of the men.

"We only need it for cooking," she explained as she readied the fire for their meal.

Alexandra had retreated to an intersection where there was only a faint breeze, carrying the scent of flowers. She closed her eyes and evoked a protection circle around her, asking for the guardian of the cave to assist. She needed to feel Gari's presence.

She recognized Gari but she had changed. Their connection was strong, but someone was interfering with it. Suddenly it was disconnected. Gi was quickly at her side.

"You must not contact your mate," she told her in a low voice. "There are some who will use your connection to hurt you and her. Only touch her when you are in a temple protected by the High Priestess."

"Where is my mate?" Alexandra asked softly.

"She is helping some people flee from their imprisonment by colonists from your galaxy. She is underground looking for a way out. But she has a Dwarf with her. He shall steer true."

Alexandra smiled in the dark at the figure before her. "You don't look the same."

<the energy is changing in here, it effects your perceptions and thoughts: i have lowered my energy to be seen by everyone here, but i will not be able to lower it any more>

"Oh." Her thoughts went over the implications. She felt like slapping her forehead in mock dismay with herself. "Our thoughts," she nodded. They all needed to change their way of thinking. Well, if she lost connection to Gi she had Cpl. Wetfoot's generations of mining experience genetically imprinted to guide them to an exit.

<you understand>

"I should have figured it out before it got to this. The difficult part is to lift the mood without causing further animosity."

Rather than pushing on, Gi noted the group's exhaustion and set up a small camp.

Alexandra and the group slept restlessly. For Alexandra, it seemed like every soldier that had been in her command and died on her watch had something to say to her. Wearily, she rolled to her feet and went to join Vanstar who was huddled near the fire.

"Gawds but I don't want to be a channeler," she muttered as she dropped near Vanstar.

Vanstar merely grunted, seeming to be caught up in her own issues. "Damn place. We need to get outta here before I go screaming up the tunnels and throw myself into an abyss."

Alexandra glanced at her, her own discomfort forgotten. "Can you manage for a few days more?"

"A few days? I can't even figure out what time of day it is...night, day, noon or is this the same day, maybe we only think we're passing through time."

That was uncharacteristic of Vanstar. Alexandra studied her profile in the flickering light. "Hmm. You have a point there. Since this planet has their own way of going about their business and meting out justice..."

Wetfoot was in the corner speaking to Gi who was listening more than speaking.

Gi had the group breaking camp shortly after a liquid breakfast. The men grumbled loudly at being rushed; however, Gi kept a fast pace, taking advantage of the path that was flat. The first of the men's lamps went out about five standard minutes into their walk and then the other two quickly followed.

"Wait! Wait! We can't see!" a panic stricken Jer's voice incited the others to loudly shout out their fears.

"Stop!" Alexandra commanded. "And be quiet!" she added in a lower voice as Jer's excited shouting echoed up and down the tunnels. There was another noise echoing, and it was not from Jer's yelling.

"What...what is that?"

"Creatures of the mountain," Gi told them unworried.

"We don't know what's down here. We should not have come with you! You don't even have the right equipment!" Amonic told her angrily.

"What equipment might that be?" Vanstar asked curious about their fear.

"Guns, weapons that can kill whatever lives in these tunnels," he explained.

"Whatever lives in these tunnels it's their home, not ours. We are just visitors or trespassers, depending how they see it. We can't just start shooting at..." she let out a few expletives. "Where did you get the gun, Jer?"

Vanstar quickly confiscated it and frisked the others. She found small knives hidden in their boots and one other gun that was not allowed on Arnica. "Can't trust civilians with weapons." Vanstar turned to E'l. "Got anything?"

She shook her head but Lt. Vanstar searched her anyway. She found nothing.

"Let's get this understood right now," Alexandra began in a soft voice. "We are visitors here. I'm leading this group, which you chose to follow, so you will abide by my rules. Now, I will give you about twenty stan minutes to let your eyes adjust to the darkness, then we move on. The guide to walking in the dark is to put out a hand on the shoulder of the person in front of you. If you need a privacy break, either Lt. Vanstar or I will make sure you don't go astray."

A loud screech silenced the group. Then a high pitch keening sound came from Jer.

"Shut up! I can't hear from which direction it's coming," Lt. Vanstar barked.

Whatever it was, it came rushing down the tunnel at them, first hitting them with a choking odor, then knocking E'l down. Cpl. Wetfoot picked E'l up and pulled her to stand beside Alexandra while Vanstar yelled at the men to gather with them but they were pressed against the wall. The four women were attacked again as the energy seemed to be focused on them.

Alexandra was momentarily taken back by the familiarity of the dark cloud of despair and anger. While the fear from those around her escalated and fed the cloud, Alexandra repeated a mantra that calmed her. Cpl. Wetfoot and then Vanstar chanted it until the cloud dissipated.

"What in bloody moon was that?" Lt. Vanstar asked angrily, glaring at the men who rose from their corners slowly and hesitantly joined the women.

"Where's our guide?" Cpl. Wetfoot asked concerned.

"It went for her first," Vanstar commented. "Commander, do we look for her or wait here for her to reconnect with us?"

"I say build a fire. It will scare that demon thing away," Jer contributed.

"There isn't any kindling around here," Alexandra pointed out. "Why don't we continue up this tunnel and see if we can find another one of these grottos where Gi had been finding kindling stored. We may find her there waiting for us as well."

However, whatever had attacked them was waiting at the next opening where by the gusts of wind and sounds it was a large cavern opening. It started by brushing against each of the women, knocking them into the wall. When it came to E'l, it knocked her to the other side and by the sounds of it, she landed somewhere with a splash. The continued splashing indicated she was still alive.

"Commander?" Cpl. Wetfoot asked over the ruckus of the men's shouting.

"Go after her, Corporal," Alexandra ordered.

The soldier jumped off the edge of the path and landed with a splash. Just as she leaped the dark energy dissipated.

"Corporal?" Alexandra leaned over the ledge she found with her feet. Vanstar kept a hand on her elbow to steady her.

"We're okay, Commander! But there is no way back up. Nothing to grab onto."

"I'm not jumping in the dark into any water!" one of the men stated firmly, as if guessing what Alexandra was going to suggest. The other men agreed quickly.

"The river is strong. We'll get out where we can," Wetfoot's voice echoed up to them.

"Carry on!" Alexandra affirmed, and turned to Lt. Vanstar and the men. "This may be the same river we keep crossing. If so, we may meet them further on. Let's get going. Hopefully we'll meet up with them soon."

Vanstar grabbed Wetfoot's pack that she had discarded near the cliff edge.

The men started up the tunnel quicker than they had previously been traveling. Alexandra held back, touching Vanstar's sleeve in the dark.

"You want to say something to me, Commander?"

"Have you noticed some interesting things about that dark cloud that keeps after us?"

"Commander, I can't see anything in this darkness much less a dark cloud," she reported exasperated. "I just know that something kept knocking me down when I was trying to run interference for the civilian. I feel like I've been run over twice by a Vic tractor."

"I don't feel that bad but certainly bruised. What it is, is a form of energy ...and it was directed primarily at E'l."

"Energy? Like formless?" Vanstar returned impatiently. "Can't you come up with something I can wrap my hands around?"

"Maybe that's what we don't do...fight it. I know that doesn't make sense, especially since E'l was passive through the attack and she got dumped in the river." Alexandra sighed to herself. But maybe that is the better route...the river.

"I'll tell you what I did notice, whatever it was did not even go near the men," Vanstar pointed out.

"I noticed too."

"I don't trust those guys about anything."

"So, let's join them and see if we can pick up the others. I don't want them to be there first."

As they moved further away from the river they could hear mutterings echoing in the tunnel. Then suddenly shadowed shapes appeared before the two soldiers.

"Arrhhg! Bloody damn demon shifter! Ya nearly scared the life out of us!" roared one of the men. The other two joined in angrily, shouting so the echoes became agitating.

Alexandra wondered what scared the men back toward them. She really believed that the energy was created by their thoughts. It seemed kind of strange for the men not to be aware of this when they had been living on this planet for over ten stan years. Would it go after them as well? If it did not have anything to feed off it would. She remembered the black cloud of energy that used to follow Alan Fermin around and what had happened to her when she chose to ignore it.

"That's the first time you three have moved so fast. You actually left us behind," Vanstar answered sarcastically.

"Is there something further up that we need to worry about?" Alexandra asked.

"No! We just didn't hear ya behind us, is all," Jer's voice snapped back.

"Well, let's get moving then," Alexandra encouraged. The men were on the edge of falling apart.

The three men noticeably dropped behind them though not too far back. Alexandra clicked three long and three short and Vanstar replied with one long, an affirmative. Something was waiting for them up front. Alexandra found the small opening in the side of the trail and pulled Vanstar alongside of her. Both pressed themselves against the wall, waiting for the men to pass them. When the men were ten strides ahead, they fell in behind them.

It was so simple to fall behind the men that Alexandra had to remind herself not to let her guard down. So far, they did not seem to be very complex or clever by any means, but if they had resisted the local authorities for ten stan years, then they had to have something going for them.

A shout ahead of them barely prepared for something that came whizzing over their heads. It seemed like a flock of something, squeaking and mewing as the air from their movement swept over them. Both women covered their heads and dropped to the floor, waiting for the noises to subside.

"Like maci or bats," Vanstar muttered, getting back to her feet. "Helgas moon, they stink!"

"Yes."

As they cautiously moved forward, their tunnel opened up into another cavern that had the stifling smell of the creatures that flew over their heads. They both quickly reached into their packs for something to cover their faces with to filter out some of the smell. Once more they moved forward, still not finding the men. They could hear the water flowing somewhere, but as with all the caverns they had entered, there were multiple exits.

The women found the men by their screams. Whatever had been chasing them was now whirling around the men who were frantically beating it off with their hands.

"You dirty traitor! Get away!" Amonic shouted furiously.

"Ya demon thing! We gave ya the heathen women! Get the bloody hell away!" Jer shouted angrily.

"You're nothing without us! Go get what you were called up for!"

Then all three voices started screaming unintelligently, though from what, neither woman could see.

"Oh, oh," Alexandra muttered under her breath as it turned toward her. She could feel its animosity. Alexandra closed her thoughts, and retreated to her heart center.

It bounced into her and knocked her off her feet. Somehow, she managed to roll to her hands and knees and crawl over to two dark figures. The men looked like they were looking for a way to break away and run. Two took off screaming down one tunnel. Alexandra took off after them, hoping to stop them from falling off a cliff.

The men ran like panic herd animals, not paying attention to where they were going. Their run took them over a cliff, splashing somewhere below the path. Alexandra did not hesitate to follow them in. The river was a key to something. She was already loosening her pack as it carried her to the bottom of the river. She released the catch when the weight was keeping her on the bottom. The button on its side turned it into a floatation device, no matter how heavy its contents. It took her quickly to the surface. She found the men by their splashing and yelling. They found a tree trunk, handily floating in the center of the river.

Alexandra grabbed onto a root partially under water and then dragged herself toward the men.

"So, what was that all about?" she demanded, referring to the conversation they had overheard.

"Dark damnation!" Sys'mara exclaimed breathlessly. "Where did you come from? Where's Jer?"

"I don't know. I'm sure Lt. Vanstar is making sure he doesn't hurt himself too badly."

"You saying we deserved this?" Amonic demanded, picking up on her unspoken thought.

"Let's get something straight here. If I am accusing you of something I will come right out and say it. That way it will save us a lot of wasted words..."

"Well that's fine with..."

"Shut up and listen. We don't have much time," Alexandra cut him from further conversation.

"No heathen tells me..."

"Amonic," his companion growled.

"This current is flowing fast which tells me we're heading to a waterfall and chances by the fast pace it's going to be a steep drop. We're going to have get out of here before it's too late."

"Why the hell for?" Amonic demanded angrily.

"Do you want to go over a waterfall attached or entangled in a log?"

There was silence in the dark. Alexandra considered her message delivered. Now she needed to concentrate on getting to a safe location. Not wishing to abandon the log yet, she found a place she could break away without getting entangled on the branches. She listened for sounds of the shore.

"Shit and hell holes!" one of the men cursed. She could hear splashing as they moved around, rocking the drift wood.

"Damn demon!" teeth chattered.

"Shut up, Amonic," Sys'mara shouted as their life raft suddenly dipped and dropped into a trough, thankfully not a great distance down, and then picked up speed.

The three fell in awkward heaps on different parts of the log getting stabbed and scratched from the branches they clung to.

"We have to let go of this thing!" Alexandra hollered to the two men over the increasing roar. Peering through the darkness for anything that they could use as a focus to swim to Alexandra thought she spotted a slower part of the river bed.

"Can you two swim...over there where it looks like dry land?"

"Where are you looking?" asked Sys'mara, his teeth chattering so hard Alexandra thought he may chip a tooth.

"Over your shoulder," she shouted back.

Surprisingly enough, the three got to shore, finding that it got shallow three strokes from the center of the river. The chill of the river sent them searching for wood. Alexandra could hear them slosh around, slapping their arms for warmth. They found nothing.

Wearily Alexandra dropped to the sand. Her pack was gone and she could not remember losing it. She was surprised to find that it was warm. She did not realize she had fallen asleep until an awful high-pitched screech made her bolt up to a sitting position.

"Bloody moon," she gasped trying to regroup to her surroundings.

"Get away...get away...kick it...kick!" Amonic was terrified.

"Where? I..." Sys'mara screamed and gurgled.

As Alexandra went to help Amonic and Sys'mara she tripped over a stone and landed against the side of something slick that pulsed at a slow beat. She found herself looking through a transparent veil. Beyond it was the two terrified men. With controlled emotions, she laid her hands against the veil and attempted to communicate on every level she could think of. She felt a powerful surge. The next thing she knew was lying on her back gasping for air.

"Not that way!" Vanstar grabbed Jer by the back of his shirt and jerked him into a small space between the two tunnel entrances. "Don't even think," she whispered close to his ear.

For once Jer obeyed without argument. She could feel his heart pounding as frantically as hers. Whatever it was followed them and paused at the fork in the tunnels.

It chose the tunnel to the left and Jer was about to bolt for the right but Vanstar kept a vise-like grip on him. It angered her more that the colonists may have created it. The idea that Commander Montran was right about the planet and what this energy thing was did not make her happy, but a soldier's life was not measured with 'happiness' but by adrenalin rushes. And this was a big one. She only had herself and she was doing good...so far. Her primary goal was to get both of them out of this situation. Her secondary was to find the Commander, and then the Corporal.

The energy and stink came roaring back up the tunnel where again it hovered between the two tunnels as if trying to sense them. Everything she could remember on being absolutely still was in two words Zohra had told her once, 'don't think'. It seemed easy then. At the time she wanted the special ops job of infiltrating a tight group that provided protection for one of the largest smuggler cartels in GCFC space. Without much surprise, Zohra was given the task of softening the group up to accept its first female member. After three years of being alone in the Black Rose, they finally acknowledged that women could be just as mean and crazy as the men. It was not that women were not assigned to the troop, it was that the hazing from the men was more brutal to women. Zohra's method was beating the men to the punch and never leaving herself open. She spent three years in enemy territory, trusting no one. Images of the hardened soldier came back to Vanstar easily. The Zohra of that time was not the same person she spent years of training with at the academy.

Suddenly whatever it was, was gone. Vanstar let a small puff of air out. Memories. She needed to put those behind her. She had a job to do.

"I'm not going in there!" Jer whispered nearly hysterical as Vanstar pushed him into the same tunnel their assailant went down.

"Jer, get the bloody hell moving and stop with this crap!" she whispered firmly.

"I'm not following that thing anywhere!"

"Really? From the conversation you and your friends were having, this is your creation and you're supposed to be the boss. What happened? You didn't give it enough supplication?"

Jer said nothing, but Vanstar could feel his angry thought and then it was quickly squelched. Vanstar turned into the tunnel, knowing Jer was not going to stay behind

alone. She led them down a steep incline when her boot kicked something. She stopped suddenly but Jer kept moving forward. She quickly grabbed onto an outcropping of the wall and stopped both of them from falling over the cliff.

"What is with all these bloody drops into the water!" Vanstar muttered.

They searched along the wall until Jer found another tunnel.

"I'm not too sure about this one. No air movement," Vanstar whispered.

"Tunnels with a lot of twist and turns are like this. The demon will not go into these."

"You know this as a fact, huh? Alright. I'm getting tired of being bounced off walls."

It was after the third turn that the ground dropped from under them and both fell into a pool of cold water, sinking to the bottom. At the bottom Vanstar grabbed Jer's arm when she realized he was not rising. Her life pack was engaged and it lifted them both upward. She dragged his choking body up to the shore, over rocks, and then further away from the water.

Wetfoot pulled E'l onto a drifting log. They both clung to it as the quickening current carried the log faster downstream. Before long they lost their grip on the log when the river dropped out from under them. Both were flung away from the log and came up sputtering.

"Gi!" Wetfoot spotted the shimmering form on the bank of the shore. "E'l, over that way! Can you swim!"

By E'l's frantic thrashing she guessed not. Quickly she grabbed her and put her into a lifesaving position, swimming for them both. Gi waded in and pulled them out easily.

Around the warm fire the women enjoyed a warm cup of tea that Gi had prepared.

"We will continue along this way and meet up with the others," Gi explained to the two tired women. "For now, you need rest. We will move on when you are rested."

Chapter 13

Captain Malchi looked around her as she stepped from her shuttle. She was flanked by four of her sisters, each was a high-ranking member of the guild, Hekate's Inner Circle. Malchi was proud to be the spokesperson. Before them was the temple. They would be meeting in the garden below the tall tower. As each one of them stepped onto the surface they all had to stand for a few moments and adjust to the energy that surged into them. Captain Malchi shook her hands out to flick some of the charge into the air. Otherwise, she knew if she touched someone, she would shock them with more energy than he or she may be ready for.

A tall Micas was standing still in the shadows of an old knar tree. When Malchi spotted him, he came forward. He was alone, but the hilt of his sword could be seen over his shoulder. Since Hekate's Inner Circle were all warriors, they admired the Commander's weapon, his carriage, and most of all, the sense of power that he carried without having to project it around him as some soldiers felt was necessary.

He bowed his head and gestured for them to follow him. Captain Malchi remembered that conversations would not be started until they were in an area Commander O'Malley indicated was safe. Thoughts were also held quiet as they could easily be picked up by spies.

"Greetings Captain Malchi, Lieutenants Fra Colomi, C' Chia, Juumat, and Fra Jo," the Micas began formally. "I am Commander O'Malley of the Queen's Kiuzi."

"Greetings Commander O'Malley," the five chorused.

"What plans have you for us, Commander?" Captain Malchi started, not one for prolonged conversations when battle plans were being formed.

"Your subjects are settling on an island off 4th continent, Octuple." His gestures brought up a holographic map of the planet. "This is where we are now...this is where they are moving. The island has no one that they can threaten. The chain of command is simple. There is one civilian that gives orders to one military figure. He has four military leaders below him. In two weeks, they shall be completely moved out of the mountain and residing here. They will be highly suspicious of anyone that approaches their island."

They have been studying it for over six months and know it has not been visited during any of that time."

"Why hasn't it?" Captain Malchi asked suddenly.

"The Queen ordered it," he stated simply.

"She can see the future?" she asked, feeling rather stupid when she asked it.

"As you understand it, yes."

The holograph changed to show the island from the beach perspective.

"Without the proper equipment a tortuous cliff to climb. Rocks that can break any craft not made for that purpose rules out simple approaches from the beach. I see we got an interesting challenge. Before I tire my brain out figuring how we're going to get on the island unseen, I'm sure you have that already covered. Want to share?" Bian Malchi asked with a grin.

"We have the one tone that will render the chip of all but one inoperative."

Now it made sense to Captain Malchi. When the MS were rendered unconscious she and her group would pick them up, store them in the SEC ship and no more problems.

She glanced at her sisters. It was too easy. "All but one?"

"Our agent has no chip. She will make sure that there is no interference."

"One? How sure can you be sure that she is working for your interests?" Malchi asked.

"Because we have already removed her chip."

Malchi was uneasy. Alan never messed with females unless he wanted to torture them to feel their terror. With the exception of Lady Alexandra, implanting a chip in his female victims was not his style.

"Perhaps it is because you expect things to go wrong that they do," Commander O'Malley suggested.

The sisters around her broke into laughter and then Malchi followed.

"Yes. Or, it's just planning for possible outcomes to not be taken by surprise," she countered.

Commander O'Malley nodded, his eyes seeing more than what Malchi wanted seen. "Knowing the difference between self-deceit and being practicable is a useable skill."

"So, what do we do now?"

"Wait. Until then, we have warriors that would like to meet you." His smile was broad and had enough challenge in his eyes for the women to know what it was about.

"Bring them on!" Lt. Visu reported rubbing her hands to activate chi. She was the best hand-to-hand fighter Malchi had met in a long time.

"Good. If you don't mind my asking, would any of you wish to have a friendly spar with me?" He touched the hilt of his sword.

Malchi and the others looked at each other. *Clor!*

"We have such a sister that would give you a challenge," Malchi told him. And give her one. Blasted woman needs someone that can take her down a notch.

The others agreed.

Malchi was relieved they would not have to just wait around with nothing to do. The long journey and then inaction was driving many of her shipmates to do irresponsible things. None had experienced long journeys with only themselves to amuse. The koan had given them assignments, with mediation as one of the many tasks but prolonged space travel seemed to change something.

She dug her foot into the ground, relishing the connection and just as the feeling gave her satisfaction it dawned on her what the sensitive staff was suffering from. She laughed to herself. They all needed to touch the life of a living planet periodically to rebalance.

This awareness she sent out in thought to the other koan members so they would work out a plan to alleviate the unnecessary tensions in her crew.

Chapter 14

Tukuli's raised his aching head from his filthy hands. He heard unfamiliar footsteps enter the temple. If it was his young helper, he would give him a tongue lashing for being late, though he didn't really know if there was a set time the boy was to attend to him. He was still not able to tell time and he could not hear thoughts. At first that terrified him, the silence, then he was quite happy not to have to hear a shonae, a commoner's thoughts. Who want to hear their boring chatter out loud and mentally? It would be incessant noise.

He was about to shout indignantly at someone disturbing his peace when he remembered this was a public building, and the local authorities could order him to leave for unbecoming behavior. He had nowhere else to go and certainly was not going to ask any monk for help. Instead, he slid further down on the bench to avoid being noticed. Tukuli nearly jumped out of his skin when a voice angrily started yelling in a foreign language. Listening to the tirade reminded him of himself not so long ago when he verbally abused a shonae servant in his Ju'n teacher's home.

But that was another life. He mentally cursed at the situation he was in but not with the same intensity as he did months ago. Was that how long he had been here? No, it couldn't be. It only felt that way. Probably only a week, his conscience taunted him. He tuned in again to the voice. It sounded like he was making a list of something. Probably all his complaints against life, Tukuli snorted. He had more problems than him, he thought with some smugness. Anger will get him nowhere.

Tukuli rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Anger. He was always angry. That was why his teacher had invited him to his place because living on Allint was starting to give him headaches.

That, he reminded himself was why he was ordered not to return to Allint...until he was considered cleaned. His anger again flashed. His cousin had no business telling everyone he could not safely reside on Allint. She publicly shamed him. He was not going to be marrying anyone that was that rude. Her position as Queen obviously went to her head.

A voice near his ear suddenly shouted at him.

Tukuli lashed out an arm in startlement, trying to push away the invader of his personal space, and then he became angry. He was going to shout obscenities when his pride reminded him that he was at a disadvantage. Whatever familiar retorts he had used in the past would do him more harm than good in his present circumstances.

He heard someone shouting the call for a police officer. That word he recognized. Finally, he found his voice. "How dare you shout at me!"

"Tukie, Tukie!" his young helper called frantically. He felt small hands grab his hand and tug at him to follow.

"What? What? Where are you taking me?" Tukuli tried to follow the boy without tripping over anything. They took the same steps he had been using since his arrival; he knew how to hurry down them without falling so he allowed himself to be pulled by the boy not understanding the situation but trusting his young guide.

His guide didn't follow the same route to the baths, instead he pulled him along a road, smooth, and well maintained. Tukuli guessed he was in a wealthy town if there were no holes in the road, then he fell as his foot caught on a slight rise of the road.

"Tukie," the young boy whispered urgently, "get up, get up!"

"What is wrong? I have not done anything wrong!"

"You cannot live in private temples!"

The boy had told him that almost everyday, encouraging him to move to the healers' hospice, but Tukuli had flatly told him he was not going to go anywhere until whoever put him where he was, removed him themselves. What Tukuli couldn't understand about shoane was what the big deal it was for him to live in a temple. Monks did it all the time, and the temples were his cousin's. Now that caused him to think a little more. If the temple was part of M'Lu's holdings, why was he not feeling ill? And how did the person that was making all that noise manage to enter the temple without hurting himself.

He would have asked the boy, but he had to concentrate on the change of the road. They were now on a rough path. Finally, the boy stopped and pushed him until he sat on a tree stump.

"Where are we?"

"My camp," the boy answered from a distance. By the sounds he was preparing for something.

"What kind of a temple was that?"

"Don't you know?" the boy asked closer, sounding surprised.

"No."

"The Turnkey built it over his son's mound. He built it as a memorial and called it a temple, but it has no real function except that the dead man's son visits it every now and then and curses his grandfather and father for their mistakes."

"It must have a lot of bad energy in there," Tuluki muttered. "Why does anyone allow it?"

"It's part of his healing," the boy answered further away.

"What are you doing?" Tuluki asked finally.

"I am preparing you a place to sleep. You must not go wandering around here and you must not shout."

"Ah. A squatter," he nodded.

"*We* are."

"Yes...we are." Tuluki realized that maybe his pride was putting this boy's livelihood in jeopardy. He was feeling more than out of his element. He sighed.

"It will be okay, Tukie. Maybe it's better you didn't go to the healers' cottage. You would have had to work for your board and keep and you would not like what work they have for you."

"What would that be?"

"Washing."

Tuluki's hands reflexively curled with the repugnance of doing menial work.

"Don't they have machines to do that?" Maybe he was mistaken, and this was not a wealthy town.

"Contemplation through work," the boy stated easily, and by the sounds, he was doing some.

"Must you always be busy?" Tuluki demanded, for some reason feeling uncomfortable.

"If I don't finish this, we will be found and evicted. I will be sent away and you will go to the healers' hospice," he warned.

"Well, what are you doing? Maybe I can help," he added gruffly.

"Stay where you are and don't move...and be quiet!" he hissed fiercely. "Sound travels at night," he said softer.

Whatever he was doing, it sounded like a lot of trouble. Tuluki was wondering just where they were that needed so much secrecy and then why the boy was helping him. Tiredly, Tuluki pulled his legs up and attempted to sit the solui pose but realized he had not done it for so long that his body was not limber enough for it. So, he sat in a modified version. If he had to remain quiet and not move, to protect his sanity he would meditate. He nearly laughed. His teacher had said meditation was for people who had nothing to do, and here he was.

Chapter 15

Queen M'Lu had been sitting on the elaborately carved throne for four hours listening to petitions from various clan members for exemption on one rule of Drusu or another for their special project. Just as Guardian had feared, those who stood to lose prestige as well as privilege were trying to talk the young monarch out of enforcing the mandate...as if she could or would. These were citizens of Arnica that seldom visited Allint, and who were apathetic to the royal presence until their personal interests on Allint were to be brought to an end.

The new cabinet was present and were disgruntled that such petitions were being allowed to be heard. With amusement the Queen watched the play between the next group as they nervously approached the throne, and the Guardian and the Sacred Jester. Smiling to herself, she could feel C'Lea and Ji'am make a silent agreement. The Guardian and Sacred Jester had decided to put a stop to the petitioners who were not listening to those before them, asking for the same exemptions and after all that, getting the same reply. Or, perhaps they were weary of protecting them from the high energy of the palace.

"My Queen, it is Lord Besame from the Hiyanta mountains and his cousins from 4th continent, Octuple. We have heard of Lord Besame's talents as a speaker and storyteller and how on winter days he can spin a tale that would make one forget the howling cold weather outside one's home," the Sacred Jester commented to the Queen, loud enough for everyone in the hall to hear.

The young Queen managed not to laugh.

"So far, all those that have been before us have been referred to read the noble book on Drusu living, therefore, I would like to hear the noble Lord read from this inspirational book. It is said, My Queen, that hearing inspirational words aloud, re-inspires even the uninterested."

The Queen nodded wordlessly to the Jester. Ji'am looked expectantly at C'Lea who presented him a book which he handed to the Dwarf who was uncertain to feel honored or out maneuvered.

From the podium, he cleared his throat. "And to those noble souls that wish to walk with an open heart...." began the Dwarf, "is the journey along the compassionate path..."

Queen M'Lu listened to the words and the rhythm, realizing that the Dwarf indeed had a gift for verbal presentation. However, she could also see that he had fallen in of late with cousins from the 4th continent that presented an easier life for him. She watched the colors that played about him, content that as he read, he also heard on a multitude of levels the truth of the words and was responding to the messages. Even his cousins were positively affected, though it would take a lot more than hearing an inspirational reading. Momentarily, she touched her connection with Guardian and Sacred Jester and decided they were handling the meeting well. Queen M'Lu let her thoughts wander to the Queen Mother. She was sure that there was a change in her mother's condition but now was not the time to approach her.

Mentally she searched the palace grounds then moved to the outer parameters, testing energy and anything that may have changed since her last inspection. Kiuzi guards blended in with the citizens, looking for anyone that was using artificial means to be on Allint. The reason for anyone to make the effort to come to Allint would be to harm a member of the royal family. Commander O'Malley felt it would be a simultaneous attack against her mother and her, thus splitting the Kiuzi guards of the palace. The Queen left that for her commander while she was more concerned with the off-world soldiers. She worried about the physical changes in their bodies from their inability to adapt to Arnica's energy.

The Queen sighed and returned her attention to the Dwarf's reading. He was at the part she loved to hear.

"Heart to heart...communion. Intimacy of divineness surpassed by cosmic blowouts and wondrous emanations weaving realities beyond imagination... Everlasting life flowing through seen and unseen, felt and unfelt, imagined and unimagined, yet unlimited by dualities. We are limited only by what we think..."

Again, the Queen's thoughts wandered to the worlds she shared with the creatures of Arnica and from other dimensions. Suddenly she sat up.

When the Dwarf finished his reading, she nodded to him.

"My Lord Besame, let a proclamation go out that the Queen has been honored to hear a voice as compelling as yours read an inspirational book that Allint holds as their guideline for living. If possible, WE would like to hear you read from Johan Se's book of collected praises to the Beloved. The Royal Secretary will arrange a time that would be convenient for both our busy calendars."

Queen M'Lu thought the Dwarf was going to faint.

"I believe at one time the royal house did have a loremaster. If you care to fill that post, Lord Bisbane, then it is yours and from the moment of your acceptance, let your new title be Loremaster to the Queen." Queen M'Lu looked toward her secretary who was already planning the necessary preparations.

The Sacred Jester and Guardian both knew that Lord Bisbane was just given a role that would require a lot of work with the monks to rise his energy level and instruct him in the profound and mundane works the Queen loved to read and hear read.

"I...My Queen..." he bowed toward her overwhelmed. "I would be most honored to take such a position in your cabinet."

"Good! We shall all benefit Loremaster. So, it shall be announced that I have found a Loremaster. Guardian will find you a suitable Librarian. One that knows my tastes." She smiled and nodded to the Guardian that she was finished for the day.

The Guardian closed the meeting.

"WE will be having visitors. The monks that were Mother's advisors will be at the Queen's Lodge in two days. Since Commander O'Malley is working with the off-worlders Kaili Maipuga will be in attendance." Queen M'Lu spoke to her sister and Ji'am as she led the way quickly to the palace garden.

"What is it?" C'Lea asked her sister as she looked around her, looking for any danger that may headed their way.

"I know what mother is holding!"

Further conversation was stopped when the three suddenly felt the change in the air. The alert Kiuizi were ready and met the attack. Weapons that were from the off-worlders lit up the sky as they were launched from a residence nearby and headed for the three.

Chapter 16

Their movement in the tunnel echoed, making it difficult for JG to know if there was anything ahead or behind them. Nameer was uncomfortable with so many around him and his agitation was translating into a headache for her. The smell of the mixture of species only exacerbated the darkness and closeness of the walls around them. It was worse than being in an underground rail station during the summer.

"Hold up," JG called softly. Horiku sent a mental order to the rest. The water bags were passed around. Small murmurs between the survivors were too loud for JG and she found her temper rising. If she were not carrying the Dwarf on the plank she would be pacing as Nameer, perhaps escaping by running up the tunnel with the excuse that she was scouting out its safety. That realization tipped her off that her connection to Nameer was affecting her. Perhaps she needed to disconnect from him, though she hesitated because she liked the feel.

JG turned to Horiku who was sitting next to her, watching her. "Horiku, about this mind thing..." she sighed heavily and almost laughed at herself.

"Though we're not sharing mental thoughts, our combined nervous energy is causing a buildup of force that will need to be displaced or we will all be ill," Horiku explained. "I have been using various Drusu techniques; however, I am not skilled in dealing with so much at once."

JG rubbed her forehead. "I'm not feeling too comfortable with this situation either. Maybe if all of us practice these techniques. Are they secret or..." she swallowed as her own anxiety at the closeness of the place turned into a nauseous stomach.

Horiku shook her head. "It's a visualization of a comfortable place," Horiku explained. "However, every time I think I have the thought something comes and dissolves it. It is replaced with anxiety."

"One of these people?"

"I am too anxious to know."

Nameer's grumpy mood suddenly got worse. He let out a mental roar, or was it physical. JG's head jerked up and she peered into the darkness behind her and in front of

her. No one else appeared to have heard it. Not even Horiku who was drinking deeply from the water bottle. The roar cleared her mind.

If this were a group of soldiers whose spirits were low, they would be singing marching songs or... "How about a chant?" JG was surprised at her choice of words. Song was what she meant.

Horiku nodded, looking older than she had when JG first met her. Was all this aging them? It was a funny thought, JG told herself, but thinking about it more she realized that it was a common belief that dreary thoughts aged the thinker. JG shook her head, ruefully reminding herself that on Arnica, thoughts were as real as...

"Whatever we choose must not be powerful or we will have a clash of energy and a disruption of the purpose of this site that many feel is sacred," Horiku pointed out.

"What would you suggest?" JG asked, totally out of her element.

Horiku rose and glanced around the scattered group. "We shall ask them each what gives them comfort. The color of their aura will be the tone for them to hum. We will then see what the combination of vibrations have on the energy as a whole."

This was really out of her league. JG nodded. Horiku began her collection of information among the group. JG squinted and then after a while, relaxed her sight. She was startled to see different glows around each person Horiku questioned.

They spent time with everyone humming or thinking of the sound until Horiku was satisfied on who should hum out loud and who should mentally hum. JG was not just amazed at what she was seeing but that something so subtle could affect so strongly what was around them. She shook her head, bemused with herself at the continued reminders that Arnica was not like any other planet she had visited. It made her curious to know what the cities were like and how business was conducted since some of the mental games played with buyer and seller would take on a different flavor here. It probably would be a lot more complicated than the gambling games she played in the villages.

JG felt a pop inside her head. Her tension was gone. She promptly jumped up, wanting to move on.

"Are we ready?" she asked glancing around. The people nodded and Nameer growled.

"Excuse me," a small voice at her elbow said.

"Yes?"

"If we go further, the tunnel will be too low for the others to follow..."

"Then we'll pick another exit. No one gets left behind," JG told him gently.

He nodded. "If the left tunnel is taken, it leads out. I remember hearing a story of the Well. To the right is the way to the top of the mountain. The others will not be able to follow the right because they are not meant to."

JG nodded understanding what he was trying to say. "Thank you...?"

"Jac."

"Jac. We'll split up then." JG went to speak with the others. They were happy their exile would be ending soon.

JG turned to Horiku. "I would feel better if you guided them out. I can take Master Dwarf from here."

Horiku thought of the two paths being presented to her. Opening her heart, she realized that JG had to finish her singu without her. The tunnel, like a birth canal to many species, was JG's movement into another phase of her growth. Horiku refocused her attentions to the group of survivors that still had an uphill climb in the dark to the exit. She heard Chumka's recitation of the story for JG and the rest of the groups benefit. It told of further tests for them whichever tunnel they chose. This was the Well of Despair that was used as an initiation for the higher drousan's and if these people wanted to get out, they would have to take on the mantle of the initiate. She could feel the group's slight hesitation and then a collective sigh, as they all accepted it. Because they lacked her training, she would attend to them. However, leading them, she would not. This was their journey. She gave a prayer to the Beloved and a message of her progress to the Queen.

Nameer reluctantly allowed Horiku and JG to fashion a harness that would allow him to carry one end of the plank. The group accepting the role of the initiate gave prayers of encouragement and well wishes to themselves and to JG's journey.

Chapter 17

Alexandra felt a shaking palm on her forehead. When she took a deep breath, the hand withdrew. Opening her eyes, she saw the dark cavernous ceiling arching above her. The ground she laid on was warm and vibrant. Taking another deep breath, she focused on the two men sitting back from her.

"We saved your life!" Sys'mara declared triumphant.

Alexandra bit back the caustic reply and took another breath, clearing the fog in her head. She drew energy from the spirit of the cavern. The cloud that was covering her moved out of her and hovered above them, and then dissipated.

"You owe us homage!" Amonic echoed with the same attitude.

For a moment Alexandra couldn't figure out what they were declaring.

"You are Lady Montran from Mendoca and we declare homage for saving your life!" Amonic explained sounding pleased with himself.

"Homage? Only a Mendocain can ask for that type of protection," she stressed so that they did not think that it meant she was their servant. Besides, she was already protecting them, though they didn't see it that way.

"I demand it on my mother's side! Her grandmother was from your stinking planet!"

"Whoa! With that attitude you're going to be creating more problems for yourself, and I will not be taking on your personal burdens. It's not possible."

"You're backing out of the responsibility! I can declare you to the board and you shall be stripped of your title!" a triumphant Amonic continued.

Alexandra wondered if this was a joke. Her palms were pressed against the floor of the cavern to hold herself upright and through them she sent out tentative feelings to see if this was real.

"Amonic, what are you talking about? There is no law on Mendoca that places the blame of one person's acts on another."

"And who is going to believe your word against the two of ours?"

"The Monks of Hela, Council of Rings, and you two. Why don't you just tell me what all this is about, and I'll see what I can do? You don't have to play these games."

"We declare homage!" Amonic shrieked and ducked.

"What the..."

Alexandra was knocked over when Sys'mara tried to crawl over her to hide behind her. She could feel the panic of the two men as she struggled to right herself and neutralize the energy of the apparition. However, she was tired, and their intense fear was too much for her.

"Stop!" she called out on three levels and movement froze. Alexandra blinked her eyes and looked about her. She gestured to the two physical forms and the men's ethereal bodies rose to meet hers. She was firm in her directions to the men. They were to take responsibility for this apparition that they created. It was easy to speak to them on this level; however, the physical level would be more challenging.

They all dropped back into the physical.

"I can't stop it!" squealed Amonic as the apparition took a dive toward his head.

"Sit! Sit!" Alexandra ordered, getting into the position that she wanted them in. She waited for the two to do the same and then showed them how to hold them.

Reluctantly the two men pulled themselves into a sitting position and followed her directions all the while fearfully watching the apparition hover beside them.

"Hum," she directed. She hummed to give them an idea and waited for them to find their own pitch. As they relaxed their hum became the true pitch to their individual vibration. Alexandra was sure that there was a lot of subtle influence assisting the men, as long as they made the effort.

Vanstar pulled Jer back from where he was stumbling. "Helgas moon! Watch where you're going!"

"What difference does it make if we fall over a cliff or stumble over a cliff, we aren't going to get hurt."

"Duh. Like that was a difficult thing to figure out. The next part is the stumper, why don't you just stop with all this trouble and face whatever it is that keeps us going in circles. This is the fifth time we've been here."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he responded hotly.

"Then we're just going to be wandering around in circles until you do. All of this tripping around in the dark is because of you and your friends created that damn cloud or whatever it is."

"Shut uupp." His voice sounded like it was fading.

"Aww, crap," Vanstar cursed as she heard the body hit the water. "We are so lucky both of us can swim." She walked to the edge of a shelf she could dimly make out and looked over the edge. Jer was already pulling himself out of the water. They had done it so many times they both were getting better at this. Instead of jumping after him, Vanstar decided to wait for him. After all, they kept ending up here. However, five minutes later she heard a shriek. It wasn't Jer. She jumped without hesitation, cursing the man as she hit the water.

She followed his wet prints but instead of taking the usual turn he had taken another. "Damn idiot."

She found Jer's body by tripping over it. As she was falling something that was covering him lifted and knocked her to the side. "Ohhh, helgas bloody moon! What the hell was that?" She shivered and crawled over to Jer. She pulled him to his feet where he swayed for a few minutes.

"Hey!" She slapped his face a few times and then shook him.

She pulled him further into the tunnel, looking for a place to sit. "You find us a tunnel we haven't been in and there are no exits," she muttered. Jer was heavy and she was carrying most of his weight.

"I can walk," a grumpy Jer informed her struggling to get his feet to move forward.

"Let's find a place to sit out of this tunnel and then we'll take inventory."

Predictably, a small area for them to rest appeared a few steps later.

"Okay. Sit. Jer, what were you doing? We can't be separated then the Commander will have two more lost lambs." She felt in one of her pockets where she suddenly remembered she had a trail bar stashed. She pulled out the bar and unwrapped it. She broke it in half and gave a piece to Jer. "It's all I have so savor the flavor," she told him as she would any enlistee that had the mishap of ending up stuck with her in a situation that needed a CO. She laughed to herself. She was supposed to be an officer, not a noncom,

so why was she always acting like a noncom. She really needed to get her roles straightened out. The commander was expecting her to get him out safely even if she had to carry him. She sighed heavily.

"I don't think I can take much more of this," Jer mentioned quietly.

"More of what? It's just falling into a pool of water, getting out, and then dropping again. Though, that whatever I found lying on you...that's a new one."

"Wha...what did you say?"

"When you decided to take another tunnel without telling me, I followed you. I didn't see you or hear you. I found you by tripping over you because this dark thing was lying on you."

"No," Jer whispered horrified. She could hear him patting himself as though seeing if he were still there.

"What's wrong?"

"The shadow, it...it sucks the life out of you," he whispered frightened.

"You know about it? Where did it come from?" There was only silence and heavy breathing. "This is something you guys created, right?" she asked suspiciously.

Only his heavy breathing could be heard. She decided she didn't want to hear any more about this mess. She would take it to the commander and let her figure it out. "Let's get going. And don't think! If you have to think...think flowers...nice ones. We gotta find the others." Vanstar was aggravated.

"I...I don't want to go on," Jer whispered still frightened.

"Jer, you have to face this thing...you created it...right? Therefore, it's going to be made up of whatever you fear. Okay? So, this is your moment to face your fear. You got me right here. Helga's moon's but I've seen and been through enough scary things in my life to know you just keep on moving through stuff like this." She chuckled, her voice softening. "You let your dreams sort out the stuff and believe it or not...eventually it's nothing." She didn't tell him that what really happened was other nightmarish experiences replaced the old ones. A soldier's life was not pretty when called to war.

"I don't want to," he told her firmly.

"Hm. You know, I've been to more planets than you and I have digits to count them on, but the best advice I ever received was from my mom when I left home to

follow my dream. She said if I don't face my demons no matter where I run, they'll follow me. She was right. Whatever unresolved problems I had at home; they were the face of every problem I couldn't face after that."

Jer scrubbed his face with his hands.

With compassion, Vanstar touched Jer's arm. "Come on, Jer. We can walk and talk. You gotta tell me what the helgas moon you got against women."

He bristled but got up and started in the direction Vanstar indicated.

"I'm the only boy in the family," he started in a low voice. "My...mother didn't want a son because she was the only girl in her family and her brothers made her life miserable."

"Oh."

"It doesn't excuse her! She pushed me to leave the house as soon as I was of age. I had nowhere to go."

"What do you remember about your parents? Just so I can get an idea of what's got you bothered."

"She...my mother, was sold to my father. She had started her first menses and the marriage went forward quickly. Father thought the bargain was good. She was smart and could run his business and raise his family. He didn't mind having daughters because it meant he could marry into other families and the potential of more customers was a good thing. He only wanted one son to avoid inheritance fights between sons. I hated the business...visiting with buyers and smiling at their damn stupid jokes. They always expected expensive gifts and party favors. Well, I was spared carrying on his business," his voice held a note of contempt. "Father died in his whore's bed. Mother became the sole owner because father didn't see fit to leave it to me and she wanted me out of the house. Sent me away to school and when I became old enough, told me not to bother to come home. I didn't care anyway. I had joined a group of people that were going to one of the new colonies. I would be doing what I wanted...traveling. And when I got tired, I would settle down and..." he shrugged his shoulders.

"You never got beyond traveling, huh? Well, don't feel so bad. A lot of military recruits think the same. They join to get away from family and to travel, not knowing

what they're going to do after their contract expires. They're too busy surviving to figure out their future."

"Yeah," he said softly.

"So, what would you want to do besides whatever you're doing now?"

"I... I'm fine the way I am now," he told her stubbornly, but not with as much heat as he had before.

"Yeah. I can't think of anything I would want to do besides being a soldier. Of course, I wouldn't mind visiting home now and then. But I like a soldier's life. I can do without the killing part though. That part got old in a hurry. But, the challenge of each situation being different; not knowing what to expect each corner I turn; it makes my blood rush and gives me a charge," she hummed.

"What do you do with your things?"

"What things? Personal belongings like trinkets?" She laughed. "Ehh. My kit doesn't have room, and nor do I want to carry too much weight. No trinkets."

"I...would like to have one place I can return to. A place where I can look at the things I gathered on my travels..."

"Then what? Who's going to dust them or store them?"

"I can get a storage room," Jer insisted. "They have those here."

"So, where are you going to travel, and what are you going to do to pay the bills?"

Jer shook his head in dismay.

"You know, in our neck of the woods, they have those tests to match your interests up with something out on the job market...or, they do..."

"They have that here too," Jer interrupted. "The others...that's how they found jobs when they left their colonies." Jer heaved a heavy sigh and for a moment Vanstar thought she heard him sobbing.

Vanstar continued their walk, thinking that if he was crying, he would prefer her not taking notice of it.

"Hey, here's an opening. Gi always found food and wood in places like this. You take that side, and no swimming before dinner," she warned.

"Yeah. I've had enough of that," Jer agreed softly.

With their bellies full they relaxed in the warm flickering light of the fire.

"I like working with maba," Jer told her. "They're animals."

"What do they look like?" Vanstar asked.

"Like horses, or challents, or bredants. They're intelligent here. Won't let you get near them much less on them if they don't like you. I met a traveler; he told me of a ranch on Vashaba the 2nd continent, owned by Princess Lelahul. She trains people to work all sorts of animals. They and the animals perform, do jumps and really fancy stuff. Everyone is happy." He sighed and shook his head. "I'm too old for something like that but, I would like to travel to her ranch and see the shows she puts on."

"You're limiting yourself before you even get there," Vanstar told him. "If a soldier ever came to me with any attitude like that before a battle, I would tell him to stay in his bunk." *Or shoot him. I'm not gonna let a person that already feels defeated go into battle with others that feel they can win.*

"Are you gonna shoot me?" Jer asked picking up on her thought.

Vanstar laughed. "No. Why don't you wait until you get there...to this ranch? See what it's all about, then decide what you want to put your energy into. Helga's moon, you may decide all that stuff is too much work and the only thing that interests you is watching the shows. Then...just get a job selling tickets or something that lets you do other things."

"Yeah," he said with relief and excitement.

Both of them laid down for a nap.

* * *

Gi watched over the groups nodding at their progress and then returned to the two that were waking.

Corporal Wetfoot woke with all her senses alert. E'l was only moments behind her. E'l always awakened when she sensed someone around her in a waking state.

Gi moved over to the fire and stirred the soup. It was intentionally chilly in this part of the labyrinth.

"Gi, that smells good. Better than soldier's rations," Cpl. Wetfoot told her. The corporal turned to E'l to see if she was okay. Her eyes had their usual dull look that she wore to protect herself. "E'l, you hungry?"

E'l nodded.

"You aren't going back," Wetfoot told her believing it. "The Commander, I can tell she's not going to let the colonists continue as they have been."

E'l nodded and took the cup of soup from Gi.

"Gi," Wetfoot looked up from the soup. "How do you do this...magic or something?"

Gi smiled. "E'l knows," she said softly.

Wetfoot watched Gi carefully, knowing that if she wanted to disappear, all she had to do was turn sideways. Her paper-thin frame would be near impossible to see in the dim lighting.

"How does she do it, E'l?" Wetfoot asked as she sipped the soup. It was good.

E'l shrugged her shoulders.

"Dogone, E'l," Wetfoot chided, "tell me. This planet is full of all sorts of things that are here and then not. And people, they are so nice but...I can't believe that anyone could be that nice," she told her in an undertone.

E'l smiled and sipped her soup.

"You're not going to tell me, are you?" Wetfoot stared into the fire. "I wonder how the Commander is going to tame the colonists. I know she is. The hag said so. She described her down to her bright orange hair." She sighed and played with her cup. "You know, the only way she can do anything about the colonists, is get them to change their way of thinking; to get them to see things from another perspective; but..." she shook her head. "Damn but the hunters, they love being away from your village and not having to follow the rules they are subjecting everyone else to. You know, if the hunters didn't bring any more people back the village would disappear." Wetfoot swirled the cup of soup watching the herbs spin around and then, the spinning became a whirl. She watched with fascination as the whirl changed to a scene, she was going to break it off, embarrassed, because this was a recent occurrence that happened to her when she looked into cups of liquid, especially water so she no longer looked into her cup. The scenes that unfolded were of her and E'l walking down the main street of her village. E'l gave the women their voices back and they all left. The male children and men became belligerent and threatening as the females, old and young left, unstoppable. Why? What was

different this time? E'l was holding something. It hurt if she stared at it, and this was held aloft so the men could not approach them as they waited until the last cart of belongings and women left. One boy cried and E'l turned to him. Before the nearest male could cuff him, she raised her hand and prevented the boy from getting hurt. She beckoned to him, and he came running to her. His mother having heard his cry, came back for him. She grabbed him up and hurried back to her cart, joyful that her son chose her. Then the scene went away.

Wetfoot looked up at E'l who was still sipping her soup. "You already know what's going to happen."

E'l continued to smile.

"You're just waiting, until the others get their voices back. You activated the hearthstone."

She nodded.

"But, what about the men? If they're left behind..."

Gi waved a hand gently and the apprehension left Wetfoot. "As you said, your Commander will take care of that."

Wetfoot looked at Gi, "I'm here to protect her, not Commander Montran."

Gi looked surprised. "I don't know what your orders are."

"Gi, I don't mean those orders...I mean fate or whatever you call it. That's why I always seem to be around when E'l is in trouble."

Gi nodded. "It seems your fates are tied together."

"So, I have to figure out how to get E'l back to the village, without the hunters. If the village men see the hunters they will herd all the women into the common expecting to see punishment. We can't have that type of energy. But how are we going to get all the women and girls in one place..."

"They will feel my arrival and begin preparing for their journey," E'l whispered.

Gi nodded. "You have completed your task in the maze."

E'l rose and gestured for Wetfoot to do the same. The two started up a tunnel, to the light of the day.

Chapter 18

Tukuli's nose caught that allusive scent. Sighing when it disappeared, he stood still. He knew how to move silently, instinctively knowing where to go and where to avoid, from potholes and nests, to overhanging branches and noisy leaf foliage that would give his presence away.

Again it breezed by him. Faint and fading. Another day, he thought. He returned to their encampment. By the temperature of the air, and the sounds of the creatures around him, he knew it was nearly time when the boy he now called Diami, would return. If they were fortunate, he would have enough food to fill their stomachs. Diami had taught him to weave baskets. What baskets Diami was able to sell, minus the percentage to the local Hostel, he purchased supplies. Tukuli was still learning but he tore many apart when the symbols or texture didn't feel right. It was frustrating to Diami who thought they were fine. But they were not starving, and for the first time that Tukuli could ever remember, he was enjoying life.

Tukuli sat on his seat that Diami found cast off in the local trash heap. They cleaned it and made some modifications to accommodate Tukuli's position while weaving. Reaching to his left, his fingers felt the reed he was looking for. It had a red streak in the center. He knew because he could feel the color vibrate stronger than any of the others. Humming softly to himself, fingers moved through one container of reeds and leaves, to another of foliage and beads, picturing what they were to represent and where they would fit.

Tukuli paused from his work, when he heard Diami's soft footfall. Something was wrong. He was stumbling. Putting aside his basket, Tukuli sought what may be disturbing the boy, but found nothing. He sniffed the air. Diami was frightened. The boy fell into the campsite. He was crying.

"What is it, Diami?" he rose from his seat and felt his way to the boy's side, his confidence in knowing what was around him, was gone with one thing out of place in his ordered world. He felt his way clumsily to the boy's side. The boy cried softly, inconsolable until he fell asleep wrapped in Tukuli's arms.

Tukuli was startled awake when the boy shivered. "Boy, what is it that disturbs you?" he asked softly. The boy only shivered and burrowed further into Tukuli's cloak. Tukuli sniffed the air, catching the dampness of the early morning hours. Light was still hours away. He could smell rain also. However, the air temperature was not right for rain. Perhaps it would pass them. He had weaved a roof for them and there were sides to their shelter, but it was not large enough to protect his supplies and they came before him. Tukuli sniffed again. "Fire," he whispered.

The boy nodded. "Raiders. They were stopped but not before they destroyed the temple. They had something that made a sound that hurt my head. I could hear the stones and the cries of those in pain from the sound." He began to weep again.

Tukuli rocked him waiting for him to stop.

"They...hurt my friends and now they have gone away!"

"Well," he soothed, "you still have me Diami. If you want, you can count me as your friend."

"Oh, Tukie," the boy wept harder.

Tuluki felt compassion for the boy. The monks gave him odd jobs and taught him things that would help him earn a living as he got older. Most villages had orphans live in a home where they could grow up with children their own age and nurtured by those that acted as surrogate parents, but for some reason that Diami would not discuss with Tuluki, he would not live in one. Since Tuluki took that attitude about his own situation he refrained from telling Diami how to live his life.

By midmorning, Diami was moving around. Not his usual self, and not gathering baskets to sell.

"Diami," he called as he threaded a bead.

"Yes, Tukie," Diami answered sadly.

"You said they used something to knock the temple walls down?"

"The harvester said it was one of those machines the Black Alliance is using to break into the Sacred Caves."

"Do you believe this?" he asked the young boy, wanting him to think about something before he accepted gossip as fact. *"For each ear that hears a story, a new version to it was added."* so says his aunt. He sighed. Another life.

"I don't know. But I know that whatever disharmony is on this planet, it will blend eventually into the whole."

"Yes. Exactly."

"They're going to form work groups to rebuild the temple..."

"They said this?"

"It is the Way of Drou."

"Do you want to participate, Diami?"

"Yes. I want you too to come."

"Then I will."

"It will not be easy, Tukie. The temple is the Reatrate. The quarry for sacred stones is a week from here."

"And to keep in tradition, everyone walks. I think, my friend, it's time I get out and see what is beyond our home. I know our neighbors too well. I would like to meet some new ones."

Diami laughed. At first Tuluki was frightened by the night noises and could not sleep, so Diami told him that each noise was a friend waiting to be met. Tuluki found great peace in this approach as well as friendship with creatures that allowed him to touch them.

"We will need to pack then. We don't have to go with the others. They will be taking up the available spaces at the Way Houses. We can sell your baskets as we go and pay our way. We have eleven here. That is more than enough. When we carry the stones, people will feed and give us shelter."

Diami was excited. His wisdom was beyond his years, Tuluki thought.

Tuluki frowned. "I hope there are not a lot of people making this pilgrimage or the people along the way will become poor honoring this tradition."

"The monks will reimburse them," Diami said as he gathered what they would need. "Queen M'Lu has always honored those that give from their hearts. You cannot lie to her," he informed Tuluki seriously.

A blanket of sadness settled over Tuluki but he pushed it aside. He would deal with that another day. "Are you saying that from personal experience?" he teased.

He was surprised when Diami laughed and admitted. "Yes." His tone effectively closing the subject.

Diami settled the pack on Tuluki's back and handed him a walking stick. They set out with the sounds of a storm heading their way. Tuluki sniffed the air doubting it would reach them that day.

Diami set a comfortable pace. There were many on the road, from what Tuluki's ears could pick up. When asked, Diami translated for him the conversations happening around him. Most of the trip however, Tuluki retreated into his dark isolated world. In the solitude he found a place of life. He enjoyed the banter of the creatures of the sky even if he didn't understand what they were saying. He was captivated by the various sounds of the wind in the surrounding trees. He knew when they past a forest or a field.

Tuluki suddenly sniffed deeper. Next to him, Diami was having an animated conversation with another young voice. Again he took a deep breath trying to pinpoint what was bothering him about the feel of this breeze. The energy in it was stinging.

"Diami!" Tuluki called.

"Yes, Tukie?" he patted his shoulder.

"What is happening...in the air?"

"Nothing."

"Behind us...to the sides...in front of us?" He now felt the snapping of electricity along his arms.

Someone further up the road hollered something.

"What did he say?"

"Tornado. What is that?" Diami asked.

"A ditch...we must find a ditch with a bridge over it! Diami, that or a cellar and..."

Suddenly he felt his arm being pulled. He stumbled along, trying to keep his feet moving under him. He could feel the sudden drop in temperature and hear the sudden silence. Then a noise in the distance began to grow in volume.

Shouting voices were all around him. He was jostled in the crowd of scurrying people. When he stumbled a hand helped him right himself. He was guided down steps

and pushed against a wall where others were also gathering. The roaring noise was buffeted.

"Diami," he called softly.

"Here, Tukie. They have cellars along the roads for travelers and in case someone is working in the fields when one of these things visit. We are very fortunate and blessed," Diami informed him seriously.

"Yes."

One of the occupants began a tale. Tukuli couldn't understand the words, but the rhythm was comforting and soon he fell into a light sleep.

Chapter 19

"Hold up, Nameer," wheezed JG. "I need to rest." Dropping her burden, she crawled by the plank and worked the harness off Nameer so he could hunt or rest. Exhausted, she rolled on her back and enjoyed the etchings on the ceiling of the tunnel. She liked the rests because the journey in the tunnel had consisted of one endless fresco depicting scenes from the lives and insights of other people who had traveled through the threshold of death.

"Well, Master Dwarf, I have to say, this has been the most interesting of journeys I've had in a long time," she softly informed him. "Let me tell you about this scene. It has a Dwarf in this one..." and so she began recounting the story she believed was unfolding in the drawings.

"Come and see this, Master Dwarf." She grunted as she pulled the plank under the drawing. "See there...the Dwarf is either giving or receiving something from the dog creature. Hmm. I sure hope it's not a token you have to have to cross the threshold because I don't think I have anything to pay for your way across. But then again, maybe your tales of crossing over are not like some of the one's I've heard."

She grabbed the harness and resumed the journey, pulling the plank forward, deciding not to wait for Nameer. She sent out a tentative call for the cat wondering what was taking him so long. Her knees, numb from having to crawl, were finally given a break when she dropped to her belly. She wiggled forward, pulled the plank, wiggled forward, and pulled the plank. As she wiggled forward again, the ground became a slide. Instinctively she released the plank and alone she went careening right and left and then dumped on top of a body. It was dark. Her pillow snarled.

"Nameer!" she tried to roll off him, but their new enclosure was tight. "Helga's moon."

:There is no way out but the way we came in: was his soulful report.

"Well, then that's the way we're gonna get out." JG felt the sides of their exit. They were smooth with nothing to grip onto. "Okay. Here's how we're gonna do this. I can brace myself and move up using my legs and arms. You'll have to jump in my lap

and, gawds I hope you don't weight a lot. There are places where it branches this way and that...I can rest there."

It took several attempts of getting situated then sliding back into the room before they worked out a position where JG could carry the cat's weight. Her arms and legs were tired, but she had to get it done. She had no intention of dying in a shaft.

Sweat was burning JG's eyes and her legs and arms were trembling. Nameer was her cheering section.

:we're almost there.

Suddenly, something dropped in her face and she nearly lost her grip.

"Tie the leopard to the harness. I will pull him up," Jac's small voice instructed.

JG was too tired to argue with the small creature that Nameer would be too heavy for him, so with one hand, with Nameer's help, she did as she was told.

"Okay, he's ready," she hoarsely called.

Nameer rose, almost easily. Then came the harness back down.

When JG crawled over the ledge back into the tunnel, she found Nameer helping to raise her. She fell to the floor. Every muscle in her body was quivering. Jac stepped over to her and began rubbing her arms.

"Why aren't you with the others?" she asked curious.

"Master Dwarf, he was my friend. I should have been the one to accompany him on his final journey. I was frightened so I didn't offer."

"Well, Jac I'm glad you got over it," JG told him.

"Me too. But I'm glad it was you and not me that found that shaft. I forgot about them. They're to confuse those that are not serious on this journey. We must go on now. The sun, see how the light is beginning to fade in the tunnel...we must be to the top as the moon climbs the sky. You go ahead and let us know if there are any more of those shafts, I will pull Master Dwarf, if you will grant me the honor."

"How did you pull all our weight?"

"I will tell you later. Now, I must compose a story for Master Dwarf," Jac told her kindly. He smiled at the tired off-worlder's expression, but he knew she was too exhausted to argue.

The appearance of the starry sky came into view. JG turned to help Jac lift the Dwarf from the plank and set his body on the elaborate stone altar. The wind was blowing hard and cold, so JG wanted to hurry them along. She looked up at the stars and wished his soul peace and swift travel to his afterlife.

Jac had something to say but whatever it was, JG couldn't understand. Nameer was peering down a path that seemed a better road to return by than the way they came. JG was agreeable to it, but it was dark, and falling off a cliff was not her...suddenly she reached into her pocket and pulled out her night light.

The three were halfway down when Jac pointed at a dark shadow in the mountain wall. "It is a hostel for those that have been to the top and need a break on the way down. It appears to be vacant...but..."

JG felt the same...she didn't want to take any chances. "You and Nameer wait here..."

:There are people waiting around the building: Nameer supplied.

"Well, that does it. Nameer said we have visitors. I would rather not have company."

Jac nodded. "I think I have had enough adventure for this week."

JG's acute night vision revealed a faint animal path. Nameer could see it but Jac could not. JG fastened rope from their harness around his waist, so he would not get lost. Nameer led the way and JG followed behind Jac. At one point, Nameer veered off the path and into the dense tree cover.

"We'll spend the night in the tree," JG told Jac softly.

Effortlessly, Nameer leaped onto a branch. JG tossed Jac up where he hung onto a branch until JG helped him up further.

The next morning, rather than going back to the trail, JG let Nameer lead them. He was taking them back to his mother's land. She knew that because he was purring and sending out signals she couldn't translate.

"I promised Nameer I would help him with his mother's land. Off-worlders had..." she brought up sharply, pulling Jac behind a tree while Nameer leaped onto its branch. Quietly, JG helped Jac to a branch and gestured for him to climb higher. Touching the tree, she asked for insight.

JG moved up the tree until she was looking over the valley. It was the one that had been contaminated. She knew that because she remembered one tree in particular that was still untouched by the contamination. It leaned at an odd angle. The valley was now green and lush with new growth. It looked like the general had sent a team. From what she could see now there were some people with weapons looking for something.

:They are hunting: and Nameer's thoughts broke into an angry roar that nearly deafened JG.

JG saw the hunters look up startled then yelled happily, heading in their direction.

"They should not be hunting," Jac protested. "It is not our way. Who is hunting?"

"Let's go see," JG told him.

JG waited for the hunters at the crest of trees. She watched them as they warily approached her.

"You're not from here," one of the hunters informed her.

"Nor are you, or you would know that hunting is not permitted," JG reported. "So, put your weapons down and don't ever come back." She smirked to herself, knowing it fell on deaf ears.

"You got one of those midget people with you," one of the hunters taunted. "They make good house pets."

"You guys are so dull," JG told them, hearing them as they moved behind her. Then suddenly the air moved around her and before she could intercept it...

<you are in trouble again> Horiku informed her, as she landed in a flip behind JG.
<you can use my chobo>

<ah: i see you only come for the fun parts>

Jac's eyes were on the men with the bows and arrows. Many a time he had to run from hunters because of his antics. Now was the time to put all that practice to use.

JG tested the feel of the short stick Horiku had handed her. "Jac, will you be okay?" she asked softly.

"Oh, yeah. I'm used to this. I'm pretty fast at duck and roll, if you get my drift," he laughed.

JG laughed too. "My, my, us three against ten. Not good for them." She bat away an arrow and then rushed the men nearest her, giving them less time to notch their arrow.

With the stick she found spots to hit or jab, the men falling in pain. But back on their feet with a hand or arm not able to use their bows. She was beginning to tire when Jac, who disappeared sometime during the first wave of arrows, was behind the group with a sling shot. JG had to keep her eye on her attackers, but she noticed many of them were not getting up after Jac's shots. Someone must have realized this too because a few broke ranks, leaving four in front and three behind them. Horiku gave a cluck noise and sprinted to the three facing her and JG took on the four, knocking them down. She was running down one of the others that was charging Jac who was reloading his sling shot, but Nameer beat her to him.

"So, what do we do with these men?" JG asked. She tied the last one up and from Nameer's grunt, it was the group he asked her to apprehend.

"There is a monastery, a day from here. The monks will take care of them," Horiku told her smiling. She could see a difference in the energy around JG.

<you have done well>

JG jumped up and stood still as a warm feeling encompassed her. She breathed in deeply, tears forming in her eyes.

<my queen> Horiku bowed her head.

JG watched as a solid form appeared before them. It looked as real as if she were really before her.

"I am really here," the child queen laughed delighted. "You call it teleporting." She turned to Nameer who was purring and looked like he was smiling, his canines shining in the sun. "Your mother will be proud of you Nameer, as I am of you. May your lands be plentiful and your hunts glorious."

Nameer gave Zohra a glance. :I thank you for what you have done for us: It will not be forgotten: With that, the great leopard leaped over a rock and disappeared into the new growth of fauna.

Queen M'Lu turned to Jac who was staring at her with his mouth opened and tears falling from his eyes. The Queen smiled at him tenderly. "You are a gifted artist, Jac and if you are willing, I know a master craftsman who is looking for a student."

Jac nodded, still unable to speak.

"Speak to the monk, Gemuba. She will give you the introduction you will need to Master Craftsman Sea. A friend I hold dear will also be on the island. S'Bo. He is a very wise man to speak with if you so desire. I miss his council. You both will enjoy each other's company."

Jac nodded. He had heard of the elder S'Bo. His father held him in disdain, which probably meant the elder would be an interesting person to befriend. He swallowed and croaked out something and then tried again. "Are you...are you the queen?"

"I am Queen M'Lu. I beg your pardon for not introducing myself sooner. I have been informed that your antics at the university have gotten you expelled again. It is time to put those behaviors aside young Caladia and go about your business."

Jac nodded, feeling remorseful. "I...I understand my Queen. I will always be your servant," he finished.

"You shall never be anyone's servant young Jac. You are too full of your own ideas," she laughed playfully. "You need to focus on your art. You have the heart for it." From Jac she moved her attention to Jina Gari.

"Thank you for asking your people to repair this damage. This time, they asked permission before using their chemicals to clean this up." The Queen looked around nodding at what she saw. "The monks will finish healing the area."

Queen M'Lu turned to her young Kiuzi warrior. "Horiku, you have done well on your mission. Commander O'Malley is proud of you also. I have one more job to ask of you before you return home. Jina Gari needs to be escorted to Ilo. Could you see that she gets there by the half moon? Her bondmate will be waiting for her."

JG could feel her heart beating frantically as she thought of seeing Alexandra again. The Queen smiled. "You will have time for your dance," she hinted.

JG looked at her startled. "Dance?"

"Yes. The time has come for you to perform it, before you become separated again." The Queen raised her hand and blessed the two women and Jac whose eyes were still glistening. She turned to the group of men that could not see her nor hear her and said a prayer for them. "The monks will assist them in leaving Arnica."

JG was excited and as soon as the Queen left, she was pushing the men to fast march down the path to the main road. They passed many vehicles and for a moment she

was worried they were going to get hit, but Horiku and Jac seemed unconcerned and kept them to the side of the road where they were not bothered. Jac looked like he was walking on air with a wide smile across his face. JG brushed her fingers over her heart that felt the Queen's love filling her to the point she thought she would burst out in colors. JG shook her head. Now where did that come from. Ahh. Looking around her she laughed. She was seeing not just images overlapping images, but colors. Everything had colors. It came and went but it was stabilizing so she could see it longer. Jac's colors were soft pinks and blues, and then greens and pink again.

"Horiku."

Horiku dropped back to her side.

"Is there a stream near the monastery?"

"Yes."

"Good." She sighed. She missed the Sha'Kar.

Their arrival was expected. A group of monks and warriors met them. From how Horiku's posture changed, JG suspected it was an honor for her to meet them. They greeted Horiku as an equal, which seemed to take Horiku by surprise.

Their prisoners were taken off their hands. Jac gave JG a hug and left her to compose himself. He seemed to be on the verge of crying since meeting the Queen.

After cleaning up and wearing new robes, JG went to find Jac. She found him sitting in a garden, swinging his legs nervously as he stared unseeing at a fountain.

"Hey, Jac. You excited about your future?" she asked, taking the seat the Jac offered her.

"I have met the Queen," he whispered. "Never in this life had I thought I could meet the Queen." He paused as he tried to pull himself together. "I was never good at anything, just getting into trouble my father said. And he was right. To be able to see Queen M'Lu of Allint, and to be sponsored by her is..."

"A great honor," JG supplied. "And I would guess, it means you're sort of Drosuan."

"Yes!"

"I don't think you were that bad of a boy, Jac. I think you were somewhere you didn't want to be and couldn't figure out how to get to where you wanted to be."

He leaned toward her. "But I saw, felt and spoke to the Queen and she to me!" He took a deep breath and sobbed in his hands. Finally, he raised his tear stained face. "I have always dreamed of creating art that would be shown in the Queen's Hall. I can't share this with my family because they are...they wouldn't understand. Nor my friends."

JG smiled at the young man. "I understand," she told him softly. "So, it's time to make new friends and adopt a new family."

He nodded and returned his stare into the fountain. She got up and went for a walk in the gardens. She closed her eyes for a moment to identify the ache that was vaguely familiar.

<my love>

<my heart>

* * *

It was late at night, but JG wanted to go to a stream bed and see if she could feel her friend the Sha'Kar. She was worried. Everyone seemed to be asleep, but JG. She left her pallet and let herself out of the building. Where she was going, she didn't know. She let her feelings guide her. There were no busy thoughts distracting her only an intense awareness and a sense of danger. Something was wrong with the Sha'Kar. She could feel this in the air about her. She slid down an embankment and just as she touched a rock to regain her balance, she knew she was deceived. Before her was the metrasoldier leader that she had seen once and before she could react, she was knocked out.

Chapter 20

Alexandra paced. She had felt a joyous communication with Jina Gari earlier and then only moments ago something had slammed into her senses. JG was her first thought. She was sitting in the monastery near a fountain waiting for Gi when it happened. She reached out to touch her lover and there was a darkness that made her want to heave the contents of her stomach. It was nothing like what the colonists had created. This was...the absence of love.

Gi and others were quickly at her side as she tried to stand from the shock. "What...what is happening with Gari?" she asked frantically. Just as she got that out, she realized she was escalating the wrong feelings. Steadying herself, she focused on her lover.

"An island," she whispered. She was being carried. Then she was pushed out and away. Her eyes opened.

"It is where the Black Alliance has their headquarters," one of the Kiuzi guards informed them. "They have machines that block out any of our touches. They have one of your off-world soldiers helping them. The Queen can block many of your weapons, but not all."

"What would they want with Jina Gari? She's not from here. What can she offer them?" She rubbed her head, entangling her fingers in the long curly hair. "Maybe they want to leave this planet and they think she's their way off," she concluded.

Kaili Maipuga nodded. "They are getting desperate. However, if they wish to leave, they merely have to ask, and we would supply them a ship with enough supplies to last to an appropriate planet."

"Do they know this?"

Kaili Maipuga nodded again. "We have told them this. They have looked over the ships; however, they don't have weapons. Therefore, they will not take them."

"Ahh. They do have a point there. There are raiders and pirates out there. A ship not equipped with anything to protect..."

"They have equipment that will protect them from others...the ship can move unseen. They wish to be raiders and pirates with the ability to conceal themselves and then attack others." Gi informed her dryly.

"So...what now?" she looked at Kaili Maipuga.

"We prepare to go to war," he smiled smugly. "But not a war that you are familiar with.

A short warrior with braids wrapped on top of her head looking like a hat, stepped into the room. "The ship is ready, Kaili Maipuga."

"Good. Everyone. We go now."

Alexandra's stomach dropped a few times as the ship lifted swiftly and swooped down ten minutes later, too soon for her to have recovered the first lift. Eagerly Alexandra clambered off the plane. Her first step on the ground was a jolt that she was sure sent bolts of electricity through her hair ends. Kaili Maipuga paused at her side, waiting for her to adjust. The Queen had assured Kaili Maipuga that the off-worlder would be able to withstand the higher vibration of the palace. Since the attack on the palace its energy was raised, preventing anyone or anything to enter into its space unchallenged.

Alexandra spotted someone official looking standing near a garden, which by her stance, looked like the queen; however, someone crossed in front of her and both disappeared back into the garden. Alexandra looked up at Kaili Maipuga.

"Queen Mother," he informed her softly.

They were accompanied by ten Kiuzi warriors that had accompanied Kaili Maipuga, but at the palace entrance, they went no further. Another group of warriors, also Kiuzi, but dressed differently escorted them further into the palace halls. Alexandra looked right and left, studying the paintings of many species she didn't recognize as well as those she did. A centaur greeted them at another door. His beard was clipped and braided with beads while his long hair was loose with the exception of the two long braids at the sides of his face.

"Kaili Maipuga," the centaur spoke in a deep voice. "It is a pleasure to see you and to be the one to show you to the Queen's office."

Kaili Maipuga turned to Alexandra, "May I present Lt. Commander Lady Alexandra Harriet Montran, to the esteemed secretary of Queen M'Lu, Count Victoresque."

The centaur bowed his head as he waved them forward, to another hall. "I am truly blessed to be meeting two important guests of the Queens."

The door opened as they neared, and a preoccupied Dwarf moved passed them without looking, muttering to himself as he read over some lines.

"That is the Queen's storyteller. He has been recently given the position and has proved to be a very earnest student of the trade. It helps that his voice is very compelling." The centaur laughed at this, and then explained. "He was telling a story about a young boy and his sister that had met up with something that to them was just a voice from a rock. He had everyone, including the Kiuzi guards, raptly listening to him recount a tale that many of us have heard all our lives." He chuckled again. "It is worth listening to it again with someone that has the gift." He pushed open another door after rapping it two times.

Queen M'Lu was standing over a desk with her hands clasped behind her back, studying something. There were three others in the room. Alexandra knew the moment she walked in the room, if she even tried to raise her hand, it would be slowed or stopped if it was considered a threat. Her eyes moved to the young woman near a window. Both studied each other while the Queen finished up with the elf scribe. He bowed to everyone and smiling happily left the room.

Alexandra pulled her eyes from the young woman and studied the white-haired youth that was watching her with a smile on his face. It was as if she did something that was amusing.

"Usually, no one can feel my sister's touch. So Ji'am finds this interesting, especially since you are not from Arnica. Welcome, Lady Alexandra. This is my sister and Guardian of the crown of Allint, C'Lea. Ji'am is Sacred Jester...ah. You understand." She nodded pleased.

Alexandra felt out of place among those she saw physically as children. Kaili Maipuga and her were the oldest in the room. Yet, she knew full well that the power in the room could probably implode a planet if directed right.

"Yes, that is a fair assumption. However, we are merely guides using subtle and gentle methods." She frowned for a moment. "Kaili Maipuga you know what I am asking but I am asking with an expectation for you to answer with all honesty."

Kaili Maipuga nodded. He turned to Alexandra. "The blank energy you felt, when you attempted to touch your lifemate, it has engulfed the Queen Mother. We do not wish to banish it from her because she is holding it for a reason. Since we can't communicate with her, we have surmised after a time of debate, that we cannot banish it or harm it in any way. It is also what those that have seized your lifemate worship. They wish to use her as its vessel."

Alexandra's eyes opened wide. "Oh," she said softly."

"Exactly. As with all that is happening over the entire planet," Queen M'Lu continued. "Our lessons are becoming more intense and in greater number as Itachi nears the flash point. A Sha'Kar had accompanied you and your bondmate. They are no longer with you because they feel the quickening."

"It is like a rush after you have performed a good kata," a voice spoke from behind Alexandra. She turned to see a tall Micas waiting to be waved in.

"Commander O'Malley!" Queen M'Lu greeted happily. "You have finished your chore?"

"Yes, my Queen. They are on a ship waiting for it to power up. It will take a few days to get under way."

"Lady Alexandra, this is Commander O'Malley. Head of the Queen's Kiuzi guard. A handy soldier to have around if you should go walking in forests when warned not to," Kaili Maipuga joked. Commander O'Malley blushed and shook his head ruefully.

"I will be sure to heed my clan's shaman next time."

The group laughed.

"So, what shall we do?" Kaili Maipuga asked.

The Queen gestured around the table for them to take seats. "This will take a while so let's get comfortable and share ideas."

For a long wearying time they were tossing ideas back and forth about how to get the 'ogre' out of the Queen Mother and neutralize it so it would not take possession of Alexandra's lover. Alexandra had her chin resting in her hand not thinking about

anything. She was tired from racking her brains for ideas and since she didn't know that much about Arnica, she was limited in her suggestions. She tapped her chin in thought as she remembered a conversation she had with the Sha'Kar while she was recovering from her stay in the sleep module. Her eyes blinked up at those around the table. She gulped. "Sorry, I was...ahh, remembering a conversation I had with the Sha'Kar." She cleared her throat and took a quick sip of water.

"Please, tell us," Kaili Maipuga encouraged.

"The Sha'Kar was telling me a story of a lost soul that traveled the galaxy looking for a place to rest. It didn't mean to stop at this one place because the energy was wrong, and it was repulsed with the life that was on the planet, but something had sucked it down and imprisoned it in a small container. It was furious and the more it was unable to leave, the angrier it became." She looked around at the others, wondering if they would pick up on the similarities.

"So, how does this end?" Ji'am asked.

"I woke up. It was in a dream. But I recall what it hated most of its confinement was boredom." She rubbed her forehead, worried about JG.

"So, what was suggested?"

"That was my challenge. The Sha'Kar asked me how I would release something that had become so angry that it could not separate its jailer with its rescuer. My quick answer was breaking the container and run. But now..." she hesitated as she let her thoughts work out why she instinctually chose this story to recount. "There are many levels to this problem. First of all, for an entity such as this to go from one environment to another, willingly, it needs to be interested and compelled. It also must feel safe and be able to not feel unreasonably contained, until it can safely be released. And the second thing is, why was it lost in the first place? It will need a guide to assist in finding its way back to where it needs to be."

"Where would we put it?" Ji'am asked.

C'Lea added, "Aside from being a wandering entity...we don't know where to direct it."

"What we do know, is that it attached itself to one of the colony ships. Who it latched onto is uncertain but I don't believe it was a person. It had created pockets of an

energy it felt comfortable with. Not something that is good for Arnica. Living things that once thrived in that area died when it settled there."

"So given a chance it would go back into the ground," Alexandra thought out loud.

Ji'am shook his head. "We already discarded that idea. We cannot let it into the ground around Allint for it may perish or anywhere on Arnica where it will either perish or cause strife."

"Well, I was thinking of an anchor. You see," she hurriedly explained when the others were looking at her with blank stares, "you surround the ground so that it cannot escape anywhere but into a person, who is holding a Djed...which it will escape into."

What she pictured in her mind was the way she hoped it would happen.

"A Tjet!" three voices identified.

"Well, no." She got the image of what they were picturing. "You need to make it intricate and full of meaning and complicated like a maze or labyrinth. It needs to be interesting. I think what makes the planet interesting is because there are so many different forms of life it can experience. Since it latched onto the Queen Mother, I will guess it is because she is connected to more than what is here on the planet."

Kaili Maipuga nodded.

"The next question is, who will be the person? We cannot use mother. It knows her and therefore everyone on this planet." Queen M'Lu looked over at Alexandra.

"Oh, gods. Last time I volunteer information," she nervously joked. The others laughed. But she knew it was true. In order for it to leave its present vessel it would have to be something that intrigued it.

"So Ji'am, we need the monks from Ilo that make ritual pieces to begin on the piece Lady Alexandra has suggested. We will take this show to Lilith Island. No one, including the creature will be hurt. Kaili Maipuga let it slip to these people that have our Kiuzi warrior, Jina Gari, where we are heading. They will not pass up capturing two off-worlders." She turned to the others. "The royal house will not be going. Mother is all that I can risk."

The others nodded. "We will meditate and guide from here," C'Lea assured her sister. Both were feeling the fear of letting their mother, only protected by an off-worlder, to be alone on an island and with people that wished to do the royal house harm.

Kaili Maipuga frowned and Commander O'Malley appeared to be ready to object, however the Queen continued, "WE are finished here. When the ritual object is completed, Lady Alexandra and the Queen Mother will be taken to the island. No one else," she stated firmly. She didn't consider it fair to gang up on a creature that was confused and upset about what it considered being locked away against it's will.

Chapter 21

JG moved easily through places that she had seen before with the Sha'Kar. This time however, she was looking for someone. Her Sha'Kar. Where had he gone? She searched for a river to dip into and contact him but the currents to the rivers of energy moving in the galaxy were not right.

Something was compelling her to consciousness, but she felt protected in her cocoon of darkness. She returned to her search for the Sha'Kar. He could tell her how Alexandra was. As soon as she thought of her lover, she could feel herself being drawn quickly back to consciousness. She couldn't see and she was sure her eyes were open. Then the physical pain burned her consciousness. She kept her head down but someone pulled her head up by her hair.

"Where is your mate?" the metasoldier's voice demanded. "Contact her!"

Ow! Damn. Now I remember. They want Alexandra. I didn't have the key to Alan's ship.

A slap across her numb face only rocked her head. Then she remembered that the others in the room could read thoughts. She dropped back into unconsciousness. A handy skill to know.

Malchi's A team reported back that Colonel Zohra was captured by the enemy.

Malchi's ears burned, but she gave the order. "We are not to do anything yet. The locals will handle it."

"Well we can't let them slap her around like that!" SgtM Helenski objected while she paced the small deck of the SEC ship. Two steps one way and two the other.

"How much longer before the SEC ship is ready to sail," Captain Malchi asked irritated. Her soldiers were too agitated to not hide their feelings and would give away the plans for the rescue if she informed them. Instead, Malchi had them check the metrasoldiers once again. They could do that while the ship's systems were brought on line. It only had enough fuel to take it to Jeazua where the orbiting outpost was experienced in chip implants. The soldiers would then be shipped back to their home planets following their debriefing and erasing their memory if need be. Her hands were itching to go back and look for the one soldier that got away. Commander O'Malley's

agent claimed she was Alan's top cop. She could roam anywhere and gather information and process it and act independently.

The SgtMajor was looking at all the gages and monitoring devices that showed progress. "Another hour. Air in incubation room is too rich, Captain. I think we need someone to check it out."

"Linda. Go and check it out. Take a squad. It doesn't sound right so treat it as a possible break out. Helgas bloody moon. Doesn't anything run smoothly around here?" she muttered. She had expected the worse and it was about to happen, she thought. Mentally she began to weave a different ending, all with the prisoners leaving the planet secured in their pods and no loss of life; however, her alarm went off. She slapped the lock down signal to red and decided weapons were not going to be the choice of toys to play with.

"Hand-to-hand, girls and boys," she whispered over her communicator. "Get the weapons off the ship, Johnnie," she ordered. "Dump them in the shuttle's life boat and get them out of reach...now," she ordered.

"Aye, Captain. Weapons away."

They all knew metrasoldiers were suicidal and would use a captured weapon to send them all into the galaxy as drift matter.

She jumped onto the escalator. Someone had called for it and she was ready to make sure it was not a metrasoldier.

The moment she saw no one waiting she was leaping out and to the side, spinning on her back and catching the falling soldier that dropped to take her out. She caught him in the groin and solar plexus, then gave one kick that knocked him unconscious. After looking around she snapped a restraining collar on him. Someone had freed the soldiers. However, the soldier was not that difficult to take out, which had her suspicious that this was merely a distraction.

"Gang five-o-four, mutiny afoot," she whispered in her com. She smiled. They had a real challenge, finally.

She moved her unconscious soldier back up to the sleep chambers. She needed to put him back and find out just how many escaped.

She found a few of her troops lying about. After assuring herself that they were not dead she moved on.

Lt. Visu was quickly at her side.

"Captain. Did you notice something odd going on about this break out?"

"Yeah. They aren't fighting like a metrasoldier would."

Visu nodded. "Whoever broke them out doesn't realize that in order to get them motivated with a killer's instinct, they have to take ownership of them. Obviously, they have not."

"So, they're in a daze."

"Have you figured out who it is?"

"Alao. I was reading his bios before the breakout. It seems Alan has a backup in his brain. He mentally unlocked himself and got the computer to release the others. He didn't seem all that smart when we were interrogating him."

Malchi nodded. "No, he didn't. Well, let's round them up and get someone over here that knows more about these chip implants and how to locate them. I want this to be discussed at length at our next briefing. This could be a problem for the trip home."

"Well, take heart, Alao was the first person we captured. He was trying to get in one of the trash dumpsters."

"Suicide?"

"No. He thought it was a life pod."

"Oh, Helgas moon." She touched her earpiece. "Malchi here. Go, ahead. I read you. Bring them back to bed, Malchi out." She nodded at Visu, "You're right. Seven were released and all seven have been recaptured. Help me get this guy."

"Gladly. I want to get off this ship and join the party they're throwing for our wedding couple," Visu smiled grimly as she grabbed the other shoulder of the large man.

Chapter 22

Tukuli wrapped a rag around his blistered hands, and then grabbed the handles of the cart. With determination, he leaned forward and began to pull.

"Go!" Diami shouted to the others, and everyone pushed.

They had found a discarded vegetable cart on their trek back to the village and while resting, Tukuli's curious hands found the problem. Then some of their fellow travelers fixed the axel. Since the monk had okayed its use the others quickly piled their rocks into it. This allowed many to return to the quarry for more.



The cart moved out of the rut and back onto a smoother part of the road. While Tukuli pulled, he joined in the blessing song that continued once they were on the move again. The song spoke of lightening the load of life by sharing in joyous celebrations, and rituals with neighbors, and called for blessings on all the things that went into the rebuilding of a temple, including the builder's sweat. Hearts were opened and all voices reflected their communion with goodness.

On their tenth load they stopped on the road to rest and share food. Water was passed as throats became dry, and Tukuli grateful sucked on the water bag when it was

presented to him. He sniffed the air periodically to see how close the storm was. This time the closeness startled him.

"Take shelter!" he hollered in a language only Diami understood.

"Eeee!" voices shouted down the line.

Diami tugged on his arm. "There is no shelter around here!"

"What is around us," he sniffed and listened to the escalating wind. "Branches! I can weave a shelter if there is enough leaf."

The rain came after three small shelters were constructed, however they needed more. Tukuli continued to work in the downpour. Others brought what was needed for him to work. While he weaved, they erected the frames his walls and roofs would cover. They were not completely dry, but with the crowding together, they were warm enough.

It lasted two hours, not long for a storm. The time was spent listening to one of their members sing or another recount stories that were related to the building of a temple. Thus, keeping them, all focused on their task.

The storm blew past them and back the way they had come. Quickly, they moved back to the road, wanting to make it to the hostel for the night. Their thoughts were on the food that would be awaiting them. Anticipation pushed the group faster and feeling blessed that the road was in good repair, their spirits were high.

Chapter 23

Alexandra looked over the Djed. It was as beautiful as it was complex. There were two eyes that looked out of its column. She was fascinated at their realness. The object was two feet by four inches in some places. She was admiring the piece when she felt the air around her change. It was a curious feeling, nothing threatening. Looking around she realized a shadow in the corner of the plane was watching her. Alexandra had been rushed onto the plane still partially asleep with the Djed thrust into her hands. She had no time to notice any other passengers. The shadowed figure remained where it was, not attempting any conversation.

The plane had only been in the air for thirty minutes when it began a quick descent. The door popped open the moment they touched ground. Obviously, there was an urgency to this. She clambered down the ramp and looked around her. She could hear another set of footsteps behind her, but she ignored them and moved off to explore the island. She was looking for an ideal place. It didn't take long to find it. She turned to face the woman who was following her and nearly called her by name; however, she realized it could not be Queen M'Lu but an older version. They were so strikingly alike. The older woman walked around Alexandra, seeming to check her out. The movement was so quick, one moment she was watching the woman circle out of her sight and then her vision changed and up into the Djed it went.

Alexandra sat the ritual object on the stone floor of the cliff looking at the object and trying to understand what she was missing.

"Do not stare at it. It will mesmerize you," the soft voice warned her. Alexandra turned to look at the Queen Mother. She had straightened up and carried herself with more authority. "Come, we will prepare it for its passage."

The Queen Mother showed her the herbs and flowers to pick. They gathered them until they had five big bunches. Alexandra was then showed how to prepare a wreath of the mixture. After an hour of preparation, they placed the wreathes around the Djed.

"Now, we wait."

"What are we waiting for?"

"It's tribe. It got lost in its wandering and became trapped. However, if I had loosened it on Arnica, it would have hurt both the planet and itself."

"Is it a Sha'Kar?"

The Queen Mother smiled and nodded. "Yes, friend of the Sha'Kar. It recognized you and the familiar energy you have about you. That is why it left me."

Alexandra closed her eyes and called to her friend the Sha'Kar. She was in deep meditation and didn't hear the arrival of soldiers. Opening her eyes when nudged she looked at the red shirted men that surrounded her. A tall figure joined them.

"Get up or we will kill your bond mate," she threatened.

Alexandra took a sharp breath in as her eyes fell on the unconscious form of Jina Gari hanging between two soldiers. She stood up not looking around for the Queen Mother. She was hoping she had escaped. Into a ship she was pushed, but not allowed to get near JG. However, as much as she seemed to be hurt, Alexandra could tell by the colors around her that she was not as bad as it seemed.

"What do you want me for?"

"We were going to ask you to unlock the ship that is in the castle of the Black Soldiers, however, there is a ship large enough for us all that is powering up just North of here. You will get us on that ship."

"What makes you think anyone is going to turn over their ship to me?"

"You will find a way to get us aboard. We will do the rest."

"We're being hailed, General," a voice hollered back at them.

"Get up," the General waved a weapon.

"You know, if you shoot that off...we all will become one with space vacuum." She ducked as she walked onto the bridge of the flyer. She took the mic from a soldier.

"This is Commander Harriet Montran to ship to starboard of us, come in whydon'tcha."

"This is Captain Malchi of the right honorable SCE, coming back atcha."

Alexandra frowned to keep from laughing. "I have passengers that would like to take passage on your ship homebound, whydontcha."

"Any extra luggage other than carry ons is not gonna happen, backatcha," Malchi replied.

"She says that she has seating for extra passengers but if you have a lot of..."

"I don't care what she wants. Get us on the damn ship!"

"Roger, roger, Honorable SCE. Passengers have carryons and are willing to pay a bonus, whydontcha."

"Well, get them on over here. Pull over to the side hatch marked B for bothersome. It's got air and the crew's quarters nearby. Hey, we only got twenty beds...just how many you got over there, backatcha?"

"Five, by five and two," she glanced at the irritated General. She could feel JG now. "That means five people and suitcases and in two minutes we'll be docking," she translated for the officer. "He does know how to dock, right?" By the nervous looks she gathered not.

"Do you mind if I do it? I don't want to be splattered..."

"Just shut up and do it!" She turned to one of the men and said something.

Alexandra flexed her fingers and wished she had more time to practice this. She had not done this for...hmm. She did not want to think about that.

"Roundabout, baby, easy, easy," she coaxed. How these men had gotten the shuttle she could only guess. They had it long enough to learn to fly but not much practice with mating up with another vessel.

"Hey!" a hoarse voice called softly. "You're coming about too fast. Ease up Commander," JG was seated in two seats behind her but with a view of the screens that was showing her approach.

"It's not like I do this more than once a year," she muttered as she checked her suction between the two ships. The connection was with a thump. Nothing damaging. Alexandra released the seal when the gages read okay. She was about to turn to speak to JG when she spotted the grenade being tossed their way and the hatch was slammed shut. She could hear it being locked into place. JG quickly grabbed the explosive and tossed it into an ejector chute.

"Don't blow yet, don't blow yet," Alexandra whispered as she moved over to JG.

"It's just a gasser. They can't afford to blow this ship until they're over there," JG muttered. "How in the heavens name have you been Lady Alexandra?" she asked trying to grin through bruised lips.

"Doing better than you look. But that doesn't mean you're not a sight for sore eyes." She leaned into JG and kissed her gently. They could hear someone unlocking the hatch. Both moved to the side but stopped when Malchi and some of her team rushed in and took over the controls.

"Let's get the hades out of here. Those guys are going to be so, pissed."

"What's going to happen to them? They're not in sleep pods."

"Not to worry Commander...long time no see. How are you doing? The ship will be giving out directions that they are in danger and need to get in the life pods or they will die. *Catching Butterflies* will pick them up and find a planet for them, with the exception of one stray MS. Astronomics found a lot of potential places for unhappy inhabitants of Arnica. They just volunteered for the first wave."

The ship broke away and under a more experienced hand, they dropped away quickly and without the dips that gave Alexandra stomach aches.

"Calo, get a medic here for the Colonel." She turned to the two women, "So, where to?"

"Ilo. It's an island..." JG started.

"I know exactly where it is. What's there?" Captain Malchi asked teasing.

"I have a dance date with my true heart." She smiled at Alexandra who was holding her hand, neither wanting to let it go least one of them disappear.

"Uh huh. Well, I heard someone was planning a big party bash. I wonder just what type a place like Arnica can give."

"Not the kind a soldier would find on most planets, I would image," Alexandra said, looking into Gari's eyes and reading not just her thoughts but her eyes showing a profound yearning. This was the most powerful she had ever felt the Shunja's influence.

Both women wondered if they could endure the compellation until the ceremony started.

Chapter 24

Lt. Vanstar was sitting under a tree away from the monastery business and the warrior trainee compound. For two days, while she waited for her CO, Commander Montran, she was barracked with the Kiuzi warrior trainees. She thought it would be a place she could shine but she had been bested by their best. She was comforted knowing



that they used their magic tricks on her to win. However, she felt miffed that young people that had never been in battle were more skilled than her. Lt. Vanstar smiled at herself. There were some benefits to the contests. She learned some tricks and fighting techniques similar to some sisters she always wondered about. Hekate's Inner Circle had many unknown levels of warriors though they were only rumored about. Now that she had been around the Kiuzi warriors she knew the rumors were true. She guessed that in the years she was

away doing covert work in the Spartan's Black Rose troop, she missed that sort of training.

She rubbed her sore forearms and glanced back at the ocean. What would she do with that training anyway? It was like working with the Commander. Empaths! She chuckled to herself. That was Black Rose bravado talking. All brawn and noise. And, she was not a Black Rose soldier in reality. She was an officer...not a noncom. Definitely, she needed more debriefing and downtime to get back to the reality of who she was. And that really was the crux of her dilemma. Who in Helgas moon was she? Her first response was...she was a soldier...a soldier's soldier. Turning her eyes back to the forest where she knew the warrior barracks were, she shook her head ruefully. But what kind of soldier? She knew JG, once a close friend, was part of that elite warrior group of Hekate's. Yet, JG had spent more time in covert operations with the same harsh group, so, how did she advance and not her? But then, even as a cadet, Zohra was outstanding.

So, she was back to the same question she had been pondering when she was busted down to the lowest grade of officer for her conduct unbecoming. What was she going to do with her career now? Using magic tricks as part of her soldier's repertoire of skills didn't seem likely.

She sighed. Still not coming up with a decision she decided it could wait until they got back to their part of the galaxy. She turned her thoughts to the event she was dressed up for.

The Colonel and Commander were going to be joined. It was considered as important as if it were a royal marriage, she thought dejectedly. Even though she had not spoken with her since Merker's Outpost, JG had asked Vanstar to stand with her. It was difficult for her to not feel guilty and think the request was done out of politeness or because there was only limited amounts of friends JG had here.

To keep her mind busy, she went over the guest list. There was Brigadier General Mack Mcarn who would be representing the Montran clan; Rear Admiral Mora was representing...probably just himself; Captain Malchi was representing JG's clan house, House of Athena and Hecate's' Inner Circle; Cpl. Wetfoot somehow got an invitation, but then maybe the Commander wanted someone to stand for her and the Corporal was the only one she had to draw from, just like the Colonel only had her. Vanstar shook her head. She was getting depressed and this was supposed to be a joyous occasion. Why they couldn't wait until they got back to their side of the galaxy, she wasn't privy to.

A vessel moving faster than other ships was approaching the harbor. Vanstar leapt to her feet excited. It had to be them. Brushing off her uniform, she slipped her coat on and adjusted the braid and badge of her sister house. She pulled her beret from the epaulet and set it on her head. Pride for her friend and sister filled her and happiness for the Commander brought tears to her eyes. In a better frame of mood, she walked to the open area for the ceremony.

As Vanstar stepped into the area her heart was filled with an incredible warmth.

"It is Queen M'Lu presence that you feel," a Caladia informed her. His eyes were sparkling as he watched a young Zanzar move among the guests.

Vanstar had not seen a Zanzar in ages. An older version of her was working the other side of the area. "Who is that over there?"

"Queen Mother. She had been out of the public eye for six errs. The Guardian, C'Lea, she is the Queen's sister. She is the one sitting next to JG." He turned to regard Vanstar. "I see you are wearing the same type of clothing. Is it a uniform of some sort?"

"Yes. How do you know Colonel Zohra?" she asked surprised.

"We saved each other's lives on a journey," he smiled up at her.

Vanstar would have asked more, but the Queen Mother moved toward them.

She took the hand of the young Caladia and smiled as a mother would at her favorite child. "My dear Jac. I have heard that you are sponsored by the Queen with my old master craftsman. He claimed he wanted to retire to meditation." She shook her head in merriment. "However, I heard he was driving everyone crazy. You both shall do each other a world of good."

Jac nodded his head vigorously. "Yes, Queen Mother. He is amazing." He knew he couldn't describe the feeling of being where he belonged when he arrived at the retired master craftsman's home. But the Queen Mother knew and smiled.

"I will have to visit and see if he is willing to part with some of his works to an old admirer," the Queen Mother told him.

Jac hesitated, knowing that Sea would rather break an art work than sell it. He was the consummate hoarder with his work since he retired. The Queen Mother's laugh told him she was well aware of that.

The Queen Mother moved to stand in front of Vanstar. Megan Vanstar gulped. Never had she been before royalty this high. She had always distained monarchies and for a long time didn't feel comfortable with any titled people...including Lady Montran. It was embarrassing that the moment her hand was in the Queen Mother's the woman probably understood more about herself than she did. For a moment, she wanted to ask her just what she should do with her life.

"You are an adventurer, and very comfortable with that life. It suits you," Queen Mother told her. "Welcome to Arnica. I hope you have a chance to visit our planet before you leave." And then she was gone.

Vanstar was left standing blinking at this information. *An adventurer! Yes. That is what I am.* Suddenly Vanstar found herself looking down into the violet eyes of Queen

M'Lu. The second time in her life that she met royalty and it was changing her whole belief system.

"We queens are all different," Queen M'Lu said. "If you go to one of the other continents like Chirion, the 2nd continent, you will find the type of royalty you have in mind..."

Vanstar cringed inside. The sisters had a motto similar to that and she knew what the Queen was implying. "I meant no disrespect."

"It is your issue," she agreed smiling. "You are being called for."

Vanstar looked up startled and found Captain Malchi looking for her. The Queen was gone.

Malchi moved to her side. "You're looking dressed up, smart, and well cut, Leut."

Vanstar took her hand and shook it. "Captain, nice to see you again."

She laughed. "Ehh. You stick with the Colonel and Commander and you'll always be in trouble. We added a third sleep chamber to the Rouster so you all can chug home in comfort; however, from what the two are saying, they have no intention of sleeping their way back. I'm suspecting you are going to be getting into trouble on that voyage." She laughed at Vanstar's relieved look.

"I see you didn't like the sleep over either," Vanstar told her defensively.

"We also plan on taking our time back. There are some planets to investigate and we'll be keeping an eye out on those SEC vessels just to be sure they don't get lost or knocked off course."

The Captain suddenly braced up. A group of officers were walking toward them.

"Captain Onry, Lady Malu, Lady Dell, this is Lt. Megan Vanstar. Leut, this is Captain Onry of *Catching Butterflies*, Lady Malu second in command, and Lady Dell cousin to Colonel Zohra."

Vanstar nodded and shook the gloved hands of the senior members. Everyone was wearing their dress uniforms and looking parade smart.

"Shall we find our places?" Lady Dell told the group and gestured to where she wanted them.

Vanstar was grateful when Captain Malchi remained near her. Looking around her she was feeling uncomfortable with the atmosphere.

"Bloody moon," she muttered. "What a time to feel uncomfortable with this place."

"It will be over soon, leut. And you won't be reduced to ashes. The monks have erected a protective barrier around those that would normally not be able to sustain the high energy around here."

Vanstar didn't dare look around her to guess just who that may be, but she was relieved that she was not the only one.

Chapter 25

Tuluki felt the smooth new stones. He could actually feel the power in the stone. He touched his forehead to the stone as he tracked the source of the power, his concentration focused on its journey. Down it went, deep into Arnica it dove, fed by ley lines that crossed and recrossed. It branched out. Tuluki was excited as he traveled the life line, energized from its connection that it shared with him. He felt more alive than he had weaving his baskets. Life was so exciting.

"Tukie, are you alright?" Diami asked concerned.

Tuluki lifted his head reluctantly from the repaired stone wall, blinking back tears. Before him was the scarred face of a Dwarf. He couldn't tell his age, but his voice made him sound younger than his teen errs.

Tuluki lifted his hand and gently touched the Dwarf's face. "Diami?"

"Tukie?"

"I...I can see," he whispered.

The crest fallen face told him more than he realized an expression could show.

"Hey, why are you sad? It means, we can travel and see our world without being challenged as vagrants."

Diami looked unsure.

"Didn't you tell me that you wanted to see the world? Well, I can make baskets and you can sell them. I certainly don't have the patience to sell. When we don't have funds, we can stay in the way houses. We will become travelers!"

"Travelers? I can be a traveler?"

"Sure. All you need is an adult to travel with you. That's me."

"Can we stop at the monastery on Almen? That's where my friends have been taken."

"Yes. We can stop wherever you want to explore, and since I don't know the languages, you can teach me as we go. Well?"

"Yes, Tukie. I would like that. Let me go tell the monk Germaine." He leaned forward and whispered. "I think he was going to make me go to the orphan's home. He is replacing my friend Laufla."

"Then tell him. We shall leave when I have completed five baskets."

"I will gather up supplies. You wait here! I will return." And the boy excitedly ran down the stairs and over the dirt fence into the garden where a monk was bent over repairing the temple garden.

Tukuli laughed happily. He breathed in deeply, feeling the energy about him and separating the various life forms in each bundle of energy. He looked down at his hands and noted that they were filthy from his work. Stepping down from the porch, he sauntered to the outside cistern.

To himself he was humming a blessing prayer his mother had taught him as a child. It brought back memories of a pampered life that he realized separated him from what his cousins had experienced. He could now begin preparation to return back to Allint, but he didn't want to return yet. He wanted to journey and discover. He wanted to experience the various life forms as they evolved.

A warmth in his heart radiated out through his chakras, cleansing them from the last remnants of the veil of self-deception.

He turned to face his cousin. As he stood before the apparition, he knew she was protecting him from her energy. He still had work to do.

"My Queen, Cousin."

"Your wish for the boy is within your power, Cousin. Your companion and you shall be given traveler status. Blessings upon you both and great adventures."

He smiled. His eyes teared as he understood her meaning. Through living Drusu he would possess the power to heal his friend's scars.

"Thank you. Blessings upon you and all under your care," he whispered.

Chapter 26

Alexandra looked in the mirror again, trying to will her insides to stop shaking. Her reflection belied her nervousness. Taking another deep breath, she turned from the mirror and concentrated on the Dance.

Helgas moon but I wish Gedaliaha were here. What if I forget a step...Oh stop it! You know once the Dance is begun...it moves to the energy of the participants. Okay. I'm okay. I... then she felt JG. She was as nervous as her and yet...

Their touch was of longing to move to their final state of bonding in their commitment to each other. The Dance of Joining, Hai Shunja.

Calmer, JG fastened her sash around her waist and took the bowl she would enter the joining area with.

A monk walked before her and one behind. Their peacefulness gave her the needed feeling of tranquility. As her bare feet felt the grass she stepped onto, she spotted Alexandra, also dressed similarly but holding two flowers in the palms of her hands. They appeared to be soft white stars.

Their eyes held each other's, until they moved up the aisle, side by side to stand before Queen M'Lu.

Previously, they performed the verbal part of their bonding. It was long and the two women went through it automatically. Both were more focused on the private ceremony of the dance that would take place in seclusion with only a few present not only as witnesses but as guardians.

Unlike the dreams they both had, where JG started the dance, Alexandra went first. She danced a short dance of acceptance to JG's first dance, A Shunja, the Dance of Invitation. It had been danced when JG had her first menses. Alexandra had told JG she wanted to take what was done in spirit and put it into the physical, solidifying their stages. Smoothly she flowed into the reply to the Hiri Shunja, the Dance of Attraction that called for her to make her presence known to her pledged. The drum beat in the background at first wasn't noticeable in the first dance, but now it was meant to be felt. Alexandra's body moved around JG and the sweet smell of her essence told Alexandra, she had her rapt attention. She finished her dance, close to JG, but never touching.

JG stepped forward, giving a backward seductive look at Alexandra who was glistening from the physical exertion. JG's dance was about her stamina, her strength and the promise of sensuous nights. Her moves were fast or well measured, depending on what she was telling her bondmate. She stopped in front of Alexandra, holding her hands out. Alexandra smoothly stepped into her arms, and like the old tango, they danced around the grassed area, finally coming to a halt in the middle of the circle. Then they shared a kiss that seared more than one level of awareness.

"I declare this a joining," the Guardian intoned as an unseen bell chimed.

Alexandra stepped back and looked around at those that composed the circle. "Gedaliaha! Sharon! Carol-Maa!" If they were apparitions, they didn't feel it as Alexandra hugged each of them. She turned to her brother, Hadrian. She could feel his presence. He had been standing out of sight behind General Aglauros.

"Hello, Hadrian," she whispered. He enveloped her in his arms and held her close for a long moment.

"Mother," JG whispered, as she held her foster mother tightly.

"It was beautiful, my daughter. I am glad you have finally settled down," she teased. "Young ones would be nice too. Before I get too old to enjoy them."

"I don't know about that mother. She gets into a lot of trouble to be bringing any additional mischief into our lives."

Chuckles were shared by those around them.

"Two peas in a pod," Gedaliaha told everyone. Gedaliaha bowed to the Queens as they joined the group. "Your planet has made it a lovely experience."

Queen M'Lu, her sister and Queen Mother smiled.

Alexandra made the introductions in case anyone had not met in person. The group then moved to the feast, where those of importance would discuss higher matters that Alexandra and JG were grateful, they didn't have to be a part of.

Hadrian found Alexandra and JG sitting on a stone bench that overlooked the ocean.

"So, Hadrie, are you staying for a few days or leaving soon?"

"I leave tonight." He looked apologetic. "You may be able to absorb this energy, but I'm finding a headache doesn't make a good companion when sightseeing."

"You all arrived through the portal," Alexandra guessed.

"We did at the invitation of Arnica's portal guardian. I won't bother to offer you to come back with us."

"Good. And thank you for making it possible for us to travel back on *Rouster* and not *Butterflies* or *Emperors*."

He smiled, looking for a moment worried. "You'll stay within hailing distance of those two, won't you?"

"Of course," Colonel Zohra told him, taking offense at his over protectiveness.

"Don't ask for things that may not be possible to give," General Aglauros said behind him. She gave a hug to Alexandra and then JG.

"I'm leaving Lt. Vanstar with you, to make sure you remember you have a home to be heading to. Don't drive her crazy." Aglauros winked at JG.

"More than likely she'll drive us crazy. That woman is an adrenalin junkie, Mother," JG teased.

Alexandra looked at her new spouse and a smile curved on her lips. They had two weeks to visit Arnica with Kiuzi guards showing them the sights and then they would catch up with *Catching Butterflies* and *Emperors Last Chance*, or so the plan was.

Chapter 27

Alexandra stood on the rock facing the roaring waterfall.



"That is awesome," Gari whispered.

"I don't care how many waterfalls I see in my lifetime; this will be the most magnificent to witness," Alexandra agreed.

"Can you feel the energy it's putting out?"

"Like something tickling my arms?"

"No, that's the spray. Look it's leaving tiny rainbow bubbles on you. Come on. Let's get up close and personal," she leaned in to enjoy Gari's lips.

"Helgas moon, woman! I thought this would lessen," Gari groaned as her legs shook with passion the touch of Alexandra's lips

sent through her.

"Come on. I want to feel the waterfall before we leave..." She was interrupted by a passionate kiss from Gari. "Hmm. We keep this up and we'll spend the night up here," she whispered, though not minding it at all.

They both laughed and started down the trail. At the bottom they stood at the bank of the river.

"Alexandra? Have you tried to contact the Sha'Kar that came with you?"

"The day of our joining. I felt she was there, but it was a light touch." She looked over at the fast-moving river. "Want to try again?"

Gari nodded and turned to make her way over the boulders that framed the river. Alexandra followed.

"That is a strong current," Gari remarked as she balanced on a boulder. She sat and removed her foot wear with Alexandra. Holding hands, they sat quietly with their feet dangling in the water.

When the day's heat was no longer felt on their faces, both women realized that they had been visiting for a long time. They looked at each other and smiled.

"Well, I guess that answers our questions," Alexandra remarked.

"Uh huh. At least we don't have to worry about them asking us to take that Djed back with us."

"A lost Sha'Kar. Who would have guessed?" Alexandra stood up and pulled Gari with her. "I'm hungry."

"Uh huh. Me too," Gari waggled her brows.

"Then come on my lovely. I have something planned for your entertainment."

"You know, Vanstar was delighted to come back with us," Gari mentioned.

"I heard. Do you think she's happier with us than on a big ship?"

Gari laughed. "Maybe. But, we're gonna have to restrict a lot of our activity to our cabin."

"It's just across the corridor from her cabin, isn't it?"

"We'll use the *Yanaba* if things get too noisy...or she can sleep in the *Yanaba*."

"With her feelings still as they are about empathys, she couldn't be assigned to Captain Malchi's group or *Butterflies*. That would leave *Emperor* and they have too many yahoos that would be challenging her to a fight every hour. Very unsettling. I'm sure we can make her voyage interesting. How many possible planets for visiting did *Catching Butterflies* identify on the way here?"

"We can't visit all of them. Besides, I don't want to run into their crew on shore leave or the *Emperors*." Gari said. "Gawds, that's all we need too. Damn dinners with the ships captains."

"Here, here," Alexandra agreed heartily. "When Vanstar seems to be going crazy, we can stop by at one and give her an adventure."

"Hmm."

"And you too love. So, what happened to Horiku?"

"Very hush, hush. No one would talk about her. My guess is that they have plans for her. I saw her leave with the Kiuzi that you met in the sacred caverns."

"Ahh. A different type of warrior. They have a different feeling than the Kiuzi of the Queen's guard. Did you notice that?"

"Yeah. The hairs on my arms stood up." JG shivered.

"Look at the rainbow!"

They both stopped at the grassed shelf and admired the play of light until a kiss was shared.

Epilog

"All systems ready to go," Vanstar reported as she watched the screen on the ship's vitals.

"Blessings have been made and forgiveness given for landing in their pond," Alexandra reported.

Vanstar was happy to be leaving. She was beginning to feel sick on the planet. Headaches and stomach aches from undigested meals was from what Cpl. Wetfoot told her, typical of a person not adjusting to the vibration levels on the planet.

"Okay, let's get back to our home away from home. We have a galaxy to explore!" JG sang out happily.

Alexandra held onto her seat as the shuttle banked to the left, over a mountain and then up into the gray sky. Once they broke orbit, JG began hailing the *Rouster* that had been parked in orbit around Arnica. She and Alexandra had decided that Alexandra would be captain of the *Rouster* while Gari was Colonel when they flew shuttle missions. It sounded simple. When Vanstar heard their decision by her blank stare both women knew she was seeing impossible vignettes where in one case she took direct orders from JG and in other cases from Alexandra.

JG had to assure her that her CO was Alexandra until they reached home port. Vanstar thought it wise not to ask what they thought home port to be, since they both owed allegiances to two different galaxy powers.

"Coming about for docking," Vanstar informed the two officers.

"Docking bay is open. Security has been lowered. It's a go," JG reported.

"Hey, sweetheart, you didn't leave a mess, did you?" Alexandra asked as her hands moved over her screens to verify what the other two reported.

"He's got four fully functioning bots. If the place isn't cleaned..." she looked over at Alexandra and smiled, "that falls under your command."

"Uh huh. Just want to know what you're handing over, ground pounder," she replied.

"Docked and air breathable," Vanstar reported. Rolling her eyes was not permitted. She remembered that in her cadet class. It was considered insubordination.

"It's been upgraded, so I'll give you both a tour. It's also got the latest program on weapons training, or about six stan months ago the latest. It has a master teacher that gives 'owies' if you don't catch on quick enough."

"Now that is worth being a third wheel," Vanstar said.

The two women laughed as Vanstar blushed and then joined in.

Dinner was eaten while examining star maps. *Rouster* was running an in-depth diagnostic on itself. As much as they all wanted to leave quickly, protocols were followed on making sure their ride was shipshape. Both of the larger ships had already departed. They would all be keeping in touch.

"*Captain on the bridge,*" the ship intoned. "*Diagnostics completed and engines are ready to be engaged.*"

"Yessssss!" three voices whooped. Abandoning their food, they raced to the bridge.

Alexandra sat in the captain's chair, JG in the second, and Vanstar covering navigation.

"Captain to crew. Fasten your seatbelts. We got a lot of sightseeing to do before we get home. Navigator, set our course to the first acceptable port and send our intentions to *Butterflies* and the *Emperor*," she ordered.

"Aye, aye Captain. Plot entered and engines engaged. Message has been sent."

"Hang on, everybody, here we come," JG sang.

"Are you sure they said it's alright for us to take these detours?" Vanstar dared to ask.

"Yep. As long as our fuel lasts, was what I heard." Alexandra verified.

"Do they know that this prototype doesn't run out of fuel?" Vanstar asked.

"Not our problem," JG informed her smugly. She glanced at Alexandra.

Lady Dell knows, they both thought.

Vanstar smiled and rechecked the space around them. It was wide open for adventures.

End



To be continued with *Foreign Harbors*