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Reality's Plaything Series Book 4: Savants Ascendant By Will Greenway

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Dedication

This one is dedicated to writers who live in fear of *deus ex machina*. I say *bah!* For those who wanted to see the alpha and omega of savants, first ones, and the ultimate aspects of the Ring Realms universe... here ya go. Don't say I didn't warn you... because I didn't. It was high time that the savants of the Ring Realms started kicking tail instead of being beat down. We've got it here. There's a number of firsts in this book for me. It's my hope that those unique hurdles translate to something memorable and enjoyable for you the reader. May you find what comes after diverting and pleasurable...

A Word (or two) About Mythology

Welcome to the Ring Realms universe, a cosmology populated by magic, technology, gods, goddesses, and multi-verses. Comic fans will feel right at home, but fandom is not necessary to be drawn into the world's magic and heroism. Those learned in mythology may see a name (or a score of them) that they recognize. Intentional. In fact, I've taken heat for not creating my own gods and goddesses. Key to the point is they ARE my gods and goddesses, and you the reader's as well. I wanted something familiar to the readership rather than add EVEN MORE bizarre names to the milieu--something that is one of the all-too-common pitfalls of fantasy writing. If you see a name you recognize, rejoice in that knowledge because where possible I have tried to keep to the spirit of those myths whilst incorporating them into a much larger cosmology. Notice, I say 'spirit of'--please don't flagellate me (however much I might enjoy it) for not adhering more closely to the source myths. Liberal dramatic license has been taken in order to heighten and enrich the story... Enjoy.

Other books in the chronicles of the Ring

Realms

Reality's Plaything Series -- Tales following the adventures of Bannor Starfist.

Reality's Plaything

Neath Odin's Eye

Gaea's Legacy: Eternal's Agenda

Gaea's Legacy: Savants Ascendant

Gaea's Legacy: Infinity Annihilator

Savant's Blood Series -- Tales following the adventures of Wren Kergatha.

Savant's Blood: Shadows of the Avatar

Savant's Blood: Hecate's Bounty

Aesir's Blood

Gaea's Blood

Shaladen Chronicles Series -- Tales following the adventures of Corim Vale.

Shaladen Chronicles: A Knot In Time

Shaladen Chronicles: Anvil of Sorrow

Shaladen Chronicles: Who Mourns the Creator

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What Has Gone Before

For Bannor, what starts as simple inquiry into Janai and Daena's dealings in another kingdom becomes an interview with Advocate Eternal Koass. The ancient creature is looking for 'subject matter specialists' and Bannor, Wren, and Daena are persuaded to assist the Protectorate in dealing with a little problem--an army of a million warriors running rampant through the Ring Realms.

The group accepts and are introduced to several new allies including: Aarlen Frielos, Beia Targallae, Wren's old friend Ziedra, Dulcere the Kriar, Corim, and Senalloy. The group travels to a place in the void simply called a way-point. There Bannor uncovers evidence of a bloody battle and the last stand of a handful of Dulcere's kinsmen. During the investigation, the group encounters Quasar, a rogue commander of the Kriar military. After some initial friction, Quasar is allowed to observe the investigation. Things proceed but despite all his efforts, it seems Bannor might be unable to find a thread of Eternity to lead him to culprits.

As things begin to wind down and Bannor is about to give up, he realizes that some of the perpetrators of the massacre may still be at the way-point. He shortly learns, much to everyone's dismay, that he's right. The discovery immediately turns into a fracas that the group barely survives--they do however get two prisoners and a lead. Mission accomplished.

Bannor, Wren, Daena and Janai return to Malan accompanied by Ziedra, her husband Radian, Dulcere, Senalloy, and Corim who will all be guests of Janai. With his mission over, Bannor turns his attention back to his wedding plans with Sarai and learning everything he must for the ceremony.

Unfortunately, matters at home get upset as well. Assassins have attacked the citadel and the Queen begins an investigation by rounding up all the outsiders. Concerned for her parents' safety Sarai persuades the group to covertly conduct their own investigation. It is during this investigation that Bannor and others are attacked by a new enemy--Kell.

This new entity is amazingly strong and easily defeats them all and at the crux of the encounter, makes yet another change to Daena. The young savant turned First one has now become a true second generation daughter of Gaea.

Not being complicated enough, while on a walk Bannor and Sarai witness a covert meeting between Queen Kalindinai's brother Bertrand Valharesh and one of the King's elite guards. They come to the conclusion that Bertrand may in some way be tied to assassins. It is shortly after that Sarai collapses due to

complications in her pregnancy. It appears the baby immortal developing in her womb has special needs that will result in both their deaths if not treated. Wren's ties to family Felspar are called upon and Cassandra Kel'Ishtauri is asked to consult on the problem.

Despite all the excitement, the wheels of the wedding plans continue to grind forward, Bannor's struggles notwithstanding. It is during a discussion of his troubles that Dulcere and Corim come up with a proposal to enlist Bannor in the ongoing Protectorate investigation in return for teaching him the various things he needs to satisfy the T'Evagduran's ceremony. This the Queen and Sarai agree to, and through a painful process of Kriar "mind magic" Bannor learns several things, including how to speak Elvish and how to better control savant energies.

At a party where Bannor is supposed to demonstrate one of his new "wedding skills" the menace of the Baronians comes to Malan. The King, Queen, family Felspar and all their allies are assaulted by a small army of intruders. The many friends band together and fight back with vicious efficiency and defeat the enemy. As Wren and her brother Azir are preparing to capture and question the commander of the Baronian forces, they are kidnapped by the rogue Kriar Quasar and taken to a far off world...

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Chapter One

Playing Tag

After untold millennia of life, it is not often I am shaken. After knowing me but a handful of kilorevs, the child reached out, grabbed my heart and showed it to me. I will never underestimate him again.

**-- Quasar Lathan Diliaysus,
Prime Tarkath, 1st Sabre Legion**

The devastation of the party chamber looked and felt familiar to Bannor. Friends bleeding and broken, the air tainted with the smell of burned flesh and hair, the drained feeling of fear unraveling in his stomach. The conflict had followed him to Malan. Only now, the opponents were bigger, more vicious, and more organized. The only thing that saved them was that hugely powerful allies had been on hand to fend off the assault.

The multi-tiered hall with its beautiful stone, crystal and glasswork had become a blood-splashed scene of carnage. Smoke still rose from corpses, and bits of cloth and tapestry smoldered from contact with battle magic. The hard granite floor was scored, pitted, and blackened from powerful hits and the crushing strength of those who had done battle. Despite the grisly display, even the youngest of the four to five score party-goers were reacting more with agitation than horror. The Felspar and Frielos families did not like having their fun disturbed.

Bannor pulled at his perspiration-slick silk tunic and scrubbed his hands through his hair. What a mess. The King and Queen, along with Baron and Baroness looked like they had run through a briar patch, cut, scratched, and bruised with their fine clothes in tatters. Few of Loric's family, or the many friends that had been with them escaped injury.

"I am terribly sorry, Ri," Loric said to Wren's mother. The gray-haired warrior looked a wreck, his scratched muscular torso showing through rips in his fine silk tunic. "That fellow was taking everything I had to just to tie him up. Li just jumped in there--" He shook his head. "I couldn't pull my strike."

Bannor held up a hand. "She's okay. I can feel her. Her life is strong."

Ziedra floated down from where she was surveying the room. The dark-haired savant of magic was one of the few that showed little effects of the battle, though her shiny dress was dotted with enemy blood. "If Wren was enhanced the way I was,"

Ziedra added. "It would take a lot to seriously hurt her."

Loric let out a breath slowly. "I was striking to slay an *elder* ..."

"Did it occur to you that we needed that commander for questioning?" Aarlen said with a scowl.

Loric rubbed the back of his head. "Protectorate business wasn't exactly at the forefront of my thinking at that moment. I was trying to avoid getting killed."

"I-- *want*--my children back," Euriel said stomping her foot hard enough to rattle the floor. "Bannor you said you could track them... can you or can't you?"

"They're really far away," he answered. He narrowed his eyes, casting his nola power toward that distant location through his link to Eternity. "It is someplace--" He frowned. "Strange. A place of metal. So huge..."

"I know where they are," Eclipse said, rubbing the white crescent tattoo on his gold face. "She took them back to her estate on Homeworld."

<How do you know?> Dulcere asked.

Eclipse sighed. Bannor could feel the male Kriar's discomfort. "We were mates for fifty millennia." He touched the jewel glowing near his collarbone. "She does not hide herself from me."

"And you can sense them there?" Dulcere said to Bannor.

He looked around and shrugged. "I sense that maybe she didn't want to cut them off." He probed that far away place. "There is great energy in that place, I sense she could have sealed it, but chose not to."

"Bait," Aarlen murmured. "It's not us she wants to follow. The Baronians..."

One of the other Kriar, a slender elfin-looking female with

floor-length hair frowned. Gown swishing around her body she shifted forward and touched Dulcere on the arm. It was then that Bannor recognized the similarity between the two females. That must be Dulcere's mother. She spoke in clear concise common language. "Can she really mean to do that Varkath Shargris?" she asked. "Lead enemy combatants back to Homeworld?"

Eclipse bowed his head. "I cannot say her intentions, Vatraena. We have been-- *separated*--since the timequake incident. For a while, she thought me dead..."

"As did we all," the Vatraena interrupted. The female moved forward to stand beside Dulcere. She dipped her head to the group, glowing blue eyes heavy lidded. "Apologies to those who do not know me. I am Marna Solaris, Kriar Vatraena and," She put a hand on Dulcere's shoulder. "Dulcere's dam." She looked around. "If Quasar is on Homeworld, and I believe Eclipse, you will need my assistance."

"Homeworld?" Euriel frowned, looking up at Marna. "What is this Homeworld?"

"Remember the place we showed you in Sarai's quarters?" Ziedra asked.

Euriel nodded. She shifted and put an arm around her husband. The red-haired man pulled her close.

"It is like that place," Ziedra said. "Only much bigger, big enough that all the people of Titaan could each stand a league apart and still fit into some of the larger chambers."

Euriel's eyes widened. King T'Evagduran and Kalindinai also expressed shock with open mouths.

"You must be exaggerating," Sarai piped up by Bannor's side. "That would take something..."

"Her simile is well composed," Marna said with a hand held to her breast. "Working together my race spent tens of millions of season-cycles building it. Just the estates of some the elder families would seem like a world to your folk."

"Tens of *millions*? " Daena breathed. She looked to Bannor. "An entire people building something for that long..."

"Building with the magic we saw on the way-point," Bannor said. "That's..." He swallowed. He had an active imagination, but simply couldn't grasp it.

"Look," Tal said. "This is no problem. Counsel Solaris, just give me permission we'll go in and retrieve them."

The Kriar woman frowned. "Lord Falor, on Homeworld the Shael Dal are *guests*. " She emphasized the word. "No Protectorate law has been broken, so you have no authority there."

"Lady Solaris," Euriel gritted in a forced voice. "If this Quasar is luring those Baronian monsters to her, I do *not* want my children in the middle of that!"

The Vatraena held up a hand. "Apologies again, I simply had to make clear to Commander Falor that he will not go storming aboard Homeworld to swing his sword wherever he may. We have laws, and military people of our own."

"Isn't Quasar like one of your military leaders?" Bannor asked.

"Indeed," Marna said. "Which is why more care must be taken. Nowhere is Quasar more powerful than on Homeworld in her own demesnes."

"So, what do you propose we do?" Aarlen asked. The woman stroked her throat. "I must admit, I admire her strategy. The Baronians won't lightly approach Homeworld, but they cannot ignore the capture of a high-ranking officer. If the Baronians attack Homeworld, the council must react, they can no longer hide their heads in the sand."

Lady Solaris frowned. "Yes, this is obviously a well-considered design on Quasar's part, she was simply awaiting the proper opportunity." She drew a breath and focused on Eclipse. "Varkath Shargris, do you still serve the interests of the Kriar?"

The tall gold warrior nodded. "I do, Vatraena."

"Will you act again as an agent in service to the council and myself?"

"I will," he answered.

"Commander Falor, commander Frielos, I will give you warrants to conduct operations on Homeworld. However, you operate solely at the discretion of my daughter and Varkath Shargris." She cast her gaze to Dulcere and then raised her eyes to Eclipse. "I want Wren and Azir Kergatha back unharmed if possible. If it can be managed, I want to avoid a Kriar/Baronian war, failing that I want the scope of the conflict minimized and controlled. You have white seal authority in this matter, do you understand?"

Eclipse crossed his wrists over his chest and bowed his head. "Yes, Vatraena."

Dulcere duplicated the gesture.

"What about the rest of us?" Bannor asked. "They are our friends and family."

"We will not exclude you." She glanced around the chamber. "Quasar wants to be found, but she will not make it easy."

"Why did she take Wren and Azir?" Euriel wanted to know. "What do they have to do with this?"

"No doubt she saw as I did, the ability of this assemblage to destroy the Baronians. She cannot kill them all herself, so she baits both them and us where we have no choice but deal with the enemy."

King T'Evagduran growled. "And what does she have against these creatures, and for that matter what is it that they are after?"

"The Baronians that attacked here tonight are after an artifact of power," Aarlen informed him. "Something of such power that we

believe it may be able to reshape a cosmos."

"What?" Euriel said, eyes going wide.

"Well," Bannor said. "Maybe. I believe I've seen visions of this thing. It is the essence of creation, which can also annihilate. Its true power doesn't matter. It's what these Baronians think it's worth and what they are willing to risk to get it. Especially if there are a million of them like Koass told me."

"A--" The word seemed to stick in King T'Evagduran's throat. He brushed at his hair, gaze panning the carnage in the chamber, and the huge bodies prostrate on the stone floor. "A *million* of those brutes? A fraction of that number could crush every capital on Titaan."

"Good thing they aren't interested in Titaan," Euriel said.

"That's not true," Ziedra said. "Wren said something in the middle of the fight that I think is true. They were after Bannor. They want those agents back that we captured at the way-point. They may focus on getting that commander back, but they still want their spies back. At the way-point, after the four of us blew the drek out of their coven, Bannor basically introduced himself to them. They probably think he's a major player in that whole operation. I'd lay odds that they will come after him again."

"You introduced yourself?" Sarai growled, frowning at him with hands on hips.

He rolled his eyes. "Star, it wasn't like 'hello how are you', we exchanged names--it's a battlefield thing--it shows respect for the enemy."

His wife-to-be shook her head. "You gave a warmage your *name*? You *never* tell your true name to strangers! I know I've told you that before!"

"Star, that's just a myth, you can't get magicked just by saying your name..." His voice trailed off as he saw the furrowed brows and shaking heads of all the mages in the circle. "...right?"

"That's my fault," Ziedra said running a hand through her dark hair. "I should have said something. At the time, I didn't think they would come after Bannor. Since they couldn't pursue Aarlen, he's the logical choice."

Loric massaged the bridge of his nose. "This is a fine kettle. We can't just go looking for Wren. We have to protect Kul'Amaron from a possible follow-up."

Queen Kalindinai had both hands gripping her hair. "Bannor, how--" She muttered in a higher than normal pitch. " *How*, do you do this? It's just unfathomable--" She let out an exasperated breath.

The pain in the Queen's face made a pang in his heart. "Matradomma, honestly I had no idea--"

The Queen held up a hand. "Stop, it was a rhetorical--" She halted with wide eyes and focused on him. "I was speaking in Elvish... and you... *Dykeeni? How...* " She shook herself and clenched her fists. "Never mind." She looked around the circle. "What is the likelihood of those creatures returning?"

"My niece is right," Aarlen said. "They want those spies. Bannor is their only link to them. After getting their arses handed to them, they are going to take this place very seriously. They will return for paybacks if nothing else."

King T'Evagduran thumped a fist against his forehead and gritted his teeth. "This is not good. If I brought every mage and top warrior in the kingdom we do not have the power here to repel a larger group."

"I'll just leave," Bannor said. "There's no reason for them to attack here, if I'm elsewhere."

"Don't be silly," the Queen said. "Of course they will. You don't chase a lone warrior. You attack their base of operations. There's more information and resources to be gained."

Senalloy pressed her hands to her face and drew a breath. "Matradomma is correct. We showed them a lot of power, but

not more than they can overcome. That was only a single platoon, with six elite. If they come back it will be with a full assault company. The same force they used to take the way-point."

"I--" the King started to say something and was interrupted as one of the elf commanders came up and whispered in his ear. "Pardon me I will rejoin you in a moment." He bowed to the circle of warriors and stepped back. He then stepped into a small circle of higher-ranking soldiers.

"How do we fight something like that!?" Sarai asked, hands knotting in the hem of her gown. "I saw that vision Ziedra showed us. Those Kriar were annihilated and their warriors are elders!"

"The Kriar don't know magic. We do," Loric said. "They got through the shields here because of the power of their mages. The enchantments of this citadel can be considerably reinforced. We can deny them teleportation the way they tried to deny us. We can also minimize their stealth and etherlock tricks."

"House Frielos has a guard contingent trained and armed to combat Baronians," Aarlen remarked. "Of course, they'd have to be stationed here."

Vatraena Solaris nodded. "Since we are responsible for involving Bannor in this. The Kriar council will make twenty of the first Sabre legion elite available to you. Belkirin Cirrus who currently commands them is on detached duty and working with the Shael Dal. Having come from Karanganoi Homeworld from where these Baronians hail, he is extremely knowledgeable in their capabilities and tactics."

"Those are both very generous offers," The Queen said shaking her head. "The timing of this... it is so phenomenally *bad* ."

"You're not thinking of turning their help down, Mother?" Sarai asked with wide eyes.

"This is the second attack in as many days," the Queen answered. "I can only thank Ishtar that none of the guard were

killed or we'd already have suffered an almost unrecoverable blow to confidence in our leadership. As it is, even though there are already orders to keep this quiet, it will leak out. The power of these creatures was quite evident, and the fact that the members of a party repelled them balances out the fact that our security was so lax as to let them in the first place."

"Mother, no citadel on Titaan could have kept those monsters out!" Janai said. "How could this possibly reflect negatively on us?"

The Queen frowned. "If we hadn't been associating with outsiders like Bannor and Daena, it wouldn't have happened in the first place, now would it?"

Bannor felt a slam in his chest. There it was, blunt but true.

"Mother!" Sarai cried.

"Don't raise your voice to me," Kalindinaï snapped. "That's the way the noble houses will see it. We, *I*, chose to accept Bannor into this house." She gestured around. "This is the consequence. Your Father and I have no choice but to accept any blame as a result of our choice. The result is *all* the houses care about. I happen to think Bannor brings a great deal to the house in terms of integrity, heart, and compassion... but I am in the minority. In order to retain the confidence of the houses, we can't have even more outsiders swarming over the citadel."

"Damn this is a thorny problem, Kal," Euriel said. "I wish we could stay and help you solve it. We have to go after Wren and Azir."

Bannor stepped over and put a hand on Euriel's shoulder. He cast his nola senses out to Wren and Azir. The connection was just strong enough for him to know they were healthy. Agitated, upset, a little scared, all to be expected if they were being held against their will. Not enough fear to suggest they were any immediate danger. "Lady Euriel, please let's see if we can't help solve the defense problem first," he said. "I can sense Wren and she's okay, she's conscious and not fearful. If you wish, I will contact Quasar directly--I doubt I can make her bring them back

but I can get her attention."

"You have a way to make Quasar communicate with you?" the Vatraena asked.

"I believe so," he answered with a nod. "Let's say, I can make her not want to ignore me."

"Well, then," Euriel growled. "Leave us to that... I will give her a chance to explain herself before I knock in her teeth..."

The King stepped back into the circle. He focused on Bannor for a moment with his amber eyes. He rubbed absently at a cut on his cheek.

"If I heard right, I do not believe communicating with this creature will do any good. She will anticipate anything you have to say, threats included. Our biggest problem is as my wife said, because of limited confidence accepting outside assistance into our ranks will be committing political suicide."

Dorian raised a finger. "What about inside assistance?"

"Pardon?" the King said with a frown.

"Well," Dorian said. "Aarlen's Sen'Gen are a bit obvious. However, if we can somehow get your guard staff out of the citadel we could have some disguised stand-ins who are a little more equal to those Baronian elite..." Dorian put a hand on white-haired Desiray's shoulder. The shapely woman smiled and her body shimmered and changed. In an instant she looked like an elf with glowing green eyes and silver hair.

Kalindinai blinked. When she spoke, it was with an incredulous tone. "Shape change a whole contingent of defenders?"

Dorian shrugged. "Is that a problem?" She looked around.

Kalindinai's gaze tracked to Euriel, then to Cassandra, Loric, Ziedra, Aarlen and her daughters. "Granted, not out of the question with these resources, but..."

"If we clean out the entire guard staff that should give you some breathing space, not to mention keeping them out of harm's way."

"I'm starting to warm to the idea, Jhaan," Kalindinai said. "We know that the houses have many eyes among the guard staff. Those agents cannot report what they are not present to see. If the replacements look like the guards they replace, then any other spies on the staff might report something odd but the scale of this thing is so preposterous that I don't think the houses would dare accuse us of it."

King Jhaan rubbed his chin. "Yes, but how do we get the entire staff out? I mean if we send all of them on leave, it will definitely be a cause for concern."

"Your elite shouldn't be a problem," Senalloy told them. "They go on solo missions all the time. Send them all on missions they can't discuss with one another. It's the regulars that will be tough. Especially in the limited time we have."

"Mother, what about a plague outbreak?" Ryelle suggested. "Remember, when we had to send most of the staff home that one time? The news of that assassin has already leaked. We say that the assassin managed to spread a magical disease before she was captured. That way you can send all the non-essential regulars and elite home until the risk is abated. If you say the disease only affects elves, you can even excuse extra outsiders being on the premises in the interest of not risking Elven lives."

"Whoa, that's pretty devious," Dorian lauded.

"Yes," Kalindinai responded with a frown. "It's plausible enough to work too."

"All right, I think we can work with that," King Jhaan said. "Still, we would be trusting the security of Kul'Amaron to these strangers. The Baronians are not the only threat to the citadel. Who would these stand-ins be? What assurances would we have?"

Dorian grinned, she looked down then glanced over to Senalloy.

"Well, in my mind, the best way to fight a Baronian is with another Baronian. I know twelve elite who would be happy for the opportunity to get a little payback."

"Luthice and Senalloy," Aarlen said with a nod. "And the rest of the Baronian refugees working for Isis."

King T'Evagduran raised an eyebrow. "Twelve, elite elders like lady Senalloy?"

"Yes," Senalloy confirmed. "Luthice is my sister. In matters of security, she surpasses me. I believe she and I could persuade the others to participate."

"Twelve doesn't fill all the billets," Tal said. "You need, what--fifty or sixty?"

"There are fifty-six elite constantly on staff in the Kul'Amaron," the King said.

"Well, I can get some Shael Dal, to stand in," Tal offered. "Arabella, T'Gor, and Tigress--perhaps Megan and Adwena. I don't know how well they'll take to this shape changing stuff."

"We have a means to disguise our warriors to this need," Marna offered. "That would give you twenty more. I am quite confident in their trustworthiness and ability to serve the needs of your security."

"Kylie and Millicent would probably help us," Bannor added. "You could probably get enough Chosen to fill in the rest. Especially, if you ask Idun and Sif."

"If I ask Mother for assistance, she will insist on coming," Euriel said.

"Why is that a problem?" Bannor said. "There's no guarantee we'll find Quasar before the Baronians do. She'd be pretty helpful. It's her grand-daughter after all."

"I dislike asking Mother for help," Euriel growled. She shuddered and clenched her fists. "You're right though, she will

be most unpleasant if I do not involve her in this."

"So," Tal said ticking off on his fingers. "A handful of Baronian elite, some Shael Dal, four squads of Kriar elite, and a bunch of Valkyrie." He shook his head. "That's one arse-kicking defense detail. They could hold off a couple companies of Baronians easy."

King Jhaan rubbed his chin, brow furrowed over his amber eyes. He glanced to his wife.

Kalindinai's face was set in a stern expression, glowing eyes narrowed in concentration. She shook her head. "I can't bring myself to worry about the politics right now. These Baronians are too dangerous. The most important thing is protecting the lives of our citizens. If the council wants to charge us, let them." She rocked her head back, then looked to the King. "It makes me uncomfortable, but in the short time we have it will give us the best chance. Bannor's idea with the Chosen is inspired. I trust Kylie and Millicent, having them as the balance of this defense force would make me feel secure indeed." She looked to Dorian. "How long to recruit these Baronians?"

"A bell or so, Matradomma," Dorian answered.

"I can have the Shael Dal here in half a bell," Tal said.

"I will call to have the Sabres mobilized," Marna said. "They can be here before the next bell."

"It shouldn't take long to get Mother here," Euriel said. "She can contact Kylie and Millicent."

"With Kalindinai's help, Cassandra and I can start working on the citadel defenses," Loric said.

"So, who's going after Wren and Azir?" Tal asked. "We need Bannor obviously. I'll bring my buddy Algernon in case we need extra tracking, my wife will be a help--she's really up on this Kriar artifice stuff. Whitey, you're in on this, right?"

Aarlen nodded. "I will go, I will request that Beia, and my

daughters stay here to help with the defense."

"Myself and Belkirin Dulcere will be with you," Eclipse said.

"I will be there as well," the Vatraena said.

Dulcere looked over in surprise. <Mother?>

The wispy Kriar woman smiled. "A few Baronians do not frighten me. I shall invite Dominique along. She's quite sturdy."

"Excellent," Tal said. "Almost the same as the Karanganoi exploration team. So, Ri, you and Van are going obviously."

"Obviously," Euriel answered. "And probably my mother."

"I want to go," Sarai said with a growl.

"Not a chance," Kalindinai said. "You're pregnant, and you still need those treatments."

"Allow me to go," Ziedra said. "I can hold my own."

"If my wife goes, I go," Radian said.

"I'm with you if you'll have me," Damay said.

"You might need me," Daena said. "I'll go if you want."

"I'm coming," Desiray said. "Wren is almost as much my kid as Ri's. You may need someone savvy with traps."

"That's eighteen," Tal said. "That's already a bigger team than I'd like, but we may have to split up. Everyone good with that line up?"

"Sounds like an awesome team to me," Loric remarked. "Every possible discipline and skill seems covered."

"We did plenty of damage in Gladshiem with a lot less," Bannor said. "I'm going to go get ready to go. When do we meet back here?"

"You're sure that Wren is all right?" Euriel asked him.

"Yes," he answered. "I'm not saying we should dawdle, but make every preparation we can before we go. I'm going to go make certain she and Azir are safe."

Euriel's brow furrowed. "Bannor?"

Sarai scowled at him. "All right, what are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking I need to get out of these clothes and into some leathers," he answered. "So, what time?"

"Damn it, I hate hesitating so long," Euriel said. She glanced at her husband Vanidaar.

The red-haired man stared at Bannor. "You're certain they are in good health?"

"I haven't felt a change in their condition. They're frustrated, angry, concerned... I sense a little pain from Wren, but I think that's from getting hit by Loric's sword."

"All right," Vanidaar said. "A bell? Is that enough time? Where do we meet?"

"On the south steps," the King recommended.

"Got it," Bannor said. "Daena could I get you tell help me with something?"

The auburn-haired savant stared at him with glowing green eyes. "Uhhh, sure."

"Let's go. *Matradomma, Dom'Ista*," he bowed to the King and Queen. "My apologies for this mess, I wish there were something I could have done to prevent all this."

The King and Queen nodded to him, neither seeming to have words to answer that.

He touched Euriel on the shoulder and whispered in her ear. "I'm going to check up on Wren and Azir for you. Wish me luck."

The powerful mage looked at him with wide blue eyes. "You--of course you can--please be careful."

"I will," he nodded to her.

He stepped up to Sarai who was eying him.

"You know, I don't want you to go," she growled.

"You know I have to. Come on." He headed for the exit.

Daena followed, and an apparently curious Janai followed as well.

"Bannor, you're planning to get in trouble," Sarai said walking quickly to keep up with him as they climbed the steps and headed out into the cold night air. "I can tell from your eyes."

"Yes," he agreed. He drew a breath as they crossed the balcony and started down the ramp into the yard. "I'm going to look around ahead of the team. Just to satisfy myself."

"You want me to go with you?" Daena said.

He nodded.

"You mean astrally?" Sarai asked.

"Yes," he answered. "I didn't want to get Euriel's hopes up. If we can guide Wren and Azir's astral forms back, Euriel may be able to pull them back."

"Like she did with us!" Daena said, thumping him on the shoulder. "That's brilliant!"

"Yes," he said with a frown. "It's just that Quasar may have a way to block it. So, we explore first, see what we can learn."

"I thought you couldn't pass through metal," Sarai said, as her

feet started clicking on the bridge that crossed into Green Run.

"Not a lot, but even a small gap is enough to slip through. We just need to try and see."

"Brother-to-be, I just hope this plan of yours doesn't make things worse," Janai said. "You and Daena are precious to me, I'd hate for you to get your taos trapped in that far off place."

"Think happy thoughts," he said. "Hopefully, we've already gotten our quota of bad luck for the month..."

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Chapter Two

Void Trek

I almost don't even bother with fear anymore. I know something will make an end of me sooner or later. For now, I'm resigned to dodging death as long as I possibly can. I just keep an eye out and watch my back. Worrying about getting killed simply drains any enjoyment I might get out of life.

**-- Bannor Nalthane Starfist,
Prince Conjugal of Malan**

On his way back to their quarters Bannor resigned himself to the difficulty of the task he had proposed. Still, he had to try. If they were successful, it would circumvent the potentially costly need of going to that alien Homeworld and trying to spar with a creature that in many ways was more powerful than a pantheon lord.

Sarai walked at his side, her threads seething with frustration. He felt her tension in the way she gripped his wrist. She walked with stiff determined strides, her jaw set and eyes straight

ahead. She had given up protesting verbally--there was no point to it. Emotions drove his wife-to-be only so far, she could see reason and necessity. That level-headed part of her was one of the things about her he admired. It was a trait he didn't see often outside of their close circle of friends.

Practical or not, Sarai hated being left out of anything. He didn't like excluding her, she was smart, experienced, and inventive. Astral travel was just not something she could do--it was a savants-club only activity. Even Wren, with her far greater experience had trouble keeping up with he and Daena.

They entered their quarters with Daena and Janai close behind. Bannor sat on the foyer bench and removed his dress boots and coat, handing them to the maid that rushed over.

Sarai folded her arms. When she spoke, her tone was brittle and raw. "So, what are we supposed to do if you get yourself trapped?"

Bannor looked up at her. She frowned back, glowing violet eyes narrowed. He rose and gathered her close in his arms and pressed his cheek against hers. "I'll be okay," he whispered. "If we're not back in a bell just yell for one of the elders. Somebody will come up with a plan."

She pushed back from him. "That's your contingency!? Let one of the elders figure it out?"

He pressed his lips to a line and held her shoulders. "Star, if there's one thing I've learned, it's to have faith in our friends. I can't let Wren down now--we owe her too much."

"Hmph." Sarai snorted. "I think that's the other way around. You got her out of Hel. She owes *you* ."

He shrugged. "Then I might as well keep her indebted then." He looked up at Daena. "You okay with this?"

The auburn-haired girl grinned. "I'm always up for an adventure, you know that."

"Is this dangerous?" Janai asked head tilted and one glowing amber eye closed. "I mean, more dangerous than usual?"

Bannor frowned and rubbed the back of his head. "Well, there's less risk for Daena than for me. She can last a lot longer outside of her body than I can. In fact, even if her body were to die, I don't think it would kill her--just make life inconvenient until she found a body to bind with."

The girl ran a hand through her wavy locks looking uncomfortable, but not deterred.

"Well, that's an *inconvenience* I'd rather not deal with," the second princess responded with growl.

"Trust me," he soothed. "I don't want to end up needing to be rescued myself." He leaned into Sarai for a kiss. "Please don't worry, I'll be careful."

Sarai resisted but kissed him after a moment. "You better."

"Come on." He lead the way to the conference circle. He plunked himself down on the cushions and lay out flat. "If we're not back in a bell yell for help."

Janai brushed back her long dark hair and put hands on hips. "Tell me again why you need, Daena?"

"Because she's about twenty times as strong as me in astral form," he responded. "She's also much faster. We have to cover a big distance in a short time, so for this to work I need her to tow me out there."

Daena kissed Janai on the forehead. "Don't worry Momsa, he'll take care of me."

She sat down on the couch across the circle from him, taking the combs out of her hair, and kicking off her slippers. Pulling her hair to one side she reclined on the cushions and let out a breath. "Let's see if I remember how to do this."

Bannor composed himself, focusing inward on the tracery he

knew to be his 'self'. He focused on the pattern, pushing himself into the tangled weave of threads and out of the confines of his physical body.

All sense of weight and tactile sensation faded, replaced by a distant tingling. The thudding of his heart became a far off pulsing.

The scene of the room, Sarai and Janai with concerned expressions leaning over he and Daena came into his view. He drew a non-existent breath, his ephemeral spirit-body not having substance to echo the habits of his physical form. Focusing his will, he made himself more 'solid', more tangible as he floated in the air above his body.

Startled, Sarai jerked back. She frowned up at him. "Damn, I've seen you do this several times, and it still catches me by surprise."

He shrugged. Not really certain the gesture was communicated as when in his physical body. <Sorry,> he thought to her. He looked to Daena. She had not yet emerged from her body. The big auburn-haired girl lay on the divan, body composed, brow furrowed but face otherwise placid. <Wonder what-->

His thought was interrupted as light erupted from Daena's body causing Janai to reel back and Sarai to shield her eyes. The young first one's spirit form emerged from her flesh in crackle of power.

She floated above her body, but her form appeared as a solid white rendition of herself, like a finely carved figure of marble. Her spirit form was even substantial enough to cast shadows on the furniture beneath her. The young woman's long hair flowed around her as if she were floating in water. She looked down at her body, then examined her hand. <Whoa.>

Janai was still rubbing at her eyes. "Are you okay, Mimi?"

<I feel great,> Daena answered. She drifted over and touched Janai's shoulder. <Whoa, I can feel you.>

Janai reached up to Daena's hand. "You're warm." She looked down to Daena's body. "I don't understand. How can you be solid? You're--down--there."

Daena shrugged. <Part of being a first one I guess.>

<Damn, Kell's change to you was even more major than I thought,> Bannor marveled. <Still, we don't have much time. We can ponder later.>

"Will Daena be all right like this?" Janai asked.

<She just seems substantial, she's still really only a spirit, it's just she has a really, really *strong* spirit now.>

Janai's glowing amber eyes were wide. She touched Daena's arm. The alabaster version of the girl smiled down at her.

"I guess," Janai responded, a concerned expression still on her round face.

<Show me the way, Boss,> Daena thought to him.

He paused to give Sarai an intangible hug, allowing his essence, that of his love and unborn child to mingle. <I love you,> he told both of them.

Sarai blinked and sniffed. After a moment, she nodded without saying anything.

He stretched out his senses, following his connection to Eternity and to Wren. He found her thread as he had several times before. Focused on that far away contact he drifted to Daena. <Okay, I have her.> He reached out the young woman, touching the essence of her 'self' and willed the knowledge to her.

Daena nodded. <Damn, it *is* far away. All right, let's go.> She took hold of him and towed him upward.

Together they climbed into the starry sky of Malan with increasing speed. The radiant city gleamed beneath them, glistening rivers and glades sparkling in the moonlight. The

details dwindled in instants, merging with the landscape of hills and vegetation. Snowy mountains like majestic shadows grew small as the land curved and grew tiny beneath their feet. The livid ellipse of morning burned on a horizon thousands of leagues away.

<This is so beautiful,> Daena breathed. <I don't know why we don't do this more often!>

<Because it makes people testy, they don't like the idea of us wandering around without our bodies.>

<Hmph,> Daena acknowledged with a mental snort.

In moments, Titaan became nothing more than a blue green disk striped with clouds and storm systems.

<How do you feel?> he asked her.

<I feel awesome. It always felt great to leave my body, but after whatever Kell did to me--I--> The thought didn't translate.

<Good, do you still have the line?>

He could feel her drawing a breath. <Yes.>

<Ready when you are.>

Daena took another glance back at the world she had made her home for the past few scoredays. <All right, yell if it gets to be too much.> Though it was purely for visual effect, she floated beneath him and took his other hand. <Here we go...>

The young first one pulled and the universe seemed to become a streaked tunnel as space flew around them. At the same time, pain cascaded through him, as though knives were shredding through his ephemeral form.

<Arrrgh! Stop! Stop! Stop!> he gritted.

Daena slowed in an instant. <Bannor are you okay?>

Had he normal lungs he would be gasping. They were alone in a vast void, the stars like distant pinpricks. A massive pinwheel of light gleamed above them. He could feel his far off body trembling, his physical heart pounding. The speed burned. He thought his recent practice might have made him strong enough to withstand it, but Daena was simply too powerful. Back at Green Run he sensed Sarai at his side fretting, seeing the pain echoed in his form. He was going to get a scolding for certain.

<Bannor?> Daena asked again.

<I--I-- ow.>

<Damn, I didn't mean to-->

<Not your fault,> he managed to wheeze the thought. After a moment, he composed himself. <That didn't hurt you?>

Daena shrugged. <I liked it actually.> She looked around them. <Whoa, what is that big thing? It sure is pretty--like a big flower of light.>

He shook his head. He was certain Dulcere or one of the others would know.

<Well, I better take us back,> she told him. <If it's going to hurt you that much.>

<Damn, wait, let me think.>

What caused the pain? He had no body. Was the velocity so great that even his spirit form was being harmed? Daena was almost solid and experiencing no distress at all.

Daena studied him with a furrowed brow. After a moment, her pale expression brightened. <I know!> She moved close and wrapped her arms and legs around him.

<Hey!>

<This'll work,> she insisted.

He struggled as the girl seemed to flow around him. Her enormous strength was pulling him in before he could even resist. Like being submerged in warm water, he felt himself engulfed in her spirit. He felt the thudding of a powerful heart.

Daena shuddered around him. <Oooh. That feels nice.>

A moment of terror took hold of him. She had absorbed his spirit into hers, made him a part of her!

<Daena!>

<You're--okay,> she seemed to snuggle closer. <Mmmm.> She turned her attention away from him. <Now.>

They shot forward. The universe gyrated around them, streamers of light sizzling around them in a dizzying array. Bannor felt no pain, but a queasy, uncomfortable intimacy made another tremble go through his far off body.

<Faster,> she murmured. The gyrations of the universe increased. <Faster.> The depths of Eternity blurred together in whirl of colors spinning by at unfathomable velocity. <Not yellin now, are you, Brother?> She smiled in his mind with wicked superiority.

<Daena,> his thought was tiny. <You're scaring me.>

<You should be scared,> she said. <I finally have you where I want you. I might not let you go.>

He didn't respond to that--didn't need to. She could feel and sense his every thought.

The whirling lights exploded to a stop. The stars had been replaced by what appeared to be a titanic barricade. Geometric shapes were carved into the surface in leagues deep notches. In an alien way, it looked like how a city might from above, only this was in front of them and stretched in every direction.

<Who would put a wall in the middle of the void?> Daena muttered. <How?>

They drifted down into a massive crack ten times the size of any canyon that Bannor had ever been in. At close range, he identified the substance as some kind of *metal*. The perspective made him dizzy. The construct went on for thousands of leagues in every direction.

<What is this?> Daena wanted to know. <The trace comes here, but there's nothing alive.> He felt her frown. <Could this be their 'homeworld'? The place is dead!>

He wriggled, feeling Daena's cloying warmth closing in around him. The most uncomfortable part was that it had begun to feel good. He tried to ignore that. <When you stand in the middle of desert it looks flat. We're too close to it I think.>

Daena didn't disagree. In a surge of will, the girl leaped them away from the surface hundreds of thousands of leagues. At this range their home of Titaan had been a disk like a moon in the night sky. The impossible structure still looked to be, for all intents and purposes, a wall floating in the void although Bannor noted what looked like a slight curving of the surface.

<That's crazy,> Daena murmured in his mind.

<They said it was big.>

<I know they did--but...> her thought trailed off. In exasperation, they backed up yet further, streaking away from Wren's trace at Daena's horrendous speed. At some immense distance, they were finally able to discern the limits of the thing, visible as a black disk blocking the view of the stars in the backdrop.

<Lords,> Daena breathed. <It's-->

<Big,> Bannor muttered in awe. <Tens of millions of leagues across.>

<It's just not-- *possible*.>

<Really? Says the girl that came half way across Eternity in a

few breaths?>

That seemed to take the legs out of her awe. She seemed to resolve herself. <There must be a way in.> They streaked forward, taking a course around the now obvious sphere.

<Are you going to let me out?> he asked.

<You're staying in there,> she determined. <It's the one place I can't lose you. If we get in trouble--it will be together. So, enjoy the ride.>

<Ever?> he insisted.

<Oh, you might talk me into it. You feel awfully nice in there.>

That's what he was afraid of.

They streaked around the spherical structure, at intervals there were raised projections that rose up from the surface for leagues. Nothing evidenced their purpose or function.

Daena paused with hands on hips. <You're sure you have the right trace? This is silly! The thing is so big that simply to see where we're going we have to stay back so far from the surface we couldn't see a door even if it was a hundred leagues across.>

<Let's use our brains for a moment,> Bannor said.

<I'm listening.>

How did they find the way in? As Daena said, it was nearly impossible. If they used her speed, they would never see the opening. Any slower and they could spend an eon looking and never locate it. When they were far enough back to survey a significant portion of the surface, even the most enormous of details blended together.

At the way-point they had seen the craft that the Kriar piloted in their voyages through the void. How would *they* find the door in such vast construction? The thought made him pause. How did they know Wren was here? He had followed a thread here. A

magical signal, like smoke rising from a far off hilltop. It was a certainty, that the Kriar would have a way to signal their ships. Naturally, such a signal would show the way *in* . He could follow such a signal if he knew what to look for.

Without the native power of his body, and being so far from it, his thread sight was greatly weakened. It didn't help that he was inside of Daena, her milky essence further clouding his perceptions.

He delved into his nola vision. As he went deeper and deeper into the view, it became obvious that this thing was *not* dead. Energies of all kinds radiated into space around it, most of them completely invisible to normal vision. The majority of the power seemed to pour from the raised sections that were evenly distributed around the sphere. That didn't help much. Like Homeworld itself, it was too big and too much, there wasn't anything that was different enough to follow. Maybe he was thinking about it wrong. What *did* they know? The ships. He remembered Daena saying she had felt a special kind of falling force coming from them.

<Daena,> he thought to her. <Remember when you said you sensed something special coming from the Kriar void ships?>

She paused. <Yes.>

<Maybe we just need to find and follow one of the ships to the door.>

<Find a ship? That's like trying to find a pebble in the ocean. I'd have to be close.>

<Those ships were docked, not under way. I'm thinking there'll be a lot more to sense.>

He felt Daena shrug. <Nothing to lose I suppose.> She seemed to compose herself, then they shot forward again. Her speed was so great that a complete orbit of the gargantuan sphere took only the span of a long breath. As she finished a circuit she altered their course slightly so they would cover a different area. After their fifth circuit Daena paused, and headed for the surface.

They stopped and hovered over a single larger trench that could be no less than ten leagues across and more deep. The giant notch continued in both directions to the limit of their vision.

<Whoa, how did we miss this?> Bannor asked.

<It all looks the same from a hundred million leagues away.>

<Did you sense this?>

<Didn't sense a whit, I just kept seeing this irregularity. It's like a seam between the two halves of the globe. Safe bet the door will be somewhere along this.>

<Agreed.>

They streaked along the trench, moving slower but still at a velocity that made tens of thousands of leagues blur by in fractions of an eye-blink. The enormity of the structure left the mind numb. What did the Kriar use it all for? Every living thing on Titaan would fit in one of those square raised areas they saw from far out. Even though Counsel Solaris had told them Homeworld was this big, it simply didn't register in the mind as something that could possibly be true--a fabrication, an exaggeration of the largest kind.

Even at Daena's terrific speed it seemed to take forever, they did after several long breaths find an area that was unmistakably a "door". A vast canyon hundreds perhaps thousands of leagues across honeycombed with openings. Here, Homeworld was anything but dead, dozens of the voidships like the ones they saw at the way-point were heading in or leaving.

A soft-blue radiance emanated into the void from the area, making Bannor wonder why they had been unable to see it from further away.

<Why couldn't we see this before?> Daena echoed his question. <We should have seen that light from a hundred million leagues out.> She turned and streaked away from the surface and into the void.

As they turned back to look, the vast docking area and its radiant light were gone. It looked like any other area on Homeworld they had seen.

<Spit.> Bannor murmured. Mentally, he smacked himself for not thinking of the possibility. <Camouflaged. They could be all over the place and we wouldn't know it.>

<Why in Hades would they do that?!> Daena demanded.

He gave his best mental impression of shrug. <If they have enemies, it's to their advantage to hide the doors.>

Curiosity appeased, they dove back to the surface. As they closed with the dock, the enormity continued to awe as titanic vessels drifted gracefully in and out of the many league-wide bays. Now, with only a distance of thousands of paces separating them from the surface, it was possible to make out glowing view ports looking into the docking area.

Smaller vessels not much larger than a wagon were making their way from the bigger ships to smaller areas cut into the canyon walls. Daena picked one to follow.

As they pursued, Bannor grew wary. <Better dim down your aura and cloak us. They might sense us.>

Daena frowned. <Yeah, who knows what they can do if they can build something like this.> He felt the girl focus her energies and shield them.

They flew deeper into the construct, the areas growing continually smaller until the craft settled down on the floor of an area that was merely the size of ten battle arenas placed together.

The young savant glided ahead to the obvious openings. Flitting into a giant corridor much like ones they saw at the way-point. The area opened into a gathering area with a circular central desk where dozens of Kriar were going about whatever it was they did here.

Daena was shaking her head. <And Wren is in this place--*somewhere?*> She turned slowly. <It's a damn good thing we have a trace to follow. Even with it. We can't go through solid metal and this place is like a maze!>

Bannor was focused on the activity below. From above it appeared little different than the port authorities back on Titaan where ships and crews checked in. Of course, the Kriar artifice magic made it look different--alien--and everything was on an enormous scale, magnified to the point it seemed ludicrous.

<Follow those Kriar in red,> he advised. <If those aren't enforcement people I'll eat my axe.>

Daena found the Kriar he indicated and she followed the male and female as they entered a spherical mechanism that zipped along with amazing speed down an adjacent passage.

They pursued the two Kriar through dozens of chambers at a velocity that was hundreds of times faster than a horse at full gallop. The views that flashed by were nothing short of wondrous; the Kriar seemed to be the smallest population of creatures roaming about. Even with their quick movement it was possible for Bannor's thread sense to 'taste' the dozens of different kinds of entities interacting in the various markets and open areas.

<This place is pretty wizard,> Daena said. <If you can get over the size. There's so much stuff!>

<Yes,> he agreed.

The machine with the two Kriar inside it went into a much more confined tunnel. After what must have been a league of darkness, the confines became a tube of clear material that looked out into what must be the internal structure of Homeworld.

The sight made Daena stutter to a stop in awe. The perspective made Bannor's mind hurt. The sphere, which they knew was millions of leagues across, was not solid. A glistening lattice of tubes similar the one they were in connected various

oddly-shaped 'chunks' that appeared to float in the vast sea that was the interior expanse. The only thing that seemed to anchor these roughly cube-shaped pieces were hundred pace-wide cables that seemed ridiculously thin in proportion to the 'worlds' that were suspended from them. Bannor internally called them 'worlds' because they ranged in size from a few tens of leagues on a side to larger sections that must be more than a thousand leagues cubed.

<Lords,> the awe was back in Daena's mind. <You could lose a thousand worlds in here.>

<More like a hundred thousand,> he murmured, feeling every bit of the awe she did. <Maybe a million. What's it all for? Why? Just because they could?>

He felt Daena draw a breath. <We're wasting time. It's been more almost half a bell and we're not even close to finding Wren.>

<You're right. Find an opening and get us out of the tube.>

It wasn't difficult for Daena to find an access probably used to do repairs on the structure. Free of the tube they could shoot anywhere in Homeworld by staying in the spaces between the planet-sections.

The young savant took up Wren's trace again and they shot on an erratic course, zigzagging through a sea of crystalline threads. Because Daena could not go at her full speed without ramming into a leagues-thick chunk of metal, it took a distressingly long time to isolate the area where the blonde savant must be.

It wasn't the biggest planet-section they had seen but it was plenty big enough, Bannor guessed a couple hundred leagues cubed. Distance was so hard to judge when everything went so far as to converge into a single point.

They entered one of the crystalline tubes and followed it into the interior of the section. Inside was what could only be called a world. Shortly after penetrating the league-thick skin of the

section they were flying over an ocean. The change was so startling that Daena had to pause again and look back. The tube seemed to vanish into the distance, and even where the water obviously ended there was some kind of illusion that made it appear to continue. Daena found a way out of the tube and floated down to the sea surface. It was alive. Bannor could feel the threads of what must be fish and all manner of life forms.

After dipping her hand in the water she continued to follow Wren's thread past islands covered with strange vegetation. Birds flew in patterns around the shores on which blue-green breakers crashed. If he hadn't come through the wall he wouldn't have known they weren't on the surface of a 'normal' world.

Daena floated on her back and looked up to the sky that appeared no different than staring up into the clouds back home. <The weird thing is I can sense another ocean above us. There's just an illusion covering the ceiling. There's probably enough area distributed through the levels to have all of Titaan in this one section.>

<The part that frightens me Daena, is the Kriar can do these miraculous feats on such a grand scale--and they're *scared* of the Baronians. What am I missing?>

<I was thinking the same thing,> Daena remarked. <Of course, you noticed how few Kriar there were. I saw like one or two for every hundred or so of those other creatures. Maybe it's just a numbers thing.>

<Maybe.>

The ocean gave way to a large landmass, mountain ranges capped with snow rose into the pearlescent sky. Storm systems swirled over forests and plains. Perhaps fifty leagues inland the signal ended in what looked like a wide caldera surrounded by lakes. All around the basin, waterfalls churned down steep cliff-sides in glistening cascades filling a series of tree-rimmed lakes at the base. The floor of the area looked like a faerie-land of low rolling hills and covered by thick knots of trees. At the very center lay a crystalline-appearing spire that must be four or five furlongs high.

As they drew near, it more closely resembled a castle with many wings and hundreds of open balconies for looking out over every possible vista.

<You have to say Quasar lives in style,> Daena remarked.
<Kul'Amaron is like a peasant hut compared to this place.>

<She could have the whole country of Malan for sleep-over in that thing,> Bannor said. <I think I sense Wren near the top.>

<Got it,> Daena answered. They hissed up the side of the structure to a point close to nearly a thousand paces up and onto a broad railed balcony. Wide crystal doors lay open on the side of the building.

Beyond the opening stood a sumptuous chamber filled with every imaginable appointment. The roughly circular area had a large hearth-like device as its hub. Bookcases crammed with books ringed a chamber lushly appointed with divans, drawing tables, a kitchen, sleeping arrangements, and what looked like areas for training and entertainment. It was the most comfortable-looking jail cell Bannor could imagine.

Reclining on one of the divans with a book in her hand and bowl of fruit at her elbow was Wren. She didn't look distressed or in much hurry to find a means of escape. Hands behind his back, Wren's brother paced back and forth in obvious agitation.

Daena drifted up to Wren's side and made herself more solid. Wren noticed them and smiled. She placed a purple-velvet mark between the pages of the book, closed it, and sat up.

"Took you long enough," she said with a grin.

Her brother looked around startled. He gripped his head with his hands. "They did come!" He breathed.

Wren rolled her eyes. "I told you they would."

Daena put hands on hips. <You don't seem to be putting much effort into escaping.>

"Oh yeah," Wren said with a frown. "Like to where? Even if I could teleport--which I can't--I don't think I'd have the range to get us out of here."

<You wouldn't,> Bannor said. <She's just giving you a hard time. I can't get out this far, Daena barely made it. So, you're okay--not hurt?>

"Bannor?" Wren said looking around. "You're here too?"

<I'm kind of sharing spirit-bodies with Daena, only way I could reach.>

The blonde savant frowned. "Isn't that a little--"

<See no evil, speak no evil, please... Sarai doesn't need to know.>

Wren drew a breath. "Ah. Well, yes, I have a cut and big bruise on my back but I'll live." She rubbed her shoulder. "Loric is going to get some words about that."

Azir was staring at Daena. "So, can you get us out of here?"

<Well, that was the plan originally...> Bannor told them. <We were going to lead you back to Euriel in astral form so she could do that summoning thing she does. Now...>

<I'm pretty sure it's too far.> Daena filled in. <I might be able to absorb you two--and carry you back but I don't know what would happen with three of you together.> Daena did a slow turn. <So, Quasar kidnapped you and left?>

Wren sighed. "Pretty much. She knows I don't have the range to even reach with savant telepathy, she wasn't much concerned with us running off."

"So, how in the blazes are we getting out of here?" Azir demanded, his slim face set in a frown. "I don't trust that gold wench, she's trouble for certain."

"Take it easy, Brother," Wren said making settling motions.
"They're putting together a rescue party I assume?"

<They put together a team that makes Odin's High Jury look like a bunch of gimps,> Daena said. <We just wanted to avoid the confrontation if possible.>

<I promised your mother I would make sure you and Azir were okay,> Bannor told them.

"You're the best," Wren responded with a smile.

"So, you can't get us out?" Azir asked looking crestfallen. "I hate being caged up--even if it looks like suites in the palace."

<I don't know enough about the astral merger,> Daena said with a shake of her head.

"What about teleporting?" Wren asked. "You *can* teleport."

Daena looked around. "Yes..." She drew the sound out and looked around. "She's got that blocked though. If you could get the shield down I might be able to get in."

<Don't even try,> Bannor said. <That Quasar has incredible powers. She can kill in an eyeblink. The worst possible thing to do is to agitate her. As long as you aren't a threat to her, she won't hurt you.>

"And how would you know that?" A female voice asked from across the room.

Dressed in a long black translucent gown, Quasar glided into the room. The Kriar's knee length hair was unclasped and flowed down over her shoulders in glimmering blue-black cascades making her jeweled golden face look as if it were floating in shadow.

The ancient creature shook her head. "You are truly phenomenal creatures to be able to do this with so little experience. I shudder to think of your capabilities after you have been trained."

<We want you to release Wren and Azir,> Daena thought to her with a growl.

Quasar raised an eyebrow. "Of course you do. I shall do that very thing as soon as Counsel Marna shows up. I will release them to no-one else. By that time, the commander and I shall have finished our chat."

<But that will bring that Baronian force down on you!> Bannor burst out.

Quasar sighed and leaned her head to one side. "That is certainly my hope. I left a trail a drooling idiot could follow."

<But even you can't fight a whole squadron of those monsters!> Daena declared.

<Child, I think there is little chance of my fighting alone. I have disabled the Homeworld defenses around this domicile. If the Kriar council doesn't want several thousand Baronian elite running amok in Homeworld's inner-realms they will have to plug the hole and make ready to repel the attack that the Baronians have little choice but to stage.>

<They would have to be insane to attack Homeworld,> Daena said.

"Your point being?" Quasar shrugged. "Either they come get us, or we come get them."

<With one of their commanders captured, they'd simply move,> Bannor said. <You still can't go after them.>

"Yes, I can," Quasar said with a knowing smile. "Or at least I can now. Bannor, you taught me that, and I thank you for it. With his material links to all his superiors and subordinates, magic can find them. They'd have to kill half their command staff to keep us from finding them. Something that's too costly even for them. No, they must get him back or at some point an armada of Kriar ships is going to appear in the sky over their heads and erase them from existence."

<You mean if we cooperate.>

"And why won't you, hmmm? Otherwise they will be paying that beautiful old citadel regular visits until there isn't a single creature left alive in it."

<Damn it,> Daena growled.

"There's no need for cursing," Quasar said strolling into the room and stopping a short distance from Azir. "I did all of you a favor. I forced the high council to involve itself in this--they can't let you people go running around in Homeworld unescorted. There's too many uncomfortable secrets for you to find. So, I suggest you return to Dulcere and the others and tell them to hurry. I don't imagine those Baronians will wait terribly long before they send the first scouts." She looked to Wren and Azir. "As you see, they are in no danger." She paused. "Well, at least they aren't now. It may be different when the Baronians come looking for their commander."

<We'd better head back,> Bannor said. <She's right, we have to play along until we find a better way.>

<That's it? We just do what she says?>

"Do like Bannor says, Daena," Wren advised. "You can't fight her, especially not now. Thanks for coming and checking on us."

<You'll see us again,> Daena growled drifting up off the floor.

"I hope soon," Quasar responded brushing at the jewels on her face. "I do so feel a need for rescue."

Frustration burned through Daena as they turned and started the long trek home. Bannor could only give a mental sigh. They would be back, and Quasar had made the war with the Baronians inevitable.

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Chapter Three

Power Play

After the war on Karanganoi Homeworld, I thought it real unlikely I'd ever be a part of a team that capable again. It's always interestin' to get proven wrong when you're talkin' about a group of people who can, when riled, make pantheon lords cry like babies...

**-- Talorin "Tal" Falor,
Protectorate Tactical Officer**

The way back home was far easier than the one to get to Quasar's fortress. After several dives through the crystalline tube systems that wound their way through Homeworld's titanic structure, they were back in the void accelerating toward Titaan and Green Run.

As the lights of the universe exploded around them Bannor began steeling himself for the ordeal to come. He knew for certain that even if the team arrived before the Baronian assault, Quasar would somehow manage to delay them so that avoiding confrontation was impossible.

They shot down into an inky-dark Malan, the cities far below scattered pinpoints of lights and gleaming ribbons of water reflecting the light of the moons. As the young first one slowed to approach Green Run, Bannor spoke into her mind.

<You can let me out of here, right?>

<Hmmm?> Daena hummed in his thoughts. She paused above the roof of the east wing, where the quarters he and Sarai shared, lay. <Of course I can.>

<And?> he prompted. <Please don't do that in front of Sarai, she would be very unhappy. She's already uncomfortable enough

with you around me as it is.>

<She is?> Daena wondered. <Whoa, she's never let on.> She sighed in his mind. <I'm very jealous of her you know.>

<Daena, *please* .>

He felt her roll her eyes. <Oh, all right.>

Bannor felt the warmth of her spirit recede as she unwound from around him like a snake uncoiling from around its prey.

As he hovered there in the night air above Green Run, he felt different... changed somehow. He stared at Daena who floated near him smiling.

<What?> She asked with a tilt of her head. <I let you go.>

It was difficult to look at his own pattern. Everything appeared the same. He couldn't account for the different feel though. Well, there was nothing for it, they were already late. <Let's go.>

He dived through the roof into their chambers.

He was ready for a confrontation with Sarai, who had probably already summoned help to get them unstuck.

"There they are," he heard Sarai's unmistakable growl.

Bannor froze near the ceiling. The room was packed with people. He thought they would meet on the citadel south steps! Arms folded, tapping her foot, Sarai stood in the center of the conference circle staring up at him. Around her, the entire assault team was sitting on the various couches and chairs. There were new faces he did not know; a tall brown-maned woman who had herself draped around Tal who was sitting on the floor. A shorter extremely broad man, sat on the couch behind Tal. Counsel Solaris had another woman with her with pale skin and long, straight, black hair. As expected, Idun was there with Euriel and Vanidaar. Desiray the white-haired guildmistress, now dressed in shiny black leather stood with her arm around Loric. Even in his astral form, Bannor could feel the

staggering power of that group.

"Fascinating," Marna breathed, looking up at him.

"I don't recall this being part of the plan," Aarlen mused from another part of the circle.

Daena had stopped in surprise a little below him. She looked around. <Ummm, hello everyone...> Her thought trailed off. <Uhhh, sorry we're... ummm... late.>

"Yes," Euriel said, staring up at them. "We do hope you have good intelligence after scaring us like this."

<Well...> Bannor murmured.

"Bannorrr..." Sarai cut him off. "Get in your body... and talk... *normally*. Damn you, always cutting things close..."

Him cutting things close! She was the one always taking risks! Feeling drained, he drifted down to his body and began synchronizing with the threads of his physical self. After a brief dive into darkness, he pulled up through multicolored light to consciousness.

He drew a breath with real lungs. His body ached and his skin burned. He looked down at his arms. They were toasted red as if he'd been out in the sun too long. The burning had actually been echoed to his physical body.

He grimaced.

Sarai loomed over him. She took hold of his hand and lifted his burned arm and gestured to it. "Was *that* part of the plan? You scared me... we thought you were dying!"

"Star, I'm okay," he soothed.

<It's my fault,> Daena tried, still hovering over them in her marble white spirit form. <I just-->

"You stay out of this!" Sarai pointed a finger at her.

" *Arminwen*," Loric said in a low but firm voice. "Can you scold him later? He was about to tell us what information they uncovered."

Sarai subsided but continued to scowl at him.

Bannor glanced up at her and winced. He tried not to let those burning violet eyes distract him. With effort he sat up and pushed himself to his feet. His legs felt rubbery underneath him. That trip took even more out of him than he realized.

"Well," he said. "We found Quasar, Wren, and Azir. They are in what I'm guessing is the bottom-most layer of one of those world sections they have there. There is this giant circular valley with a silver spire in the center. Wren and Azir are in a chamber near its top."

"That is Estate Lorning," Eclipse remarked.

"Security?" Tal asked from where he was sitting on the floor polishing a sword.

"None," Bannor answered. "Quasar said that Wren and Azir were free to leave as soon as Counsel Solaris came to personally take them away."

Marna who stood with her daughter and the new woman, leaned her head to one side and raised an eyebrow.

<She also mentioned something about disabling Homeworld defenses...???)> Daena added.

<What?)> Dulcere responded. The thought was so sharp it made Bannor wince. Others around the room pressed a finger to their temple from the volume.

Eclipse sighed. <She is determined to force the issue. She is going to pose a target the Baronians cannot refuse.>

Tal growled. "I say we snatch Wren and Azir outta there and leave her to her own devices. I like a good fight, but I ain't

jumping through nobody's hoops."

"If only we had that luxury..." Loric said. He paused and frowned up at Daena. "Miss Sheento, would you mind returning to your body?"

The young first one flinched. "Uhhh, right." She dived into the flesh of her body where it reclined on the divan.

Marna shook her head. "Truly astonishing ability." She looked to Bannor. "And you projected all the way to Homeworld and through its shields?"

He rubbed the back of his head. "What took us so long was you have the doors camouflaged. We had to search. That took a bit."

The ancient creature's eyes widened. "You--searched..."

"It's really big," Bannor added.

"Yes..." Marna's voice trembled. "I am aware." She let out a breath. "Quite incredible."

Daena sat up and ran a hand through her hair. She blinked at the group. "Sorry." She rose, put an arm around Janai and pulled her close in a hug.

"So," Tal said. "We got the team. What're we sittin around for?"

Loric looked around at the group. "Indeed." He focused on the male Kriar. "Eclipse?"

The gold male rubbed the crescent on his cheek and nodded. He focused on Marna with his luminescent blue eyes for a moment and his features tightened. "Bannor, Daena, we'll give you two a little time to gather any gear you want to take with you. Everyone else is ready."

"When you get back, I will treat those burns," Marna offered.

"Our thanks," Sarai said with a nod to Marna. To him she said, "I had the stewards bring your leathers and pack to our

chambers."

"I'll make it quick," Bannor offered to the group. "Sorry."

He and Sarai retreated to their chambers, leaving the powerful team behind them.

"I hate this," Sarai murmured, next to him as they hurried down the corridor. "And I'm really unhappy with you."

He rubbed her shoulder and brushed back a few strands of her silvery hair. "Star, we needed to do it." He paused and opened the doors to their suite, and stepped in. His leathers were lying on the bed. He went to them directly and began changing.

"I don't have to be happy about it," Sarai grumbled. "I should be going with you."

"You know you can't," he said stepping out of his dress pants and pulling up the leather breeches. "You have to get those treatments to keep you and the baby healthy."

She scrubbed her face with her hands. "If it wasn't so damn embarrassing, I could have one of them out there do it. That Ziedra girl could probably do it."

"Probably," he responded. He pulled the leather hauberk over his head, and pushed his arms out through the sleeves. He laced up the front as he spoke. "Star, there's no way--your mother would have a fit that would eclipse everything else we've seen put together. Jhaan would be *worse*. Please don't do that to me."

Fists clenched, Sarai growled in response.

Sitting down on the bed he stepped into a boot and laced it up. He pulled on the second and looked up at his wife to be. "Star, I'll be okay. I'm just going as a tracker." He rose, found his axe sheaths and belted them on. He glanced in the pack that had a smattering of food, some utensils and small tools. He probably wouldn't need it, but better to be safe. He cinched down the flap and shouldered the knapsack.

Sarai frowned. She reached down and adjusted a loose buckle. She sighed and gave him a hug. She pressed her cheek against his. "Damn it, I love you."

He put his arms around her. "Tell you what." He ran a hand through her hair. "Most of those folks out there have telepathy. We can keep in contact, would that be better?"

"Better than nothing," she drew a breath. "Come on, they're waiting." She pulled back from him and lead him back to the team waiting in the conference area.

Back in the conference circle, an already prepared Daena stood with an arm around Janai while the elder princess fussed over her. The rest of the team stood together ready to step into what would likely become an incredibly violent enterprise.

Burly Tal, his willowy wife, powerfully built Algernon, Lord Loric, Magestrix Frielos and the enigmatic Eclipse, the strength of those six probably exceeded the prodigious strength of the group that laid Odin's High Jury low. Goddess Idun and her half-god daughter Euriel by themselves had ample strength to make any creature think carefully. Add to the mix two more Kriar, four savants that included himself, Daena, Vanidaar, and Ziedra, Lord Loric's wife Desiray, Marna's pale warrior friend, and Cassandra's golden son Radian.

He let out a breath. The Baronians would have their hands full if they took on this team. He gave Sarai a squeeze. "Star, look at them, I'm going to be okay."

She sniffed and nodded.

"So," he spoke up as he stepped up. "Who do I call 'Boss'?"

"I will be strategic authority," Eclipse said in a firm voice. "Lord Loric and Magestrix Frielos will be our magic tactics experts. We'll have three teams. Team one will be Tal, Terra, Daena, Belkirin Dulcere, Loric and Desiray. Team two will be Aarlen, Bannor, Counsel Solaris, Dominique, Damay and Idun. Team three will be Algernon, Euriel, Vanidaar, myself, Ziedra and

Radian." He looked around. "I hope no-one has issues with those groups, I tried to balance skills, experience, and people who had worked with one another."

"Works for me," Tal rumbled, his face splitting into a grin. "Almost like you make a living doing this sort of thing."

The corner of the Kriar's mouth quirked up. "Indeed."

"I do have one request," Bannor said to them. "Is there a way I can keep in contact with Sarai while we're gone?"

Marna stepped forward. "I considered that. We should keep in contact with the citadel. I will be in contact with Sabre-team but the T'Evagdurans may wish to keep apprised of what goes on." She held out her hand, in her palm were four blue jewels, small flat ellipses a little larger than a coat button. "Each of you take one." She held them to Bannor and Sarai, then to Daena and Janai. "Press it here behind your ear." She brushed back her long hair and indicated the spot where she already had a similar jewel.

"This won't fall off?" Sarai asked, placing the gem as Marna indicated.

"No," the elder demurred. "Not unless it is struck very hard or you pull on it with the intent to remove it."

Bannor did as directed. The jewel felt curiously warm. When he pressed it behind his ear he heard a strange crackling and felt an odd tingle. When he let go, the jewel did not move. In fact, as he ran his finger over the spot it felt as if it had become a part of his skin.

Daena and Janai with a little reticence had done the same.

"The operation is simple," Marna continued. "Though you don't need to, touching the jewel with a finger helps the focus. Touch the jewel and think of the person you want to speak with, then just speak the words."

Sarai frowned. She touched the jewel and spoke. "Hello?"

Hello? Bannor jerked. He heard her voice in the room and inside his head at the same time. "Whoa, that was weird!"

He frowned and pressed his finger against the jewel. He thought of Sarai and speaking to her. "Can you hear me, Sarai?"

He saw by his fiance's flinch and expression of surprise that she had.

Daena and Janai experimented with equal success.

"This will work as far away as Homeworld?" Daena wanted to know.

"The device itself does not have the power," Marna answered. "The Sabre-team brought Kriar magic with them which will allow you to remain in communication." She tilted her head and focused glowing green eyes on Sarai. "I trust that is satisfactory?"

"I'd rather Bannor not go, but this is an acceptable alternative," Sarai answered.

"Now," Marna said. "If Bannor would allow me to be a little familiar I can deal with those burns."

He stared at the ancient Kriar for perhaps an instant and stepped forward.

"This won't hurt," the Counsel told him. She drew a breath closed her eyes for a moment, then raised a glowing hand to his arm. He saw threads spin-out from her hand and whirl through the flesh of his stinging arm. He felt a tingling and his flesh bubbled. Slowly, the angry red burns turned the normal tanned color of his skin. The pain was gone. She repeated the process on his other arm and touched his neck and the other burned areas. In moments all the pain was gone.

"There," she said. "That's the worst of it."

He rubbed at his arm and stretched it out a few times. "Yes,

thank you." He turned his head to one side. "You did that all without magic, and without any devices."

"Mind power." She grinned and winked. "There are some things where good old fashioned brain power still gets the job done."

"Team members, prepare yourselves for transport," Eclipse said.

Tal stood up and the others gathered close.

Bannor gave Sarai a hug. "I'll stay as safe as I can."

"You better," she growled, kissing him.

"Jumping in five--" Eclipse intoned. "Four--three--two--one."

Almost before the last word finished echoing in Bannor's ears, his view of the conference circle and Sarai vanished. For an unfathomable instant, it seemed like all the threads in the universe aligned around him, bent, then snapped taut again.

The chambers at Green Run were gone. Instead, cold sterile smelling air pushed in around them. The entire team stood in an enormous chamber with the walls streaking upward to some distant point dizzyingly far away. Only a few paces away a ledge dropped off into an unknowably deep metallic canyon. Needle-prowed void ships the size of cities floated in the vast space beyond.

The sight had been impressive enough when he had visited this place in spirit form. Feeling the hum of the metal beneath his feet and the vertigo of his body, the sensations it evoked in him were all but overwhelming.

Even sturdy Euriel and her goddess mother Idun were staggering back in awestruck wonderment.

"Take a moment to acclimate yourselves," Eclipse advised. "I know the scope of things is disconcerting to first timers."

He drew a slow breath. He reached up to the jewel behind his ear and touched it. He focused on his fiance now unimaginably

far away. "Star, can you hear me?"

After a pause of only a heartbeat, he heard a clicking sound. **I hear you, my One. You're there?**

"We are." He looked at the others who were looking at him. "I can't believe how easily Eclipse did that. I wish I could describe this place. The way-point we showed you is a like drip compared to an ocean."

Bannor felt the growl in her voice. **You can describe it to me when you get back.** He heard her draw a breath and he could visualize her tight expression. **Just get Wren and get out of there. Don't stay an instant longer than you need to.** She paused. **Thank Marna again for her marvelous communication magic. It is as if you are right next to me. It will make all of this-- *easier*.

"I'll call you later with a progress report," he told her. "I love you."

Love you, she responded. He tapped the communication jewel off and straightened up.

The others were staring at him. Why? Had he suddenly sprouted a second head?

"Come," Eclipse said, gesturing to the group. "We need to check in and get our equipment." He turned and started heading toward the metallic canyon wall. In what Bannor could only call a cleft in the gigantic vertical face was a place where a counter and gate had been placed. Several Kriar in red uniforms were going about unknown duties, milling around unfamiliar machines.

"Are we getting some toys to play with?" Tal asked with a grin, following him.

"We would be remiss if we didn't provide proper equipment," Marna said, trailing after them. "One reminder, as before, these materials do not leave Homeworld."

The big man sighed and rolled his eyes. "What good is having toys if we can't play with them unsupervised?"

"Falor," Aarlen growled. "Grow up."

"Whitey," Tal focused hard eyes on the big woman, his tone going from jovial to icy. "I don't need to hear that from you. You do your job. I'll do mine."

"Easy, Tiger," the woman with him said putting a hand on his shoulder. "We haven't even started the mission."

It was clear, despite the changes in Aarlen, that there was no love lost between Tal and the ancient elder.

Loric shook his head, stepping smartly next to Eclipse. "Good thing you put them on separate teams."

Eclipse nodded. "Yes."

After a long breath of walking, they arrived at the "checkpoint". Though it had not looked it from hundred paces away, it too was a sizable area easily able to house fifty personnel. The "counter" was actually a huge window looking into a chamber built into the vertical face. From the reinforcing around it, the twenty pace high entry gate next to it could probably withstand an impact sufficient to destroy a city. The two Kriar guards dressed in black uniforms with red sleeves that stood to either side of it were there as a courtesy only.

Eclipse stepped up to the desk. Bannor heard the burly Kriar's thoughts in his head. <Deck officer, council team gamma-tau-licensed requests authorized ingress.>

A male Kriar, his space-black hair tied in braids stepped to the counter. He pressed three fingers to the jewel on his forehead, then again to the glowing jewel on his sternum and dipped his head with a click of his heels on the metal decking. <Tarkath, permission is granted, Eh'san.>

With a boom and a humming, the massive gate doors parted.

The two guards at the gate saluted, then un-shouldered long weapons and stood at the ready.

Eclipse moved through the opening, the others trailing after him. He stopped at an open counter on the far side as Kriar filed out of a doorway into the passage next to him. "We will check you all in as quickly as possible. Please cooperate with our guard staff. I assure you, every step is essential." He turned to Loric. "Those who have current citizenship and insignia, please get your security updated. For the duration of this mission you will have white seal clearance. Step to the left," he gestured to the doorway. "Thane Veenal and Thane Tsallis will assist you. The rest of you step to the counter." He gestured to female Kriar and her male companion. "Thane Xera and Thane Dhallen will process you for entry. When you are done, report to either Dulcere or myself, we will equip you for the mission." He pointed to a second open doorway down the passage.

Loric, Desiray, Tal, Terra, Dominique, Aarlen and Radian stepped through the doorway with the two Kriar, who led them to a desk-like structure a short distance behind the counter.

Eclipse, Dulcere, and Marna headed toward the other doorway.

<Welcome to Homeworld,> Thane Xera said into their minds. Dressed in form fitting shiny red and silver, dark hair loose to her waist and black eyes glinting, the Kriar woman was nothing short of exotic. Her face with its metallic looking gold skin had an ageless quality to it. <Please step to the counter.>

Shaking his head, broad shouldered Algernon was the first to step forward. "Damn, I hate all this technical dren." He pulled the gauntlets off his hands, and undid the brow-cloth tying back his thick hair. He unbuckled the heavy sheath strapped over his shoulder. He held it out to Euriel. "Ri, hold on to this for a moment would you."

The short Vanir warrior looked up at him with wide eyes and took the blade from him, handling the sheath with great care. Even powerful Idun's brow was furrowed as she eyed the weapon.

One glance at the threads surrounding the sword made Bannor understand the gingerly handling; there was enough power in it to flatten a mountain.

With a shrug of his broad shoulders Algernon stepped to the counter, set aside his gloves and headband, and placed his hands on the metallic surface palms up.

"This stuff don't hurt," Algernon said over his shoulder. "It's their way of making sure we don't get lost. They stick these little crystals in your hands." The Kriar behind the counter pressed a silver cylinder into Algernon's palm and he jerked a little. "They do both hands," the Kriar hit his other palm with the tool and he winced. "In case there's an-- *accident*. If you ask nice, they'll pull them out when you leave." He raised one hand. The Kriar reached down to something behind the counter and raised it. The thing looked like a small silver sphere with a gray cord attached. The object had a single red 'eye', and from that issued a bluish light which the male played across the Algernon's fingers and palm, and then on his forehead and face. "This thing here kinda tingles. From what I understand it makes sure you haven't got any illnesses or anything."

<That is correct,> Thane Xera confirmed.

The Kriar behind the counter nodded to him, procedure apparently complete. Algernon tied on his hair band then pulled his gauntlets back on. He stepped back and took his sword back from Euriel. "Thanks."

Seeing that neither the goddess or her daughter were quick to step forward, Vanidaar straightened, took off his gloves and stepped to the counter. To say he looked uncomfortable was an understatement. He obviously found this place incredibly unsettling. Bannor could almost hear him muttering Wren's name under his breath as the Kriar security person inserted the crystals into his hands and used the silver sphere to shine a light onto the Baron's hand and face.

Ziedra, who was huddled close to Damay, thrust herself forward next. The dark-haired savant had looked frightened and lost ever since her husband had gone behind the counter. The quiet elder

savant looked equally uncomfortable. Her expression darkened as the younger stopped at the counter.

"It'll be okay, Baby," Radian said in a soothing voice not far away. Another security person was doing something to his hand while he spoke.

The dark-haired savant swallowed and thrust her hands onto the counter. She gritted her teeth the whole time it went on. After a few moments the operation was finished. She stepped back rubbing her palms and frowning.

Idun growled and stomped up to the counter. The goddess took longer. Apparently, the Kriar man needed to make several small adjustments in his tool in order to place the crystal that had easily been inserted into the hands of the others.

Bannor glanced to Damay. She met his eyes. She rubbed her hands together, jeweled rings on her fingers flashing. She drew a breath as she watched the process.

"I better go next," Daena said by Bannor's shoulder. "He'll probably have the same difficulty with this silly First-one skin of mine."

After Idun, she stepped up as the others had done.

The goddess was rubbing her palms and frowning.

"Is there something wrong, Mother?" Euriel asked.

The pantheon lady shook her head. "I do not like their artifices being able to look inside of me so easily."

Bannor understood that sentiment.

Daena returned to Bannor, staring at her palm. "That wasn't so bad. Amazing what something so small is capable of."

Euriel, Bannor, and Damay all glanced at one another, none of them eager to step forward. With a grunt, Euriel leaned forward to be processed.

Loric and others filed out. Radian came and put an arm around Ziedra, and whispered something in her ear. The dark-haired savant sighed and relaxed against him.

<Sir?> Xera said into Bannor's mind.

He jerked. He realized that Damay had already taken the spot ahead of him and was done. Drawing a breath, he stepped up to the counter and turned his palms up on the cold metal surface. Despite trying to keep himself calm, his heart speeded anyways. He reasoned that there was nothing to fear, yet still he felt threatened. The Kriar behind the counter tapped briefly on a device by his hands looked at something in a glowing device then raised the wand he'd been using on the others.

<There should only be a slight discomfort,> the Kriar told him as he pressed the device down.

Bannor felt a sharp pricking sensation like being jabbed with a needle, then again in the other hand. With that part over, he raised his palm up like he'd seen Algernon do. The eye-device, as the warrior described, did tingle, making his skin grow warm where the illumination touched.

After only a moment, there was a low thrumming from the device. The Kriar frowned, and pulled the little sphere back to examine it. He punched something on the device then played the light over Bannor's hand again. The noise hummed again.

Xera, who was at Bannor's shoulder, frowned. She went around the counter and looked at that glowing machine. After a moment, she took the sphere from the counter person. She tapped at the artifice and played the light over his hand for the third time. The sound happened yet again.

Loric came and leaned over the counter. "What's wrong?"

The lady Kriar wore a perplexed expression. <His energy signature is wrong. We accommodated for the increased heterotrophic levels of the others, but his is just wrong.>

"Wrong as in too much?"

<Wrong as in he doesn't register at all. I can get a basic analysis but his helixes are totally occluded. That's--> She narrowed her space black eyes. <--not *possible* .>

The gray-haired elder looked at Bannor. He raised an eyebrow and the corner of his mouth quirked up. "I guess Gaea doesn't want you getting too good a look at him." He sighed. "I'd get permission from the Vatraena and pass him--I think she'll understand what's going on."

The thane nodded.

After a brief exchange, the Kriar female waved him to go in with the others.

A short distance down the passage through an archway, Eclipse, Dulcere, and Counsel Solaris waited for them in tiered circular chamber thirty paces across. Tables that followed the rounded contour of the room had been placed on the two lowest tiers, with seats situated behind them. Strange devices, odd belts, backpacks and pieces of what looked like armor had been arranged on the tables.

"Do not worry about what any of these items do yet," Eclipse advised. "There is a changing area up the steps on my left." He pointed to an open archway on the far side of the room. "We advise wearing these bodysuits." He held up what looked like a thin black fabric. "Put them on underneath your clothing. These will keep you alive should an area lose air pressure. The rest of these items, take one of each."

"One size fits all, I suppose?" Daena asked taking one of suits with a dubious expression.

"It does," Eclipse responded.

"Things don't look like much," Tal remarked taking one from Eclipse. "But they are pretty sweet." He glanced back at the others and winked. "Clothing that shape changes."

"This?" Euriel held up the cloth bundle that Eclipse handed her. "There's no magic in this."

Tal shrugged. "Ain't magic, but it works though. You'll see."

Bannor took one of the suits, a heavy belt made of something similar to leather, what looked like a backpack but was rigid and what was obviously a chest plate. There were also some extra items inside of a small clear sack.

Of the items handed to him, he found the clear sack the most fascinating. A lightweight material that from brief examination was both sturdy and see-through.

"Just put on the suits," Eclipse said. "Wait for those who are familiar to help you the rest."

Everyone knew there was a need to be quick so there was no arguing. At the top of the steps the archway led into a room divided into twelve closable alcoves.

"Wear it right against your skin," Tal advised as they entered the chamber. "It'll feel creepy but you'll get used to it. The stuff splits in the middle. Pull it up over yer legs first. It stretches a lot more'n you'd expect. Just get an arm in the top and you can sneak it over."

"Do I really need such a thing?" Idun asked, pausing in the space between the alcoves.

"Can you live in a vacuum?" Aarlen asked.

"Not long I would think," the pantheon lady answered.

"Small inconvenience," the white-haired elder said. She stepped into an alcove and closed the partition.

Because there were more people than alcoves, Bannor waited outside with Algernon while the others dressed.

Tal's wife Terra stepped back out of the dressing area after only a short breath of time, with the belt and other equipment

arranged over her shoulders. She hadn't bothered to put her clothing back on, wearing only the skin-tight material hugging her shapely curves. It might as well have been a coating of paint for all it hid--which was to say--nothing. The cattish woman gestured Algernon in and he stepped in and closed the door. She looped the heavy belt around her narrow waist and buckled it with a metallic clack.

She grinned at Bannor, intense golden eyes glinting with impish mirth. "Watch this," she confided.

She held up the chest plate, which had no contour to it save a dip to allow for the throat. "Hard, right?" She knocked on it with her knuckles.

Bannor frowned and nodded. No way would that fit a woman even half as healthy as the burly woman warrior.

Terra ran a long nailed finger down the middle of the carapace then breathed on it. The solid material flopped over itself as if it had become black seaweed. The woman pulled the stuff to her neck then spread the material over her ample breasts and torso like she were spreading bread dough. After a few moments of carefully applying the stuff she gave her stomach a sharp slap.

There was a sizzling sound and the gooey soft substance flashed and jumped rigid, becoming a shiny black color. Even though Terra hadn't spread it evenly, the Kriar magic had uniformly covered her and made itself consistent.

She winked at him and knocked on the now rigid carapace perfectly proportioned for her. "Pretty wizard, huh?"

"Yes," he drew the word out. "Is it strong?"

"This stuff?" Terra looked down at it. "Anything that'll go through it would kill you from the impact anyway."

He sighed. "That's reassuring."

Terra shrugged. She opened up the clear sack and began fishing out the contents. "Here's our other toys." She held up a small

red ovoid. "Kriar communication magic." She pushed it in her left ear. She held up a thick metal band and clicked it around her throat. "Breather and filter." She held up a small silver cylinder. "Ummm, no word for this in common. Tal and I just call them multi-gadgets." She slid it into a loop on the belt obviously meant for it. "Now, the real fun." She pulled out a collection of about eight objects, and began fitting them together with obvious expertise. The device consisted of a series of cylinders fitted into a rounded rectangular body into which fit a shaped grip somewhat reminiscent of sword pommel.

Terra slid and clicked pieces for a few more moments, then thumbed three red jewels on the item's side. Each one she touched turned green. She brought the object close to her lips. "Mark six, initialize and attune, I am Terra Karlin Falor, acknowledge and secure." She wrapped her fingers around the handle.

A tinny voice emanated from the device. **Mark six recognizes operator Terra Karlin Falor. Body patterns committed and locked.**

She nodded, spinning the thing in a circle on her finger and dropping it into a special sheath obviously made for it on the belt.

Bannor eyed the object. "And what is that? Some kind of weapon?"

She nodded. "Not as good as my Shaladen." She gestured and with a rasp and a flare of light a sword in a jeweled sheath appeared in her hand. She belted the weapon on with deft hands. "A ranged weapon definitely has its advantages though."

"It doesn't look like much."

"You'll change your mind." She patted him on the shoulder and pointed him toward an alcove as Tal stepped out with all his gear already in place like hers.

Bannor went into the alcove Tal had exited. The 'changing room' was actually bigger than he expected, with a long wide bench

and numerous hooks for clothing and gear. He sat, tossing the bundle of items onto the bench next to him. He removed his satchel, pulled off his boots, and stripped out of his leathers and other garments.

Naked in the area he felt a tremble of unease go through him. With a frown, he picked up the soft stretchy 'suit'. He found the split in the material as Tal described and worked his foot into one of the obvious legs.

The black cloth did, as Tal described, feel creepy--slightly damp but somewhat like fur in how it felt against the skin. It stretched an amazing amount. It took only instants to work the stuff up over both legs. Since the garment was all one piece it took some bending in addition to get it up over his head, but the difficulty lasted only a matter of moments. Unlike Terra, he would not traipse all over Homeworld dressed in what amounted to a second skin. He pulled on his leather breeches and stepped into his boots.

He adjusted and clipped on the heavy belt, then arranged the sheaths for his axes with it.

Bannor stepped back out into the hall with the rest of his gear looped over his shoulder. Eclipse now stood in the passage between the changing rooms and gestured him back to the larger chamber.

Marna, Dulcere, Aarlen, and Dominique stood together at the doorway helping the less experienced people suit up. Dulcere took him by the arm and led him off a few steps. She took his equipment and put it aside on the table.

<Arms out at your sides,> she asked, lifting one of his arms.

Bannor complied. Dulcere grabbed the carapace and snapped it like a housewife might snap a towel--the material becoming pliable as when Terra had manipulated her own. With deft expertise Dulcere splayed the material against his chest and "thumped" it rigid in a single smooth motion. She put the rest of the Kriar equipment on him with equal dexterity.

She assembled that curious weapon for him and put it in his hand. <Now, speak to it,> she told him. She had him repeat a phrase similar to what Terra had said.

****Mark six recognizes operator Bannor Starfist. Body patterns committed and locked.****

<We'll network these later,> Dulcere said. <For the time being, only you will be able to use this.> She guided his hand so that he set the item in the sheath on the belt.

"I have no idea how to..."

<Don't worry,> Dulcere said. <We'll get to it.>

Dulcere finished adjusting the Kriar pack so it would not interfere with his own knapsack--bending the thin metallic shell so it contoured with his back much like the carapace had.

That was something he had to admire, the Kriar devices were so thin and lightweight that he barely even recognized they were present. He shrugged his jacket back on, and adjusted his knapsack.

Bannor heard Aarlen's deep voice small but clear in his ear where the Dulcere had placed the red device. ****Team two comm. check, acknowledge,****

****Solaris go,**** Bannor heard the counsel respond.

****Ariok go,**** Dominique said.

"Ummm," he raised his hand. "Yeah."

"Understood," Damay responded rubbing at her ear, and looking confused.

"I too," Idun responded, appearing equally lost.

"Feel on the neck piece," Aarlen said reaching up to an indentation on her own.

Bannor found it.

"Press and hold to talk," Aarlen continued. "Or tap it twice to leave the vocal on."

He pressed it. "I just talk?"

That's it, Aarlen smiled.

"What is the range of these?" Idun asked.

"A lot," Aarlen said looking over at Eclipse. "Like five thousand leagues clear line of sight, two hundred in heavy terrain."

"And this is supposed to be better than telepathy?" Idun asked. The goddess while obviously not familiar with the Kriar equipment, seemed comfortable with the armaments. A golden glow had begun to gather on the pantheon lady's skin. Bannor could tell the ancient creature was beginning to get excited about the prospect of going into battle. He guessed there was no way to completely suppress the war-like nature of the Aesir no matter how old and staid they became.

"No," Marna said. "But some on the team don't have telepathy, and others cannot shield their minds so as not to give away their position. These devices are secure."

"Let us head to the pick up point," Eclipse told them. He looked to Bannor. "Has there been any change in your friends--are they still in the same location?"

Bannor closed his eyes and felt his ties to Eternity and Wren. The savant still felt strong. They were now immeasurably closer than they had been, but they still remained a tremendous distance from her. There was no real way for him to tell if she had moved.

He wondered if she was close enough for savant contact. He focused on Wren's tracery and pushed his thoughts toward it through his link to Eternity. <Wren, can you hear me?>

There was a short pause. Then Wren's thought rang in his head

clear and powerful. <Bannor!? Are you here already!?!>

It took him a moment to recover from the volume of the blonde savant's exuberance. <Well, no. We're on Homeworld and are getting ready to head in. Has Quasar moved you?>

<No. Not a hair. The old witch is getting ready for visitors though, there's all kind of critters running all over the place.>

<Okay.>

He opened his eyes. "Wren's okay and says they haven't been moved. She says that Quasar has been preparing, something about creatures--?"

"You can mindspeak her!?" Euriel burst out. "Damn, I didn't even try! I just assumed it would be blocked!"

Eclipse sighed. "No reason for Quasar to block it. She just wants to force us to engage the Baronians."

Bannor felt a barrage of savant speak ignite the shared links of Eternity as Wren struggled to keep up with the deluge of telepathic calls suddenly directed at her by her friends and family.

Loric's wife Desiray, looking quite at home in the Kriar garb, stepped up to Marna. She brushed back white hair and folded her arms. "Let me ask one thing."

The Kriar matriarch tilted her head. "Yes, Desiray?"

"Okay, now I'm not complaining about an excuse to get a little action, but why haven't you just sent the Kriar army in there? I mean, can't you just get Quasar out of there, and close the hole she made?"

"Desiray, please," Marna replied with a shake of her head. "If the solution was that simple don't you think it already would have been done?"

The guild woman leaned back and raised her chin. "Has it?"

The Counsel let out a breath. "Yes, Desiray, it has. I dispatched five-hundred troops the instant I had confirmation of Wren's whereabouts." She pressed her lips to a line. "Quasar is the mistress of her estate. Its defenses are significant and she can keep them out for days. She *wants* this group to come in. We are equipped magically to deal with the Baronian threat. The Baronians are geared to fight Kriar soldiers, not Protectorate agents and pantheon warriors." She glanced at Daena. "And certainly not first ones."

"Well, the odds still stink," Tal growled. "They ain't going to underestimate again."

"I'm certain Quasar is allowing for that," Marna agreed. "You see this is more of a political move than anything else. Our council has been slow to dedicate resources to this endeavor. The reigning sentiment is 'why invite trouble with further involvement'. I personally cannot simply forget the soldiers at the way-point who lost their lives--but there are others who can. Quasar is apparently willing to sacrifice her freedom in order to lure the Baronians here and force the issue not only with us but the ruling council. As a strategy, it is admirable, bait the Baronians with an irresistible lure and force them to do battle where we will be at our strongest with all of Homeworld's resources nearby."

"So, you promise she'll be punished for this?" Euriel growled.

"Oh, that is a certainty," Marna answered with a nod.

Bannor saw Eclipse's face cloud over. No doubt he blamed himself for Quasar's current path of self-destruction. The ancient Kriar had indeed lost much when he chose to be apart from her. Letting out a breath, he picked up a heavy jacket and shrugged into it and fastened it up. He swung something that looked like a much bigger weapon over his shoulder. "Let us get this over with." He stalked toward the exit.

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Chapter Four

Approach

The team put together to recover Wren and fight the Baronian assault was a team of truly awesome power and experience. Against the onslaught of juggernauts we expected to face--we knew that even this formidable force might still not be enough...
**-- Bannor Nalthane Starfist,
Prince Conjugal, Malan**

The group watched Eclipse stalk off. The ancient Kriar warrior was a knot of emotions that Bannor didn't need his nola sight to see. It was in the Kriar's stiff bearing and the way he clenched his fists. Standing by Bannor with hands on hips, Dulcere watched the other Kriar for a few moments before moving to follow him.

"He sure isn't happy," Daena said stepping to Bannor's shoulder. Dressed in the Kriar battle carapace with a blaze of auburn hair tumbling over her shoulders, the young savant looked quite striking. She blinked at him with glowing green eyes. Bannor felt a hitch in his chest. Damn, the girl wasn't just striking, she was magnificent. Why hadn't he noticed that before? He shook himself--where had that thought come from?

Bannor managed to find some words. "He loved that woman for eons. The prospect of locking her up can't make him happy."

Daena pressed her lips together and nodded. "Yes."

The group filed out following Eclipse down the giant hall to an open area. The best way for Bannor to describe it would be the alien equivalent of a town square. Notches were cut into the walls with counters. Kriar and other creatures Bannor didn't recognize stood behind them. Most looked human to a degree, but there were strange hair and skin colors. He saw some that

looked reptilian, and one that had four arms. There was simply too much to take in as they rushed by.

The crowd of patrons was even more varied than the sellers, with skin, hair, and eyes from a rainbow of hues. Of the hundreds present, perhaps one in fifty were Kriar. The Kriar sentinels watching over the exits outnumbered the gold citizens sedately looking around. Bannor noticed that the other races seemed to give the few Kriar quite a bit of space. It wasn't like they were exactly afraid--but they seemed to hold them in some awe.

The throng parted around Eclipse, the sight of him and their group seeming to strike the observers dumb. What had been a noisy trade venue became a funeral hush as their team filed through.

"Damn, this place is even more wizard up close," Daena murmured. "Look at all the different kinds of people. Did you ever imagine...???"

Bannor shook his head. It was bewildering indeed. Not only were there humans of a kind he had never seen before, they had the means to come to this far off place.

"I forgot how wizard it is to shop here," Desiray murmured to Loric. "When we get Wren back from that old witch, we should bring Ri and Daar on an expedition."

Her gray-haired husband rolled his eyes. "Des, you are hopelessly optimistic. I'm stunned that shopping even occurs to you now..."

The woman shoved her hip against him. "I'm a woman, shopping is never far from our minds." She laughed.

Behind her Ziedra giggled. "Is there good stuff here, Mom Des?"

Desiray looked back and grinned. "To die for." She paused. "Well, not actually *die* --but you know what I mean."

"Let's focus on staying alive, shall we?" Aarlen growled. "If we

have to fight a thousand baronians there's going to be a lot of blood and a lot of pain."

"Don't worry, Miz Nibs," Desiray snapped back. "I'll do my part. I'm not exactly an amateur you know."

"No, you merely *act* like it," the elder responded with a frown.

"I think I liked her better when she was in a good mood," Daena whispered.

He nodded.

Eclipse led them through an archway and down a ramp. Bannor immediately recognized the area as one of the chambers he and Daena saw earlier that accessed the crystal tubes that ran between the world sections.

A cylindrical construction about twenty paces long sat in a depression a short distance from the end of the ramp across a platform. Doors opened into the thing near each end and a row of twenty windows ran down its ribbed side. Blinking jewels flashed red at the edge of the depression, and black and yellow stripes were painted on the floor and rails surrounding the big machine.

Eclipse went to one of the doors, pressed his hand to a square green section and the door slid aside. "In," he said standing in doorway and gesturing. "Take a seat."

Bannor followed Daena in near the back of the group. The inside of the thing was divided down the middle by a narrow path. To either side thickly padded couches lined either wall. Marna, who was already sitting in one of the couches next to pale-skinned Dominique, gestured Bannor, Daena, and Damay to the empty seats next to her.

The chamber shuddered as the door closed behind Eclipse. The big Kriar touched some lighted jewels on the panel at the front the machine as the whole structure lurched forward and began to move.

Though he had expected it, Bannor's fingers still clamped down on the padded arm rest. Daena put her warm hand on top of his. Next to her, Bannor saw Damay tense. The elder savant gritted her teeth then seemed to master herself.

Daena leaned over and rubbed the older woman's shoulder. "It'll be okay, Big Sis."

Damay swallowed. "Aye."

As the vehicle continued to accelerate into darkness, Bannor saw Idun frowning sitting in the couch gripping her daughter's hand. She was having at least as bad a time as Damay. Euriel's husband Vanidaar sat in his chair stiff and stoic, an arm around his wife. With there being room for forty people, Tal and Terra had pushed up the chair arms and were sitting longwise down the couch with the attractive woman spooned into Tal's lap, her back reclining against his chest. The two looked so totally at ease. Loric and Desiray while not quite as relaxed, were obviously not concerned as the huge device hummed around them, the platforms opening out of the tube shot by at ever faster speed. He noticed Aarlen, like Tal and Terra, had folded some of the chair arms down. She sat in what was now the back of the contraption, feet up on the cushions and arms folded.

"You know, you two are very brave," Marna said to them.

Daena looked down at her. "How's that?"

"All these strange new things and I'd dare you've hardly twitched at any of it."

"New isn't always scary," Daena remarked. "After I met this fellow." She elbowed Bannor gently. "Everything is new--new face--new family-- new enemies." She shrugged. "It used to scare me, but I've grown accustomed to it."

Marna nodded. "What about you, Bannor?"

He sighed. "I guess I'm much the same. Sarai changed my entire life. Then I met Wren and things..." His voice trailed off. "Well, let's say it hasn't been boring."

"So I have heard," the Kriar said with a nod.

"Can I ask a question?" Daena asked.

Marna nodded.

"You're the head boss-lady here, the leader for this whole immense world, right? What are you here for? Should you be risking your life like this?"

Marna tilted her head and smiled. "And what leader is any good if they aren't willing to take some risks for their people?"

"Isn't it--well--" Daena lowered her voice. "Irresponsible?"

Marna pursed her lips. "Actually, yes," the Kriar batted her eyes. She grinned at Dominique who smiled back. "It gives my advisors fits." She sighed. "There are hundreds of people waiting in line to take my place. If something were to happen... I wouldn't be missed for long."

"Well, I would miss you," Loric said. "You're far too good company to write you off so easily."

Marna dipped her head. "Ever the gentleman."

<I don't like you going at all,> Dulcere thought to them. <But then you never listened to me.>

"My Heart," the Kriar leader said smiling toward Dulcere. "I always *listen* . It is that I do not always *agree* . If you recall, I did not want you to become a soldier. We both see how well you listened."

<Yes,> the word was frosty in Dulcere's mind. She folded her arms.

Euriel and the others made an 'ooohing' sound as vehicle left the enclosed area of the tunnel, now surrounded only by the clear material in the open space between the world sections. If anything, the sight was more impressive in the flesh. To see the

titanic structures apparently suspended on comparatively tiny threads all around them.

"I just don't understand," Bannor said without thinking. "Why does it need to be so big?"

"To hold all our expectations," Marna said. She said it with a flip tone, no doubt having answered the question a million or more times.

"It's really a world lab," Loric said. "Farmers on your world raise chickens, the Kriar raise complex species and play god."

"Ric, we do not play god. We interfere if only very rarely with those developing cultures--that defeats the purpose."

"The purpose being?" Loric asked.

"To usher other cultures to enlightenment," Marna replied. "I've told you this before. Most of the races we transplanted here were dying or on the brink of extinction from various causes. We gave them a new start."

"That's the answer I keep hearing," the gray-haired elder said. "It sounds like a zoo keeper's justification to me."

Marna let out an exasperated breath. "When they are ready, they come out and interact. You saw them in the trade areas."

Loric frowned. "I see how they are when the living gods walk among them."

Marna rocked her head back. She had obviously had this discussion before. She didn't respond except to sigh and run a hand through her long tresses. Dominique rubbed her arm.

Bannor watched the ancient Kriar lady, she simply did not give off the vibrations of a ruler of an entire race--much less a race that was likely one of the most powerful in Eternity. Her threads told a different story. They spoke of incomprehensible age and complex knots of potential that did things he could only begin to imagine. She looked and acted so young though... or was that

simply an affectation? Her psyche pattern was so intricate that Bannor couldn't tell. Quasar had been easy to read by comparison.

"Something wrong?" Daena asked, squeezing his arm.

Bannor looked down at the slim but powerful fingers on his skin. He liked the feel of them. Her touch made him warm inside. He liked everything about that hand in fact--especially being attached to the vibrant young savant beside him. They had so much in common...

He swallowed and winced. He could *not* be thinking like that. Sarai was his love. They had a lot in common, especially a baby daughter on the way!

"Bannor?" Daena leaned over and gazed into his eyes. The glowing green orbs of the young savant's eyes cast reflections on her shiny smooth skin.

A rush of heat gripped his chest. Reflexively, he pulled his arm away from her hand. "I'm--okay." He drew a breath. "Just thinking about--Sarai."

If only he had been.

"Oh," Daena tilted her head to one side. She looked down at the arm that he'd pulled away from her touch and raised an eyebrow. She glanced at him, sniffed, and leaned back in her seat.

"Sorry," he said.

She folded her arms. "I understand."

He expected her to be annoyed by his flinching away, but it didn't come through in her tone at all. She seemed-- *satisfied*. That didn't make sense. Hades, *he* wasn't making sense. He could admit to having some attraction for Daena... what wasn't to like? Sarai was his first and only love, and though Daena and others had tried to tempt him, he'd felt little more than a twinge. Sarai was everything he wanted in a woman, attractive, strong,

passionate, understanding, and devoted. So, what were these sudden feelings? Why now?

He pushed it out of his mind. This was no time to be worrying about such things. "How long will it take us to get to Quasar's place?"

Marna frowned. "Time references in the common tongue are terrible..." She looked at Dominique. "How much would a kilorev be?"

"Roughly, a quarter bell," the dark-haired woman filled in.

"So, are we going to learn how to use these items before we actually need them?" Bannor asked fingering the weapon on his side.

Eclipse turned from where he was sitting at the front of the machine. He reached into a pocket and pulled something out. He walked back along the rows handing the items to Vanidaar, Euriel, Idun, Daena, Ziedra, himself and Damay.

Bannor looked at the object, it looked like a flat red crystalline circle a little smaller than a coin.

"We don't have time to train you properly," Eclipse told them. "These are the next best thing. Press it to the back of your neck until it takes hold."

Idun looked at the object in her hand with suspicion. "And *what* is this?"

"A skill implant," Marna said. "With our short lead time we couldn't even use quick teach. So these are the next best thing. Suffice to say, they are like a learn-as-you-go quick teach. When you need to use one of the pieces of equipment we supplied--touch the object and think about what you want to do--there's a pause--and you'll have an instinct for it."

"I like that better than a massive headache," Daena said, frowning at the object. "Back of the neck, huh?"

Marna nodded.

The girl shrugged, pulled her hair out of the way, and pressed the object where indicated. After a few moments, she let go. "Hmmm, tingles." She undid the catch on the weapon and held it in her hand. She narrowed her glowing eyes. Reaching up she fingered a beveled cylinder that jutted from the back of the device. She paused, brow furrowing. Then placed the heel of her hand on top of the cylinder and spun it quickly through its range of motion by moving her hand side-to-side. "Huh. That's wizard." She looked to Bannor, then to Damay. She spun the wheel all the way to the left. "Stun." She raked her hand across the wheel. She looked down the length of the device with one eye closed. "Obliterate." She straightened up and grinned. "Nice." She shook her head. "Knowledge on demand. That is just too wizard for words. You just have to focus. It takes a little time." She frowned at Marna as she put the weapon back in its holder. "It stings though... you didn't mention that part."

The ancient Kriar shrugged.

Apparently satisfied that the device was not harmful, Idun did the same. She did a similar experiment and nodded in acknowledgement of the cleverness of the device. With her mother declaring it safe, Euriel donned her device.

Bannor frowned. He seemed to be learning a lot recently--the hard (easy?) way. He, Damay, Vanidaar, and Ziedra put their devices on at the same time. When the crystal took hold he felt a hot tingling race through his arms and legs and a sharp prickling sensation in the back of his neck. He didn't feel different at all.

He pulled the weapon out of the holder--he felt a tingle in the back of his head-- *holster*. Strange, that odd word had popped into his mind. He held the item--the tingle came again-- *Mark VI*. As he stared at the handle-- *the grip*--he wrapped his hand around it, putting his finger through the-- *guard*--and on the-- *trigger*.

Bannor felt an ache pulsing in his temple--it was similar to the pain he experienced with the quick teach, but far less severe.

Without really analyzing it, he knew squeezing the trigger would make the weapon launch a bolt of-- *energy*. It was like a crossbow only far stronger. He put the heel of his hand against the wheel on the back of the weapon and slid it through the range of motion--' *stun*' to ' *obliterate*'--the same words that Daena had used.

He looked up from his study to see Damay, Euriel, Vanidaar, Ziedra and Idun all with contemplative expressions exploring the ability of the skill implants.

"I don't know why you call this anything other than magic," he said to Marna. "Your artifices, these jewels, this armor," he tapped the chest plate. "It seems like magic to me."

Marna shrugged. "It isn't magic when you understand it. Our artifices are merely the result of eons of study. What you do, Bannor, with no artifices save your mind and spirit-- *that's* magic. It is doubly magic to me, as I do not even understand how it works."

"It works because Gaea wants it to," Ziedra said from across the way. The dark-haired savant twisted a finger in her long tresses. "Big brother there is the reincarnation of her first born--Alpha."

Damay tilted her head and looked past Daena to Bannor. "That may be something of an exaggeration. He does have a plentitude of our lady's gifts however."

Ziedra shrugged. "I don't think it's *much* of an exaggeration. The longer I know him, the more and more outrageous stuff I see him do. That thing at the party." She shook her head. "Does anything else make sense? Alpha was the catalyst that caused Gaea's spiritual powers to incarnate in the first place."

"I thought Alpha was a *part* of Gaea?" Marna said with a furrowed brow.

Ziedra shrugged. "Do I look old enough to understand a cosmic being able to create all the life in universe? Does Bannor being an extension of Gaea seem all that far fetched?"

"Not to me," Loric said with a nod. "It is a sound bit of reasoning. It makes sense from the standpoint of savant mythology as well."

"I have ventured with Captain Starfist extensively," Vanidaar said with a furrowed brow. "The strength and timbre of his life-force has always perplexed me. In fact, when another creature would have been slain from the drain on their spirit, he persevered. That Gaea watches over him goes without question."

Bannor sighed. He hated when people talked about him like he was some kind of strange mythical beast. "Did it ever occur to you that I don't want to be thought of as some kind of *creature*?"

"Nothing wrong with being a creature," Terra giggled, rubbing her face against Tal's. "Especially if everyone likes the creature that you are. Which everyone seems to."

He frowned. "I just want to be normal. I could live without all this-- *stuff* happening to me!"

"Friend," Desiray said. "I don't know you yet, but if you're a friend of Wren's, I wager if you were *normal* you'd be bored out of your skull."

"You'd lose that bet," he growled. "I had a perfectly normal life--worst thing that ever happened was a stray ogre now and then. I was *happy* ."

Euriel leaned her head against her husband. "You mean you'd be happier if you'd never met Sarai?"

He scowled. The thought made his stomach twist. "Of course not."

"What part of her life style is 'normal'?"

He rocked his head back. "We were normal, we lived in the mountains like normal people--then Hecate came along and ruined everything."

"Come on, Bannor, you're kidding yourself. Much as I moan about being normal, I don't kid myself like that..." Daena said next to him. "How long was that going to last with or without Hecate? You know the Queen would have dug you out of wherever you were hiding eventually. Sarai loves you, but she wouldn't have done the shack in the woods thing forever..."

He sniffed. "Maybe."

Desiray shook her head and laughed. "Talk about reluctant hero. Friend, one day all the excitement is going to stop and you are going to wake up one morning feeling empty and terribly, terribly bored."

"Well, I look forward to it," he growled. "I'm pulled so thin now I feel like a lump of tree-sap squished under someone's shoe."

The white-haired woman chuckled. "You'll get used to it--try being a mother of six, head of a couple guilds, and be an active agent for a goddess. Now, *that* is stretched thin..."

"Seems that thinness had you and Wren almost killing one another..." Ziedra said wistfully.

"Girl was mighty hacked at me to be certain," Desiray responded with a nod. She shrugged. "Can't say I blame her seeing what she went through. It wasn't exactly my *fault* --just my *responsibility* ."

"It is still a pretty sore point with her," Euriel said. "I think you've made most of it up to her."

"I've sure tried," Desiray said with a sigh.

"We appreciate everything you've done for her and for us," Vanidaar said. "We count ourselves lucky to be able to add you and Ric to our circle of friends."

"The pleasure is shared we assure you," Loric said with a nod. "This will be our first official knock down together, if you don't count the party."

"It will indeed," Euriel said, rubbing her hands together and glancing at her mother. "It won't be quite the same without Cassandra. She seems to be quite a scrapper."

"She hates getting dirty," Desiray confided with a grin. "She'll fight like a demon just to have to keep from doing laundry." The four of them laughed.

At an earlier time, he would have found their blase attitude toward the upcoming fight appalling, but in truth, he'd fought so much in recent tendays that he'd come to be largely the same way.

"We're coming up on the station," Eclipse said. "Security is compromised so we need to be alert, not only for Baronians but Daergon regulars who may be capitalizing on the low security and the Vatraena being here."

"Wait--you mean we may have to fight Kriar here too?" Bannor said with wide eyes. "Nobody mentioned that."

"It's only a possibility," Eclipse said. "I would be remiss not to mention it. Now, everyone not familiar, pull out your weapon." He pulled out his own sidearm. "Notice if you point at another team member." He pointed his weapon at Bannor. "Note here," he pointed to a spot near the-- *gun sight*--that was now glowing red. "That's the target sounder. Red means the weapon will not fire because the target is friendly. You have to over-ride the weapon to fire on a friendly. It works because our signatures have been loaded into these weapons. The signatures of any Kriar agents who we might possibly encounter in this mission have also been entered. If you meet a stranger that does not make the sounder turn red--it is best to treat them as an enemy." He looked around. "Any questions?"

Bannor raised his hand.

"Bannor?"

"Assuming I understand this thing correctly," he said. He spun the dial on the back of the Mark VI with his hand. "The crystal didn't tell me what setting to use to stop a Baronian."

"Anything less than quarter power is most likely going to just make them really mad," Aarlen said from the back. "Remember, they expect to fight Kriar so they'll have armor good against these kinds of weapons."

"I assume using full power is a bad idea?" Daena said.

"The weapon is good for about ten full-power shots before the mechanism will disable itself for safety reasons," Eclipse said. "We'll be on beam power, but a full intensity shot will overheat the gun and make it useless for a good fifteen count. Don't do it in a pitched battle unless you have something as a back up."

"Dulcere and I will have these Mark XIIIs," Eclipse held up the far larger weapon. "If a target is resisting your attacks, call one of us."

The machine began to hum around them and Bannor felt himself surge forward as divisions in the tube flashed by with gradually less speed. The machine was approaching some kind of complex on the side of one of the world segments. It did not look like the one that he and Daena had entered.

<All right,> Dulcere spoke into their minds. <We are point team, Tal, you have lead. Daena, you will stay with me, we will be rear guard. Loric, Terra, Desiray stay spread out until the area is secure. Consider the platform a compromised area.>

"Gotcha," Tal growled. He cracked his knuckles and rolled his shoulders.

"We are the point team's cover," Aarlen said. "We are off second. Bannor you are lead--just keep sharp and call out any enemies you sense. Dom, you have one job, keep any heat off Bannor so he can locate targets. Marna you coordinate Bannor's spotting with the team one and two. Damay, you stay with Idun and I. You will play anchor and defense, while Idun and I are team hitters... Bannor points them out--"

"--We *hit* them. Yes." Idun smacked a glowing fist into her palm. "That makes sense to me."

"We're off last," Eclipse said. "Rear guard. Algernon you are lead. Euriel you watch Idun's back. Vanidaar you cover Aarlen. Ziedra, you and Radian will be spotters. Stay high and stay in contact with Marna. I will cover you."

Bannor drew a breath. This was so different. There was actually a plan-- *organization*. He had an assigned role too; to use his thread sight to spot danger. He clenched his fists-- *that* he could do. He was also team lead. It had been a long time since he had actually led a team as opposed to simply participating in mass melee and trying to survive.

Daena put a hand on his shoulder. "You okay?"

He nodded. "It's not like we haven't been through this before."

She laughed. "No, it's not."

He put a hand to his chest. His heart was pumping fast. The vehicle was almost stopped now, and they were pulling into the far end of the platform.

He touched behind his ear to the far-speak gem. "Sarai?"

There was a pause of perhaps a few heartbeats. ****My One?**** Her voice rang clear and warm in his head. Just the sound of it was soothing.

"Star, we're at the drop off and heading in. I'll call when it's safe. I love you."

****Stay safe,**** she told him. ****Things are going well here in Kul'Amaron.****

"Love you," he murmured.

****Love you,**** she answered back.

He tapped the crystal off and focused on the platform the vehicle was sliding toward. The whole machine bumped and shuddered as it seemed to ride up on something that clicked and

clacked. They were going slow now, by comparison, perhaps only three or four times the speed of galloping horse.

Out the window they were running alongside what looked like a huge covered pavilion area.

Eclipse pulled something on the side of his big weapon that made a loud clack and he stared at the scene. "We have to make our way across the open plaza to the point-to-point station on the far side. From there we can transport out to Quasar's estate." He pointed to spots in the high ceiling as the vehicle bounced and slowed further. "Watch the balconies."

Tal straightened up and rolled his shoulders. "Guess it's time to go to work." He kissed his wife on the neck. Terra made a purring sound and rubbed her face against his. She rose to a standing position and grabbed one of the overhead rails as the machine came to a complete stop. Tal rose, drew a breath, and his expression changed from a slight smile to a hard mask of narrowed eyes and taut jaw.

Bannor heard a hissing sound and a clunk as metal moved under the vehicle. The doors at either end of the vehicle slid open with a humming noise.

Tal nodded to Eclipse and Dulcere. He moved to the front of vehicle, spinning the Mark VI out of its holster. With his right hand he reached up and seemed to grip the air. In a hiss and a flare of light, a long two-edged blade flashed into being.

Like Algernon's weapon, the sword had an incredibly complex knot of threads spinning around it. Tal shifted down the steps with the gun and sword at his sides.

Loric rose from his seat by Desiray, he patted Terra on the shoulder as he passed her and proceeded down the steps. Terra followed him, with Desiray rising to follow on her heels.

Next to him, Daena drew a breath. She gave his hand a squeeze and stood up. She nodded to him and stepped after Dulcere as the lady Kriar slapped something on the big weapon she carried and stepped toward the exit.

He got to his feet and followed Daena as she and Dulcere went out the rear exit of the vehicle.

He nodded to Aarlen. The white-haired elder nodded back. Dominique stepped out of the front exit as he left the vehicle. Her hands flashed and a pair of wicked looking swords flickered into being. She tossed her head, black-hair wreathing around her face. A reddish light gleamed in her blue eyes and they turned a golden color.

She raised her head and sniffed the air.

Bannor ignored her for the moment, focusing instead on Dulcere's back and proceeding after her.

The members of the team moved with quiet efficiency, even burly Tal moved across the plaza in near total silence.

As they left the immediate area of the platform, the roof opened into an enormous dome that Bannor guessed was some three or four hundred paces high. Underfoot, the area was tiled in stones in an interlocking mosaic pattern. Circular gardens filled with various shrubs, trees, and flowers were spread out through the area. The center of the area was terraced down into a square with several statues on raised platforms.

It was a huge park--one empty of people. Some ancient Kriar artisan had designed and built the place, but there were apparently no patrons to enjoy it. The stone underfoot was pristine and clean, devoid of wear. The grass and plants looked well tended as though brand new. It made him harken back to when he asked Marna what they needed all the space for-- *to hold all our expectations*. Perhaps the answer had not been as rhetorical as he first thought. With untold millions upon millions of summers of life--what did a person, or a race, do? He stared around. Create. The more he thought about what he had seen in his previous trip to Homeworld--the whole titanic artifice was like a near infinite canvas where the minds of the Kriar could create without end. Their creations went beyond mere art, statuary, and topiary... they created life... created worlds. That's what Loric had meant in his remark about playing god.

At the moment, it wasn't for him to judge. He glanced back. Face serious, Dominique shadowed him, golden eyes scanning the landscape. Her gaze met his briefly and the pale woman smiled and nodded. The way she held her weapons, the sure movements of her body told him this was no pampered lady playing at being a warrior. The two single-edged, curved swords she held glowed and flashed in the diffuse light of plaza. From the tangle of magical threads that spun around those weapons, they were nothing a person wanted to be touched by, much less struck, especially with the kind of force the woman was obviously capable of generating.

They continued across the plaza, the only sounds coming from the soft foot-falls of the team as they made their way across, the hiss of cloth and creak of armor.

Bannor stared at the place through his thread-sight. The threads of the Kriar Homeworld were so strange. He found many of the threads he saw on a normal world, but they looked and felt different. Though he didn't see anything to give any alarm, something felt wrong--out of place. Was it a sound? Or a sensation?

He stopped, knelt and pressed the palm of his hand against the stone flags.

****Forward team, hold up,**** Bannor heard Marna's voice in his ear. ****Bannor stopped.****

He glanced up. He saw Tal's team had paused a short distance away. Dulcere raised her chin. Standing next to the Kriar, Daena wore a concerned expression, her brow furrowed.

He drew a breath, meeting the Kriar's dark eyes. He focused again on his hand and the strange sensation. There was a vibration there, but his thread sense said the physical sensation was merely machinery beneath their feet--air moving. The thing making him uneasy was something else.

He raised a closed fist and shook his head. He stood.

Dulcere gestured her team ahead with a swing of her weapon.

Tal frowned. He spun his sword, his head turning as he looked for possible enemies.

Dominique closed with him, her shoulder brushing his.

****What was it?**** Marna asked in his ear.

He looked back at her. Unsure of how to send the message without speaking aloud, the way she and Aarlen apparently could. He shrugged and frowned.

The Kriar's brow furrowed.

Perhaps a half breath further, they were nearing the far side of the dome. The sound of running water muted their footsteps. A narrow canal wound its way around the gardens on this side. Tal headed for the nearest bridge spanning the gap.

The uneasiness became a pulse in the back of his skull. Damn not being able to do it quietly. Something bad was afoot. He thumbed the comm. "Tal, hold up!"

The warrior froze with his foot hovering over the bridge.

Water always had a tremendous number of threads associated with it. So many kinds of tiny creatures lived in water and gave the liquid an appearance of being alive. The water tended to obscure other things in it. There was something else... something out of place near that bridge, near one of the stubby posts supporting the walkway.

Was it something--or a lack of it?

Bannor didn't wait any longer to act. He swung his hand, raking his nola power through all the threads underneath the bridge. When he hit resistance he clamped down and yanked.

Tal was poised and questioning what was going on when there was an eruption of sparks as something splashed through the water and slammed against the cobbles in shriek of metal on

stone.

Stealth armor, like the stuff Quasar had been using, perhaps even better because he hadn't even seen the threads to give it away.

****Spit,**** Aarlen yelled. ****Incoming!****

The members of the team became a blur of motion as lances of energy began stabbing down into the plaza. Before he had a chance to move Dominique leaped in front of him and fended aside a massive blast of power that deflected from her crossed swords and created a smoking trench in the stone with a roar.

****Dark, they have phalanx suits,**** Eclipse snarled. He dived and rolled, the big weapon shrieked as it made the walls of the dome erupt.

Bannor unholstered the Mark VI, cranked the power three fourths of the way up, and aimed at a spot high on the dome wall that was empty of threads. He pulled the trigger. The weapon trilled, kicked in his hand, and a bolt of energy smashed the surprised creature back against the wall, making it tumble from the high perch and crash into stone cobbles some twenty paces below.

He stared at the gun. Terra was right. The little thing was more than impressive!

"Frell," Dominique let out. She deflected another blast with a grunt. The energy hit the area beside them in a blast of heat and rain of pebble sized debris. "You can see them? How many are there?"

"Can't tell. I'm only catching glimpses of them," he called back. Bannor heard a snarl behind him and he glanced back. Damay was on one knee doubled over as if in pain. Idun lay on the ground. Smoke rose from her shoulder where one of the energy blasts had obviously struck her.

"Mother!" Euriel cried out.

The goddess pushed to her feet. Fire ignited in her eyes and a white glow surrounded her. Her skin turned from pale to a metallic looking sheen and she expanded in size with a crackling sound.

"Spit," Aarlen let out, staggering back from the powerful pantheon lord.

Idun raised her arms over her head and a globe of dark radiance gathered between her outstretched hands. Several blasts came at her but the energy glanced from her body.

She stepped back from the black globe which hung in the air like a dark mirror, threads and elemental power spinning around it. The goddess aimed a glowing fist in the direction of where the shots seemed to be coming from. "Come cowardly spawn of Friggia. Let us do *real* battle." She made a clawing motion in the air, then swung her arms down as if slamming something to the ground.

Sparks whirled around the goddess, hot air gusted and lightning crackled and flashed. With a shriek, six glowing figures poured out of the dark spot, slamming down at her feet so hard the cobbles shook underfoot.

Bannor didn't wait for the stunned Kriar to react, but snatched up their threads and heaved, sending them skittering across the stone. "Get them!" Bannor yelled. He sent a rasp of will through their threads causing sparks and flashes of energy to flare and dance around each opponent's body.

With obvious targets to deal with, the assault team focused on the attackers with vicious efficiency. Gun blasts, magic, and swords hammered the rogue Kriar with brutal power.

In only instants, the plaza was silent except the fizzling of dying artifices and the rasp of heavy breaths.

"Damn," Tal grunted. "Glad she's on our side."

The three Kriar were staring at the goddess with wide eyes.

"Are you all right?" Euriel asked her mother.

Idun growled, she sniffed and kicked one of the armored bodies at her feet. She rubbed the still smoking burn in her shoulder. She drew a breath and returned to her smaller pale-skinned form with a flash of crackling magic. "I will manage," Idun said. "These weapons," she nudged the long weapon the Kriar attacker had been holding. "They have surprising power."

The goddess turned to Damay who was still on her knees face screwed up in a mask of pain and helped the little woman to her feet. "My thanks, Sister. I would have taken a worse hit if not for your shield. Let me lend you strength." The goddess' hands glowed, and a sheen of greenish light spread down Damay's body.

The elder savant straightened and shook her head. "Aie. Thank you. My apologies for not being more effective. I was not prepared for the strike to be so strong." She drew a breath and shuddered. "I will know better in the future."

"From now on, you will have my strength to sustain you," Idun responded with a nod. She growled at looked around to the others. "Devil the wretch that forced us to come here. Her pain will be most exquisite."

Bannor saw Eclipse swallow. His expression turned very grim.

"Lady Idun," Marna said. "I understand your anger. I must request that you do not kill Quasar. We will have need of her."

Idun turned burning eyes on Marna. "One cannot experience pain when they are *dead* ."

"Let's move on," Eclipse said. "I've notified security to come pick these traitors up."

Shaking their heads, the teams gathered up and moved toward the exit on the far side of the plaza.

"I found your performance quite impressive," Dominique said, keeping pace with Bannor. The woman had a mesmerizing voice,

deep and syrupy. "This is the first I've seen your power first hand."

He nodded. "I'm learning. Thanks for your defense."

"You heard Aarlen," she grinned. "That's my job."

He looked to the young savant. "You okay, Daena?"

The girl nodded.

The three teams moved at a quick pace. Tal opened the huge vault-like doors that lay on the far side. The giant metal valves slid aside with a hiss, revealing a broad corridor easily wide enough for four carriages to comfortably travel side by side. The ceiling of the walkway had been constructed of a clear material that allowed them to see up and out into the vast interior structure of Homeworld. A half dozen steps in were the moving walkways like they had seen in the way-point. The air smelled of strange things that Bannor did not recognize, it reminded him of some kind of incense but doubted that was what it was. The place was so quiet, only the vaguely metallic grind of the walkway's movement made any sound.

Eclipse shut the massive valves behind them. The metal came together with a boom. At his gesture that their rear was secure, Tal stepped up on the moving walkway. Loric, Terra, and Desiray waited a few moments before following suit. Daena and Dulcere went next leaving an even spacing. Bannor gave them a five count and stepped onto the moving contraption.

Dominique took a position right behind him and stepped beside him, blades resting on her shoulders.

"Lady Dominique, might I ask a favor?"

"Of course," she responded. "And just call me Dom, we're team mates."

"As you wish," he said with a nod. He tapped the device around his neck. "I was unable to signal the others without talking aloud. Could you show me how Aarlen and Marna are able to

speak silently?"

"Oh certainly," she said. "Here unclip the band." She sheathed her swords and unclasped the neckband from around his throat. "The skill implant wasn't working because you couldn't see it." She put it in his hand. "Now, look at it and say 'sub-vocal'."

"Sub vocal," he murmured. His hand went instinctively to a slide on the side of the collar. " *Telepathic synchronis. Multicast. Cybernetic enhancement. Secure communications...*" The words flowed into his mind, and some of their meanings. He touched the *controls* that operated those functions.

He blinked. *Controls* . That was the name for all those things that he kept calling 'gems' in his head. They were *controls* or more specifically *buttons* . So bizarre.

He clipped the neckband back on and slid the subvocal slider into position, then focused on the band and told it to synchronize.

He heard a crackle in his ear that gradually seemed to become words. ****Test, test, test...**** He pressed the accept control on the band. ****Synchronization complete.****

****Team broadcast,**** he spoke silently. ****Now can I talk without giving everyone away?****

****Acknowledged,**** Aarlen said.

****Team one leader reads you,**** Dulcere answered.

****Team three leader clear,**** Eclipse responded.

Dominique gave him a clenched fist sign of approval.

"Thank you. I hate being a plebe."

She leaned her head to one side, and looked at him sidelong. "You're fine." She glanced up through the crystal above into the massive interior of Homeworld, then looked back to Marna and smiled. The ancient Kriar leader smiled back and nodded.

Bannor felt a brief hitch in his chest, recognizing something familiar--something human.

"Counsel Solaris is somebody special to you?" he asked.

Dominique turned golden eyes on him. Her pale skin flushed for a moment. She grinned. "Aye."

If he was any judge she was more than special. "Perhaps you would feel better guarding her than me."

The dark-haired woman shook her head. "Not to worry, she has defenses you wouldn't dream of. That attack back there was meant for her--if you noticed, she wasn't touched. You have no such protection, Aarlen knows her business."

He nodded. "As long as you're comfortable with it, I know what it's like not to be able to protect someone you love."

Dominique reached out and gave his shoulder a squeeze. "I appreciate the sentiment. You're a good guy, it's no wonder they..." She leaned close. " *Both* love you."

He winced. "Is it that obvious?"

She raised an eyebrow. "I've been in a love triangle or three... I know the look. That girl Daena..." She drew a breath. "Quite a handful."

Bannor gave a weary nod.

"Be careful of her," Dominique advised. "I can tell she's not the kind that will give up--and she's going to live a *long* time."

Dominique was right on that count.

"I can't do anything about it," he growled in a whisper. "I've never done anything to encourage it except be *nice* to her."

The dark haired woman shook her head. "Girl that age, that's all it takes. Do you want some advice?"

He rolled his eyes. "What?"

She tugged on his sleeve and he met the woman's golden eyes. "You need to take her seriously. That girl isn't desperate because you aren't married yet. She still thinks she has a chance."

"How do *you* know--you just met us."

She smiled and for the first time he noticed that she had fangs. "Call me an expert on charms. If you don't want a lot of heartbreak, you need to find someone else for her to focus on."

Bannor shook his head. "You jest. No chance. I am absolutely no good at that sort of thing."

"Assuming we live," she looked around. They were nearing the end of the journey down the long corridor. "Hire someone. Since the Felspars are hanging around and you know Wren. Get her to introduce you to Dorian. She *specializes* in just that sort of thing."

"In love triangles?" he said with an incredulous tone.

"In getting out of trouble. Because, friend, you're in a lot of trouble--you just don't realize it yet. That girl has a claw in you, and she's going to start reeling you in soon. Even though she's just a baby, she's smart, and *powerful*. It's not wise to play with the heart of a goddess." She glanced back to Idun. "Trust me."

He gave Dominique a weary nod. Why did everything have to be so complicated? He had thought that Daena was over him, but there had been hints recently of her renewed interest. The most insane thing was that he was worrying about it now, when they were getting ready to confront what might be the biggest battle of their lives.

Tal reached the end of the long passage and worked at the mechanism to open the doors for a few moments. The massive valves grated open, revealing what might be a large thoroughfare or market. There appeared to be what looked like shops with display windows, curbs and what were obviously

streets for carriages or whatever the things were that Kriar used. Despite being what looked like a fully appointed city, the place seemed empty and dead.

Nothing moved.

A hundred million worlds of space, and simply not enough creatures to fill the areas.

****Left turn,**** Eclipse advised from the rear. ****Turn right at the second intersection.****

****Got it,**** Tal acknowledged. ****Tac leader, should I be still be watching for Daergons?****

****Affirmative, point One,**** Eclipse broadcast.

****Grrreat.****

The team filed down the silent streets, furtively glancing up and cautiously crossing openings between the shop structures. Ziedra and Radian floated along a few paces above the ground at the back of the group. The dark-haired savant held a staff in her hands now. When did she get that? He guessed if the other team members could summon weapons, she could too. She was a savant of magic after all.

Tal started to round the corner, stopped, and pulled back.
****Hold up.****

Everyone immediately hugged the walls and hunkered down. Dominique pulled out her swords and began looking around.

****Tac leader,**** Tal said. ****Are there any units supposed to be in the area?****

****Negative, point One.****

****These guys don't feel like the last bunch, and I can smell 'em.****

Bannor stretched out his nola senses toward the street. There

were indeed tangles of life forces. He guessed about a score, it was tough to tell reading through the threads of energy wound through the buildings and structures between them and the possible enemy. They were indeed different and did not feel like Kriar. His next thought was they might be Baronians but these creatures did not seem to possess magic either.

****They aren't Kriar or Baronians,**** Bannor broadcast.

Loric moved up until he was at Tal's shoulder. ****Marna did you have this area locked down?****

****Negative,**** the counsel responded. ****We haven't had time.****

Desiray slid up next to her husband. ****I'll scout ahead.**** She pulled up the hood of her cloak and vanished.

Bannor blinked. That was a nice trick!

****Wiz,**** he heard Daena murmur on the comm. link.

Though Desiray was not visible, Bannor could follow the tangle of magic and life energy he knew to be the white-haired woman. She drifted up the street. After a period of about a long breath, Desiray sighed on the comm. ****Damn, it's just peepers. They must have followed us from the market. Move up, but be careful in case hostiles are using them as a screen.****

****How did they get here ahead of us?**** Bannor asked.

****With people who are so new to Homeworld we can't move around in the fastest transit systems.****

Tal moved forward at a cautious trot still keeping against the wall furthest from the observers. Loric and Terra followed behind him. Daena and Dulcere stopped at the corner to watch their progress, proceeding around when it seemed safe.

****Damn, can't believe we're getting jumpy over a bunch of spectators.****

****What do they expect to see?**** Euriel asked.

****What do they hope to see?**** Eclipse broadcast.

****Tragedy.****

Bannor followed Dulcere and Daena, moving as they did close to the walls on the far side of the street. Dominique stayed right behind him, her swords at the ready. As they neared an intersection where Desiray still waited cloaked in her magic, he saw the 'spectators'. He guessed about a twenty of them stood at the street side, dressed in various colors. They didn't seem hostile, and there were no weapons among them. The creatures weren't Kriar though there were some similarities. Some had gold skin like the Kriar, but not the eyes. Males and females they watched with intent expressions. Even with his thread sight these creatures were tough to read.

****Do you think they were watching back in the park?****

****Probably.****

****You should get security to clear them out,**** Tal said. ****Last thing we need is a bunch of battle voyeurs.****

****The order is already in,**** Marna confirmed.

****Damn waste of time,**** Tal grumbled. He leaned into a fast trot up the street.

The rest of the forward team increased their pace to stay with him. Bannor leaned into a jog as well, he felt the pressure of time even if they had only been on the move for half a bell.

At the end of the street lay a circular complex with a high domed roof. Crystalline tubes similar to the ones they had come in only smaller ran up out of sight and through the walls of the enclosure. The stairs running up around the periphery and the marble-appearing columns reminded Bannor of a combat arena.

As they topped the steps Bannor saw that the entire structure was a circle of archways, all of which gave off a soft blue light.

Tal stopped at the nearest opening and punched on a rectangular panel positioned by it. A pulsation and a humming came from the glowing arch, and for a moment the air flickered and rippled like the surface of water.

****Goin in,**** Tal said. He stepped into the opening and vanished in a flash of light.

There was perhaps a half breath of time in which the whole team seemed to tense up.

****Landing zone looks clear,**** Tal said. ****I think our hostess is getting impatient. She rerouted gate drop to a platform barely a stone throw from the target. Come on down.****

Loric moved in with Desiray and Terra close behind. Dulcere and Daena stepped in only moments after.

****Team One, clear,**** Dulcere advised.

****Team Two move up,**** Aarlen ordered.

Bannor drew a breath, crossing the street, and climbing the steps to the portal. Dominique stayed at his shoulder.

"Don't think about it," she advised. "Just step in."

Heart thudding, he leaned into the last few steps and pushed into the shimmering surface. There was an icy feeling like he had pushed his face into a snowbank and a ripple of static hummed through his clothing. Threads whirled and flashed around him. For an instant there was a brief sense of falling, stars seemed to rush up at him from a black abyss, then light flared around him and he stumbled down onto something metallic that clanked underfoot.

Warm hands gripped his arm to steady him. He looked into Daena's glowing green eyes. She smiled at him and he smiled back.

He stepped down off the platform as the archway behind him hummed and shimmered. Dominique seemed to step out of a

pool of rippling reflective metal. Tiny bolts of lightning seemed to crackle along her skin as she passed through the surface and clumped down onto the landing pad.

Bannor looked around. They stood in a railed circle perhaps twenty paces across. Boulders and trees overgrown with ferns and moss surrounded the structure. Water cascaded through rocks nearby sending a spray down over the far side of the circle. The area smelled of age and living things, the air cool and wet.

He noticed Daena looking up to a point behind him. He turned and craned his neck up. A vertical spire jutted out of the landscape, its summit shrouded in clouds, its polished sides reflected the verdant surroundings, lakes, rivers, and dense forests. Somewhere at the top of that colossal structure Wren waited for them.

Tal snorted. "Prettiest damn place I ever faced death in."

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Chapter Five

Armed Tactical Negotiations

After the first time I kissed him, I always thought of Bannor as mine. He brought me out of darkness and led me to a life among friends and sweet affection. He can marry Sarai or a dozen other women, it cannot change the fact that he was meant for me. It might take a while, but I will make it true. After all, I'm immortal now, and I have all the time in the universe...

**-- Daena Sheento,
Ward Prodigal of Malan**

Surrounded by vegetation, a pale sun glowed overhead in a cloud-dappled sky, it was impossible to envision where they stood was not just some strange locale on Titaan, the world of his birth. The reflective spire jutting up through the clouds, its base surrounded by lakes and rivers made the wild possibility more believable.

It was as Tal had said, a most beautiful place to confront death. The rocky sloping terrain saturated with thick vegetation, laced by watercourses and dotted with lakes and ponds was a defender's paradise. A creature could vanish in five steps in the thick undergrowth. Hard cover was abundant. The numerous waterfalls provided obscuring noise to cover movement.

Bannor doubted any confrontation would occur out here. The mammoth structure with its hundreds of levels and chambers was the most likely battleground.

"Quite a place," Loric breathed.

Aarlen, Damay and Idun stepped from the portal onto the platform behind Marna. The four of them stepped down to the surrounding deck.

The white-haired Magestrix thumbed the comm. on her neck.
Team Two, clear.

Acknowledged, Eclipse answered. **Team Three move up.**

In moments, Algernon appeared on the platform in a crackle of energy. Ziedra and Radian soon after. Last came Eclipse. The burly Kriar male stepped down to the platform and surveyed the area with glowing blue eyes. He frowned. He turned to the gate and punched something on the panel, the glow of the archway dimmed to black, the hum it made going silent.

The Kriar warrior looked around at the terrain, brow furrowing in thought. He looked up to the massive spire. "Teams, we go airborne from here."

One by one, the team members reached in to jackets, cast spells, or activated devices, and rose off the ground. Damay, using her nola, swept into the air with a thump of vibration that rumbled through the structure underfoot.

Ziedra drifted over and cast the spell of flight on himself and Daena again.

"Oh yes, thanks Lady Zee!" Daena burbled. "Next thing I learn, it's going to be how to fly on my own!" She swooped up and did a flip in the air. She grinned and looked down at Bannor.

He drew a breath, the magic humming around his hands and feet and rose a few paces into the air. He had to admit the flying was growing on him. After spending all the time in the citadel airborne and under his own volition, the weightless feeling no longer made his stomach sour. There definitely was a freeing sensation to be able to move any way he wanted with little more than a thought and a sway of his balance.

****Team one, move out,**** Dulcere signaled.

Tal accelerated away from the platform, and shot out over the vegetation-choked landscape. Loric, Desiray, and Terra followed only heartbeats after. The group moved fast, easily two or three times the speed of a galloping horse. Daena and Dulcere hissed out after them in a flutter of wind blown clothing.

He swallowed, counted to five, and urged himself after them. Ziedra's powerful flight magic had him moving far faster than he ever wanted to go in just a few heartbeats. Fast as that seemed to be, with the rocks and trees whipping by underneath him, he was already falling behind.

"Come on," Dominique urged. She took hold of his arm and pulled him faster so the air was nothing but a roar of speed in his ears.

Ahead of him, Daena seemed to be having the time of her life, arms outstretched and sweeping around Dulcere as the Kriar woman flew arrow straight over the landscape, hair flying in the wind.

He glanced back. Marna cruised along behind them perhaps a dozen paces back, face composed, arms behind her back.

Aarlen, Idun, and Damay flew in a triangular pattern, their expressions serious and bodies taut.

Algernon and the rear guard all seemed comfortable with flight and dipped through the uneven terrain with fluid precision.

Tal did not track straight toward the immense edifice, halfway there he dropped lower and shot down into the valleys and cuts between the hills. The rest of the assault team were forced to follow a snaking high-speed slalom down river courses and shallow rock-studded valleys. The big man's speed did not slow, if anything, he speeded up--mist and dust forming spinning vortices as he streaked ahead.

Dominique, obviously a veteran of such maneuvers pulled Bannor through the careening rise and fall of the darting dodging course.

Ahead of them, Daena was less joyous, the tight maneuvering obviously taking all her focus. What surprised Bannor was that she could do it at all. Without Dominique to help him, he would have long ago eaten a tree or boulder.

Another glance back showed the rest of the team smoothly mirroring the gyrating flight.

That's enough sight seein', Tal rumbled on the comm. **I saw enough. Shall I spike?**

Copy Lead One, Dulcere's voice responded.

Acknowledged, Aarlen answered.

Affirmative, Lead One, Eclipse replied. **Go for spike.**

"Hold on," Dominique told him.

Hold on? They were going to go faster?! They were bloody

ripping the leaves off the trees now! Bannor's heart, already beating fast, picked up to hammering gallop.

Ahead of them, Tal drew out his sword, and then gripping it ahead of him tightened his body into a hard line and accelerated away from the lead team. Contrails spiraled off the hilt and tip of his sword as he shrieked into a climb, fired into the sky as though from crossbow.

Loric, Terra, and Desiray did not follow him, but fanned out, also increasing their speed and climbing toward the summit of the high tower. Dulcere and Daena stayed together, only angling up slightly and steering as though to circle the tower.

****Spotter going high side,**** Dominique spoke over the comm.

****Go.**** Aarlen answered.

"Grab your stomach," the pale-warrior told him.

Bannor didn't have time to even wonder what she meant as a flare of light surrounded them, and the threads of the universe spun and flickered. The two of them plunged down through darkness and immersed high above the terrain some hundreds of paces above the pinnacle of Quasar's immense fortress.

"Ack." Bannor grabbed the side of his suddenly aching head.
"What..."

"Focus," Dominique ordered gripping his shoulders. "Look for enemies."

As he looked down, he noticed the entire tailing anchor team had vanished.

"The spike maneuver is something we've practiced," Dominique explained looking over his shoulder. "The intent is draw out the enemy and shake any pursuit. The lead team splits up, the striker/spotters go to high ground, and the tail guard goes stealth active to flank anything that's flushed out."

Bannor dove into his thread vision. Instead of looking for

enemies, he *listened* . The powerful and clever alien magicians had developed the most perfect concealment imaginable. However, he had seen the way that powerful magic bent and twisted the threads of reality. The ether itself resonated as it was warped by those strange forces. So, while he couldn't yet 'see' them, he could detect their presence from the vibration of the threads the armor disturbed in its passing.

It had been such a short time since the Baronian attack at Kul'Amaron, a little over two bells. He didn't expect the creatures to have mobilized an attack.

His stomach twisted as he witnessed eight trails of disrupted threads now scattering across the landscape.

****Frell,**** he murmured into the comm.. ****Eight enemies, but I can't--****

****Dom, sense-link him now!**** Aarlen ordered.

Bannor felt the pale woman's hands tighten on his shoulders, and suddenly the cool woman's presence was in his mind. Like a misty ghost she seemed everywhere in him at once, making his whole body tingle. He felt threads spin out from him, spearing across distance to every other member of the assault team.

The sky all over the valley seemed to ignite as magic and Kriar weapon blasts shrieked out at each of the concealed targets.

Half the now fleeing spies simply disintegrated under the horrendous assault. The other half where smashed out of the air to slam down into the lakes and ravines near the base of the tower.

The previously invisible anchor team, aided by Aarlen, Idun and Damay fell on the staggered opponents. Bannor could tell from the size and power of the enemy threads that these were Baronians and they were not common foot soldiers but elites with the powerful auras he'd come to associate with elders.

The point team also came shrieking out of the sky to assist as these last enemies fought back.

Against any other group, those four aliens might have been able to fight clear, but under the concentrated assault of Loric, Aarlen, Idun, and Euriel, backed by the Eclipse and Dulcere and the others, they were simply overmatched. In a span of a long breath, the huge warriors were down, with the black stealth armor stripped off them.

****Well done,**** Eclipse commended. With them so far below Bannor couldn't really make out any details but he could feel the ancient Kriar looking up at him. ****Our thanks, Bannor.****

Bannor heard clapping come over the comms. ****Excellently performed,**** A cool female voice that was unmistakably Quasar's. ****That should shake any confidence they might have had remaining in their stealth abilities.**** There was a pause. ****You should hurry up here to the aerie, they'll feel pressed for time now that their agents were discovered.****

He looked down to the building below and located the balcony where he and Daena had entered only a short time ago. With a growl in his throat he dropped toward the open windows and landed with Dominique behind him.

Quasar stood in the opening with arms folded, dressed in some kind of heavy red armor, far more bulky than what she wore at the way-point. She had one of the large weapons over her shoulder and a mark VI on either hip. Her long hair was braided and clamped. She had painted black patterns on her face, and highlighted her glowing eyes with white outlines to make her look even more fierce than she already was.

Further in the room, Bannor saw Wren and Azir stand up. The two of them were also wearing armor that looked significantly more sturdy than the simple torso protection given to himself and the others.

"Welcome," Quasar said. "Rather lightly armed to fight a war."

"We weren't interested in fighting your war," he growled. "Wren are you and Azir okay?"

"Fine," Wren answered. "What's happening?"

"I don't know yet, but this place will probably be swarming with Baronians in just a bit."

"Quasar, let them go," Dominique said in a low rasp. "You got your frelling wish... we're here."

Behind Dominique, members of the assault team started landing on the balcony. First to hit the ground was Euriel, closely followed by Idun, Damay, and then Vanidaar.

Euriel was a study in fury as she stormed toward Quasar. "Spawn of Fenris, I'll have your head for this..."

Wren sprinted forward. Quasar who made no move to impede her as the blonde savant intercepted her mother three steps from the Kriar warrior.

"Mother, no!" Wren hugged the powerful woman. "I'm okay, she didn't hurt us!"

"We will have an apology for this effrontery," Idun said, stopping to put a hand on Wren's shoulder. The goddess' eyes burned as though aflame, and a golden aura of magic licked and sparked around her body. "Else we will have your life."

Azir, keeping an eye on Quasar and a hand on the sword at his side, moved past her to step next to Idun. He put a hand on the goddess' arm. She glanced down at him and then glared at Quasar.

Behind the Kergatha family, the rest of the assault team took up positions on the huge balcony which could easily hold four times their number.

Quasar stared into Idun's eyes and raised an eyebrow. "My apologies for using your grand-daughter in such a fashion. The need was great and she and Azir were by far the best catalysts to serve that need."

"Devil you," Vanidaar snarled. "You had no right. You could

have *asked* ."

The Kriar shrugged. "If only I could have. You are here because only under emergency tenets could the Vatraena assemble such a team to fight within the bounds of Homeworld. An unfortunate truth is that most of my brethren are cowards--especially our leaders. Excepting perhaps the Vatraena herself." She looked to Idun. "If you wish my life, you may have it, but slay the Baronians first."

Eclipse strode around the back of the group and stepped up beside Bannor. He focused glowing blue eyes on Quasar. The burly Kriar folded his arms and stared at the female with a tilted head. "Since you value your life so little, will you give it to me instead?"

Quasar glared at him for a moment, then the hard lines of her face softened, and her lip trembled. A single tear squeezed out and trickled down her jeweled cheek. She swiped at it viciously. "You already have my life! You took it with you when you left. You and your dark forsaken 'doing the right thing'. This is the *right* thing, damn you, and you know it." She stared at Marna. "You needed an emergency, a potential scandal, a disruption with a high ranking family in order to take the permissions you needed to get these killers before they get us. You have it. All you needed was a martyr." She slammed an armored fist against her chest. "Here I am! As I have been a thousand times before, ready to lay down my life to protect a flock of worthless stargazing cowardly *sheep!* "

"You don't mean that."

"Don't I?" Quasar seethed. "Ask your own daughter! She fought in a war that almost killed our entire people. She faced death, dishonor, and worse. Why? It was because the leadership and its citizens were too weak--too afraid--to stand up to some pompous aggrandizing fool with a violent streak. He dragged us down into darkness Marna--and *you* let him. We've picked up the pieces, but the same stick-our-heads-in-the-sand cowardice that nearly destroyed us before is still there on the brink of doing it again!"

Bannor stepped forward and threw out his hands. "That is enough." He focused on Quasar. "No one is going to be a martyr." He turned to Idun and Euriel. "No one is going to kill anyone." He drew a breath. "I really don't give a dragon-flop about the politics of this felled situation. I don't care who made the damn stew we're in or why. I just want out-- *alive*. We have to stop these Baronians now--or we're going to have them at our backs. So, let's focus on that shall we? We can argue about who to blame later."

"Well said," Loric agreed from the middle of the group.

"All that talking was makin' my head hurt anyway," Tal rumbled.

"Lady Solaris, Dulcere, Eclipse," he turned to the jeweled Kriar. "Quasar." He pulled the axes off his side and flipped them. "I'm ready. They're coming after me regardless. I might as well face them here away from my family."

Daena stepped forward and raised glowing fists. "I'm with you, Brother."

"Might as well fight," Wren said holding up her arms and looking down at her armored body. "I'm already dressed for it."

"Where my sister goes, I do," Azir said with nod, wrapping his arm around Wren's neck.

"We fight as a family," Euriel growled. She pointed a finger at Quasar. "Still, I will have satisfaction over this matter--apology or not."

"I am with my wife," Vanidaar said.

"And my place is with my daughter," Idun rumbled.

"The Shael Dal are here to do a job," Tal said. "Namely kick Baronian arse--so you know we're in."

"The Kergathas are our friends," Loric said with a hand on Desiray's shoulder. "If they're in, we are."

"I should help keep the young savants out of trouble," Damay said in a wistful tone.

"We're with father and Wren," Radian said, an arm around Ziedra.

"Now, respecting all the experience and brainpower here," Bannor said. "I have an idea that may really help us out."

"Speak," Aarlen said.

"Most of you saw what happened when I linked the savants at the party."

"Yeah," Azir made a fist. "That was awesome. You can't do that for very long though can you?"

"No," Bannor shook his head. "I can't. However, during the fight with the Daergons, Lady Idun gave me an idea."

"How is that?" Idun said.

"You lent Damay your strength."

"Aye. It is not a difficult thing."

"Could you hold me together while I link up all the savants?"

"I get it!" Wren said. "Yeah. You could do a spirit merge with Nonna and probably be able to do it for bells. The thing is--I don't know how long the rest of us can maintain that much tao energy."

"Even if we can only maintain it for a short time," Damay said. "We would be certain to put them back on their heels. Especially with the others to support us."

"There is one small problem," Quasar said.

Everyone focused on her.

"All right, what's the bad news, Goldie?" Tal asked.

"They come to fight Kriar. I have no doubt in the open space of this bioclave, that they will employ mecha. Many of the tactics that worked against individual soldiers will not work against top-of-the-line Kriar war machines--that is what they will bring to this fight. Count on it."

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Chapter Six

Mecha

Me and that artifice magic, I can use it, deal with it, but it ain't really my thing. All that said, there's something about piloting a suit of armor as big as a house that just turns me on...--Talorin "Tal" Falor,
Beta Class Protectorate Enforcer

Mecha. The word meant nothing to Bannor, but just the way Quasar said it made his skin prickle. *Top-of-the-line Kriar war machines...* The phrase was alien, but the meaning was clear--Kriar combat artifices. He gripped the Mark VI on his side and glanced down at it. Such a small device, yet capable of generating devastating force. He visualized Baronians wielding even larger and more powerful versions of it and shuddered. He looked around to the other members of the assault team. Half the group looked in pain, the other half simply confused. The Shael Dal and those closely associated with Kriar seemed to understand all the implications.

Tal thumped his forehead with his fist. "Yer certain of this? I mean what's yer source? They showed up twice, ain't nothin' been seen like that."

"Investigation," Quasar answered. "Kriar ships are designed to

dump their cargo manifest to the station cybers when they approach a way-point. The Baronians attempted to destroy all the way-point's data stores but they missed one. So, I was able to assemble a weapons inventory."

Dulcere frowned. <You found this on your own?> She let out a breath obviously upset at the failure of the other Kriar investigators to find something apparently so important. <What do they have?>

"Five thousand suits of Karanganoi variant of the Phalanx armor. Over a thousand Mark XII heavy rifles--" She pointed to the big gun slung over Dulcere's shoulder. "Sixteen armed landing craft, eight mobile support emplacements, forty suits of Daedalus armor, and twenty four suits of Gryphon heavy assault mecha."

"Gryphons?" Tal asked. "That those big bruisers with those plasma claws we fought on Karanganoi?"

<Affirmative,> Dulcere answered with a nod.

"Spit," Tal muttered. "This is accurate?" Tal asked. "You're not readin' stuff from when the ships was in Karanganoi service?"

Quasar put her hands behind her back. "The Baronians don't trust their slaved Kriar engineers, so they use repair drones to service the Karanganoi equipment. Drones are meticulous record keepers."

Aarlen clumped forward, pulling at the strands of her white hair in thought. "Well, that rules out any kind of direct confrontation."

Wren put hands on hips. "Perhaps you'd care to translate for those of us, who have no idea what was just said."

"That Daedalus armor is a suit that flies," Tal said. "It flies faster than anything you can imagine. The Gryphons are big--like ten paces tall, covered with fist-thick plates of this stuff." He tapped the chest piece covering his torso. "Those emplacements--think catapult that can knock down a castle with one shot. The landers are big armored flyin boats with weapons

on 'em."

Bannor stared at big man, then swung around to look at Quasar. His stomach twisted. "You must be jesting. How do we deal with that?"

"I have analyzed this engagement carefully," Quasar said looking around. "First, getting their strike team aboard is risky and time critical. Homeworld defenses will fire on them the instant they are in range. They must approach, transport, and retreat--all within moments. Taking the time needed to gate in even a tenth of their force is dangerous. It's likely they'll make passes and send squads. That gives us more time and a better chance."

"How do we crack those Gryphons and emplacements?" Tal asked.

"Estate Lorning is a fortress," Quasar answered. "Slow targets like the Gryphons pose a minimal threat. Even should they manage to bring all of their heavy bombards to bear--the screens around this tower will keep them out for half a day. The real danger is the Daedalus armor and Phalanx suits. The Daedalus is too fast for heavy emplacements to track, and the stealth of the Phalanx suits defeats the fortress sensing artifices." She pointed a finger at Bannor. "If the trick that he and Daena performed during the fight at the party can be replicated here, the estate's defenses will be all the backup you need. Kriar artifices cannot see through the Baronian stealth, but savant senses can."

"Okay, so we have a chance," Desiray said. "What's the point though? Why not let the Kriar military in here to do *their* job."

"The council gave strict orders not to assault the Baronians, only defend," Marna said. "As Quasar said, the council is afraid. They fear a reprisal. I myself think that shrinking from this vanguard is the surest way to encourage further attacks. However, they have voted down every measure I have brought to the table to strengthen our position. Even if Quasar lets the Kriar army in, they will simply give up the prisoner to the Baronians and drive them away."

"This stinks," Algernon muttered. He glared at Quasar. "I understand the problem, but you shouldn't have brought these kids into it. There were other emergencies you could have set up for your little council coup."

Wren put hands on hips. "I am *not* a kid."

Euriel raised an eyebrow. "Shush."

"I don't know what we're standing around for," Ziedra said coming forward. "We knew we had to deal with these guys, and they're too powerful for us to be picky about our allies." She shot a hard look at the Kriar warrior. "Those Baronians are vicious animals, and every one we stop here can't attack the T'Evagdurans."

"Let us make this simple," Eclipse said, looking around. "Does any of you plan not to participate?"

Everyone looked at one another. It was the fight rather than the choice of allies that no-doubt weighed heaviest on everyone's mind. No-one spoke up.

"Any objections?" Eclipse asked again, looking around. After a long pause he turned back to Quasar. "Let's be clear, Marna charged me with being responsible for the members of this team. Terms of engagement will be my discretion and that of the team officers and their point people."

The Kriar woman sniffed. "Understood."

"Wren," Eclipse said. "You will work with Bannor on team two. Azir, you will work with your mother and father on my team."

The two savants nodded.

"We've wasted a lot of time with all this talk," Bannor said. "All this standing around is making me antsy."

"Man after my own heart," Tal rumbled, smacking a fist into his palm. "Let's get crackin'."

"You want everyone to be able to see the stealthed Baronians like I can, correct?" Bannor said.

"That would be optimal," Eclipse said.

"I have an idea that may work," Bannor said. "Most of us here have ties to eternity--the savants through their nolas, the Shael Dal through their weapons, the Kriar through their time-sense, even Lady Desiray has a link through a spirit-binding that I sense in her."

The white-haired guildmistress reflexively put a hand to her chest.

"Loric, Idun, Euriel, Radian there are common threads in you that I can use as well. Everyone willing, I can try an experiment that may help us all."

"I am willing," Eclipse spoke up first.

"I'm interested," Aarlen said folding her arms.

<I trust you, Bannor,> Dulcere said.

He looked around. "This may be a bit weird, anyone want to opt out?"

Everyone looked around, mostly they shrugged.

He turned to Ziedra. "Lady Ziedra, I need your assistance."

The dark-haired savant put a hand to her breast in a 'me?' gesture. He nodded. "Ummm, okay. What do you want me to do?"

He held out his hand. "Take hold."

The woman glanced at her husband and then at Wren. The blonde savant nodded to her. Ziedra stepped over and took his hand. Her fingers were cool and dry, her grip was firm as she locked thumbs with him.

"Okay, I need you to cast a spell on everyone. Something that will give you a nice solid link to everyone like when you do that fly magic."

"Why?" She paused a moment and her expression brightened. "Oh, I see!"

"A spell binding," Loric said with a nod. "Zee, it will need to be something high order, something that can't be dispelled."

The magic savant frowned. "You're right. Lend me your shoulder then, take me through a binding." She looked to Bannor. "I'm going to need both hands for that. Do you need to touch me?"

He nodded and released her hand and placed it on her shoulder.

"Perfect," she responded with a nod.

Loric stepped over to Ziedra and she stepped behind him, placing both hands on his shoulders, and pressing her forehead between his shoulder blades. "Go."

The gray-haired elder clapped his hands and went into a chant, uttering deep thrumming words that made the chamber seem to vibrate. A reddish glow came around his body. This was no common magic, the threads he saw spinning around Loric were ancient and primal. The elder had obviously understood exactly what he needed. The warmage focused his eyes on Desiray, a blue glow started on the surface of her skin, growing brighter as the elder gestured and murmured. With a grunt and a thrust of his fist into his palm the spell ended. The sounds seeming to echo through the room. In his thread sight, Bannor saw a strong spiral of threads now connecting the Lord to his wife.

Ziedra leaned back and blinked a golden glow shining in the surface of her dark eyes. She shook her head. "Ow." She blinked and rubbed the bridge of her nose. "This may be overkill for what Bannor wants to do, but let's do it. Take me through."

Loric repeated the spell only this time Ziedra mimicked him focusing on her husband Radian. At the conclusion, she had

formed a link just like that between Loric and his wife.

The woman nodded. "Wow. That's quite a binding."

"Ziedra, you may bind me next," Idun said. "Then I will lend you strength."

The woman nodded, repeating the process. After which the goddess stood at her shoulder and helped her cast. One by one she linked each of the team members to herself.

"Is this good, linking everyone to me?" Ziedra said as she was nearly finished. "What if something happens to me?"

"Don't worry," Bannor answered. "This binding is more than I hoped for."

Ziedra linked him last, creating a powerful magical bond between him and her. The magic wrapped itself like a warm hand folding cottony fingers around him.

With each person linked Bannor had been pulling in their signatures, learning the feel of their spirits, taos, and minds.

"All right, Lady Ziedra," he told her. "Now, it's my turn. I'm going to share the garmtur with you, and you're going to share your nola with me."

She stared at him and gave him a slow nod.

He closed his eyes and focused down into Ziedra's threads. He had already touched her on two occasions before, and now shared a magical bond as well. It was a simple matter to find her connection to eternity and press his nola into it.

Ziedra gasped.

"Baby, are you all right?" Radian asked his wife.

The dark-haired woman shuddered and brushed at her hair. "Whoa. I thought seeing magic was wizard."

Little by little he mingled their nolas. While he could see magic, he did not have Ziedra's innate grasp of it. Ziedra on the other hand saw magic only in terms of the arcane and not its relationship to eternity. As he increased their shared awareness, he realized there was a third component missing. Who to use though?

He glanced around. Which was the strongest? Eclipse? Quasar? No. It was Marna. "Lady Marna, are you willing to assist us?"

The ancient Kriar blinked glowing eyes. "I know little of magic, Bannor."

"I know, bear with me." He held out his hand.

The Vatraena let out a breath. "As you wish." She stepped forward and took his hand.

The Kriar Matriarch's hand was warm, the skin silky smooth to the touch. Her aura was so strong he didn't even need his nola to sense it. Marna did not have a nola to bind with like Ziedra, but she was tied to the magic savant through the binding. That gave him the conduit through which to insinuate the garmtur.

The elder Kriar was like a sponge, she soaked up his tao energy in a fashion that was frighteningly close to how alphas and betas joined. He pulled back a bit, this alarming discovery making him hesitant. How could she be so closely synchronized? Would he be able to unbind?

It was too late, they'd already committed so much time to this. He proceeded.

Marna made a sound, flinching as he poured his nola into her.

The Kriar matriarch's mind and spirit were vast indeed. As he pulled her senses into the binding with Ziedra the sheer beauty made his stomach churn. With Marna he had only sought to bring her temporal awareness into their perception. However, the eons old creature brought something else to the mix-- *understanding*. She saw the universe so much *clearer*, with a clarity and purity that made each shade and pattern as obvious

as black and white.

The Vatraena drew a breath and seemed to lean into the connection. As she added her will, things appeared to speed up (or was it slow down?) and split apart. Bannor blinked as echoes of time resonated around them, infinite shades of probability.

This was so much more than he intended. He knew they could see through the Baronian stealth now, but how could he possibly share this with everyone? It was tough to think much less move. How would they fight?

He felt Marna sigh. In his mind, it was as if she wrapped her arms around he and Ziedra, hugging them close.

<The plan,> Marna whispered into the fabric of their taos. <Is excellent. The execution needs work.> He felt her smile. <I hope you don't mind if carry on?>

He swallowed and nodded.

<You aren't trained to constantly perceive in this many spectrums simultaneously. So--> Bannor watched and felt as the Kriar woman stepped over and took Ziedra's hand as well. She rocked her head back, eyelids fluttering.

Inside himself, he felt the seed of Marna had planted begin growing, insinuating tendrils of will all through his psyche. It felt as if his limbs became weightless. The threads of the world speeding around him slowed, each becoming distinct and familiar. His own body, the beating of his heart, the pumping of his blood, the tiniest slide of a muscle in its sheath were all there in his awareness. So much information, he was drowning in it. She had made it worse, not better! The Kriar was everywhere in him now. It felt as if she split him apart inside, the replicated shards of his self dividing and subdividing, each component accepting and ordering the mass of sensory images.

The layers too seemed to break apart and slow. The edges of every object, each line and shadow defined and highlighted with diamond edge precision. The blurriness of his thread-sight cleared, and the threads and colors of the universe vanished.

Sights, sounds, smells, force, energy, they no longer appeared as artifacts in his vision but as knowledge. Deep down, he felt those many shards of himself somehow capturing and filtering his perceptions. How would he function now if he couldn't see the threads?

He focused on Wren. Almost faster than his own desire, he sensed her heartbeat, her concern, her impatience and fascination. Facets of her seemed to pour into him, the pulse of her nola, the taste of the Kriar artifice magic sheathing her body, down to twitch of muscles in her stomach.

It was so much faster. He really was seeing everything simultaneously. It was like thumbing through the pages of book. The problem remained that there were so many pages!

Beside him, Ziedra hummed. "Whoa, this... this..." She let out a breath.

<Next step,> Marna thought into their minds.

Bannor wasn't sure what the Kriar Matriarch did, but he *felt* it. Marna's presence flooded out through the magical links tying Ziedra to everyone else. Each person she touched seemed to themselves begin connecting to everyone else. With each mind added, the perceptions and awareness of the members of the group became sharper.

He wasn't sure how long it took, but when it was done, all of them, from elder to youngster was staring at themselves and around the room in wide-eyed wonder.

"Wizard," Daena said floating up off the floor and doing a slow turn. "Damn, and I thought I saw pretty clear before."

Tal pulled the shaladen off his shoulder and moved it in a slow path in front of his eyes. "Oh yeah, I can work with this."

"Excellently done," Loric said.

"Thank you, Marna," Bannor said to the Vatraena.

She nodded to him. "Truly a pleasure." She looked around obviously enjoying the increased perceptions. "I learned a great deal." She turned to Dulcere stepped over and put her arms around her daughter.

The other Kriar stiffened in surprise, but after a moment put her arms around her mother. <What...?>

"Hush," she told Dulcere. "You needed to be held, that was obvious."

Dulcere sighed and put her head on her mother's shoulder. She drew a breath.

Quasar watched the embrace with a raised eyebrow, lips pursed and chin raised. After a moment she looked away as though the sight hurt her. He glanced back to Eclipse. The Kriar male was studying Quasar. Bannor didn't need the powerful perception to see that Eclipse still cared a great deal for the jeweled female.

A rattling shriek echoed through the room, the sound so loud it made Bannor and others grip their ears. The sound rose and fell in a sharp pulsation that made his bones vibrate.

Quasar pulled something off her belt and thumbed a control. The vicious sound died. "The Baronians have made their first gate drop," she announced.

"All right," Eclipse said. "We're already sense linked. Marna, myself, Quasar, and Dulcere will direct the base automation. All you need to do is spot and tie up the enemy. Keep engagements brief and don't get pulled out of the defense perimeter."

Ziedra flitted over to Wren and Azir and quickly cast the flying magic on them. Gold gleaming diamonds of magic flared into being on their foreheads.

"I have keyed all the mecha and artifices in the tower to everyone here," Quasar said. "You are free to use any resource you find, and I have left presents on nearly every balcony. If you deplete a tool, find another, I have left stashes everywhere." She stepped out of the group and pressed her foot on a protrusion in

the floor. With a rumbling hiss, two huge racks bristling with items ground up on either side of her. "Keep moving. You will find allies aplenty that will respond to your needs."

"Damn, Quasar," Tal grinned. "You're crazy, but I like it." He snatched a big weapon off the rack and threw a belt of the something over his shoulder.

His wife Terra followed him and the two of them flew out the balcony.

<Move fast folks!> Tal's voice echoed in their minds. <We got Daedalus inbound.>

<Stay in teams, and watch your backs,> Aarlen ordered.

Bannor glanced down at the little Mark VI on his side and looked at the far more massive artifices on the rack. He stepped up among the others and grabbed the heavy weapon off, wrapping the sling around his arm. The heft was much like a crossbow with a stock and trigger.

"You sure you know how to use that?" Dominique asked, taking one for herself.

He looked down at it. "Point and pull the trigger, right?"

The pale woman laughed. "Yeah, pretty much."

"I'm slow, but I learn," he blew out his cheeks.

He saw Daena had grabbed several items and was already flying off the balcony. Verifying he was still covered by Ziedra's flight magic, he willed himself after the young savant.

He streaked out the opening with surprising speed. Ziedra's magic had grown considerably in strength--in fact *he* felt stronger. Across the artificial sky of Quasar's demesnes he saw the unmistakable white contrails of things moving at high speed. As he focused and that alien but familiar instinct analyzed what he was witnessing he just had to blink. Those things were moving not ten or twenty times as fast as galloping horse, but

hundreds of times that speed. It was like spirit travel only they were taking their bodies with them!

He glanced down to the lake and stream studded landscape laced with tangles of trees. They were so high up. He slowed to a stop a little behind and below Tal and Terra who had come to a halt.

Around him the rest of the team were spreading out, taking positions above, below, and to either side of him.

****Watch the flanks,**** Dulcere advised. ****Some may try to circle round and come in from the far side of the valley.****

His heart raced. He pulled the bolt back and heard the big weapon whine up to power. He cranked the power setting and put the weapon to his shoulder. It was time to send a message to these Baronian marauders. He took aim at the front most of the approaching vanguard. Time to put these savant senses to work. Wren was the sorceress of aimed things. He was already bonded to her through his Garmtur and Ziedra's magic. He reached out to her across the distance, feeling her nola, embracing his sister and making his desire known.

Wren smiled in his mind and looked out through his eyes, guided his hands.

He swallowed, hardened his heart, threw his will into the Garmtur and pulled the trigger. The heavy weapon roared, vomiting forth a massive blare of power. The blast seemed to curve as it met the speeding target in a thunderous blaze that became a rain of flaming debris.

First blood.

A cheer echoed in his mind and ears.

****Watch for Phalanx suits, they'll be interspersed with the Daedalus units,**** Eclipse warned in his ears.

"Good shot," Dominique complimented.

"Just lucky," he shook his head with a smile. "Just as likely to have shot off my foot."

The pale woman rolled her golden eyes. "Riiight."

Around him, the big weapons were roaring, filling the sky with white-hot blasts of charged mass. Two more suits dropped from the sky like smoking embers.

He touched Marna's communication crystal behind his ear and spoke across the distance to his love. **Sarai, the attack has started here, watch yourself. Wren and Azir are safe. Love you.**

They're attacking here too, the terse answer came back. He felt the urgency in her voice and it made his chest tighten. **Love you, stay safe!**

Damn. On the main communications channel he told everyone. **Sarai says they're attacking at Kul'Amaron too.**

Not unexpected, Aarlen said in an even voice. **Keep your focus here.**

Where were the stealth suits? Had their spotting of the advanced scouts made the Baronians rethink their use? No. They would just defeat being seen by adding something else to camouflage their presence.

He blinked. The Kriar had defeated his seeing them with a simple tactic back in the park.

The water.

Watch the streams and lakes! he cried. **They--**

A dozen armored forms were already spearing up into them from below...

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Chapter Seven

Savage

I fight to survive. I take no pleasure in conflict. I get no thrill from cheating death. Every time I'm forced to kill it leaves a black spot on my heart. To save my friends and loved ones I will do whatever is necessary with no hesitation. Still, it eats at me sometimes...

**-- Bannor Nalthane Starfist,
Prince Conjugal of Malan**

There was no time to think, only to react as figures that appeared only like heat ghosts in a desert fired at them from the lake water below. Cries of surprise and warning blared from the comms and yelled aloud. Flinching back, Bannor slashed across their path with the garmtur. Snaring hundreds of primal threads and bursting them like rotted rope under pressure.

Some of the racing figures veered off, some exploded in fiery blasts, and others became visible and dropped like birds stunned by a lucky sling stone.

He had only an instant to be surprised by the effectiveness of his defense. His heart slammed in his ribs and agony crashed into his brain so hard he couldn't focus to operate Ziedra's flight magic. Doubled up and clutching his head, air whistled in his ears.

"Whoa! Whoa! Whoa there partner!" He heard Dominique yell above him.

He yanked to a breath-stealing stop as something caught hold of his weapon belt.

"What the...?" Tal let out.

"Damn," Aarlen yelled. "Get those two!"

Bannor heard the big weapons roar, and the thrum of magic. Two more explosions were followed by the crackling of fire and the splash of water far below them.

"Spit, he is frelling *fast* ," Algernon remarked. "What did he do?"

"Hey, a little help here," Dominique called. He felt her get a hand under his arm and around his chest. She heaved him close, her hot flesh pressing into his back. "Bannor? You okay? What's wrong?"

He felt a hand take his right wrist and a neck wedge up under his armpit. "He just backlashed himself," he heard Daena's smooth echoing voice say right by his ear. "He's done it before."

More weapon shots fired.

Algernon, Euriel, Vanidaar, Azir, fall back and watch the flank, Eclipse ordered. **Aarlen, take Marna and Damay and keep picking on those Daedalus as they come into range.**

"Brother, you okay?" Wren asked. He heard the hum of air. "Bannor?" Her voice sounded much closer.

It had been a long time since he had felt backlash this bad. Striking those powerful psyches with their bodies sheathed in that potent armor had been like thrusting his arm and mind into the path of a lightning bolt.

"Get his head up," Wren said.

Daena and Dominique disentangled his arms and Wren pushed against forehead forcing his neck up. She levered his eye open with her thumb. Searing light stabbed into his mind and he moaned in torment and flinched away.

"Oh, ow," Wren clucked in sympathy. "He lashed himself good. I swear Bannor, you hurt yourself worse than some of our enemies!"

He only groaned in response, unable to form coherent words against the sensation of screws being cranked into his skull.

Weapons continued to shriek around him.

"Nonna," Wren called. "Can you fix backlash? *Bad* backlash?"

"I could--" the goddess' words were interrupted by a blast. She grunted and something hissed and crackled. "I could try." She finished.

Daena, Dulcere ordered on the communications. **Get him to a balcony. Wren, Dominique, Idun we need you on task.**
Bannor heard two sharp high-pitched quavers echo in his ear.
Medic to the penthouse balcony. One for treatment.

Acknowledged, a low raspy voice responded.

Go. I'll cover you.

Dominique broke away from him, leaving him in Daena's arms. "You'll be okay, Partner," the pale woman said. "Watch yourself Daena."

"I will," the young savant answered.

Wind filled his ears as Daena carried him back to the tower. "Bannor, you have got to be more careful," she told him.

He didn't try to respond. The only thing important was holding his skull together. It felt ready to fly apart. Every beat of his heart seemed ready to make his head explode.

The communications of the rest of the team resonated in his ear, orders, acknowledgements and expletives. The conflict had developed so fast.

The battle crashed around them like a storm. The weapons of the tower itself had begun to shoot now, these much larger engines of destruction sounding like rapid claps of thunder.

They set down on the balcony with a thump.

There was a whine followed by a thudding and Bannor heard Daena gasp. Something clicked and rattled. A deep metallic voice came from close by. "Peace. Combat medical technician Hiram responding for aide."

"Sorry, you scared me," Daena responded, her voice still shaking. "Where do you want him?"

An object thumped down on the balcony. "Lay him there," Hiram said in that hollow voice.

Weapons roared nearby and something shrieked out from the side of the tower. An instant later a blast shocked the air and Bannor felt the warm hiss against his face.

"Yie," Daena muttered. "Are we safe here?"

"The balcony is shielded," Hiram answered.

Daena pulled Bannor around and let him slide down onto something soft that crunched as he lay back on it.

Bannor heard that whir-thump, then another heavy impact. He felt a presence loom over him. A humming came close then cold metallic objects pressed against both his temples.

"Pardon my saying it," Daena said. "You don't look much like a healer."

Bannor heard a creaking overhead. "It is difficult to heal a fallen soldier--" Something hummed close to his ear and a cold object touched his neck. "If you cannot clear away the enemies to administer treatment."

More blasts shocked the side of the tower, making the material under his back vibrate.

"Damn, they are getting close," the girl said in a worried voice.

Hiram made a rumble like a catapult shot rolling around in a

barrel. "He has moderate synaptic trauma, and heterotrophic charge instability."

Daena raised her voice to be heard over the shriek of weapons and the blare of explosions. "And you can fix that, right?"

"Affirmative. Beginning treatment..." The Kriar healing artifice murmured and clicked, its bulk moving around him. Though he couldn't open his eyes against the pain, he could feel the mass of the artifice as its heavy steps vibrated the balcony.

Another item pressed against his neck, this time warm, and he felt a sharp pricking sensation and a hiss that made him flinch. Something big and metallic engulfed his left wrist and pressed down with a firm pressure. A tingling raced through his arm and spread across his body.

By stages the pounding in his head lessened and the hammering of his heart slowed. In a few moments more, he was able to blink the tears away. He looked up into Daena's glowing green eyes and was forced to flinch back as an explosion blasted right beside the balcony. Flames and soot blossomed against a barrier that gleamed blue and winked out as the energy of the attack dissipated.

"Whoa," he muttered.

Daena knelt next to him hands over her head. She straightened up. "Yeah, scared me too!"

"There was no danger," Hiram echoed.

Bannor focused on the origin of the voice and recoiled again.

Hulk was the first word that came to mind. The Kriar combat healer was a metallic construct that resembled a massive three pace tall human with no skin. Its legs were bigger than Bannor's torso constructed of thick pivoting rods that ended in clawed gripping feet that reminded him of a dragon's foot. The torso was covered in plates thicker than his wrist. Long arms thick enough to hold up a bridge ended in broad elaborate hands with four-jointed fingers. The head, which was armored like the rest

of the body was fronted by a surprisingly human face. Large expressive brown eyes looked out from beneath a ledge of a brow. The nose was a heavy wedge over a broad thick-lipped mouth. It was amazing to Bannor how something made of metal could appear so alive. The eyes blinked, the mouth creased, and the brow furrowed as it looked at him.

"Better, yes?" Hiram asked, turning his head to one side.

He swallowed and nodded. Forced to wince as another blast smashed against the side of the tower.

As he looked at the creature, which appeared more like a Kriar version of a golem, he realized why Daena said it didn't look like a healer. Massive weapons jutted from mounts on his back, and the handles of broad cleaving swords thrust from either side of his torso.

Daena rose to her feet and helped Bannor up. He still felt dizzy but able to function. All the objects in view had a kind of fuzziness to them that told him that Hiram's curing was a quick measure simply to get him on his feet again.

"How do you feel?" Daena asked him.

He rubbed his face forced to shy back from another attack striking the shields. "Gah! Better. Damn." He focused on Hiram again. "Thank you, Hiram."

The creature nodded and grinned. "Aiding allied sentients is my pleasure." The creature sobered and straightened to its full height. His eyes flashed gold and his hands balled into fists. The weapons on its shoulders whined out of their enclosures and pivoted to aim at something above the balcony. "You may wish to step behind me."

Bannor and Daena scrambled out of the way as the weapons on Hiram's shoulders whined and began a rapid spinning, then erupted in blare of pounding shots that shook the balcony. Three Daedalus suits hissing at the platform ran into the barrage, the metal encasing the Baronian warriors shattered and melted in the hail of energy. The destroyed figures fell past the balcony,

trailing tendrils of blood, sparks, and smoke.

Daena pulled her hands away from her ears, which she had reflexively grabbed in response to the roar of the mecha's weaponry firing. She glanced over the balcony rail. "Damn. What does Quasar need us for?"

Hiram's massive head pivoted and he swung part way around to look at her. He raised an eyebrow as though surprised she did not know the answer to the question. "We are not very effective against the science your folk call magick."

"Ah."

"Well," Bannor said. "We better get-- *spit!*" He lurched back as an enormous figure shimmered into being right by them.

The tattooing and dress were those of Baronian, but his flesh looked to be made of golden metal. The intruder was big even for one of the aliens with disproportionately thick arms and legs that made him look like a giant that had been trapped in a box so it could only grow wider instead of taller. The juggernaut's face was covered with a black featureless mask with only square holes for the eyes and mouth. A flare of red light erupted in the mask's slots and it pulled out two weapons that looked like huge cleavers with saw-tooth edges.

Despite its mass, the creature moved with hurricane speed, and it lunged before Bannor even had a chance to think to dodge. Hiram caught the beast in mid-leap with one of his swords, smashing the blade home in its torso.

The Baronian monstrosity slammed down on the balcony with an impact that made the floor shudder. Despite the brutal power of Hiram's attack, the thick creature rolled back to its feet with an angry roar that echoed through the slit in its mask.

The Kriar healer whirled into the Baronian with both weapons. Blade met blade and sparks flared as the two creatures clashed. The resounding of metal made Bannor reel back clutching his ears in pain. Hiram scored again on the big creature with a hit strong enough to cleave a dragon in half. The Kriar metal simply

flared and sparked as it rebounded from the gleaming gold skin of the marauder and knocked it back.

Daena raised her weapon and began firing. The shots whined and rasped as they deflected from the thing's shiny skin. Bannor raced into the chamber, grabbed one of the weapons off the rack, cranked the power, and added his attacks to Daena's.

His shots, like hers, did nothing to slow the creature as it leaped at Hiram. Weapons clanged together and the behemoth smashed the Kriar healer back with a heave. Hiram dug in with his clawed feet and fought back.

"Daena, blow it off the balcony!"

The girl raised a hand, bluish light flickering across the surface of her skin. "They're too close. I'll hit Hiram too!"

This was not good. He thumbed the comms on. **Need help on the balcony! Something new, it's big and inside the shield. Nothing hurts the blasted thing!**

He heard several acknowledgements but everyone obviously had their hands full.

Damn, this was going to hurt. He drew a breath, focused, and grabbed for the creature's threads. His nola hit, pinched down--and rebounded.

Bannor staggered back gripping the side of his head. "Spit. Even its threads are armored!"

The behemoth waded into the hail of blows that Hiram launched. The Kriar healer struggled valiantly to pierce the creature's impossibly tough hide but his attacks were having less and less effect. Hiram threw down one of his swords and thrust a massive hand into the juggernaut's face. The two weapons on his shoulders whined up to speed.

Bannor grabbed Daena and yanked her aside as the Kriar mecha's weaponry unleashed at close range, tearing not only into the Baronian but Hiram's gripping hand and arm as well.

Blasts of energy rebounded, tore through the balcony, shredding and pulverizing everything around the two combatants.

With a terrifying bellow, the bloodied Baronian monster thrust through the hail of energy and grabbed the spinning weapons. Hiram screamed as his guns detonated in a hail of fragments, knocking him to the floor of the blast-cratered balcony. The creature leaped on the already injured healer, ripping, tearing and pummeling.

The healer cried out, flailing with its severed arm and trying to kick and swing with its blast riddled arms and legs.

"No!" Daena thrust herself to her feet, threw down her weapons and clenched her fists. Sparks flashed around her body and her skin bubbled and frothed, turning from its normal dusky color to the silvery hard sheen of battle shape.

With cry she plunged forward and smashed home a room-shaking blow into the side of the Baronian's head. The force tore the creature off Hiram's battered form, driving it through the racks of weapons, shattering furniture and impacting the thick metallic wall with a boom.

The monster dropped to its knees with a rumble, shaking its head and thrashing around. Even that assault had only angered it.

Daena made a hugging gesture. The metal weapon racks and all the scattered weapons gathered into a spherical mass with a crackle of energy. She thrust her hand forward and the makeshift missile shot forward with a shriek and hammered into the beast with a crunch.

"Damn you! Damn! Damn! Damn!" Daena yelled thrusting her fist forward and drawing it back, making the construct pound and grind the creature against the wall as it raged and struggled.

Such punishment should have reduced the creature to a bloody smear, but instead it tore through Daena's battering ram and launched itself across the room at her.

Bannor could only look on in horror as the thing crashed into Daena. In battle shape, she weighed tons and the juggernaut knocked her down as if she was made of wax. She fell with an impact that shook the chamber, her mass making a divot in the metal floor. The Baronian swarmed on her, giant fists raining down like a blacksmith's hammer marring and tearing the young immortal's steel-like flesh.

Daena fought back, but she simply couldn't match the pure naked ferocity of the brute.

****Damn it, we need help *now!* **** Bannor screamed on the comms.

He whipped his axes from their sheaths knowing he was going to regret his foolishness, but he had to get that monstrosity off Daena before she died.

He focused on the thrashing behemoth and the chunks of its flesh that had been torn by Hiram's energy assault. In his mind, he called out to his brothers and sisters, calling on their strength to fortify him. He aimed his axe at a bloody division in the beast's armor in the middle of its shoulder and whipped it home with everything he could muster.

The mithril-headed axe rammed home past the blade with a bone-scraping thud and a spray of hot blood. The beast howled in pain, clutching at the axe lodged in its shoulder. Given an instant of respite, Daena hurled the creature off her onto the far end of the open balcony. The girl turned and swatted the monster with the repelling power of her Nola.

With shriek of tearing metal the Baronian shot off at an angle, blasting through the balcony railing, smashing into side of the tower and toppling toward the ground a thousand paces down.

A battered and shredded mess, Daena collapsed to the floor with a thud. "Ugh, owww..." She moaned. "Th--thanks for the--the save."

Bannor knelt beside her and gazed in her threads. Her life-force was diminished but steady. He put a hand against her face.

"Daena, you need to be more careful."

She laughed, then groaned. "Urgh." She pulled her legs up and hugged herself. Still wincing she raised her head and looked toward Hiram. "Did he...?"

Bannor rose and went to the Kriar healer. The artifice's face was mashed and disfigured. Chunks of his armor had been torn asunder and the softer material underneath crushed and rent. The one arm was melted off at the elbow and portions of his legs and torso were perforated and burned where shots had ricocheted back against him. A white pasty substance like blood wept from many of the wounds.

Hiram's one good eye tracked on Bannor and blinked. He tried to raise his arm and his form only shuddered. He made a sputtering sound, and white liquid splattered across his metallic lips. "I--I am--sorr..." The voice faded in mid word.

He felt a hitch in his chest and his guts twisted. Part of him said it was just an artifice--a machine. Still, it had acted like something alive--something noble. It tried to protect them, and sacrificed itself when it saw no other alternative.

"Bannor?" Daena asked.

He let out a sigh and shook his head.

The girl rocked her head back with a thump.

"Hey, are you guys--" Tal called landing on the balcony with Eclipse behind him. " *Okay?*" His voice trailed off as he looked around the demolished chamber. "Damn."

Eclipse showed the first alarm he had ever seen in the impassive male's expression. He landed beside Daena and bent down. ***Medic to the penthouse balcony,*** he called on the comms. He focused on Bannor. "Dark, what did this?"

He shook his head. "I don't know what it was. Something nearly indestructible--something--" He swallowed. " *Savage...*"

Chapter Eight

Juggernauts

Little the Baronians do surprises me anymore. They fight to win, heart, spirit, and mind. As such, I ain't got issues with that, that's just being a good warrior. Sometimes it's just tough to kill guys fightin' their guts out knowing they don't have any choice. Them not havin' a choice means I don't have one either. Sometimes life just reeks that way...

**-- Talorin "Tal" Falor,
Beta Class Protectorate Enforcer**

Bannor's ears were still ringing from the vicious battle with the creature he could only call the 'savage'. It had been something alive, made of flesh, but in many ways it was less alive than healer Hiram who had sacrificed his synthetic being to protect them. As he had thought before, the Kriar ability with artifices was truly like magic, to create something so alien and hostile appearing but capable of acting in such a benevolent way.

He drew a breath. "Eclipse, we have to watch ourselves."

The Kriar looked over at him. "Of course, they are pressing us hard. We must return to the fight." He leaned down to Daena. "Lie still. I called another healer for you."

The girl nodded. Despite her battered face, she forced a smile. Her gaze found Bannor. She blinked. "I'll be okay."

The look in her eyes made his chest ache. He smiled for her then focused back on Eclipse. "No, there's danger from that creature. Falling from this tower, even as hard as Daena threw it, wouldn't kill it."

"Yer kiddin'," Tal growled walking back to him. The big man winced as a blast expired against defense screens protecting the balcony. He leaned down by Hiram and touched the twisted metal of the healer's armor. "What did this thing look like?"

"Half again as big as the Baronian elites, distorted, extremely thick. Its skin was covered with gold metallic armor." He looked to the corpse of the dead healer. "Even Hiram's energy weapons up close barely cut it."

Tal drew a breath and rocked back like a heavy weight had dropped on his shoulders. "Frell. A coven dreadnaught."

Eclipse turned to the other warrior. "You know what this was?"

The broad shouldered fighter gave a weary nod. "Yeah. Seen a couple. If they got one, they got more. Remember how Quasar was crowin' about how the 'ronians could only send so many over at time?"

Eclipse nodded.

"Well, take ten or fifteen elites and combine 'em into one creature. See where I'm going?"

Eclipse blew out his cheeks. His glowing eyes dimmed and he rubbed at the white crescent mark on his cheek. "Unfortunately." He thumbed the comms on his neck. "**The Baronians have a new weapon on the field.**" He glanced over at the Shaladen warrior. "**Tal calls it a dreadnaught, it looks like a big Baronian with gold skin. Do *not* engage without backup.**"

Bannor heard a host of acknowledgements.

"Where did you see these things?"

"Karanganoi homeworld," the big man answered. He glanced up as the building shook under an impact. "At the time, I think they were new. We clashed with one. Hittin' it with regular weapons was like trying to break a wall with a willow switch." He drew a breath. "A shaladen hurt them, but even using two we weren't

real successful--" He rubbed the back of his head as though the memory pained him. "We got thumped *bad* ."

"That was my--my experience," Daena groaned.

Bannor walked over to the wall where she had tried to crush the monster and picked up one of the fragments in his hands. Her nola had fused all of the metal together into a solid object. The creature had torn through a hundred stone steel ball as if it was a flimsy wooden door.

Outside attacks continued to pound around the tower. Somehow they had lasted this long against an unknown number of Baronian enemies. The aliens would not give up though until the task seemed impossible.

He heard a whining clunking sound and saw another metal creature bow and enter the chamber through the inner doorway. It looked similar to Hiram but had a more female aspect to its appearance. The armor looked more stylized and had been polished to a mirror sheen. There was no way to conceal the weapons built into its back and shoulders or the broad cleaving swords sheathed at its waist.

As it entered, the huge head swiveled and wide blue eyes focused on him. That startlingly human face cast in silvery metal smiled at him.

"Here," Eclipse said.

The healer turned to the Kriar and strode forward with its thud-clunk gait, dragon-like feet planting and pushing off.

"Peace," it said in a deep female voice. "Combat medical technician Yamah responding for aide." Bannor saw its gaze turn to the hulk that used be Hiram. Her features hardened. It leaned down to Daena and smiled, and began examining her.

After a moment of probing it said, "You will need to revert. I cannot treat you in this body configuration."

"B-battle form is all that--that's holding me together," Daena

muttered.

"I will stabilize you," the creature said putting a huge hand on the girl's arm.

Daena let out a breath, closed her eyes, and dipped her chin close to her chest. Light swarmed around her limbs. The metallic sheen of her skin bleached out and slowly became its normal dusky color. The moment she transformed she groaned, blood spilled from gaping gashes, twisted metal became bruised and torn skin.

Yamah worked fast, pressing something that hissed against the girl's neck, then quickly sealing the young savant's wounds from something sprayed from the end of one of her many jointed fingers. She straightened out Daena's body and played a purplish light across her torso from something in her palm.

Tal folded his arms and looked away from the healer. "Them things would be so much easier to handle if they looked like a tea-kettle or something."

"That would be demeaning," Eclipse told him with a frown.

"The fact they can *feel* demeaned is the problem," Tal grumbled. "This guy," he looked down at Hiram. "He was hurtin'. You can see it in his face." The big warrior turned a hard expression on Eclipse. "Machines ain't supposed to feel pain."

Eclipse's brow furrowed. "I suppose pain should be unique to born creatures?"

"I ain't arguing philosophy with ya. It just don't feel right. He's a made thing, his role and destiny were predetermined--he had no choice than to be what he was. Why should he hurt too?"

Yamah looked up from its ministrations on Daena. "I have a choice," she said in her echoing hollow voice. "Hiram had a choice. Our only absolute directive is to value life--especially our own." She focused back on Daena. She shined a green light from one of her fingers on some of Daena's lesser wounds causing them to bubble and seal up. "The ability to feel pain is also the

ability to feel pleasure is it not?" Yamah's big head pivoted and looked up at Tal, its round eyes blinked and the corner of its mouth creaked up in a smile. "What life is worth living if it cannot be enjoyed?"

Tal scrubbed his face. "Well, there ya go. Bad enough that born things can have screwed up lives and rotten days. Let's make mecha that can suffer the same way. Marvelous."

Yamah grinned and nodded. "Indeed." She turned back to Daena and placed a hand across her forehead. "You are fully functional, but give the regenerative a chance to firm the wounds so they do not tear."

The girl nodded. "Thank you."

The healer straightened to her full height. The weapons on her shoulders whined out of their enclosures and she drew her swords. "Beware."

The mecha had completed half a step to the balcony when three figures smashed down on the platform. The hulking gold-skinned shapes were nightmarishly unmistakable. A fourth figure faded in behind the nearer three, the bloody form of the black-masked dreadnaught that had attacked earlier.

Yamah moved to block the creatures but Tal lunged forward with a yell. "No!" He grabbed the mecha and pulled it off balance so it fell with a crash behind him. At the same time he whipped his shaladen from the sheath and slashed from one side of the balcony opening's upper edge to the other and whipped the tip to the floor and drew it back across just as the dreadnaughts charged.

A thrum resonated through the room and Bannor's ears popped. A shimmering flickered across the opening as the lead creature roared toward them. It hit the surface of the distortion and seemed to be slashed in half before vanishing entirely. The other three creatures slid to a stop in time to avoid being completely engulfed by whatever it was Tal had done. Tal who stood only a sword length inside the opening seemed to pose an irresistible target. The monsters roared and thrashed at him. As their arms

and bodies hit the surface it looked as if a knife slashed down through them and they were pressed up against a piece of glass. As they finished their swing and drew back, their bodies were whole.

Yamah had already righted herself. Tal jumped behind her and thumped her on the back. " *Nowget them!*" He ducked down and covered his ears.

The mecha leaned forward, its clawed feet clamped down on the metal decking, her guns whined up to speed and blared.

The roaring monster on the other side of barrier swallowed its bellow, leaning back with wide eyes and an 'oh spit' expression just as the first shots began tearing into it.

The floor of the balcony hummed and Bannor clutched his ears against the deafening chatter as Yamah's guns bombarded everything on the balcony. The dreadnaughts continued to rage and thrash under that intolerable onslaught, the blasts caroming around their bodies as though they were wading against a current. The air grew hot and Bannor pulled Daena up to her feet to stand beside a wincing Eclipse. Yamah bent forward driving her two swords into the metal decking and the booming of her weapons increased even further as she literally sprayed the dreadnaughts off the balcony one at a time.

As the last creature dropped out of sight, the mecha leaned back and her smoking weapons spun down with a tired moan. Dislodging her swords from the metal deck she straightened up and sheathed them with a clank. The mecha turned to Tal. "Thank you."

Tal wiggled a pinky in his ear, still wincing. "Hey, no problem. Good job."

Eclipse stood slack jawed. The normally impassive creature staggered back a step. "That was-- *insane*." He blinked and blew out his cheeks. "Yamah, how many times did you score on the lead creature?"

"Over fourteen thousand direct hits center mass at nominal

output," Yamah reported. "Eleven hundred scores at fifty percent over nominal."

Eclipse shook his head in a totally uncharacteristic loss of composure. "Dark, it didn't even have screens. A salvo like that would have holed a battleship. Those things were *organic* for lights sake." He thumbed the comms. **Aarlen, Dulcere, regroup is imperative. Forget the Daedalus and Phalanx units. These dreads are the real threat.**

"Impressed ya did they?" Tal rumbled with a smile. "Felt kinda the same after I got my head punched in."

"I am surprised you lived."

The big man laughed. "Fortunately, I have a hard head..." He stopped and turned his head. "You hear that?"

Eclipse frowned. "I hear nothing."

"That's the point."

Tal was right. The constant battering of explosions had stopped. The tower had gone silent except for the humming of artifices.

Eclipse, the Baronians are breaking off. Dulcere reported.
Returning as requested.

Eclipse touched the comm. **Acknowledged.** The Kriar shook his head. "I wish I could view this as good omen."

Tal frowned. "I sure can't."

The big man echoed Bannor's sentiments. Those creatures would be back and next time there would be more of them. The thought made him grow cold inside.

"Lord Falor," Daena asked. "What is that you put over the entrance?"

Tal glanced back. "The best shield money can't buy--a gate." He touched hilt of the sword over his shoulder. "A single sided one

so Yamah could shoot through. I made the exit point face downward about fifty leagues away. The bugger that went through will have a long swim to get back."

Yamah whirred and turned to Eclipse. "Eh'San, permission to refit. My guns are close to failing. I recommend fitting the mark sixteen rail variant. I believe my mounts and power supply are compatible."

"Permission granted," the Kriar officer answered with a nod. "Refit your power supply as well with the new xps high output prototype, white seal authorization gamma delta epsilon. Have Ghirard and Wyrach refit the same way. Order some engineers up to transfer Hiram to a new frame. Inform cyber-authority--" The Kriar glanced at Tal. "--that he gets his choice of frame for his next commission."

Yamah bowed. "Eh'san. Thank you, Eh'San." The big mecha strode out of the room.

Tal raised an eyebrow. "Was that just for my benefit?"

Eclipse shook his head. "They are alive as you said, but there are few ways to reward exemplary behavior. Reward is key to reinforcing excellence."

Daena was staring at Hiram's destroyed body. "So, he's not dead?"

Eclipse shrugged. "Technically, that shell was never alive. It has been eons since the core personalities of our servitors were actually housed in their frame interface. Losing that body while painful is like a lizard losing its tail. Hiram's actual host form is somewhere deep in the basement of this citadel. He simply has no body and senses to interact with us until he can be joined with a new frame."

Daena's green eyes widened. "Whoa, that's wizard."

"Not to me," Tal grumbled. "It's creepy."

"Knock, knock!" Aarlen called from the balcony standing well

clear of Tal's gate. The rest of the assault team were gathered behind her. They looked battered and ragged. It was probably fortunate that the Baronians had retreated.

Tal turned. "Make sure that balcony is clear. I ain't dropping that gate and lettin that stealthed dread in here."

Ziedra settled down by Aarlen. "It's clear."

Tal pulled out his Shaladen and touched the shimmering surface which winked out. "In--fast."

Aarlen, Dulcere and their teams rushed in. The instant the last person crossed the threshold Tal drew another gate across the opening. He put his arm around Terra who wrapped herself on him with a sigh. She looked tired.

Marna settled on the floor next to Tal looking around at the carnage of the destroyed chamber. "Were these the same kind of dread we saw on Karanganoi Homeworld?"

The big man shrugged. "New and improved--if ya can swallow that." He indicated the mangled form of Hiram. "Fifteen thousand mark XIV shots at close range and all it did was tick them off."

<What?> Dulcere thought in an incredulous tone. <A Gryphon couldn't withstand that--and it has *screens* .>

"It's magic," Aarlen said. "High order invulnerability spells imbued by an elder coven." She looked around. "How many were there?"

"Four that we saw," Bannor answered. "And one can stealth itself."

"Grrreat," Algernon rumbled. He looked to Tal. "We talking about the same thing, those big bruisers that kicked our arses?"

"Yeah."

"Spit." The ranger's brow furrowed. "How'd you get rid of them?"

"One of Quasar's combat frames blew 'em off the balcony."

<So, it's an unlikely coincidence that they broke off the engagement, right after they were driven off,> Dulcere determined.

"Real unlikely," Tal answered with a frown.

"I did not know about this weapon," Quasar said with a frown. "They played this well. Spread us out thin so they could get one of these 'dreads' in the complex. No doubt everything else was merely a screen to accomplish that. When we turned away their second stepped up attempt, they pulled back to formulate a new strategy."

"If I understand how they think," Bannor told the group. "They're just figuring out how to get as many of those things up here at one time as they can."

"Having seen the power of this weapon, I would agree with that assessment," Eclipse determined.

"How many of these dreads might they have?" Idun asked. "They sound like something of a challenge." She laced her fingers and cracked her knuckles. "These other creatures are merely annoying, I relish coming to grips with something more substantial."

"Lady, you'll get yer wish, that's certain," Algernon said with a shake of his head. He touched the shaladen on his shoulder. "Granted I couldn't access all of Warstar's power, but I pushed as far as I have ever gone. Them things flat beat the spit out of me and Tal. I hit one straight on five or six times with this." He pulled out the massive blade sheathed at his shoulder. The shaladen was tremendously thick and wide, more like a sharpened anvil than a sword. Bannor guessed it probably weighed three or four stone, yet the powerful warrior held it lightly in his fist as if it were a butter knife. The magic in the thing was uncanny in its potency--no human creation could withstand it for more than a few instants. "The damn thing sniffed off my shots like I was swinging a bouquet of flowers. I

was wearin' full Kriar battle dress and thing put dents in me like you wouldn't believe--right through fully powered screens." He blew out his cheeks. "Damn. Just crazy stuff."

The tired members of the assault team simply stared at him with wide eyes. Bannor saw Euriel, Vanidaar, and Wren looking around the room again. Ziedra pulled her husband close.

"The law of conservation says that such a creation must trade something for its power," Loric said. "As described, these things cannot be easily made. They would be inordinately hard to control. It would take a coven of fifty or so to imbue just one, and the coven would have to stay convened in order to direct the creature because a community union like that would be quite unstable."

"Tying up a hundred elites is nothing to these guys," Tal reminded. "We're guessing they have two hundred thousand elites and better than a third of them is mages. They could run hundreds of them dreads."

" *Hundreds?*" Radian echoed, rubbing his gold face.

"The resources of these brutes is truly staggering," Damay remarked.

"They'll just keep hitting us with them until they break through," Terra said.

Bannor clapped his hands and straightened up. "Let them! That's it!"

Everyone stared at him.

"Loric are you sure this coven you speak of would have to be controlling these things?"

The elder mage's brow furrowed. "Fairly certain."

Bannor made a fist. " *That's*their weakness--the weapon itself can't be destroyed--but the coven is vulnerable! I can follow those threads back to the controllers. Linked like we are now...

any of us could do it!"

Aarlen snapped her fingers and nodded. "Brilliant!"

"Brilliant maybe," Dominique said. "But risky. You know those controls will be stealthed so even with these enhanced senses we'll need to be right on top of them to track it. They aren't foolish enough to have all those covens in the same place."

"It doesn't matter," Quasar growled. "Each one of these dreads is like a link to the main body of their forces. It gives us a *target*. Let them use these creatures, we can make them pay for it."

"How can we withstand that kind of pounding long enough to dish anything back?" Desiray asked, gripping her white hair. "And how? The covens are probably on ships. It's not like you can just smack down fifty elites all at once."

"Ships are the likely location," Aarlen agreed. "Because they are both mobile and have screens against Kriar warp science. I'm certain that factors into their confidence in not being traced."

Quasar pressed her hands together in front of her nose and mouth, the jewels on her face gleaming as she bowed her head in thought.

"We need to come up with something fast," Daena said. "It won't take them long to gather up a dozen of those things and throw them at us."

"The gryphon class ultra-heavy frames are no good against them," Eclipse mused. "They're too fast. I don't think the standard combat frames even with the weapons upgrade I ordered can do much."

Wren snorted and shook her head. "If Damay and I had first one bodies, we could keep them occupied. They could pound on us all they'd like we'd just turn the power against them."

"What difference does the body make?" Bannor asked.

"We savants have an automatic limiter built into us. We can't

use all our powers unless our tao is in a form that can handle it." She let out a breath and glanced around the room. "The body would have to be sturdy anyways, to take hits like that you still have to be able to store the energy long enough to dissipate or use it."

"What about me?" Daena said. "Could you merge with me?"

Wren's brow furrowed. "I can merge with a beta because spirits and taos can sorta coexist. Your tao already has an affinity for your body--I don't think it would let me share--even if you wanted to."

Bannor rubbed the back of his head. "You know, I noticed something strange. I thought savants could only bond with betas or somebody with close heredity, but when Ziedra and I linked with Marna..." He focused on the Vatraena. "I nearly merged with her... If I hadn't resisted I would have been pulled right in."

Wren straightened up. "Really?"

"I felt it as well," Ziedra agreed, straightening up. "Perhaps it is something peculiar to the Kriar."

Damay looked around at the gold aliens. "Their bodies are certainly more resilient than ours, but they would not be sufficient to the task we are describing."

Marna rubbed her hands together. "If my physiology is compatible with this bonding process you describe, then a stronger one could be made."

"Hey, yeah..." Wren's voice trailed off. She pointed a finger at Aarlen. "You even offered that to me once, because we knew Desiray had been synchronized with me and we could use her as a template. That would work for me or Damay."

The elder woman looked dubious. "We have neither the time or the materials."

"Actually," Marna said. "We, or actually I, have both..."

Chapter Nine

Waiting For Ascension

I hovered there in that room in my astral form. Across the way, I saw my daughter, her mentor, my son, and three of her best friends... all adrift like ghosts. It struck me then, even harder than usual, how strange and wondrous my family has truly become...

**-- Vanidaar Kergatha,
Regent High Baron of Cosmodarus**

Bannor felt his stomach twist, not from apprehension but from an instinct that told him something very important was about to happen. His sense of the destroyed room with its smashed furniture and pitted floor seemed to sharpen, he felt the cooled and purified air hissing from openings overhead, and detected the sodden-earth smell that clung to people fresh from a battle. Perhaps it was survival, perhaps it was something else, but Marna's words and her confidence made something ring in him. A sense in the back of his head said that he should support her even though the whole idea of switching bodies made him queasy inside. The one time he switched bodies with Wren had been a less than *comfortable* experience.

"Truly you can do this, Lady Marna?" he asked.

Others around their small conference circle, blonde Wren, her lanky brother, and Ziedra were all staring at the ancient Kriar woman.

"Indeed," the Vatraena answered. "The same type of equipment we used to heal Ziedra can do this, and quite quickly. With some tricks, I can make the needed arrangements in a very short

amount of time."

"So, lemme get this straight," Tal said. "She makes some kind of special body and you can just take it over?"

"Pretty much," Wren said.

"And suddenly you can take on one of these things?" Algernon scoffed.

"Nothing's guaranteed, but it's worth a try," Wren answered.

"I don't like it," Wren's mother Euriel growled. "It puts too much on you."

"I would be there to assist," Damay said.

"I will be at her shoulder as well," Idun said. "These brutes do not frighten me."

"It beat the doo out of me," Daena said. "But I know better now. If we fight out in the open I can keep them off us."

"Count me in for chance in one of those cool bodies," Ziedra said. "My thing is magic, in a strong enough body I might be able to disrupt this invulnerability spell they're using."

"Zee?" Radian said with a frown. "No..."

"Oh hush," the girl said with a scowl. "We all knew the risk. We all have to carry our weight."

Quasar raised her head. The jewels down her face flickered and sparkled. "If you can tie them up, I believe I have a way to locate and deal with the covens."

"Sounds like we have a plan," Eclipse said. "I will make sure that you have plenty of frames for support."

Bannor blinked. "What about me? Could I do something?"

Marna turned her head. "You are doing something. Your senses

have made the whole battle possible."

"I mean could I do more in this body thing that Wren is talking about? They shouldn't be out there alone. I should help--but--" He held up his hands. "I'm just--I'm just flesh and blood."

Wren shook her head. "Brother, the stuff you do with that flesh and blood *astounds* me." She shrugged. "You've got a pretty good handle on your powers--there hasn't been a calamity in more than a scoreday. If you're willing to take the risk... I don't see how it could hurt."

He nodded. "I'll do it. It feels weird, but I have a feeling it's what I need to do."

"Well then," Marna said. "I know what I need to do." She turned to her daughter. "'Cere perhaps you can be persuaded to assist?"

Dulcere nodded. Dominique swayed over and stood with the Kriar matriarch obviously intending to go with them.

Marna stopped in the archway. "Wren, I'll call for you and the others shortly."

Wren nodded.

The three of them disappeared down the hall.

"Quasar, we should look in on the prisoner." Loric said. "You are sure you still have him, correct?"

"Positive, but if you wish to see him, that is permissible."

"I'm on that action," Tal said.

"Me too," Algernon added.

The three men, Desiray and Terra followed Quasar as she headed out.

Bannor looked around. "Isn't anyone worried that the Baronians will be back?"

"They'll come when they come," Aarlen said. "Best to take the opportunity to rest." She looked around with a frown. "However, it appears your fight has effectively removed any chance of that happening in this room. Let us all retire to someplace less damaged."

Bannor nodded in response to the sense of that. He followed as Aarlen exited through the single doorway. The others trailed along in his wake.

It required only a few moments of exploration to find a suitable place. A short distance down the hall was doorway that opened into what looked like a large viewing area. The rectangular chamber was easily fifty paces wide and close to twenty deep with a window that ran the length of the room, providing a panorama of sparkling waterfalls pouring down into the valley. The room had no furniture in it and was instead simply built in a series of three wide tiers with a slanted ramp down the middle. A soft spongy substance covered the surface of the lower areas.

"Ah yes, Kriar simplicity," Aarlen said, stretching out her long body on one of the lower platforms with a weary sigh.

Murmuring amongst themselves the other members of the team dispersed to similarly take advantage of a place to get off their feet.

Relax. He wished he could do that as easily. How could he when he was separated from Sarai? He did find himself a spot to sit in the comfortable padding.

His eyes widened as he remembered that the Baronians had been attacking at home as well. What if they had used those creatures against Kul'Amaron! He tapped Marna's communication crystal. "Star, Star, are you there? Are you all right?"

No answer came back immediately and he felt an icy fist clench in his guts. "Star?"

Images of the damage one of those beasts could inflict on the Elven citadel whirled through his mind. Even the powerful

contingent that had come to assist the King and Queen might not be enough against those indestructible brutes.

"Star!" he yelled.

There was a crackle in his ear. **Urgh! What? What? What? **
Her voice sounded weak and strained. **My One? **

"Are you all right?"

**Damn, I'm sorry. I should have called you as soon as they broke off. I got hit really hard and I sat down to rest and just faded out. **

"Hit!?" He let out, heart lurching in his chest. "Are you okay!?"

**Easy, my One, easy. ** He heard her let out a breath. **You were right about, Senalloy. She came out of nowhere and blocked the attack, but the shock blew me right on my arse and mashed me against the wall. Ow. ** He could feel her wince.
**Mother checked me, I'm fine. What about you? **

"We almost lost. The Baronians have a new weapon called a coven dreadnaught. It's big with gold skin. They're almost indestructible. If you see them there, just get away. One mashed up Daena in battle form like she was made of wax."

**Whoa. ** He heard her swallow. **Really? **

"Really."

**I'll pass that along. What are you going to do? **

"Loric says that each creature is powered by a coven of mages. If we disrupt the coven, the creature will lose its power."

**How will you find the coven? **

"That's what we're working on. Meanwhile, we're trying to make some weapons to match them."

**Bannor, I want you to stay safe, ** she told him in a growl.

****No crazy heroics. I'm counting on you and so is Vhina.****

"Vhina? You're going to use the name I suggested?"

****I thought about it and I like it.**** He heard a smile in her voice. ****Our daughter needs a strong name.****

He sighed. "I love you. I'll stay as safe as I can."

****I'll do the same and pass along what you told me. I don't think the Baronians have given up. They were surprised by how much resistance we put up. The valkyries really took them off guard--you know how much those girls love to fight.****

Though it seemed impossible, he managed to smile. "Yeah I do. Okay, I better go. Love you."

****Love you.****

He tapped the connection off.

Bannor was startled by Daena's voice above him. "Sarai's okay?"

He got over his startle and nodded. "She had a close call, Senalloy stepped in at the last moment."

"Good, I'm glad she's safe. Janai checked with me a few moments ago to say the Baronians pulled back there too."

"She's okay?"

Daena nodded. The girl let out a breath and settled on the pads next to him. "You know, I feel like a real priss. I have all this power," she clenched her fists. "And I still keep getting the spit beat out of me."

"Dane you are so young, it takes time. Having a more adult body won't speed it up. It's the amount of time you spend with your nola using it that gives you the control." He turned to Wren who was looking at them. The blonde savant was sitting with her family, Damay, Ziedra and her husband. The whole group

seemed very close. Wren's brother was draped around their mother. Euriel leaned against her husband.

The blonde savant nodded. "He's right. Training is another big thing--you have to learn to know your body. I got beat-up for *moons* until I knew things I didn't want to know. In some ways, that first-one form is probably holding you back because it makes the stuff you can do so easy."

Daena's brow furrowed and she pursed her lips. "I never thought about it that way. The things I do really *aren't* that hard for me."

"The maturity they speak of is truly a synthesis," Damay said running a jeweled hand through her hair. "Confidence, acceptance, and simply liking what you are. Your nola is alive, it will be hesitant to reveal its secrets to someone who thinks of it as a 'monster'."

Daena frowned and clenched her fists. "What else can I call myself? I mean I can look human, but it's a lie... I am this *thing* that Hella forced on me, and Kell made worse."

Idun snorted. "Child, you are too preoccupied with being human. The likenesses between any two humans are superficial at best in any estimation. You do not have to be one of them to be accepted--at least not by people who *matter*. I rather think most here admire what you are." The goddess looked around and pressed her lips to a line. "Some of us have chosen to protect humans, but honestly, don't you think what you are now is better suited to the task?"

"I suppose. I'm just afraid I'll go crazy or something..."

The goddess rocked her head back. "Do you feel touched in the head?"

"Well, no, but crazy people never think they're crazy."

"And normal people never think they're normal," Euriel said, getting into the discussion. "My mother is right. Your angst is misplaced. You worry over the acceptance of a faceless jury who

disregard all who are different, a little different or lot is of no real moment to such creatures." She leaned across the tier and put a hand on Daena's arm. "It is far more productive to focus on the people who love you, and how little your differences matter to them." She gripped the girl's arm and smiled. "You're immortal, you're beautiful, you can do practically anything you put your mind to--by Ymir's flame let yourself *enjoy* it!"

"Celebrate your differences," Aarlen rumbled from where she lay on the padded tier. The woman's eyes were closed and her fingers were laced over her chest. "Just don't go overboard like I did and get whole planets hating you. With all your blessings, expect to be hated some. It's inevitable. Embrace it as validation. People are jealous and covetous creatures. It's not uncommon for them to loathe what they cannot have and can never be."

Ziedra frowned. "Auntie, you are so cynical."

"People my age get that way."

Daena let out a breath and nodded in response to what everyone had said. She turned glowing green eyes on him. He rubbed her shoulder. She smiled. That glimmer of happiness made him tingle inside. He winced, damn it, what was wrong with him? He could NOT let himself have serious feelings for this girl!

She looked up at him. "Bannor?"

He rubbed his face. "It's nothing. I'm just a little tired."

Perhaps Ziedra sensed his discomfort or maybe it was something else but it was obvious she wanted to break the silence. "Wren, about this body thing. You're the only one who's done it. What's it like?"

The blonde savant looked uncomfortable. She rubbed the back of her neck and rocked back. "I did it with Mom," she said. "It's not the same thing."

"What about those times with Desiray?"

"Zee, nothing I can say would really prepare you for it. The toughest thing is holding onto yourself. There's a part of you that's asleep, and when it wakes up--" She blew out her cheeks. "It's really pretty scary."

"I think I know what you mean," Daena said. "A kind of wild feeling an urge to..." Her voice faded.

"You want to use your powers," Wren finished. "It doesn't matter how or where, you just want to do it because--" She paused. "Quite frankly--it feels good. When Starholme came into me... it hurt--it was pain like I can't describe--that pain is the only thing that kept me from losing myself and mother."

"So, isn't there a danger with this thing of Marna's?" Ziedra asked.

"Sure," Wren said. "But I won't kill my own mother if I decide I want to stay in that body."

"Would you still be you?" Daena asked.

Wren shrugged. "You're already in a body like that. Are you still you?"

Daena blinked. "Uh. I don't know. Sometimes I wonder."

"Li," Wren's father said. "Stop trying to confuse the girl."

"Dad, that's the thing. Daena has a really strong grip on herself. It's just that she's the only one who doesn't realize it."

Daena thumped her hands down on the padding. "You know, damn it, you're right. Every time I'm certain, I cross myself up... I keep doubting... I keep thinking it's all a dream or something--or that I'll wake up and it's really a nightmare. Like your mother said, I'm immortal--I need to lean into it! I already live in a house full of half-way immortal elves!"

"Right!" Wren agreed. "Just take it eeeasy. Try not to scare anybody."

"Mmmm," Daena hummed, seeming pleased with herself.

"Here you are," Dominique said in her silky voice. She came down the ramp and looked around at everyone. "Marna sent me to get you and said that everything is prepared."

"Whoa!" Wren said. "That was fast."

"Li," Vanidaar asked his daughter. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Dad, these guys need to get popped for trying to kill everyone in that party. It's not going to be my real body so it'll be very tough to kill me."

"Daar," Euriel said. "She's got my warrior blood. We can't deny it."

Wren rose. "Lead on."

"This should be interesting," Aarlen said, rising. "Hope those Baronians hold off a bit longer. I'd like to see this."

The group followed Dominique out into the corridor and down the hall, taking a few turns down progressively more alien-looking passages that were lined with conduits pulsing with energy. The air grew stiff and it smelled like it did after a thunderstorm.

The pale woman touched a panel at a heavily reinforced door, causing it to slide aside.

Inside was a circular chamber humming with strange machinery. In it were twelve large clear half cylinders set on gray metal pedestals. Cables dangled down from the roof and were strung along the floor, obviously hastily connected to the various apparatus which hummed and vibrated around them.

Bannor noticed that half the cylinders were already occupied.

"Whoa," Wren breathed looking around. "Why are there so

many?"

"I assumed you didn't want to do full mergers, just spirit mergers, so the empty tubes are to monitor you," Marna answered, looking around with a raised eyebrow. "The extras were just in case others decided at the last moment to lend a hand."

Wren glanced up at her father and brother who were looking at one another.

The blonde savant walked toward the chambers and gazed through the clear glass walls at the contents with wide blue eyes.

He stopped at the first tube he came to and looked in. Inside was a man dressed in one of the skintight outfits that they had been asked to wear before the mission. The body was well over two paces tall and head and shoulders bigger than himself with a thick chest. The musculature seemed exaggerated, the golden-brown skin seemingly pulled tight over it. The dark hair, its length and the way it draped over the longish face seemed to be somewhat reminiscent of him, but that was probably a coincidence.

Wren had stopped at another tube and was making an 'ooohing' sound. Bannor stepped over and looked in. The statuesque blonde female inside was heroic in every proportion, with just enough muscle to show that the form was intended for combat. The composed face looked like a magnified and refined copy of Wren's.

Hands behind her back, Damay stood across the way studying another body which shared her hair color. The elder looked up at Marna. "There isn't much subtle about them."

"I didn't have time," Marna said. "I worked from models sampled at Starholme Prime and, of course, existing immortals when in their native form. The First-ones designed with power, aesthetics, and fertility in mind."

"Not necessarily in that order," Ziedra said looking at the

dark-haired body obviously intended for her.

"Huuuge tracts of land," Radian said looking over her shoulder and holding his gold palms up in front of him.

Ziedra glared at her husband.

"Your tracts are nice too, Sweets."

She rolled her eyes.

Bannor saw that the bodies were significantly different in their features. Ziedra's in particular had some unusual threads associated with it.

Wren's brother Azir was looking at a burly shape in another container and touched the clear material. "And we can try this too if we want?"

"Indeed," Marna answered.

"This was a great deal of work," Aarlen remarked, standing next with Euriel, Idun and Vanidaar as they stared at the body intended for the red-haired mage. "I'm surprised you could accomplish it in such a short time."

Marna sniffed. "Time dilation is one of the few legal uses of time diving that does not require authorization. This is actually several bells of work. I had to make sure the hosts matched the correct patterns."

Wren narrowed her eyes. "Gaea would probably be pretty uncomfortable if she thought you'd been studying us carefully enough to do that."

Marna walked over to the Wren and patted her cheek. "She doesn't need to know, does she?" Her tone dropped. "My loss is your loss. Take my meaning."

Wren looked like she'd eaten something sour. "I savvy that."

"Well," Ziedra said. "What are we waiting for?"

Radian turned his head to one side. "You know I'm looking forward to seeing you in those new *assets* ."

"Darling, nice as it is, I'm not keeping that body."

The young Kriar raised an eyebrow. "You say that *now* ."

Ziedra rolled her eyes. "So, Lady Marna, I just climb in this other thing?"

The Kriar nodded.

"Are these bodies alive?" Wren said, still staring at hers. "They don't have a spirit do they?"

"No," Marna answered. "Also, I believe I improved a little on the original first one design, their understanding of organics while rather good still had some rather significant flaws."

"You couldn't tell it by me," Azir said letting out a breath. "So, Sis, I've never done this. Do we do that astral travel dren and overlap ourselves with these things?"

"That's it exactly," Wren said. "In fact, if Marna designed the bodies right, you won't have to find a binding spot, it will just draw you in."

"Oookay," He said with a shrug walking around to the empty chamber near the body.

Bannor drew a breath. He really didn't like the idea of this. Then again, this was his chance to not be the weak link on the team. He took another look at the burly form that was a magnified and iconized version of him. Steeling himself he stepped around to the empty chamber.

"Now," Marna said. "The bodies are in stasis. When everyone is in position, I'm going to give you a ten count, that will give you time to prepare. I'm then going to drop the stasis and start the body functions, you need to take possession as quickly as possible. Understand?"

Everyone nodded. From his position by the empty chamber it appeared that Vanidaar had decided to join in as well. At least they'd all be sharing in the experience.

"Dom, 'Cere," Marna said. "Help them in."

Dulcere came over by Bannor and opened the case for him. The crystalline lid parted from the bottom with a hiss and opened with a quiet chugging sound.

"The other reasons for these tubes is, of course, to make sure your original body doesn't die," Marna told them. "Your hosts can survive indefinitely as long as this tower doesn't lose power."

"Good to know," Vanidaar said in a cool voice glancing at his wife.

Dominique opened the case for the red-haired savant. She helped him remove his armor and other Kriar equipment. He sat down on the padded cushions and lay back with his hands across his chest. Euriel put a hand on his arm. He nodded to her with a smile, then to Dominique.

The pale woman reached up into the cylinder lid and pulled out a cord with a flattened disk at one end. This she pressed into the middle of Vanidaar's chest. She then swung the lid down and latched it. The crystal hummed and sealed with a thunk.

<Ready?> Dulcere asked Bannor.

He nodded.

The Kriar woman helped him strip out of all of Kriar equipment including the signaling crystal he used to contact Sarai. This she put aside for him.

Heart thumping he pushed himself up to sit on the pads. Fingers laced at her mouth, Daena watched intently, her glowing green eyes never seeming to blink. "I'll be okay," he told her.

She nodded. "I know you will."

Drawing a breath, he pulled up his feet and swung around to lie flat on the soft cushions. He worked his neck and head into the cradle that seemed to be filled with some kind of thick liquid to provide extra support.

Dulcere pulled the cord down and pressed the disk against his chest.

<I'm sealing you in.>

He nodded.

She pulled the lid down with a clunk. The cylinder hissed and he felt a vibration under his back. The cushions under him seemed to grow softer and his whole body seemed to press down into the sponginess.

He looked up through the case to the distorted images of Dulcere and Daena. Dulcere nodded to him then turned away.

Bannor closed his eyes and relaxed. Focusing down into his nola he pushed into the darkness that freed his astral form. In what seemed like no time at all he was floating above his body looking down at it.

His face looked haggard, as though he had not slept in a long time.

Damn, I look tired.

"So far, so good," Daena said.

<Yes.>

He noticed the others were all hovering around the circle in astral form.

<Wow, you know, we've never had this many floating around before.>

<Actually, I have never astral traveled with my daughter,> Vanidaar said.

Wren laughed. <Well, yes, it's not something that just comes up. Hey let's dump our bodies and take a fly around the city.>

Euriel had her arms folded. "I don't like it."

"Nor I," Idun growled behind her.

<There you have the reason,> Ziedra said. She flitted around her husband, who trailed a hand through her ephemeral body.

<Makes my stomach hurt,> Azir told them. His form was much dimmer than the others. He was the only one who was not a prime savant.

Bannor floated to a point over the new body he was supposed to inhabit. Damn, that was a burly shape, what would that feel like to be inside? Odd, even with the body not being animate, he felt a subtle tugging as he grew close.

<Whoa,> he said. <I feel it pulling on me.>

<I feel it too,> Wren said. <That's some serious affinity.>

"Prepare yourselves," Marna said. The ancient Kriar went to a device in the center in the ring of cylinders and worked for a few moments. "All right, is everyone ready?"

All of the savants gave their assent. Bannor felt the muted thumping of the heart of his body. He steeled himself. What would this be like?

"Okay, beginning the count. Ten--nine--"

Bannor focused on the body, allowing the pull to guide him to the point of entry. He set his target and prepared himself as the Kriar matriarch reeled off the last of her count.

"Go."

Around the circle a flickering light illuminated the bodies, and they twitched and arched their backs.

The pull on Bannor redoubled and he followed it down into the body. Unlike when he remerged with his own body, his perception filled with a red illumination. A giant thumping sounded around him, the sound picked up speed as he felt himself twisted and pulled. A shaft of pain lanced through him and the redness went black...

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Chapter Ten

Ascendants

That feeling was back, a feeling I never thought I would experience again--a feeling I dreaded, coveted, and reveled in. Would I have to give it up? Would I have the strength to let go? If I didn't, who had the strength to force me? What if I let myself become that other creature? How long before temptation and hubris drew me in to make the same mistakes my ancient forebears made...

**-- Liandra "Wren" Kergatha,
Second Princess of Cosmodarus**

Bannor opened his eyes. Something must have gone wrong. He was back in his body. It felt wrong too--somehow *askew*. He drew a breath and with the intake of air his whole body tingled. He blinked. *That* felt strange. He drew another breath. The sensation did not go away, it grew stronger. A warm rush that made him bite down on a sound. The third breath made every muscle in his body seem to swell.

This was *definitely* not right.

He lifted his arm to press against the case lid, his fingers splaying against the crystal.

His eyes widened. He *had* transferred after all. These feelings were so strange.

The lid lifted and Daena looked in on him. "Well?" She reached out to him.

Brow furrowing he took hold and swung up to a sitting position. That movement seemed strange. He didn't even feel himself shift. There was no sensation of weight. He pushed on the cushions with both hands, quite surprised when he lifted up off the dais. Did he weigh nothing then? He could do that in his original body but it took effort.

He pushed off the padding and dropped to the floor. His feet struck the metal with a thud that made the cylinder behind him vibrate. Okay, he not only weighed something, he weighed a *lot* .

He looked down at Daena. It had been a while since he had been able to do that. He opened and closed his hand. He drew another deep breath feeling an electrifying sense of euphoria flow through him, every tendon and muscle seeming to flood with potential.

Bannor shook his head. "Does it feel--" He stopped as an echoing baritone voice spoke as he did. No, that was *his* voice. "Whoa." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Does it always feel like this for you? How do you focus to do anything?"

"Huh?" Daena stared at him for a moment. "Oh *that* , yeah, you get used to it. For a little while, you just stand there and *breathe* ." She giggled, green glowing eyes flashing.

"Oh good," Ziedra said in an echoing voice across from them. "I thought it was just me." She thudded down to the floor and looked around tossing her long black hair. Radian was right, that form had assets aplenty and they were beyond well developed. Like Daena and her husband Radian, the magic savant's eyes had become glowing orbs that now gave off a purplish light.

Radian, stepped up to his wife and touched her dark hair. He reached down and took her hand. She reached around him with her free arm and pulled him close. The woman lolled her head to one side and made a gurgling sound.

Bannor glanced to Wren. The blonde savant stood outside of her cylinder feet planted and head tilted back, hands spread out as if she were appealing to the sky. A dark swirling gathered around her limbs and bolts of lightning crackled and flashed around her now statuesque form.

"Whoa," Daena murmured with wide eyes.

The air in the room gusted, and there was a boom like thunder as she closed her hands into fists. A reddish glow flickered and rasped around her body. She let out a shuddering sigh. "Yesss." She drew the word out. She bounced up a pace in the air and came down with a thud. "Damn. I thought Desiray's body was great." She looked to across the circle to her mother. She drew a breath and her eyes fluttered. "This one... wooo."

"The feelings are--disconcerting," Damay said behind her.

The elder savant moved a few paces across the circle, opening and closing her hands, rising up to her toes and coming back down to her heels. Before, she had been a moderately attractive if unassuming person, without his savant senses he never would have guessed at the power she possessed. Now, garbed in a first one body, the elder had a room-filling presence and cut a figure that would have even the most jaded male fawning over her.

Azir thumped across the room and stood by his sister. He posed and made a muscle. "What do you think?"

The blonde savant put hands on hips. She bit her lip and glanced over at Marna. "Damay is right, nothing *subtle* ..."

"Is that good?" Azir asked with a raised eyebrow. "Damn, I feel like I don't weigh anything." He shook the hair out of his eyes and slid back into what was obviously a practiced unarmed battle stance. Sparkles danced on the surface of his skin. His eyes,

which glowed white, grew brighter. He tightened a fist. The area around his hand grew dark and the whole room appeared to distort and grow dim.

The effect seemed to startle him and he staggered back. White flames danced and flickered on the surface of his skin. He looked down at it. "Whoa. I never--it's so *strong* ..."

"Well yeah, that was the point wasn't it?" Wren chided her brother. She reached out and touched his shoulder. She seemed to study her own hand for a moment as if not believing this was happening. "I must admit, you're--"

"Attractive? Handsome? *Gooorgeous*? " Azir prompted with a grin, pushing a hand through his hair in a fay gesture.

Wren frowned. "Incorrigible."

"Hey, 'incorrigible' wasn't on the list."

Bannor heard a humming behind him. He turned to see Vanidaar. He had his arm around Euriel. The daughter of Idun had her head propped against his chest. The two of them, along with the goddess were watching Wren and Azir, no doubt enjoying the sibling camaraderie. Azir was joking, but it was to cover up his discomfort. The bodies did make their powers stronger, on a level Bannor was still afraid yet to explore. With that power came the sense of being on the verge of losing control.

Wren stepped over to Damay who seemed focused inward. "Are you okay, Sister? That's a lot of 'being' you got there."

The elder raised her head. "Indeed it is--being as I never imagined I would ever taste." She reached out and touched Wren's face. In a careful gesture, she pressed her cheek to Wren's then drew back.

The elder turned and walked over to Aarlen who put hands on hips as she approached. Though she was far larger than in her previous body she still had to look up at the huge white-haired Magestrix.

"Alas, I must still look up at you," she said in a dark tone. "I had hoped to look you in the eye."

Aarlen raised an eyebrow.

Idun who had been studying Vanidaar and the rest of them spoke up. "Lady Marna, there does seem to be something missing."

The Vatraena turned. "Missing?"

"How will they function effectively without flux stones? They cannot assume battle shape without one."

"Ah," Marna nodded. "Yes, that's one of my improvements. As you noticed, Daena no longer needs a flux stone in order to achieve that effect."

The goddess looked over and her brow furrowed. "Yes."

"I created an organic solution to replace that inorganic vulnerability."

"Oh, nice," Wren murmured. "But I didn't feel it."

"The mass absorption and distribution are instinctive. The body knows what to do."

Wren pursed her lips. "Oookay." She looked over at Daena. "A little coaching perhaps?"

The auburn-haired savant brightened like Wren had given her a handful of candy. "You want me to teach, *you*, Sis?"

"Yeah, we don't have much time," Wren answered. "We must be on borrowed moments now. I'm so surprised they aren't already beating the walls down."

Daena walked over to Wren. In her enhanced first one shape she was only hairs bigger than the blonde savant. Glowing green eyes met luminous blue. "Ready?"

Wren nodded.

Daena held out her hand. Wren clasped it. "Sister, it goes like *this* ." She rocked her head back. Light gathered around her limbs and energy crackled. Her flesh frothed and bubbled, going from dusky dark to a metallic sheen. The decking under her feet groaned and she leaned forward with a sigh her skin glinting in the diffuse light. She gave Wren an arch look. When she spoke her voice had a ringing hollow sound to it. "Pretty wizard, huh?"

The blonde savant stared at her with wide eyes. "Frelling awesome." She let go of Daena's hand and rubbed her fingers together. It was then that Bannor realized she hadn't meant the transformation.

Wren leaned back and closed her eyes. She clenched her fists. The light in the room seemed to be sucked into her body. The air stirred and grew warm as everything appeared to bend toward her. The reddish glow around her sparked and flashed and her flesh bubbled, slowly transforming from its light tan to a steely gray. The floor creaked under her as she snapped out of the focus.

"Oh ack. That feels weird." She looked at her hand.

"You can't feel much," Daena said. "That's normal."

"Indeed," Idun said. The goddess came over and rubbed Wren's shoulder. She walked around surveying her granddaughter. "It needs work," she determined. "Too much mass and not enough cohesion." She held out her hand, which turned to a bright silvery consistency with a crackle of energy. "See the color?" She held her polished appearing skin next to the gray of Wren's.

The blonde savant nodded.

"As you see, it does work," Marna said, obviously proud of her accomplishment.

"Yes," Idun said with a nod. "You are truly a worker of magic."

"Come on, guys," Daena said waving to the rest of them. "Get over here so I can 'skin teach' you."

"Skin teach?" Ziedra said with a dubious expression.

The younger woman shrugged. "What else would you call it?"

"Skin teach?" a deep voice said behind them. "Too bad I'm married, or I'd want some of that action." Bannor looked back to see the rest of the team enter the chamber. The big man whistled. "Wow. That's some serious body upgrades you guys got." He shook his head. "I hope you're nearly ready to move. The Baronians are rallying."

"We're still kind of learning," Bannor said. "It's new to some of us."

"Better learn fast," Algernon added. "They've made four or five drops since they backed off. That's why they waited so long. Whatever is coming, there's going to be a lot of it."

Wren's body shimmered to a shiny silver like her grandmother had showed her. She looked to Loric. "Do you have Mon'istiaga with you?"

The elder's eyes widened. "Yes, but..."

"Tal says the only thing that cut these dreads is a shaladen. That's the closest thing we've got. It's all fine and well for me to go out there and let those things pound me, but it would be better if I could hit back."

"Are you talking about that thing you creamed Hecate's avatars with?" Tal asked.

She nodded.

"Ain't that thing a little dangerous?"

She nodded again.

"It is a lot dangerous," Damay said. "In our quest to destroy

these creatures, let us not destroy ourselves in the process."

"Amen," Algernon rumbled.

Wren let out a breath. "I'm open to suggestions. So, Mon'istiaga as a last resort?"

"Am I misunderstanding," Quasar said. "Why are you hesitant to use this weapon?"

"It's the sword of Shiva," Aarlen said. "I know it's hard to credit, but it is capable of destroying worlds--or so the legend goes. Its power is equal to a shaladen at the very least--one with almost no controls."

"I am of Wren's mind in this," Vanidaar spoke up stepping forward. "Our nola powers will only do so much, we need the supplement of weapons."

Dominique snapped her fingers. Her gold eyes sparkled. "I have an idea. I'll be right back!" She vanished in a blue flash.

"Okay," Daena said. "While she's busy, let's do this teach." She held out her hand. "Everyone take hold."

Bannor took her hand, the others gathered close, their fingers and palms tangling. It was strange--that touch--it was like the savant affinity only far stronger.

"Here's what I know," Daena told them. Her eyes fluttered and Bannor felt an odd crawly sensation on his skin. In his mind, it was like shadows flitted around, there were voices, impressions, sensations, but it was all compressed and abstract. Without really knowing what she had conveyed, he sensed it was a great deal. "There," she said, withdrawing. "That should help."

All of his savant brothers and sisters stood with contemplative expressions. What Daena had communicated were more like instincts than anything else. She had been in a first one form longer than the rest of them, and as they had said, with time came familiarity and confidence.

Azir was nodding to himself. "Daena--nicely done!" He gripped her shoulder and gave it a shake.

The girl looked down at his hand and up at his face. She blushed. "Thanks."

The air crackled and then thumped behind them, Dominique was back and she held two large cases, one in either hand. "For those of you who don't know me," Dominique said throwing the cases across two of the cylinders. "My mother is a fairly renowned mage. One of the projects she and her apprentices were working on was the creation of a new alloy. The alloy is a mixture of the Kriar material krill, and a magical element called ishtite." She opened one of the cases revealing four large swords made of a milky metal. The surfaces of the blades looked strange. Colors flowed through them like rainbow reflections seen in a soap bubble. "These blanks were never enchanted but they are practically indestructible, and the edges are *wicked* sharp." She threw open the other case and pulled out one of the swords and swished it experimentally. She walked over to Ziedra and handed it to her. "Maybe the first one of magic can do something?"

Ziedra held the weapon in her hand. "This is beautiful. Yes, yes, I could!" She looked to Quasar and Eclipse. "How much time do we have?"

"They're on the far side of the domicile," Quasar said. "Less than a quarter bell."

"Damn." She turned to Algernon. "Let me try an experiment, pull out your shaladen."

"What? *Why?* "

"Please."

He shrugged and unsheathed the massive weapon and held it out between them.

"Tell it not to attack me."

"Done."

She stepped over to Algernon and wrapped her hand around his. She rocked her head back and a cascade of illumination flooded around her and the shaladen. At the same time, a reddish light illuminated the sword Dominique had given her.

Clouds formed around her feet and energy crackled and snapped. A wind rushed around them.

At the sword's tang, a deep violet radiance began to reach up the length of the blade. Ziedra gritted her teeth as powerful magic resonated through her body.

When the violet color had completely encased the sword, she relaxed with a gasp. The purple hue vanished. In its place, the blade looked like a piece of glass, almost transparent, a shimmering like water danced across the clear surface.

"There." She determined. "It's not as strong as a shaladen but it doesn't need to be. The magic can be reinforced with our nolas."

"Zee," Wren exclaimed. "You're awesome."

The woman wiggled her eyebrows. "I know."

"Damn, that's pretty frellin wizard... but we don't have the time," Tal said.

Bannor stepped over and grabbed the five remaining swords one at a time out of the boxes. "Zee, do it again. Daar, Wren, Damay, Azir, Daena, gather around me." With one arm around the bundle of swords and a hand on Ziedra's shoulder he began to concentrate.

"What?" Ziedra said.

"Just do what you did before," he told her, eyes still closed. "We don't have much time." He tightened his focus, he hadn't yet reached out to touch the Garmtur, but he could feel it inside him.

As the other savants closed in around him, he began the combining. Like he had at the party, he conjoined all the savants, looping their patterns through him, making them one with the power of eternity. The difference was they were no longer savants--they were first ones.

The power coursed through him, but this time he did not have a fragile human body. He had the resilient energy-hungry form of a first one. They needed to do it fast, and they needed to do it right, and they needed more than one Ziedra to do it.

So he created five more.

Through his connections to the other savants they understood his intention. Each one took a sword from him, each one replicating the enchantment with Ziedra, mirroring her actions as she worked the next weapon. With the power of six first ones behind her eyes, the first of magic flew through the enchantment, analyzing and imbuing, this time with even greater force.

In barely half the time it took to do the first sword, the next five were complete. Bannor was not done. Each savant had a piece of the knowledge needed for their success. He spread that knowledge through their union, willing the power of Eternity to fill the empty reservoirs of their newly created bodies.

Bannor drew back with a crackle of energy rasping around his hands. That had felt *good* . He had never felt so alive--so in control.

Ziedra stared at him with a slack jaw. She thumped him on the shoulder. "I officially cede my crown of awesomeness. That was brilliant."

Bannor picked up the sword that Ziedra had first created. "I know this one isn't as powerful as the others, but can I have it?"

She made a little wiggle of her head. "Uh, sure."

Azir hummed and his body cracked and assumed the silvery sheen of battle form. "Wizard," he said in the hollow voice.

Bannor remembered the words that Wren the seemed to have said eons ago. *Bannor, I can see myself.* He gripped Ziedra's enchanted weapon in both hands and willed the Garmtur into action. The incredibly hard metal turned molten, becoming a hovering ball between his hands. Reality twisted, probability combined and threaded. He pushed his mind into the molten mass and willed it into a new shape. With a sizzle, two axes formed and solidified.

He caught the hafts in his hands, and spun the two weapons. "That's better."

"Damn, Brother, you're pretty good," Daena said.

"We don't have anymore time, and you need to be ready," Quasar said. "Allow me to equip you." She didn't wait for anyone to acquiesce. The elder commander vanished in a flash of light.

It seemed like she vanished but Bannor felt an outpouring of energy and a twist in the threads of the universe. Before he could blink he was sheathed in the heavy armor that Wren had been wearing earlier that day. As he looked around, all of them were.

He felt a pressure and found that he was wearing a helmet too. The mark VI sidearm hung in its belt at his side. Heavy-duty close quarters combat knives sat in sheaths on both of thick metal boots. The larger crossbow sized weapon hung on its strap over his shoulder. A brief check showed that all the other equipment, communicator neckband, Marna's message crystal, and skill implant were in place.

As he glanced to everyone else, they had all been outfitted the same way. Even with all the power he had now, he needed to respect the Kriar's ability to move through time and space. Somehow, Quasar had compressed time and placed all that material on them.

The others were looking down at themselves and letting out sounds of surprise. Their remarks were drowned out by a crash that shook the whole tower.

Tal grabbed one of the cylinders to catch his balance. "Damn, what was that?"

Quasar's glowing eyes were wide. "That was-- *not*--good."

Ziedra bounced up in the air then fell back down. She scowled. "Pooh. No flight sigil." She gestured toward her sleeping body and a green light lanced from her hand. A grayish image like smoke spiraled back along the beam and reached out like a tendril, etching a rune covered circle at her throat and collarbone. The spell expired with a rasp and a glow flooded around her body. She floated up off the ground. "Better." She turned in the air, light stabbing out from her eyes, hitting Bannor, Wren, Damay, Azir, and Vanidaar. Gold diamonds appeared on their foreheads.

Bannor felt his body grow light.

The assault team rushed back to balcony room. As they reached it, the tower shuddered again as something massive crashed into the shields making the whole balcony light up as the screens sparked and fizzled.

"Dark," Eclipse muttered. "What did they do, pull the batteries off one of their warships?"

"Perhaps we gave them a wee too much time to plan and regroup," Loric murmured.

They reached the chamber where Tal's gate remained in place. Through the shimmering they saw something flare star bright in the distance, then a shriek as two streaks impacted the side of the tower.

The sky was filled with flying figures holding position just out of reach of the citadel's weaponry. Obviously, the Baronians felt turnabout was a good ploy. Bring the assault team to *them*. It was going to work too, they had to disable that weapon. He didn't know anything about these artifices, but it was obvious it that it wouldn't take many more shots before the shields defending Quasar's tower went down.

"Whoa," Tal said with a shake of his head. "That's a pretty major weapon."

"It is the main gun off a Starhawk class warship," Quasar said.

"Guess it's time to explore my new limitations," Wren said. She floated up off the ground.

"What are you talking about?"

"You'll see." She flew out through Tal's gate.

Damay growled. "That child will be the death of me!" She streaked out after the blonde savant.

Bannor paused for a moment. Wren didn't think...??? "Oh-- *spit!*" He willed himself to shoot forward out through Tal's gate. He felt it pass over the surface of his body like an icy caress.

Behind him, Ziedra, Azir, Vanidaar, and Idun followed.

Wren streaked down and a black shadow gathered around her. The Baronians in Daedalus armor took a few half-hearted shots at her, but she was still well within the tower's defensive perimeter and at the extreme range of their weapons. A few bolts of energy reached her but simply dissipated harmlessly against her armor. She didn't even seem to notice it.

This could be a very short lived fight for Wren.

What had to be more than five leagues away, the horizon lit up, followed instantly by the shriek of something tearing through the atmosphere.

How Wren predicted where the shot would hit, he didn't know, but she managed to be close to where the blast passed. Contrary to his worry, she did not try to block the horrendous burst of power. Instead she seemed to divert only a small portion of the energy. Even one tenth of that massive blast was potent indeed because as she absorbed it, she deflected it back toward the Baronians in Daedalus armor waiting at the perimeter.

Some of the hovering figures managed to dodge, but others caught in the fan of energy exploded, fell into pieces, and went spinning toward the ground. With one attack she had annihilated twenty enemies, by using the Baronian's own weapon against them.

Tal had taken up station at Bannor's shoulder. "That gives me an idea!" He hissed down toward Wren who had just been joined by Damay. "Where's the next shot going to hit?"

"Uhhh, well," She squinted her eyes. "About eight paces above me."

"I want to--whoa!" He lurched down with his hands over his head as a shot streaked directly at them from the horizon. Bannor's heart leaped. Wren grabbed Tal's shoulder and pushed him behind her and held up a hand as the immense energy slammed the two of them backward.

As the power hit, the blonde savant swelled like a gust of wind filling a sagging sail. Her body easily quadrupling in size as the horrendous outpouring of energy dissipated with a roar. It also caused her to explode out of every stitch of cloth and armor she'd been wearing.

"It appears they lowered their aim a tad," she boomed. She looked down. "Ack! I feel a draft!"

Behind her Ziedra whistled. "Nice arse there!"

Wren covered her naked behind with her hands and frowned at the dark-haired savant.

Tal uncovered his head apparently surprised not to be in pain. "What the frell? What--" He leaned back as he looked up at the gigantic savant. " *Uhhh*--happened?"

"Absorbed a teeny bit too much energy." Wren shook her massive head. "No offense Marna, but I prefer using Starholme Prime for my flux matrix. With Master Prime watching over me, I have infinite energy/mass conversion. If I can't buffer an

incoming force, my density and size automatically adjust to keep me from getting blown into little pieces. Pretty wizard, huh?"

Ziedra whistled again. "I love it, how long are you going to stay that way?"

"Long enough to make those Baronians regret it." She looked down at the sword Ziedra had made that now looked like a wand in her giant hand. A tornado of sparks whirled around her fist. She whipped forward into the middle of the army of floating enemies slashing and thundering.

The armored warriors fired on her, but soon realized they were only making it worse as the now gigantic first one of forces used every iota of power directed at her. In a matter of a few moments they backed off in retreat.

The massive guns which had been firing at the tower stopped as well.

"There," Wren said, floating in the sky hands on hips. "All I had to do was get naked."

"That would scare anybody!" her brother hooted.

"At least have the decency to be embarrassed," Euriel growled.

"Like nobody could see my arse in that skin-tight stuff?"

"Yes, but now your butt is the size of a barn!" Azir laughed.

Wren scowled at him. She pinched her thumb and forefinger together. "I'm going to flick you--and it's going to *hurt*."

"We need to stay serious," Eclipse said. "Are you in any danger Wren?"

She grinned. "I'm in danger of being thumped by my mother if I don't put on some clothes." She bowed her head. "Let me see if I can fix it."

"If you coulda done that mass thing to begin with," Tal asked.

"Why didn't you just let the first shot hit you?"

"It's like this," Wren said, pressing her hands together. As she did, a blue mist swirled around her and the air turned chilly.

"You go to a merchant and buy a suit of armor. The instructions on the armor say 'arrow-proof'." She rocked her head back.

Shadows flickered on the surface of her skin and she began to shrink. As she spoke, her voice went from a ringing boom to the echoing timbre it had when she first transformed into a first one.

"Not knowing how well it works..." She sighed, opened her eyes and looked at him. "Do you jump in front of the first arrow you see to test it out?"

"Oh."

Wren turned to Quasar. "Any chance I can get another of those instant redresses? I really don't want to get thumped by my mother." She glanced at the frowning Aesir woman. Her voice dropped to a conspiratorial tone. "She hits really hard."

Quasar glanced at Marna who was eying Wren with wide eyes. It was obvious that the Kriar had known that savants turned first ones would be potent, apparently she never dreamed that one of them could possess that kind of ability.

The elder Kriar did however comply with Wren's wish, restoring her clothing. With a swirl of light and flickering of the threads of the universe Wren was dressed again in the same uniform.

Seeing a repeat of the trick just increased his respect for Quasar. Assembling all of Wren's clothing and weaponry in an eyeblink while seemingly innocuous, showed how dangerous the Kriar woman was. Despite all their powers as first ones, none of them had any defense against a time-based attack. Quasar didn't simply know about travel, she was a master with eons of experience.

"Thanks," Wren said, sliding the sword through a loop in her belt. "I'll try not to ruin these."

Loric was frowning and studying the empty landscape. "Why did they stop shooting? Surely their commanders know she couldn't

continue to block shots like that..."

"Likely they were concerned she might start shooting back," Aarlen said.

"Despite the interesting--" Vanidaar cleared his throat and looked sidelong at the glowing paragon that his daughter had become. "-- *show*. I feel somewhat slighted. Could they have given up this easily?"

"Not a chance," Algernon growled. "They're just considering their options. They want us to come to them so bad they can taste it. They know the tower gives us the advantage in a prolonged battle."

<You must respect their ingenuity,> Dulcere said. <Salvaging the weapons off one of their ships--and in such a short amount of time. They had to create a power source too.>

Damay looked over at Wren. "If there is a next time, you *should* shoot back instead of playing around."

"Ummm, like *how*? "

"What do you mean--'how'?" Damay demanded. "You just annihilated all those enemies with a redirection. You do all these other tricks, why can't you use the massed energy to launch an attack of your own?"

Wren put fists on hips. "Why?" She leaned forward. "Because my *mentor* has been on holiday! How much do you expect me to teach myself in a summer or two that I spent being chased by Hecate and locked in Hella's dungeon, hmmm?"

Damay scowled at her. "Don't be impertinent."

"I'm not impertinent." Wren folded her arms and raised her chin. "I'm indignant."

"So," Azir said with mock bewilderment. "Now, you have no dignity?"

"I am sooo going to smack you..."

Bannor was going to add a little to the levity, when he heard a crackle in his head coming from the Marna's communication crystal. ****Bannor!**** In the background he heard a crashing sound, yells and shrieking metal. ****Those dreads you warned about-- whoa!**** Bannor's heart leaped in his chest as he heard stone smash on stone through the link and he felt her gasp for breath. ****They're here! More than twenty we--**** The sound of her voice cut off...

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Chapter Eleven

Dread

I saw him and almost swallowed my tongue. It didn't help that some huge thundering beast from Hel was trying to beat me to a pulp at that precise moment...

**-- Arabella Tunespinner,
Beta Class Protectorate Enforcer**

Bannor's heart leaped to a hum in his chest. Sarai was in danger and he needed to be with her-- *now*.

"Kul'Amaron is under attack by dozens of dreads," he yelled in the giant voice that his body now possessed. "I'm going..."

Sarai's need always inspired him. She was a universe away, but that wouldn't stop him from protecting her. He dove into his nola sense, and willed himself to be where he should be.

The universe seemed to froth around him. The lush green scenery of Quasar's demesnes vanished into a sea of black, stars

rushed around him, and in flare of white light he was braced in a stone corridor with a dreadnaught roaring in his face.

A gold fist the size of a catapult shell whistled toward his nose, giving him only an eyeblink to will himself into battle form.

Power gathered in his chest and static raced down his arms and legs, bubbling flesh becoming shiny alloy in a heartbeat.

The impact smashed him back a step almost causing him to crush two figures crouched behind him. Sarai was on her haunches against the wall, a bruise already swelling on her cheek, hands braced against the rock surface and glowing violet eyes wide. Marna's blue communication crystal glinted on the floor by her. In front of her, driven to one knee, a bloodied and battered Senalloy looked up in surprise.

Instead of being painful, the dreadnaught's vicious assault made him angry. The sight of his love lying injured and terrified on the floor, made his vision go red. His heart, already pounding, became a thunder in his ears. A white-hot ache he had rarely experienced shot through him in single-minded desire to destroy.

The dread's next punch came only fractions of an instant after the first, but with a growing rage swelling in his chest Bannor met it like a battering ram, turning the hard part of his skull against it, so that it deflected off with a mace-on-shield metallic clang.

"You--" He swung back with all his mass and strength. "*Bastard!*" Hand shrieking with velocity, his knuckles struck the bridge of the Baronian dreadnought's nose straight on. The thrashing creature, so confident of its invulnerability didn't even try to dodge. The thing's face crumpled like cheap leaf armor pounded with a sledge. Stone shuddered and air gusted from the sonic impact as the monster's momentum reversed explosively. Only ten paces away, the stone corridor turned. Down in the basements like here, the walls were iron-reinforced granite several paces thick. The creature cratered the solid buttress with a blow that made the entire structure around them shake.

The beast slumped out of the indentation and fell face down on the floor. It didn't move. Instead, its body smoked and disintegrated into a grisly reddish slime that spread across the floor with a disgusting gurgle.

Breathing hard, Bannor stared at it. Damn. One shot. He looked down at his gauntleted fist and flexed his fingers. Lords that had felt *good*. That hit had been for every creature over the last few months that had beat him down. He had gotten so *damned* tired of being slammed about like a priss.

<Bannor, are you okay?> Daena called in his mind.

<Yeah, but I'm a little busy.>

He felt a tingle, the young savant looking out through his eyes.

<Whoa, did you kill one?>

<Yes,> Bannor growled. <He hacked me off. He hurt Sarai.>

<Is she okay? Janai was screamin' something in my ear about her running off...???>

<I got her.> Echoes of combat continued to resound through the halls. Steel clashed and beasts roared. He sensed more of the Baronian monstrosities, a *lot* more. A cold sensation shot through him. <There's dreads all over the place. I think since they couldn't pull us from the tower, they're trying to split us up.>

<Acknowledged. Are you going to teach me how you teleported there?>

<Maybe. I'm going to do what I can here. Tell them I recommend keeping the rest of the team there. They're trying to reduce the tower defenses so they can break through.>

<Understood. Be careful.>

<I will.>

He sighed and willed himself back into normal flesh. With a sizzling sound, his body crackled and shimmered, metal-hard tissue becoming normal skin again.

He turned to face Senalloy and Sarai. "Are you two okay? Star, are you hurt?"

Senalloy's head tilted to one side and she blinked. "Bannor?"

He nodded and helped the silver-haired Baronian up to stand. The woman drew a breath.

He knelt down to Sarai.

She stared at him. "My One?"

He reached out and touched the bruise on her cheek, willing the flesh to heal. A tickling feathery sensation played down his arm and a warmth filled his hand. The discoloration faded to the normal milky-tan color of her skin. He dropped his hand to her abdomen, extending his senses to tiny Vhina. The life force of their unborn seemed strong.

"Vhina's okay." Letting out a breath and picked up the blue communication crystal and put it in her hand. "When that went dead it scared the *spit* out of me."

Sarai looked down at it, then back up at him as if unable to believe he was really there.

"Bannor--is that *you*? "

"It's me," he looked down at himself. "Big change, huh?"

"It's you though," she said. " *More*you, the you I've always seen in my heart."

He rolled his eyes. "Yes, I love you too." He took the crystal, which was forgotten in her fingers, and placed it behind her ear.

She touched the spot and blinked up at him. Was his appearance so stunning? Was he that ugly?

He gathered her up in his arms. She didn't seem to weigh anything. She put her arms around his neck. "All right, let's get you back to the vault."

Bannor listened to the sounds, and sensed where Janai and Ryelle were. He turned to Senalloy. "Is it safe to teleport now?"

The elder shook her head. "The attackers have teleporting monitored. We'd go right into one of their traps."

"Dammit," he growled. "All right, let's hoof it."

He leaned into a trot, heading toward where Sarai's two sisters were being kept. Senalloy followed him. "Sarai, if you give Sen a hard time again, I will be very cross with you. If I have to promise to stay safe, you have to do the same."

"I didn't give her a hard time!"

"You left the vault, and she had to rescue you. That's trouble in my thinking."

"Mother and Father need help."

"I'll help them. This time you're going to stay there until it's safe."

She smacked his shoulder. He didn't even feel it. "Keep me with you damn it!"

He frowned at her. "No. Not this time. These things are too dangerous."

"Bannor, aren't you even going to explain?"

"Explain what?"

She smacked his shoulder again. "What happened to you? How did you get here?" She glanced back down the hall. "How did you kill that thing?"

"Uh, this is my first one body," he said with a shrug. "We needed them to fight the dreads." He tilted his head. "As to how, he made me mad and I hit him really hard."

She studied his face with wide violet eyes. "You know I can walk."

"While I'm holding onto you nothing is going to bother you--at least not if I have anything to say about it."

She put her head on his shoulder. "You do feel good. Warm--even through all that armor."

Down a flight of stairs, and through several heavy steel and mithril doors that Senalloy locked behind them, they arrived at the safe vault where Senalloy had originally brought Sarai. The elder knocked in a pattern and they heard a bolt clanked back. Senalloy opened the massive door. Ryelle and Janai stood on the other side obviously agitated and concerned.

Bannor waded through the flood of questions and exclamations and set Sarai down. He wrapped his arms around her and gave her a hug. "Now, *stay*. "

He turned to Ryelle and Janai. "Sit on her if you have to."

Ryelle blinked amber eyes at him. "Brother?"

Janai openly stared at him. " *Jihkalla*." (Beautiful.)

The structure shuddered, then a tumbling crash that was the unmistakable sound of something heavy tumbling down stairs. One of the huge vault doors they locked behind them by the sound.

He swung his senses to the passages above them. More dreads. Why? There was nothing here except the vault.

"Damn," he said. "Could they be targeting Sarai directly to get to me?"

The booming came again, another door being battered down.

The silver-haired Baronian listened to the sound and frowned. "You gave Voldrax your name, it wouldn't take much to find out what she is to you."

"Just frelling great, there's like five dreads coming." He looked at Senalloy. "Can you do much against these things?"

She shrugged and pulled out the clear crystalline sword. "I have something that cuts them."

"Good." He turned to the three sisters. He stepped up and put his hands on the shoulders of Janai and Ryelle. "I'm going to try to deal with this, then get upstairs to help your parents."

The normally impassive Ryelle brushed back her pale hair, let out little cry and gave him a hug. "Thank you, Brother."

" *Kala*," Janai said, also giving him a hug.

He took Sarai by the shoulders and kissed her. Body trembling, she kissed him back. He pushed away. "I have a plan. Do-- *not* --go out there. Remember the boom at Brondheim?"

Sarai eyes went wide. So, did Janai's.

He pointed to the door that was half a pace of reinforced and magicked mithril. "That will hold. It won't protect you if it's open. Get it?"

The three of them nodded with scared expressions. The crash of doors was getting close.

"We have to go. I'll be back as soon as I can."

He gave Sarai a meaningful look then turned away. He stepped into the hall and pulled it shut behind Senalloy.

Bannor paused and looked back at the door. Sarai had seemed different. He shook his head. She probably was simply not used to how he appeared.

He focused on the hall. It wouldn't take the dreads long now.

He willed himself into battle-form feeling the mass harden around his limbs in a crackle of static. Those bastards would not get past him.

"Shield yourself with your strongest protection, I'm going to try and scramble them up. If it works, you should have plenty of opportunities to work them."

The silver-haired Baronian went through the cadences of a complicated spell as the thundering and bashing of the dreads came closer. The incantation ended with a clap and a hemisphere of green energy surrounded her. He examined it in his nola sight. Potent magic indeed, it should hold up to what he planned.

The dreads came around the corner thundering like a pack of rhinotaurs. Prepared for their threads to be armored, he pushed through the resistance with the immortal strength of his new body and grabbed hold of the first two creatures. As he pinched down, he felt the dozens of mages at ends of those cords of magic--they were all about to get a very large headache. Like he had done with Tyr and Vidar at the foot of Brondheim peak he tangled the creatures threads of power around each other then planted himself. He didn't have Wren and Daena to provide the impetus this time. So, he would do it himself.

"Brace yourself!" he yelled. He set, calling even more mass and potential into himself, visualizing his need, making clear in his will what he needed to do. The stone underfoot cracked, then cratered as he willed his body to diamond hardness.

One thing about the dreads, for all their horrific powers of melee, they were tremendously predictable. They had one goal in mind, and that was to smash him to a pulp. Full headlong charge, mattock-sized hands spread and ready to crush.

He pushed off, driving forward and focusing all his will and strength through the beast. He aimed at the broadest portion of the chest and thundered his fist home.

The mystic protections around the charging behemoth shrieked

under the strain. The golden skin crumpled inward under the titanic thrust and burst. At the same time, the momentum and inertia smashed the creature back at hurricane speed.

Threads tangled and mashed down.

He did not however get the desired effect. Apparently, the threads of the aliens were not like those of the pantheon lords. The same kinds of threads that annihilated Tyr and Vidar because of their strength--snapped.

While the attack failed to cause the explosion he hoped for, he did disrupt their charge as the lead creature became an invulnerable battering ram, scattering the others like a boulder catapulted into a grove of saplings.

"Dammit!" He charged forward, whipping his axes from their sheaths, and pounded one of the toppled creatures.

Powered by the mass and strength of first one's battle form, the mystic metal cut the gold armor. The creature howled in pain as he ripped huge gashes in its torso. The beast pounded back with incredible strength that he felt even through battleshape.

Two more of the creatures leaped on him, slamming and battering. Damn, those hits *hurt*. Nerves buried in a thumb-length of solid alloy and he could *still* feel those strikes.

He focused on one. Fighting the thing was like chopping down an ironwood tree, chipping away a little at a time, the thing would just *not* die! Meanwhile, the other two hammered him with strikes. He simply couldn't do much to block or dodge. With his mass increased to this level, he couldn't move fast enough. If he decreased his density even a little, they'd make divots in him like lance hits on a jousting dummy.

One of the creatures froze in mid-swing as Senalloy's clear crystalline sword sprouted from its forehead. The silver-haired woman leaped back as the monster thrashed and bucked on the floor in frenetic spasms of death.

Bannor landed another massive strike upside the creature's neck

and yanked it back. Riddled with cuts like a ten summer old butcher block, the creature finally succumbed and collapsed to the floor.

He staggered as the last creature redoubled its efforts to pummel him to death. He saw Senalloy swaying back and forth trying to get an opening to land a single killing strike. Anything other than a perfect attack would put her within reach of one of those devastating hits.

Bannor threw down his axes and caught one of the creature's massive arms as it crashed down on his shoulder. As it tried to pull away, he twisted its wrist and brought his free hand down on its elbow with all his tons of weight.

The creature's arm made a metallic shrieking sound, and somewhere deep in its flesh, iron-hard bone snapped. The monster let out a deafening roar of pain and reeled away.

Its bellow became a gasp as Senalloy's sword plunged up through its brain, and its body began to twitch and thrash spastically. The woman yanked the blade free and stepped back.

Bannor dropped to his knees with a gasp. "Fff--" He panted. "Fff--" He shook his head trying to get enough air and after a few more tries got it. "Frell."

Senalloy wiped the blood from her sword, sheathed it, and leaned against the wall. She glanced at the corpses that were beginning to smoke. "We lived. Amazing."

"Th-thanks," he gasped out.

"I'm guessing you didn't get quite what you wanted?"

He shook his head.

She nudged one of the corpses. "Whatever it was, it killed those first two pretty well."

With a huff, Bannor pushed himself to his feet, and relaxed the battle-form reducing his mass by increments, and finally letting

his flesh return to normal.

"Oh, argh," he groaned. Wincing, he rubbed his chest and shoulders. His body burned. "Damn, feel like butcher has been pounding on me with a meat tenderizer."

He turned to the vault door and knocked on it.

The bolt was pulled back and he and Senalloy opened it.

The three sisters looked out in the hall with wide eyes.

"You did it," Sarai breathed, hands pressed to her cheeks.

"Barely," he said, giving her a hug. He ground his teeth together even that little pressure stung. Ow. It hurt.

"Are you okay?" Sarai asked.

He blinked away the tears. "It'll heal. Okay, going for your parents now. Ryelle, can you tell Kalindinai we're coming?"

The eldest princess nodded. "She just checked with me, they're barricaded on the third level, you better hurry."

He drew a breath. "On our way."

He kissed Sarai again on the cheek.

They stepped through the door and sealed it again. He looked at the small pond of crimson slime where the creatures had been. "Do you have a way that will keep them out of here while we go elsewhere?"

"Not for very long, but a while," Senalloy said.

"Something is better than nothing."

"Agreed." They stepped back and the Baronian war-mage went through the complex cadences of a spell that covered the hall in a shimmering orange mist. The interplay of magic and forces was odd. To his senses it appeared like a powerful barrier.

"Can you fly?" he asked her.

"Sure." She chanted another spell and lifted off the ground.

He concentrated and lifted off in a hiss of mist around his arms and legs. "We can make better time."

"On your tail," she said with a nod.

They headed up the hall back the way they came. As they moved, he began to feel better. Apparently this first one body healed fast. He noticed Senalloy's cuts and bruises from earlier had already vanished. They made good time, flying up the stairs and over the debris from the doors smashed by the forced entry of the dreads.

"Do you suppose Corim is okay?" he called back to her.

"I can feel he's a little beat up, but otherwise doing fine," she responded. "I would know if he were in real danger."

"Aren't you concerned? I thought you liked him."

"Actually, I love the handsome lug," she corrected with a sigh. She shook her head as if disappointed by her own feelings. "He's too fast for those brutes to do much to him. He is exceptional with a shaladen."

In the upper hall the sounds of battle grew audible again. He recognized the battle cries of valkyries and something surprising--the roar of dragons. That sounded like Tymoril! He heard an answering rumble. That was definitely Kegari. In dragon shape, inside the castle? Where was there enough space?

He and Senalloy found out. In the main audience hall, the roof arched to a point some twenty paces high, and the chamber width sufficient so that not one but both dragons could stand shoulder to shoulder. The massive draconians hissed and rumbled, their scales flickering in the dark red of rage. The valkyries must have fed them an entire bushel of Idun's fruit because the auras of the creatures burned like a forest fire.

The Baronian dreads in their single-mindedness were trying to kill the giant reptiles, but having consumed so much of the fruit either of dragons probably weighed a thousand tons, their already steel-hard scales enhanced to the point they were like foot thick reinforced alloy.

Ten of the golden juggernauts flailed away at the dragons. The reddish slime from at least five slain dreads already occupied house-sized craters in the granite floor.

The two dragons worked together and used their mass, keeping their wings and everything remotely vulnerable squeezed tight to their bodies. Whips of their tails and swats of their claws sent creatures flying.

Tymoril stomped on a dreadnought, pinning its legs and bellowed to her partner. Kegari whipped around fifteen paces of tail like a lash that cracked with speed and brought it whistling down on the struggling gold-skinned monster.

Bannor winced as twenty tons of magically enhanced dragon armor mashed down at ten times the speed of a galloping horse. Granite exploded and the shock blew he and Senalloy back several paces. In the crater, the monster continued to struggle. It had survived! Stunned, the creation's resistance was feeble and only grew more so as the two gigantic ophidians repeatedly struck the tough nut until its golden shell cracked. When it gave, the creature made a squish audible a thousand paces away.

"Bleah!" He grimaced. "They have things well in hand."

"No way can one small objective be worth this," Senalloy said with a shake of her head. "They lose nearly a hundred elites every time one of these dreads dies. The backlash from such a coven binding is fatal. Eons of experience destroyed in a heartbeat. They can't be replaced. It's *insane* ."

Bannor lead the way, rising up near the ceiling where they wouldn't accidentally get caught in the melee. As he looked at the bellowing dreads struggling to make some impression on dragons, he, like Senalloy, had to wonder why. Why keep

fighting when it seemed fairly obvious that they could never defeat the dragons in a purely physical confrontation? The dreads were obviously a tool for intimidation and demoralization. Perhaps they were a flawed weapon that was being used in the absence of a better one. If so, it was lack-wit solution, because of the resources it cost. Perhaps the Baronians had become so jaded and confident in their ability to destroy the Kriar that they simply didn't think the defenses of Kul'Amaron could kill them. Perhaps that explained their absence from the second attack on Homeworld.

Part way across the room, Tymoril looked up at them and let out a bugle of challenge. Ignoring the enemies at her feet, she drew back, the spikes on her back turned crimson with heat.

"Whoa, Tymoril, it's me--Bannor! Easy! We're just going to help Kalandinai and the King!"

The dragon bit down on the blast of fire she was going to release. A dread leaped up and slammed a hit into her chest. The dragon clawed the golden creature down and swatted it aside. The fins on her head bent forward and the dragon made a rumbling murmur. Her scales turned from red to a rainbow of shimmering hues. She made irritated swipes with her claws, tail, and feet to clear the attackers from around her so she could look up at him. Kegari murmured and stared with golden eyes the size of war shields.

"Girls, you're doing an amazing job--just beautiful!"

Kegari made a murmuring sound. He understood the question.

"I'm fine--yes, I know I'm different."

Tymoril turned her head and raised her head to sniff. She made a rumbling. She blinked her eyes and flicked her head fins. Two more dreads continued their assault and she slammed them away.

"I'm glad I smell good," he told her. "We'll talk after, all right?"

Both dragons nodded and focused back on dispatching the

persistent dreadnoughts.

"Are those reptiles in *love* with you?" Senalloy asked in an incredulous voice. "I've never seen such mooning in all my life."

He coughed. "It's a long story."

"I bet," The Baronian chuckled. "I'll get through this fight just so I can hear it."

They ducked down and up a passage heading to the second level. There they found dozens of dead Baronian regulars, and here and there the damage from of pitched battle with elites. They came across the remains of two more slain dreads.

He found himself impressed and thanked his luck for having warned the citadel before the powerful weapon was used on them. Apparently, the planning staff had come up with a way to deal with the creatures. As they topped the stairs heading into the second level he saw part of the reasons for the defender's successes. Teams of four to six members, one Kriar, one Baronian elite, and two or three valkyrie. That gave each team a time savvy elder with eons of battle experience, an expert in Baronian tactics, and the wild immortal power of Aesir war maidens. Well, thought out, and obviously well executed. They saw some valkyries tending each other's wounds. When facing such foes, it was impossible to escape totally unscathed. A group of defenders challenged them.

"Ho there," a valkyrie yelled pointing a flaming sword at them.

Bannor stopped and floated down to the floor. Senalloy set down next to them.

A huge lanky woman with brilliant red hair swayed forward. She couldn't be anything other than a Baronian. "Sen, is that you?"

She pushed a hand through her silver hair and nodded.

"Damn, Girl, you look like hades,"

"Dread got the drop on me," Senalloy said. "I was trying to

protect the princess." She looked around. "What's the situation?"

The Baronian glanced to her Kriar counterpart.

The gold skinned warrior checked something on his wrist. <There are currently about a hundred intruders scattered through the complex. We funneled their shock troop into the draconians and took a lot of momentum out of their attack. Four teams are here on the second level in a holding action in case they try to reinforce. We have five teams upstairs trying to flank and destroy the remaining assault. The intruders were trying to get at the T'Evagdurans so we moved them to a ghost vault.>

With the Felspars, dragons, allied Baronians, and valkyries as resources to counter the attacker's magic, the Kriar commanders had come up with a great defense. With their vast experience and the insight of a couple dozen mages they must be making the Baronians pull out their hair trying to come up with some kind of gain.

The five dreads sent into the basement must have been a ploy. It might have worked too, if he hadn't been there to thwart it.

He guessed at the Kriar's rank, the skill implant gave him some vague impression of the military hierarchy. "Belkirin, we ran into five dreads in the lower vault, they were trying to get at the princesses. We put up a temporary defense, but they're alone down there."

The Kriar nodded. <I'll dispatch a team right now.> He snapped his fingers and made a coming gesture to one of the other Kriar. <Shal'kar, we have the princesses down in the safe vault, the enemy were going after them. Get a team down there and see if you can get them up with their parents in the ghost vault.>

The other Kriar thumped his hand over his heart and dipped his head. <Eh'san.> He gathered a few valkyries, and one of the allied Baronians and the whole group trotted off.

The Belkirin looked to him. <Is there anything else I can do for you Lord Starfist?>

Lord? When did he become a lord? "I'm just here to help. I'm pretty good against those dreads if you need the assistance."

<There's some tough hold-outs up there,> the Belkirin answered. <They sure could use some extra muscle to break down their resistance.>

"That I have," he said. "Who do I report to?"

<One moment,> he looked at the device on his wrist. He tapped his comm. <Tarkath, I have Lord Starfist here. I think you need to get him in a slot up there.> He paused. <Because they did something to him, my cyber is reading him as threat level forty. Yes. Affirmative. Okay I'll send him around to the north.> He looked at Bannor. <There are more than a dozen dreads supporting four full Baronian strike squads in the north audience hall. They have them contained, but haven't been able to do much with them. Report to Tarkath Chauser.>

"I'll do what I can." He floated up off the ground.

"Bannor," Senalloy said looking toward the team heading down the stairs. "I'm going back to make sure Sarai and the others actually get where they're going."

"Would you? That's great! Thank you."

She nodded and jogged off to catch up with the other group.

He focused back on the task of getting rid of the Baronian menace and headed back toward the stair that led to the third level. As he moved, he touched Marna's communication crystal and called Sarai.

"Star, can you hear me?"

She responded after a short pause. **My One, is everything okay?*

He turned a corner and proceeded down a hall, in the distance he heard more fighting and the thrum of Kriar weapons. The smell of blood was heavy in the air as he floated past the

corpses of more than a dozen Baronian regulars. This whole thing was a mess.

"I'm told your parents are safe--but I haven't seen them for myself. According to the officer I spoke with, they were moved to the ghost vault because the Baronians were targeting them specifically." He paused at a corner. The walls were blackened and scored. He found more blood and evidence of battle. The conflict sounded closer now. "There's still a lot of fighting," he continued. "They've actually started driving them back. A team is coming to take you to be with your parents. Now, this is important, don't let them in though until you know for certain Senalloy is with them. Keep her with you."

He could feel Sarai's concern. **Is there something wrong?**

"I--" He frowned and let out a breath. "It's my war instinct. There's something not quite right, I just don't know what it is yet. Be alert and call me the instant you think something is amiss."

Okay. She sighed. **I know I keep saying I love you. I guess because I don't know what else to say.**

"I love you too. You and Vhina are always in my thoughts. Okay, I need to focus now. Stay safe."

I will.

He stopped. Shields, swords, and coats of arms chattered on the walls, shuddering from the blows of super-mortal creatures being struck. Why did he suspect that something was going on? What evidence did he have? There was nothing here the Kriar wanted. Or was there? He trusted Marna, but that didn't mean there weren't subordinates working at cross-purposes. He simply didn't have enough information. The Vatraena did have rogue elements attempting to assassinate her--but she wasn't here--she was barely even an interested party. Maybe he was just getting jumpy, sensing problems where there were none.

He picked what seemed like the most direct route and drifted down the hall. Another thing occurred to him. He needed to

check in.

Bannor focused his mind and concentrated on Wren. <Wren, can you hear me?>

The blonde savant responded almost instantly. <Bannor. Whoa, we can talk even this far apart, huh?>

<Apparently.> He landed, stepped into a niche, and leaned back in the shadows. <How are things going there?>

<It's quiet,> she told him. <Strangely quiet. The Baronians seem to be all crossed up. They started to run dreads against us, we killed two and suddenly they pulled back like their hands were burned.>

<Senalloy and I killed six. I've seen evidence of about a dozen more being killed. Daena probably already told you Sarai and the others are safe.>

<Yes. So things are in hand there?>

<Not really, there's still a lot of fighting. Tell your grandmother thank you. Her preparation with Tymoril and Kegari is what really swung the battle here. The dreads didn't stand a chance against them powered up on that crazy fruit of hers.>

<I'll pass that along.> She paused. <Bannor, something's wrong. Something you're not telling me.>

Damn, she knew him well. <There's something not quite right with the Kriar. I mean they're helping. Really *helping* .>

<And, there's a problem with that?>

<Not in itself. I just have this sense that they're here to do more than fight off the Baronians.>

There was a pause. <Do what?>

<I honestly don't know. I'll tell you when I figure it out. I better get moving. Take care.>

<You too.>

He leaned out of the shadows and drifted down the hallway, glancing both ways at each intersection. Why was he being so cautious? He knew where the battle was.

He could sense the Baronians, the dreads, and the mixed teams of Kriar and valkyries. Where were the Felspars? As powerful as they were, why hadn't he seen at least some of them down in the holding action. Sarai didn't mention anything having gone wrong, or that relations broke down. Lady Cassandra was going to be a significant participant in some of the magical defenses. *Strange.*

He came to a split and a stairwell leading up. The sounds of battle were less than a stone throw away now. He started up the stairway when something grabbed him from behind.

Bannor's heart thudded and he spun in the air grabbing for his axe.

<Ally! Ally!> The huge dark-haired woman thought at him holding up her hands.

He pulled back his attack. It was one of Aarlen's silver-eyed daughters. He noticed three more figures back in the shadows of the alcove.

<In here, quick,> the same woman telepathed to him.

He allowed her to pull him down to the end where two gold girls bearing a strong resemblance to Cassandra waited with another dark-haired female who was the mirror image of the one who caught him. Two pairs of twins-- *interesting.*

<You *are* , Bannor, right?> the huge woman asked. Even in his first one shape he still had to look up at her. She and her sister towered over the gold girls who were dressed in red Kriar security uniforms.

He nodded in response.

<Sorry, to scare you like that,> she said. <I know Wren only briefly introduced us at the party. I'm Sindra.> She gestured to her dark haired double. <That's Drucilla. These are our mates.> She gestured to one of the girls. <Cassin, and the other is Annawen. We have a problem.>

A chilly hand seemed to grip his insides, and the back of his neck prickled. Obviously, they were using telepath for a reason. Though he never telepathed with non-savants, he assumed his first one adaptations and her abilities would accommodate. <A problem?> he thought to her, the same way he would a savant.

<A big one,> she answered, apparently hearing his thoughts. Hand on his shoulder she leaned toward the hallway. Then slid closer to them. <Collaborators.>

<Collaborators. Turncoat Baronians? Why is that a problem?>

<No, not Baronians-- *Kriar*.>

<Huh? No way. The Kriar are fighting and killing them, I saw it on the way up.>

<Most but not all. There's a Fabrista coup ready to happen--> She winced as though in pain. <--and we're in the middle.>

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Chapter Twelve

Coup

Strong, yes I was strong, frighteningly so. Isn't it ironic that I was almost immediately thrown into a situation where brute force wouldn't help a whit?

**-- Bannor Nalthane Starfist,
Prince Conjugal of Malan**

Coup. What in hades? Why here? It made no sense. Standing in the darkened alcove, the smell of battle thick in the air he cursed his typical luck. It was always *something*. He stared up at Aarlen's two dark-haired daughters clad in deep indigo blue. Studying them, he couldn't help but flash on Damay's remark about 'nothing subtle'. That certainly applied to Sindra and her sister Drucilla. They were big in every possible dimension while remaining jaw-droppingly attractive. Nothing born naturally looked like that. They wore bodies that must be as artificial as his own. The form-fitting carapaces they wore only made their unreal proportions more obvious. As the woman pushed a hand through her waist length hair he noticed the D'klace assassin's tattoo on her wrist. Unreal, and very, very dangerous.

He focused on the two smaller women. Except for the bright auburn hair, they looked like Kriar. From their threads and age he assumed they, like their brother Radian, were Kriar raised as humans. Dressed in red combat armor similar to his, the two girls would be impossible to tell apart without using his savant senses. While not having the obviously-synthetic beauty of the Aarlen's daughters, they were believably attractive with sleek well-trained bodies. Their threads told him that they possessed the powers of the far older Kriar he had met including the ability to see and travel through time.

Had he heard right? Their mates? He glanced between them. He must have, because he saw strong interpersonal threads woven between them. How did those youngsters get involved with these ancient killer courtesans? That was probably quite a story.

He leaned back and glanced down the corridor and up the stairs toward where he heard the sounds of battle. No one coming. He turned his attention to them, he hoped they could make this fast. The face of this standoff could change in heartbeats.

<Okay. Coup. And we do-- *what?*>He swung his gaze to gather them all in. <The only thing that matters to me is that the T'Evagdurans and their retainers stay safe.>

Cassin came forward and leaned close. <Mister Starfist, I know you don't know us, but you met our mother.>

<Cassandra.>

<Yes, I know a Kriar coup seems out of place here. It does affect this situation if you would just believe it.>

<I believe you,> he said. <Sindra and Drucilla are too experienced to buy into this if it weren't well founded.>

Cassin glanced at her sister who raised an eyebrow. Obviously, they expected more resistance.

<So, I assume it's the Daergons. What are they going to do?>

Her dark eyes widened. <You know about them?>

<They tried to assassinate Marna. They had special phalanx armor that had all the Kriar upset. Even with my powers, it's tough to see.>

Cassin hit her jeweled forehead with her fist. <You could see it? It wasn't a fluke?>

He frowned. Where were they going with this? He leaned back and checked the corridor again. This place was moderately safe, but he had creepy sense of something sneaking up on them. <No fluke. It's what I do.>

<Dark.> The Kriar girl scrubbed her hands in her auburn hair. <That must be why the Daergons are here. To get you.>

<To get *me*? >

<Oh yeah.>

<I don't get it. Why is that armor such a big deal? The Baronians have thousands of those suits.>

<Where do you think the Daergons got it?>

The revelation hit him in the forehead like a hammer. <Oh--
spit!>

<Right.>

Sindra put a hand on his shoulder. <Based on what Cassin and Annawen saw on Homeworld, we're pretty sure the Daergons are collaborating with the Baronians. From the evidence, they are planning a coup d'etat. Your capture of those spies at the way-point and being able to see through their stealth forced them to accelerate their plans.> She frowned. <Initially, they probably thought the shaladens were what defeated their stealth, but it happened again at the party. The loss of their commander was probably the biggest surprise. They want him back so bad not because he'll out their location-->

<--but because he'll out the coup and the collaboration,> Bannor finished, shaking his head. <And Quasar doesn't know about it because she hasn't been asking the right questions.>

<So,> Cassin continued. <To unseat Marna they have to defeat the Shael Dal and Felspars--and now you and the other savants that have become allied with them.>

<So, the attack on the way-point...?>

<We guess now that the search for the genemar was just a cover.>

<No, they really are after it, I sensed that.>

She raised her chin. <That might be so, but I think their primary objective was to kill the warriors loyal to Marna. I think in return for the Baronian's help in the coup, the Daergons have promised to help them find the genemar.> She paused and her voice dropped. <They may even have it already and are using it like a carrot.>

The thought made his whole body go icy. <That's crazy.>

<You get used to that when dealing with them.>

He rubbed his fist against the bridge of his nose. The battle continued to pound in the hall. Those dreads weren't going anywhere, not if they didn't want to. <Okay, so you got me, what should we do?>

<Like I said, the pressure here is really about getting to you. If they get the T'Evagdurans, you can be pressured into not assisting the Kriar or the Shael Dal. They really only need to capture one family member, but I'm guessing they'll go for all of them so they have a few extra bodies to prove their commitment to doing something barbaric.>

<Frell,> he growled. <They were probably holding off because Senalloy took the princesses to the lower vault. I just sent a bloody team to retrieve them! They're supposed to put them altogether in the ghost vault.>

<The instant they open that vault they'll take the whole lot,> Sindra said. <We have to get up there.>

<We can't fight blooded Daergon time masters, we'll get slaughtered,> Cassin told them with wide eyes.

Sindra stared at Bannor with silver eyes. <We have him now. Right?>

He drew a deep breath and smashed his fist into his palm. <Right.>

<Let's go, back this way.> Sindra gestured and a bluish glow flared around her limbs. She lifted off the ground in a hiss of air and shot off down the corridor.

Bannor followed, noting that Drucilla and the gold twins were right behind them.

<I was worried we'd have to ferret out the Daergon moles,> Sindra thought to him as they flew. <They have to jump at this. They won't have a better shot at it. Cassandra strengthened the shields around the ghost vault so that they are proof against time diving and Kriar warp science.>

The five of them hissed around several corners and up a stairwell to come at the third level from a different direction.

They turned a corner and Sindra came to a stop so suddenly that Bannor ended up wrapped around her from behind.

A figure filled the passage ahead, the torchlight glinting off gold metallic skin.

"Ahhh *spit* ," Sindra let out backing up.

Bannor grabbed the huge woman's shoulders, and swung her behind him. He dropped as the monster charged with a roar. He snatched up the beast's threads and snapped them as though he was whipping the kinks out of a boat hawser.

The behemoth flipped up into the air, crashed into the ceiling then smashed down to the floor. Eternity's energies crackled around him as he willed himself into battleshape, the strength of the stars filling his body. The stone underfoot crunched.

The juggernaut regained its feet and rushed but he was already prepared, bringing both of the mystically fortified axes home into the creature's head with a crash.

He kicked the monster back as it thrashed and spewed blood on the corridor floor. It would not be getting back up.

Bannor flicked the blood off his axes and sheathed them. He drew and breath and shimmered back to his normal flesh then turned back to Sindra. "Proceed?"

Aarlen's dark-haired daughter stared at him starry-eyed. "Oh--my-- *lord*," she breathed and glanced back at her sister. The woman vibrated as she spoke, her deep voice going up a full octave. "Bannor, you are my new hero. That was-- *amazing*."

"Sindra," Cassin said. "Calm down. We knew he kicked arse. Next you'll be offering to have his children."

The elder laced her fingers at her mouth blinked at him with enticing silver eyes. "Can I?"

He snorted. "Lady Sindra--rescue-- *remember?*"

"Right!" She nodded like she was addlebrained. "Right! *Rescue.*" She hovered off the ground and leaned forward to start out again.

"Wait." He held out a hand to forestall her.

She stopped and looked at him.

"You're good at this telepathy stuff, could you get me in contact with Senalloy?"

The big woman smiled. "Absolutely, but I have to touch you."

He sighed. "Go ahead."

She came over and put a hand on his shoulder. He felt a tickle in his mind as the elder's psyche brushed up against his. She sent a thought clear and crystal hard. Bannor heard it in his own head the way he might hear someone call across a street.
<Senalloy, please respond.>

Bannor felt a burst of confusion.

<Who?> Senalloy responded.

<This is Sindra Frielos, I am in rapport with Bannor who has urgent need to communicate with you.>

<Go ahead,> Senalloy responded. <What's the matter?>

Bannor could feel Senalloy now, feel the way that Sindra had opened the telepathic channel. It really wasn't that much different than how savants communicated with one another. It appeared that savants and pantheon lords had their own private pathways that made it easier and faster. <Sen, have you picked up the sisters yet?>

He felt her immediate unease. Apparently, she'd already sensed something amiss. <Yes, we just got them and are heading up.

What's the matter?>

<There's a good chance that there are rogue Kriar collaborating with the Baronians. We think they are going to make a grab for the entire royal family the moment all of them are together when the ghost vault is opened.>

He felt Senalloy receive his words, but all he heard in response was static. <Spit,> she finally responded. <You want me to stall them?>

<Yes. I have some time-divers with me, but it's iffy how well we'll do against trained Kriar prepared to do a smash-and-grab.>

<I'll delay as much as I can. I'll have my sister Luthice meet you. She has that gate staff and can lock them down.>

<Great. Sen, I knew I could count on you!> He gave her a telepathic hug. <Take care of Sarai and her sisters for me.>

<I'll do my best. I'll see you upstairs.> She broke contact.

"Good thinking," Sindra said. "Now, go?"

"Fast," he said.

The four of them leaned up the corridor at good speed. He thought over his shoulder to Cassin. <Does anyone else besides Sindra and Drucilla know about this?>

<No,> she answered. <We were just telling them when you arrived.>

<Okay, we need to spread this fast without alerting the Daergons. I'd start with Aarlen through her all the Shael Dal can find out. I'll tell the savants. Do you have secure ways of making sure your family knows?>

<Yes,>

<Good, I figure Sen will update her Baronian friends. By the

time we get up there, let's try to have everybody savvy to this. If we botch this and Daergons start diving every which way, we don't want anyone blind-sided.>

<No argument,> Cassin responded. He felt her immediately splitting her focus between flying and communicating with her family.

Telepathy certainly was a powerful tool in situations like this. It underscored to him the disparity between an elite family like the Felspars and the T'Evagdurans. The King and Queen possessed vast resources and powerful magic. However, those extra little things like the ability to freely teleport around the universe and communicate with all your peers at a whim... they took on giant significance when the family was threatened.

They zipped up some stairs passed a team of defenders, one without a Baronian escort. There being only twelve of the allied lady elites there were several teams that could not have them. For this team to be in this back hall seemed a bit odd, especially with them moving toward the vault and not in any kind of patrol formation. Bannor didn't slow to study them, and the team didn't challenge them as they flashed by. He saw that Sindra and Drucilla glanced back as well, everything even slightly out of the ordinary was suspicious now.

They were getting close to the ghost vault. He needed to do his part in the dissemination of information. He accelerated and caught up with Sindra and took hold of her belt. He relaxed his concentration on steering and let her pull him along as he focused his concentration inward. He found the links to all the other savants that he knew and their links to eternity. He concentrated on broadcasting his message directly into that central connection they would all hear it at once.

<Everyone, this is Bannor. Don't try to answer back I'm sending this to all of you. I've just been shown evidence that points to rogue Kriar collaborating with the Baronians. Spread this knowledge and take every possible precaution. I am on my way to try and stop what we think will be an attempt to capture the entire T'Evagduran family. Wish me luck.>

He signed off and focused back on flying. He had done everything he could think to do. He had taken the responsibility on himself, but he had not gambled everything on his own personal success. He blinked, realizing how much he had changed in just a short time.

Bannor felt the agitation of his brothers and sisters. They had definitely received the message. He hoped it helped. It certainly couldn't have hurt. Whatever happened now, at least he couldn't be called an idiot for keeping it to himself.

As they approached the front hall, they came across corpses of a couple dozen Baronian regulars and three elites lay in a smoking pile. A pair of bloody craters and the heavy marring of the walls indicated where the defenders had managed to bring down two dreadnaughts. Idun's valkyries had certainly come to the rescue.

The area was obviously not under control yet because they could hear the bellows of more dreadnoughts, blasts of battle magic, and the clash of swords.

Feeling the tremors of power, Bannor braced himself as they dove into the melee. Two tight halls opened into a broad vestibule that housed the outer set of doors that guarded the vault. Dreads, elites, and regulars were crammed into the space lashing out at everything that moved. It was clear from the formation that the Baronians were trying to push the defenders out of the halls leading to the vestibule. However, the narrowness of the entrances were both help and hindrance. The awesome power of the dreads could only be brought to bear one at a time.

As it happened, they were approaching from the opposite hall. The Baronians were obviously prepared for a flanking action and a dread greeted them with a bellow.

"Here we go again," Sindra said. A long black sword flickered into being in her hand. A runed staff also flared into reality, violet flames licking and sparking around its surface. Drucilla armed herself similarly and the twins came down shoulder to shoulder, black light flashing around their bodies. The two

leaped on the dreadnought, swords shrieking.

Bannor heard a familiar clack behind him. Energy blasts shrieked past him, tearing into the knot of Baronians. The bolts deflected from shielded elites, but the regulars, hemmed in by their own people could do little more than fight defensively and throw out a few offensive spells that glanced off some kind of protection the girls were employing.

Sindra and Drucilla possessed amazing speed, and whittled away at the dread in the tiny space, avoiding its grabs and hurricane force punches. Bannor knew instinctively it was simply to give him time to set himself.

He called down his battleform, feeling the energy course through him. The feel of it was beginning to be intoxicating; the sense of strength and near invincibility. He barely even needed to use his nola powers.

Bannor waded in, the stone cracking underfoot as he plowed into the monster with a punch that drove it backward out of the entry. Whipping out his axes, he pounded his way into the heart of the press. Sharp slashes of pain cut into him as three regulars leaped on him, their magic weapons tearing into the vulnerable spots between the plates of Kriar armor. They were fast, strong and far more skilled at fighting than him but there simply wasn't room for them to maneuver and it gave them no place to go when his axes came whistling around with the force of a tempest behind them.

An elite sent a spell at him, he batted away the threads of the magic diverting them in flight so they struck another Baronian who screamed and clutched his eyes. He hooked the elite's battle staff with his axe and brought his other axe across down on it, willing the weapon's edge to sever the main material ties of the enchantments around the staff.

Sindra screamed behind him. " *Hit the floor!*"

On the far side of the room, he saw the combatants diving into niches and prostrating themselves.

The staff detonated, sending flames and smoke roaring through the chamber and splashing the lesser creatures in the center of the room against the walls.

The blast roared over his body, the flames feeling like the bellows gust from a blacksmith's forge.

The elite to whom the staff belonged weathered the explosion but looked barely able to stand, his hair and clothes mostly burned away, and his body scored with cuts caused by flying debris.

The dreads staggered around as though confused waving ineffectually as if they were blind.

The room froze in tableau. He could see the defenders on the far side picking themselves up. Corim, and others he knew stared at him with wide eyes.

The Baronian war mage staggered back pulling out a sword and pointing it at Bannor. The other two elites who had withstood the blast stepped forward to guard him, their weapons ready. Their wounds wept blood, and they were blackened by burns. These guys sure were tough, any other creature would be writhing on the ground after getting hit like that.

He spun his axes and dropped them into the sheaths at his side. He drew a breath, his heart pounded. He summoned more energy, feeling the room shudder with potential that crackled and flashed on his skin. "Get off my world," he thundered, his voice echoing with the essence of a first one. "Stay away from my family. Leave in peace, or leave in pieces. Choose."

One of the dreads recovered its sight, focused on him, and lunged. Gaze locked on the Baronian commander, he caught the juggernaut's face in his left hand, gouging its eyes with his fingers. The monster howled and thrashed, clawing and pounding at Bannor's face and shoulder.

He summoned his nola power, concentrating the power of eternity in his other fist. He yanked his hand free and smashed the blow home. The gold creature's face crushed with a sound of

tearing metal as it hammered into the vestibule wall with a room shaking impact. The creature stumbled out of the cratered wall and fell to the stone floor with a mushy thud.

He focused on the commander again and leaned his head to one side. "Do I have to kill every one of you?"

The Baronian commander blinked. His gaze tracked unobtrusively to the slain dread.

One of the other elites rushed Bannor with a battle cry. He dodged out of the path of the flashing blade, but this creature was every bit as good as Senalloy, a mystic blade went hard between his ribs in a piercing shriek of pain.

The Baronian shoved the sword in to the hilt with a cry of effort. The pain made Bannor snarl. He caught the man's hand and locked it down. He backhanded the brute across the face with a crunch. The lieutenant collapsed to the floor and twitched.

Grimacing, Bannor pulled the sword out of his body. Feeling the pain, but also feeling the hardened metal of his battle form partially seal the wound.

He took the magic weapon, wrapped the power of the garmtur around it, and brought the flat of the blade down over his knee. The weapon snapped in rasp of magic.

The Baronian commander's eyes widened. The other lieutenant stared openly.

Bannor tossed the weapon shards at the man's feet. He drew a breath. "I'm losing my patience."

The commander raised his chin and narrowed his eyes. "I do not have a choice in this."

"Yes, you do," Bannor growled, boring his gaze into the man. "Fight for me."

The Baronian swayed back.

"Fight for me," he repeated. "I free you from your masters."

The commander and his lieutenant exchanged glances. He saw them look at the slain dread, and the other elite. Around him, Bannor felt the defenders holding their breath.

"You don't know what you're saying."

He cast a slow deliberate look to the smashed dreadnought then looked back at the Baronian. "Don't I?" He laced his fingers and cracked his knuckles with a clunking sound that made people in the room wince. He folded his arms.

The Baronian scowled. "We cannot join you."

He put force and anger in his voice. "Then get the *frell* out."

The commander pulled something from his belt. He glanced around the room, and all the living Baronians including the dreadnaughts, vanished in a clap of collapsing air.

Bannor stared at the spot where they'd been only instants before making sure they had truly left the area. He let out a breath, dropped to one knee and gripped his stomach. "Urgh."

"Are you okay?" Sindra asked, putting a hand on his back.

"No, I'm not frelling okay, he ran me through with a sword. Ummm." He let out a shuddering breath. "Watch for Sarai."

Sindra rose and watched the corridor and went to the entranceway to watch the corridor.

The people in the further hall filed in. He recognized Corim, Beia, and the valkyrie Kylie. They also had two valkyries of a new kind that he had never seen, instead of white feathers, their wings shined in a rainbow of different colors that changed and sparkled. He felt the presences of several shaladen weapons. Valkyries with shaladens? The huge white-haired Myrmigyne and the bearded warrior near her also held shaladens in their fists. Behind the Shael Dal were three or four Kriar warriors, both males and females among them. Any of them could be the

Baronian moles waiting to snatch the T'Evagdurans.

"Friend, that was truly awe inspiring," Corim said.

"Yeah," he grunted. "It was great right up to the part where he stuck me with the sword."

Cassin's sister Annawen came and wrapped herself around burly Corim. The man looked down at the gold girl's embracing arms and rolled his eyes. He didn't attempt to dissuade her though.

Cassin knelt by Bannor. "I can stop the bleeding, but you can't be doing--whatever that is."

"Better hurry up," Corim said. "Sen and the others are just down the hall."

Cassin unbuckled Bannor's chestplate and tossed it aside, then pulled up the skin tight Kriar cloth revealing his silvery metallic skin. "I'm ready," Cassin told him.

Yes, but was he? He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. He willed himself back to normal, the crackle of energy changing living alloy back to flesh. Pain shrieked through his abdomen, and the groan forced itself through his gritted teeth. "Rrrrgh."

Cassin pressed her palms over the wound that had immediately began pumping blood. She closed her eyes and white illumination flooded down her arms. Heat pressed into Bannor's abdomen and the fierce pain lessened.

The girl rocked her head back. The power in her hands swept through him touching organs and vital nerves, and the intense discomfort lessened to a manageable level.

She blew out a breath. "There. That's the worst of it. You should get a regular healer to work on you. There's still some deep tissue damage."

He patted her on the shoulder. "Th-thanks. Ow." He pulled down the cloth and refastened the chest plate.

"They're coming," Sindra from the doorway.

He pushed himself to his feet. He had to hope the quick healing of this body would hold him together.

<I have you in sight,> Senalloy's thought impinged in his mind. <I delayed them as much as possible.>

<I cleared away as many distractions as I could,> he returned, meeting her eyes down the hall. He could see the tall silver-haired Baronian looming over Ryelle at the back of a small procession.

Two Kriar, and three valkyries lead the group ahead of Sarai and Janai. The sisters were looking around uneasily. He hadn't told Sarai about the threat because he didn't want any of the princesses to accidentally give away the trap. Where was Senalloy's sister Luthice? Wasn't she supposed to be here to lock down any attackers?

He didn't have time to wonder. He reached out and wrapped threads of the garmtur around Sarai and the others, so if they somehow did get hijacked under their noses, he could follow.

People braced and readied for action as the outer vault doors were unbolted and opened. Inside the antechamber, two valkyries waited with their backs braced against the huge black doors with gold scrollwork that served as the portal into the ghost vault. Ryelle moved forward and performed the unsealing ritual to unlock the massive valves.

Bannor tensed, keeping his thread awareness sharp. Searching for anything amiss that might give him advanced warning of where the attack might come from.

Ryelle stepped back to let the two valkyries pull open the doors.

He readied himself. He saw the Beia and Corim draw their breath, as did Kylie and the others who apparently knew what might happen.

The doors unsealed with a thrum and air gusted.

Bannor stared inside the sizeable chamber and slammed his fist against his forehead. "Ah *spit!* They're already gone!"

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Chapter Thirteen

Subterfuge

Wren once joked that she overheard a conversation where they were blaming me for the sky being blue. I do get a great number of fingers pointed at me, and I am usually the first person suspected when something unexplained happens. You get that reputation when you routinely make the seemingly impossible, possible by being clever and creative. Whenever they want a sneaky solution, I'm the one they come to...

**-- Dorian Degaba Istarvariku,
Archmage of Isis**

"No! Damn it!" Bannor growled pounding his fist against the wall. His heart beat hard, and his lungs felt too large for his chest. The very nightmare he was trying to avert had happened. He searched frantically for some material evidence to indicate how they might have been removed from the interdimensional confines of the vault. He saw nothing. The magicks that had been erected around the enclosure were extremely powerful and seemed in no way porous. "How can they be gone?"

"I--don't-- *know*," Senalloy breathed, looking lost. "I escorted them in there myself! I closed the door." She stared at the valkyries who had been guarding the door. "Has anyone been in here?"

The Chosen shook their heads. They looked bewildered as well.

The bigger Valkyrie, a broad-shouldered female with thick black hair stared inside the vault with a hand on her hip and leaned on the huge war-spear she carried. She looked back to Senalloy. "We haven't moved since Millicent stationed us here."

Sarai pushed around the guards and grabbed Bannor's shoulder. "Can you see anything?"

"I don't see *anything* ," he murmured. "I don't know how they did it. There's nothing, no residue, no trace threads--it's like they were-- *never*--there."

Sarai turned to her sister Ryelle. "Rye, can you reach mother on the bloodstone?"

Pale haired Ryelle put her hand on the jeweled band on her arm. She closed her eyes and concentrated. "I don't feel her at all."

Blonde Kylie, the valkyrie that fought at his side for much of his adventures in Gladshiem, came up. She touched Janai on the shoulder, then Sarai. "Zere is nothing?" she asked.

"Either, she isn't answering. Can't answer, or is simply too far away." Ryelle shook her head. "Bannor, when you brought Sarai back to the lower vault, I called Mother and she answered. She told me everything was all right. Not that much time has passed."

That didn't make Bannor feel any better. He looked again at the vault and felt the door. It looked solid. The magic was exceptionally well constructed and balanced. It would withstand a tremendous amount of punishment without giving. "This thing is solid, nobody could get in there."

"I *assure* you," Senalloy growled, gripping her silver hair. "I watched them step in. I put a hand on Kalindinai's back--she was solid. I closed and locked that door *myself* ."

"Perhaps it is some new kind of magic," Corim surmised, rubbing the back of his neck. He pushed away from clinging Annawen gently and rubbed Senalloy's shoulder. "Sen, go easy, it's not your fault."

"Yes, it *is* ," Senalloy snarled, hitting her forehead with her fist. "I'm the bloody chief of security. What did I miss?" She looked around the chamber and checked the outer doors. "And where's my sister? She was supposed to be here."

Something didn't add up. The Baronians were fighting their tails off to hold the vestibule. If the King and Queen had already been snatched, why would they do that? To serve as a distraction? To delay the discovery of them being missing? The main goal had been accomplished, why waste further troops? The only thing that made sense is that they were holding out to get the princesses. Even if that were the reason, why didn't they strike when they were en-route? To wait until they were surrounded by a host of Shael Dal, Valkyries, and allied Kriar was stupid. What was he missing?

"We obviously can't put the princesses in there now," Sindra said. "We have to assume it's compromised."

"T'Gor, Damrosil," Corim called gesturing to two other warriors in the back of the group. "If you'd both each take a princess please."

Bannor glanced toward them. The one, that must be Damrosil, was a sky-scraping Myrmigyne with braided ankle-length white hair, dressed in a blue felt jungle tunic similar to what Beia wore. She stepped up to Ryelle and offered her arm. The princess frowned but took Damrosil's elbow.

T'Gor was dark with a heavy beard, and a lanky body. He carried his huge two-handed Shaladen resting on his shoulder. His sleeveless tunic showed off the wiry strength of his arms replete with more than a dozen campaign tattoos. He offered his hand to Janai who took it.

"Being in physical contact with the Shael Dal will prevent any teleport or time tricks while we figure this out," Corim explained. He looked around. "Where should we go?"

He shook his head, bewildered. Somehow, the enemy had been one jump ahead. He would have sworn they moved on the

intelligence with extreme speed. Cassin and Sindra's whole explanation had taken place with telepathy, it *might* have taken a few fractions of a breath. He just didn't see enough time passing. Of course, to a skilled time diver one instant or an eternity were pretty much the same. He'd seen ample evidence of that with Quasar's trick with the assembling their armor on Homeworld.

"Zo, Bannor," Kylie said. "Zis new you, is it Lady Idun's doing?"

Bannor looked up. "No, it's Kriar magic."

The valkyrie's brow furrowed and she glanced to some of the Kriar who were standing back and observing. "Zhey have some impressive tricks," she said with a nod. Her wings fluttered and she patted him on the arm. "It is not your fault either. We will get zem back."

"How, dammit?" He scrubbed his face. "I don't even know how they were taken. Ryelle, narrow it down, how long ago was it you spoke to your mother?"

The eldest princess blinked with amber eyes. She flicked a stray strand of pale hair out of her face. "It can't be even as much as a quarter bell ago. Less I'd think. Maybe half that."

He looked to Corim. "How long had you been fighting these guys?" He pointed to the vestibule.

The burly Shael Dal rubbed his throat. "Almost a quarter bell. We chased them in here. They were headed here, we tried to cut them off and keep them out, but those dreads are nearly impossible to stop."

"That's what has me tweaked. So, you guys have been out here the whole time."

"All of that time frame to be certain," Corim acknowledged.

Bannor looked to one of the Kriar who seemed to be conversing with his colleague. Again he guessed at the rank. "Kath, a moment."

The Kriar looked up, a broad-shouldered male with a hawkish features. He must have guessed the rank right. <Yes?>

"During the fight here, was there any time or warp stuff performed?"

The Kriar's brow furrowed. <I detected none.> He looked to the other Kriar with him, a slim wispy-looking female with short hair. The gold-skinned lady shook her head.

Bannor walked over and slammed the vault door so hard the room shook. "Let's find some Baronians. I want to beat the spit out of something."

"My One," Sarai said reaching out to him. "That won't help anything."

He hung his head, shoulders feeling heavy. "I know. Dammit, all this power and I *still* messed this up."

Senalloy came and thumped him on the back. "Let's head down to the second level. Maybe we can ferret out the accomplices."

The group moved back down the rear hall that Sindra and Drucilla had brought him up. Part way down the hall Bannor stopped. He looked back to the Frielos twins. "Sindra, wasn't there a group of defenders down here?"

The dark-haired woman nodded. "Yes, they were coming this way too."

"I never saw them come up," he said with a frown. He glanced to Cassin. The gold girl shook her head.

He lifted off the ground and flew a little further down the hall to where they passed that group of Kriar and valkyries. He felt around for residual threads. He sensed nothing. His brow furrowed. The magic of the Chosen was typically so strong that even passing through an area left behind some traces. The rest of the group trailed behind watching him examine the corridor.

He gestured to Kylie. "Lady Kylie, could you come here for a moment."

The valkyrie pushed off with a flap of her wings, glided over and landed next to him. She furled her wings and looked at him. "What is it?"

He backed up a few steps and gestured her forward. The valkyrie fluttered her wings and stepped forward, hand on the hilt of her sword. "Yez?"

Not only did she leave magic in the air everywhere she walked. The valkyries he had seen hadn't walked right. They didn't walk like creatures accustomed to having wings.

"Thanks, Kylie," he said patting her on the arm.

"Bannor?"

"I think the enemies are using shape changing tactics like us. I passed what I thought were three chosen in this hall with some Kriar. There's no magic here. Now that I think back... they didn't walk like the Chosen."

The blonde valkyrie's brow furrowed. "Walk?"

He leaned forward. "Kylie you are so graceful. Most of your sisters are too. Your wings are a part of you. They are part of your body language, you express with them. They aren't part of a *disguise* ."

The valkyrie colored. Her wings fluttered and she glanced back at them self-consciously. "I--" She tilted her head to one side obviously not knowing how to respond to that. "Zank you."

"They're gone now, but there may be others." He focused back toward the rest of the group. Sarai watched him with open concern, brow furrowed and violet eyes wide. She smiled for him and gave him a little finger wiggle. Something flashed on her hand. A ring.

His brow furrowed. He floated back toward them and set down

in front of her. He gazed down to the chain around her neck and the ring that hung from it.

"Bannor?" she looked up at him. For an instant, he felt a quiver of fear from her.

A cold chill went through him. Why would she be afraid unless... Talons twisted in his guts. Lords, no, it couldn't be.

He stared at the ring on her hand. He'd never seen that ring before. Sarai didn't own many pieces of jewelry, but the ones that she did were quite ornate.

"Friend, is there something wrong?" Corim asked putting a hand on his shoulder.

Bannor shrugged away from the man. "Why can't I see the aura on that ring?" he said, staring at the simple circle of gold. It was too plain, and out of place.

She looked down at the ring and drew a breath. She blinked and looked around.

Around him Bannor felt the defenders tensing.

Sarai swallowed. "Cassandra gave it to me to hide my aura. So it would be harder to find me."

Senalloy moved closer. "Bannor?"

A scalding heat burned in his stomach, a sense of terrible rage and foreboding. "Take it off."

She pushed a hand through her silvery hair. "But, I--"

"Take it *off!* " he yelled, feeling his face burn.

She fumbled with the ring, working it on her hand. "It won't--come--loose."

Scowling, Bannor, lunged forward and smacked away her hand. He pinned her arm. Sarai squeaked and tried to squirm away as

he snatched off the ring.

He grabbed her by the shoulders and dug into her with his nola. What he saw made an explosion go off inside of him. It seemed to crush out his ability to breathe.

His hands shook as he struggled with all his might simply to keep from smashing this imposter to jelly. "Now--" he paused, his voice dropped to a barely audible snarl. "You are *going* to tell me where my wife is or I *swear*-- " His voice shuddered and he gritted his teeth feeling the tears of anger and fear streak down his face. "I *swear* you will be so-- "He swallowed hard, his hands bunched up in the fabric of her blouse. "So--damn--*sorry*..."

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Chapter Fourteen

Deadly Gamble

When trying to trap a master thief every plan has a critical moment where it wavers between complete success and crashing failure...

--Luthice Wyrah Corresont, Grand Loremage of Isis

A snarl in his throat, fire behind his eyes, Bannor couldn't ever remember trembling this hard. Thoughts of his wife-to-be and child flickered through his mind like shadows. It made his chest feel as though it was being pierced by knives. Senalloy, Corim, and Kylie grabbed his shoulders to restrain him.

Bannor shrugged away their hands. He burned his gaze into the fake Sarai's violet eyes. " *Tell--me.*"

"I--" She paused. " *Sorry.*"

He was prepared for it, but even braced and ready to move, she managed to wrench free and drive her shoulder up under his chin. The move was surprising, not only from its speed, but from its strength. It caught him flat footed and knocked him off balance, her elbow crashed low in his back in a blast of pain that folded him backward with a yell.

He screamed in frustration, his angry lunge falling short as she knocked Kylie and Senalloy aside and sprinted down the hall.

"Sarai!" Janai called breaking away from T'Gor and racing after her.

"Sister!" Ryelle cried also dashing away from Damrosil.

"No!" He howled.

In that instant, he felt the universe twist as creatures of power flashed out of nothingness, dark shapes appeared in an eye blink and engulfed the three women in mid-stride.

His heart could only wrench in realization that the Daergons had been waiting for the perfect instant to strike, when Ryelle and Janai were away from their guardians.

As the figures flashed into reality a terrifying shriek cut through the hall. The sound made Bannor's blood freeze. A gigantic scythe of light slashed down the length of corridor.

The figures in dark armor, shocked back from their targets as a purplish aura pummeled them with a force that shook them side-to-side like a wolf mauling a ground rodent. They struggled and thrashed, yelling in pain. One by one, the attackers struggles grew weaker, and they collapsed to the stone floor, smoke curling up to the ceiling from their bodies.

Corim frowned and looked around. "What in hades?"

The woman who had impersonated Sarai rubbed her shoulders. "Ouch, Bannor, you have quite a grip. Damn, that was close." She bent over the armored figure that had tried to grab her and

pressed something. The close-faced helmet hissed and opened revealing a male Kriar. She removed the helmet and locked a band around his neck. She shook her head and rubbed her neck. "Too close." Her skin bubbled and her body lengthened and her hair turned blood red. Her royal battle raiment became a sparkling blue troubadour's habit.

Senalloy growled, hands on hips. "Arabella?"

"Who else but a master bard could pull off an acting job like that?" She rubbed her shoulders again. "Sorry for hitting you, Bannor, but I didn't want you to break my neck."

Ryelle rose, having similarly restrained the Kriar who attacked her. "One of these days," she said a shimmering shooting around her body. Her thin body thickened and wings swung out of her bubbling flesh revealing a statuesque valkyrie with glowing gold hair and rainbow colored wings. "One of Dorian's plans is going to flop."

"Momma Megan?" Cassin breathed. She seemed as bewildered as Senalloy.

Janai finished immobilizing her opponent. "Guess we have to bow down to her supreme sneakiness again." She looked back to the group her body flickering and growing taller. Her court robes becoming a felt jungle tunic. She tossed her blonde hair. She touched the band on her wrist which shimmered into a tiny jeweled dragon.

"Beia," Bannor growled.

"Sarai, you know your hubby-to-be kisses really good?" Arabella said massaging her shoulders.

One of the rainbow-winged valkyries Bannor had seen earlier sniffed, wings fluttering. She had silver gray hair and large green eyes. "I'll thank you to not be so proud of it. He was scared to death." She came forward. Her pale skin glinted in the torchlight. She stared at him with a love that showed through any disguise.

His eyes widened. "Sarai?"

She clasped him tight. Even through the thick armor that both of them wore, he could feel her heart beat. "I am sorry, my One. I was so scared. Once we were committed I didn't dare give it away. They told us the enemy might be watching us at any instant."

Bannor put his face next to hers. It didn't matter what she looked like. He felt the threads of the woman he loved.

"I must apologize as well," the gold-haired valkyrie who had impersonated Ryelle said. "This shell game was so we could use the princesses as bait without putting them at risk. We didn't know what tactics or weaponry the enemy might utilize when they grabbed for them."

Bannor looked around. "Where's Ryelle and Janai? What happened to Dom'Ista, and Matradomma?"

"I'm Ryelle," the other rainbow-winged valkyrie said raising her hand, and waving a large single edged blade. He realized she looked like the valkyrie--Megan--the one who impersonated her. They had switched places!

"Here," Beia's twin said. "I'm Janai. I must say, this has been a quite an experience." She held up the sword she was carrying.

Bannor blinked. He never questioned the disguise, and the Daergons wouldn't have either. "That's a *real* shaladen."

The eldest princess nodded and her body shimmered and returned to its normal shape. "I must say, it is quite satisfying to defend our sovereign territory with my own hands, and not let someone else fight for us."

"Agreed," T'Gor said. He thumped a large two-handed blade on his shoulder. His form shimmered and he took on the appearance of King T'Evagduran.

"Satisfying is a good word," Damrosil murmured. She chanted a few words and shrank down to become Kalindinai. She held the

battlesword in her fist. "I felt greatly honored to be trusted with such a weapon." She bowed toward Megan.

The rainbow winged Valkyrie bowed back. "At the trial, Koass saw into all of your hearts. He told us that any reasonable tactic would be acceptable as long as it served the goal of disarming the Baronian threat." She looked to Bannor. "This was the best defense we could provide." She shook her head. "We're so short handed that it only made sense when Dorian suggested it. Your family would be protected and could assist in the fight..."

"It's not over," Bannor said, rubbing his hand in Sarai's long gray tresses. He paused, allowing the booms and crashes deeper in the citadel to make his point. He pointed toward the origin of the sounds. "Don't we have to deal with that?"

"We do." Megan agreed. "The Felspars and the rest of the Kriar contingent have them locked down and are waiting for us. T'Gor, get those prisoners out of here before the Daergons decide to get brave."

"Ma'am," A voice echoed from behind Bannor. It sounded like King T'Evagduran, but the Elf leader was in front of him!

He turned in time to see what looked like King T'Evagduran fade in. With him was what appeared to be Queen Kalindinai.

His jaw dropped. He glanced to the real King and Queen and back to their mirror images. Even their threads seemed right. Only by extremely close scrutiny of their energies would he have not known they were not the heads of the T'Evagduran family.

Senalloy stomped her foot. "That's what happened!" She glanced back and forth between the duplicates and the real people with narrowed eyes. "How did they get out of the vault?"

"We didn't," T'Evagduran's mirror said, pulling the scepter off his side. The item transformed with a crackle into a black two-handed sword. Smoke and shadows seemed to flicker and sway around the winking edges of the evil-looking serrated blade. "Korvel is the shaladen of stealth. Fortunately, Bannor hasn't figured out how to see through this." He swung the sword

through a circle and a sheath flared into being around it. He strapped it over his shoulder. Then walked over to the fallen Daergons and began dragging them into a pile.

"We stayed until you opened the door," the Queen's double said, moving to assist her partner. "Then Bannor almost trapped us in there again when he had his little miff and slammed the door."

The images of the King and Queen worked efficiently, placing shackles on the Daergons, obviously making sure they wouldn't cause any trouble when they arrived wherever they were going. "I'd change back for you," the fake King said as he worked. "But I can't do that shape changing dross. I have to get Foross to change me back." He looked up and rubbed his hairless chin. "I'm T'Gor if you didn't guess." He rubbed his face again as if contemplating the feel of having smooth cheeks.

"And I'm Damrosil," the Queen's mirror said. "No offense Matradomma, I will be glad to stop feeling so short."

"None taken," Kalindinai said with a grin. "I felt rather like an ogre in your shape."

"Let's go," T'Gor said. He gestured to one of the Kriar. "Kath, you should go with us, otherwise the Council will scream."

The Kriar nodded. He came and stood with the two disguised shaladen warriors. The three of them vanished taking their prisoners with them.

With the Daergons vanished, Megan let out a breath, obviously relieved that they were gone. "I hope those three have some useful information." She turned to Janai and pulled Marna's blue communication crystal off her neck and handed it to the elf lady. Janai accepted it with a nod and put it back behind her ear.

"So," Cassin said coming over to Megan, taking her hand and looking up at her. "You knew about the Daergons? We just found out."

Megan ran her hand through Cassin's hair in an obviously

familiar gesture. "We didn't know for sure. Marna called Koass immediately following the attempt on her life, she suspected that the armor the Daergons were using was Karanganoi made and the same that the Baronians were using--she anticipated that if that was true--they might make a move here."

"We saw the armor and Daergon prisoners intercepted," Cassin said. "They never made it to the diagnosis team."

"Yes," Megan said. "To us, that was confirmation. So, Koass charged us with protecting Bannor's family because he's currently the only one able to see through the new stealth. When we were discussing how best to do that, Dorian pulled me aside and suggested what we did."

"I don't understand," Corim said looking at Beia, Arabella, then Megan. "Why wasn't I told?"

"If you knew, Bannor would have seen it," Beia said coming up and clapping him on the shoulder. "You reek at lying worse than you reek at cards."

The burly man turned red.

Bannor studied Sarai, his brow furrowed. "The others switched places with the Shael Dal who played them. Why aren't you Arabella?"

"She had special needs," Arabella said, rubbing a hand in her red hair. "She needed those treatments and we didn't know how long we'd have to do this. So, Foross picked a shape that could maintain the baby."

"I'm Adwena," she tilted her head. "Not actually her, it's her shape. She's Megan's sister, a Valkur air-maiden." She touched the sword on her side and looked down at it. "That shaladen is seriously kick arse."

"Star? You were fighting-- *Baronians!*"

"Only a little," she answered, trying to wheedle out of it.

Vhina! The baby. He had checked on the baby when he thought he was rescuing Sarai. He stared at Arabella. "Our baby. I saw our baby when I came to you in the hall."

Arabella nodded. "Oh yes," she let out a breath. "It's a good thing Foross is so thorough."

"She was alive. I saw it." He felt his chest tighten. "What happened when you...???"

The bard's brow furrowed. She looked down and rubbed her stomach. She blinked at him with dark eyes. "Oh my, yes, that is a--troubling--thought. I don't think Foross would actually..." She pushed a hand through her hair. She obviously was not sure.

He didn't want to think about the implications of how they had so closely simulated his wife and child. He would have to trust the eternals.

The red-haired woman came to them. "I believe this belongs to you." She pulled the communication crystal off her neck and handed it to Sarai.

Sarai took it and returned the device to its place behind her ear.

Arabella's shoulder brushed Sarai as she looked up at Bannor. "He loves you a lot." She rubbed her neck. "I had no idea how big a risk I was taking."

"I warned you he might see through it," Sarai said rubbing a hand against Bannor's chest.

Arabella snorted. She turned her head to one side. "I hope you don't mind that stolen kiss. I rather enjoyed it."

"One taste is all you get," Sarai said with a little growl.

The red-haired bard bit her lip. "Pity."

He nudged Sarai. "I'm standing here you know."

She gave him an arch look. "And?"

He frowned. Some things about Sarai would never change, regardless of whatever form she took. This Adwena she'd taken the shape of, was quite attractive and rather plentiful in her endowments. "So, how long will they be keeping the shaladens?"

"You jest," Megan said. "Seeing that display of yours. The T'Evagdurans will remain deputized until this whole thing with the Baronians is resolved."

Janai bounced. "That works for me!" She frowned. "I just wish it was a bow."

"It can be anything you wish," Megan said. She gestured and the sword in Janai's hand became a huge black shadowspar recurve.

The elf's amber eyes lit up. " *Veeg!*" She cheered.

He touched Sarai's hair. He liked the feel of it. "How long are you going to stay disguised?"

"I have to stay this way until Cassandra can make that magic device for me. I'd change to something closer to what I really look like but it has to be done by a master shape changer because I'm pregnant." She looked to Kalindinai. "Apparently, there's some risk to the baby unless it's done with particular care."

Kalindinai frowned. "That's right. You can handle having wings until Foross comes back to change you."

Sarai looked back at her wings and fluttered them. She looked up at him with deep green eyes and wiggled her eyebrows. "It's not so bad. I know you like busty shapes like this." She pressed up against him with her breasts. "This body feels great. I think it's even stronger than the one I had in Gladshiem. Together with the shaladen..." She drew another breath. "Yes." She rubbed her abdomen. "Vhina likes it much better too."

"I bet she does." He sighed. He had almost become accustomed to Sarai's changing shapes. She certainly was attracted to power.

Which, when applied to him, seemed to make no sense. When she first knew him, he was nothing--a hermit living in a cabin. He had no power except what he could hack out with his axes.

"Let us clean up the rest of this mess," Megan said.

"Lady Megan," King T'Evagduran said.

The air maiden nodded to him. "Dom'Ista?"

"That trick you did," he pointed to Janai's bow. He indicated the huge sword. "Could you?"

Megan smiled. Her wings sparkled. Bannor found himself admiring her. "Of course." She gestured and the sword became a broad, thick-limbed bow. "I apologize that I cannot accommodate arrows."

The King bowed at the waist to her. "No need for apologies." He gestured and a broad quiver of arrows appeared on his back.

"So," Kalindinai said, leaning close to Megan. "Am I understanding correctly from what I've seen, that these shaladens can become anything their user wants?"

"Within limits," the air maiden answered. "Provided you have the will to shape it."

Kalindinai raised an eyebrow. As Bannor knew, if there was anything the Queen of Malan had an abundance of--it was will power.

The Queen focused on the huge battleblade in her fist, eyes narrowing and jaw tightening. She took hold of the blade with her free hand. Blood leaked down the blade from her palm as her knuckles whitened.

With a chiming sound, sparks whirled around the blade and she seemed to stretch the weapon in her hands. Ripples shot through the surface, making the item scintillate so brightly that Bannor had to squint. The light faded and in the sword's place was a jeweled war staff. Storms and stars seemed to spin and twist in

the gems pulsating down the item's sides.

The Queen held the item up, the blood running down her arm had vanished. She smacked the butt of the shaladen on the floor with a crash that shook the hall, leaned her head back and drew a breath. "Yes." She opened her glowing amber eyes. "Now *this* is a weapon."

Megan raised an eyebrow and nodded in what was apparent admiration for Kalindinai's ability to shape the shaladen. "Matradomma," she said with a dip of her head to the Queen. "If you and Dom'Ista would care to lead, we will work together to end this incursion."

Queen bowed to Megan. She held her hand out to the King who walked over and took it. Together they stalked up the hallway like the royalty they truly were.

Bannor watched them walk away with his head tilted. "Sarai, you really do have awesome parents."

She kissed him on the cheek and hummed. "My One is *awesome* too."

As the rest of the group rallied together and followed the King and Queen, Senalloy focused a stare at each of the three sisters. "Don't think that because they gave you those shaladens you can be rousting around every which way. You will stay close where I can keep an eye on you."

"Yes, Mother," Janai said. She gestured and a quiver of black fletched arrows appeared on her back. She wiggled her fingers and an archer's glove sheathed her pull hand. A touch on her other arm created a string guard. "I'll stand right by you."

Ryelle brushed close to the big silver-haired Baronian. "I was touched to see your sincere concern for our parents."

The big woman blinked. She placed a hand carefully on the eldest princess' shoulder. "I took this post as a job, but it is so much more to me. You are beautiful people and up until recently, I have been surrounded by so much ugliness..." Her

voice trailed off.

Bannor felt a little tug in his heart seeing that Senalloy's eyes were moist. The elder had been even more concerned than she had let on.

The large team moved with speed and purpose. Now that Sarai was safe, he wondered how the group on Homeworld was doing. He imagined pretty well. While his nola power coupled with this amazing body made him strong, Wren's connection to Starholme made her into... *what?* He didn't know; something *scary* . Something the Baronians and Daergons, if they had any sense, should be very afraid of. They would probably soon realize that the intelligence they were trying to get back had already been discovered by other means.

It would be difficult for the Daergonian coup to affect the Vatraena behind the wall of Shael Dal and first ones that she currently had around her. Daena had asked Marna if she thought going into battle was reckless. The irony was that right now the safest place on Homeworld was probably *in* the battle with five of the most powerful creatures alive brutalizing anything that came near. He felt fairly certain that the crafty elder had planned it that way from the outset.

He sighed. They would be okay without him. If they needed him, Wren or Daena would call. Without the necessity to pull him, he wasn't even sure he could duplicate that feat of teleportation.

Sarai reached out and laced her fingers with his. She squeezed his hand and looked up into his face. "You know, I could get used to that gold glow in your eyes. It's *different*. "

"Gold?" He hadn't been near anything reflective. He never wondered how his eyes looked. "Well, you won't have to get used to it. I can't keep this body. It's too dangerous."

She blinked at him, those alien yet familiar green eyes peering through him. "Does it scare you--the power?"

"Power isn't scary, Star. What a person--what *I* might do with

it--that's the scary part."

"And what might you do?"

He frowned at her. "I don't know. I might go crazy or hurt someone." He let out a breath. "There's a terrible temptation and this almost out-of-control sensation..." He let his voice trail off.

"Yes," she raised her chin. "That wild on-the-verge feeling--like you might explode any moment. It's so-- *liberating*."

Liberating? How did she equate that sensation with freedom? He didn't say anything.

She brushed up against him, her wings fluttering. "Hey."

He looked down at her. "Hmmm?"

Sarai grinned and bit her lip. "Do you get this--like-- *feeling*... Sometimes, I just stand still--"

He raised an eyebrow. "--and breathe?" he finished.

Her cheeks colored and she nudged him. "Yes, I'm glad it isn't just me."

"Yes, apparently immortals can have fun with their clothes on and doing absolutely nothing at all." His brow furrowed. "The idea is both disturbing and ironic at the same time."

Sarai snorted. "Right, why couldn't Hecate have just stayed home and kept herself entertained?"

The words forced a laugh out of him. His amusement was cut short as they entered a large back hall. He guessed there had to be as many as fifty Baronians and more than a dozen dreadnoughts.

When Megan had said locked down, she had meant it. At the center of the room was a white semi-transparent sphere that sparked and flashed as angry dreads, blasting spells, and weapons smashed against it.

A circle of valkyries that included tiny Millicent, red-haired Jhord, and eight others formed a perimeter around the barrier. The winged maidens held flaming spears at the ready, and they stayed alert to places the shield seemed to weaken. The corpses of two dreadnoughts and perhaps twenty regulars lay in riddled heaps just outside the shield as evidence of their vigilance.

Ten members of the Kriar contingent stood in a rough circle behind the valkyries, red spheres of illumination surrounding their bodies, heavy weapons and blades readied. Between each Kriar binding energies intertwined, forming a confining sphere of interdimensional snarls that was no doubt preventing the intruders from teleporting out of their confinement.

Grouped into three knots of figures were the balance of family Felspar and their allies. Cassandra, stood at the center of one circle, a jeweled staff raised over her head, a flood of gold energy pouring from it into the confinement magicks. A smallish woman with sparkling ruby-red hair formed the hub of another circle. She too held up a staff contributing to the integrity of the shield. A third lady with black hair was dressed in dark violet leather and holding a red scepter was the center of the third circle. Her sharp features reminded Bannor a great deal of Dominique, the Shael Dal and mate of Marna who guarded him on Homeworld.

Tymoril and Kegari had somehow managed to get into the chamber from the lower gallery, and the two massive dragons were hunched down with their long necks and wings extended forward almost as if to provide shade for the coven groups.

"About time you got here!" Cassandra snapped. "Megan, when you said a 'little while', I wasn't thinking all bleedin' day! Elsbeth, Gabriella, are you two okay?"

"Yes," gritted the red-haired woman. Bannor noticed she was another Shael Dal, the staff had shaladen threads associated with it. Looking at her again, he realized she must not actually be a part of the family because her aura was that of an elder.

"I'm ready to end this foolishness," the dark-haired mage

muttered. "Dorian dear-- *cloth*."

Dorian who was part of the circle around Gabriella pulled out a cloth and daubed the woman's perspiring forehead.

"Spread out," King T'Evagduran said, aiming his bow.

As their group dispersed, Bannor felt the power begin to mount. Bodies tensed as Shael Dal, great elders, valkyries and Kriar, prepared to put their strength behind the already powerful assemblage.

"Lady Cassandra," King T'Evagduran said. "Can we shoot through your barrier?"

"No," the gold mage gritted.

Bannor narrowed his eyes. The barrier wasn't completely opaque. He could see places where threads could reach through.

"Ladies," he said. "Please brace yourselves."

The three mages glanced at him.

"Millicent, Jhord, get ready," he continued. "I'm going to see if I can get them to calm down in there."

"What are you...?" Sarai started.

He grabbed the physical threads of one of the pounding dreads and heaved. The huge creature slammed up against the shield causing the valkyries to reflexively jump back with yelps as the creature's face and body mashed up and flattened against the curved surface.

The three mages also jerked.

"Ow!" Cassandra gritted.

"Ack!" Elsbeth staggered but was balanced by the circle of supporters.

"Dolt!" Gabriella yelled. "Don't do that again! That *hurts!* "

"Sorry," he said, twirling his finger in the air. The already staggered and disoriented dreadnought began spinning and let out a weird confused bellow. Whirling at high speed, the nigh invulnerable creature made an effective broom, smashing aside everything inside the perimeter as he sent the monster hurtling around the circle, bouncing off and crushing anything close to the barrier. With a flick he sent the monster careening off into the Baronians gathered at the middle.

Elsbeth, Cassandra, and Gabriella visibly relaxed as the battered and disoriented Baronians stopped attacking and stared. Even the dreadnoughts paused.

"That was impressive," Sindra remarked.

<You are outmatched,> King T'Evagduran broadcast the thought through his Shaladen. <Surrender or we will slay you.>

The Baronian commanders simply shook their heads.

Kalindinai let out a breath. "That's unfortunate."

"They can't," Senalloy said. "It isn't the Baronian way."

"I know it sounds naïve," Ryelle asked, sword readied in her hands. "Isn't there some other way besides killing?"

"You heard me offer a change of allegiance," Bannor said. "They didn't go for that either."

"I understand why you did it, but you were rather lenient to let the other group go," the King said. "I do not think that option is open to us here."

"I believe I have a solution," a female said behind them. A slim black-haired woman who looked very much like Senalloy entered the room flanked by a squad of Kriar and valkyries. She carried in her hand a large staff encrusted with dark jewels. She held a large red metallic sphere in the other.

"Luthice," Senalloy growled. "Where have you been?"

The Baronian woman pointed to a bandage wrapped around and through her hair. "Getting my fractured skull mended. My brains were leaking out and it was causing me *discomfort* ." She spun the black staff.

Bannor didn't know what the intruders thought she was going to do, but whatever it was, they didn't like it. All of them went into a frenzy of activity, smashing and battering at the screen that Cassandra, Elsbeth, and Gabriella had been maintaining.

The three mages let out gasps.

Luthice sighed. She thumbed something on the side of the red sphere. Something green began blinking. She gestured with the staff and a shiny reflective disk about the size of a melon appeared in the air in front of her. At the same time another disk the same size appeared in the middle of the space enclosed by the barrier.

One of the Baronian commanders yelled and lunged for the spot but Luthice had already tossed the red ball into the gap. In the instant of leaving her hand it fell out of the duplicate disk inside the barrier and clanked to the floor.

Luthice dismissed the tiny opening with a wave of her hands as the Baronians swarmed on the object. Whatever they intended to do never happened because the room shook as the object detonated. All of the Baronians in the chamber froze, their bodies illuminated as though their bones had become flames.

A deep purple gas flooded the space with a rush. Causing all the intruders, including the dreadnoughts, to choke and cough.

"Sorry to be late to your party, Sis." Luthice said, pulling a few strands of long dark hair to her lips. "I trust this makes up for my tardiness?"

The Baronians were growing weaker by the instant, their struggles and attempts to breach the barrier becoming more misdirected and feeble.

"You promised to have that concoction, a half bell ago," Elsbeth growled.

"I didn't have a concussion a half bell ago," Luthice snapped, fingering her obviously hurting head. "Damn dread nearly crushed my skull."

Janai dropped her bow. "Guess we should be thankful for a bloodless solution to that mess."

"More than thankful," King T'Evagduran said. He bowed to Luthice with a flourish. "Our thanks, Lady Luthice."

Wincing, the Baronian woman returned the bow.

Bannor studied the circle making sure none of the creatures in the containment area were feigning unconsciousness. "It looks like they're all down," he remarked.

One of the Kriar pulled a device from his belt and panned it back and forth. <I concur. All targets appear to be neutralized.>

"Okay, let's drop the shield," Cassandra said.

"You are positive they are unconscious?" Gabriella asked.

Bannor double-checked. "Looks safe to me."

A few others in the room added their own confirmations.

"I will dismiss the gas," Luthice said. She gestured with the staff and another opening appeared inside the hemispherical area. Air rushed toward the silvery gap making hair and clothing bend toward it. In moments, the mist that had rendered the Baronian's unconscious was gone. Luthice shut the gate. "You may drop the containment shield now."

Gabriella relaxed, as did Cassandra and Elsbeth. The white shield winked out. The Kriar also withdrew the teleportation blocking energies.

"I'll call Nova for a pickup," Megan said sheathing her weapon. "We want these creatures incarcerated long before they wake up."

Bannor wondered if he could consider this a happy ending. They didn't have some ultra-violent bloodbath simply to neutralize the enemy.

Sarai fluttered her wings and tilted her head to one side. She seemed disappointed there wasn't a fight, but didn't voice it.

After only a few moments, the silvery disk of another portal opened on the floor in the middle of the fallen group of Baronians.

"Quickly," Megan said. "Let's get them in that cell!"

With Kriar, Baronians, Shael Dal, and valkyries all putting their considerable muscle to the task, it was a simple matter to hurl the dreadnoughts through the gateway. The tenth creature had flopped through the opening when he felt it--something not right.

He paused in the midst of preparing to pick up the next unconscious creature. Of the fifty or so creatures they were only half way done. Sarai, who was next to him, tossed in a body she had picked up and gave him a puzzled expression.

"What's wrong, my One?"

He held up a hand and looked around for Cassandra. She and the other two mages were getting their breath back. What they had been doing was obviously extremely taxing. "Lady Cassandra, are the citadel defenses still intact?"

The mage's head snapped up. "What? Why?"

Several people looked over in alarm.

"I don't know I feel--"

Megan stiffened and her face clouded. "Go! Go! Go!" She

shouted. "Get them all through that gate now!" The rainbow-winged Vanir air-maiden began picking up unconscious Baronians and hurling them through the portal.

The dragons who had squeezed into the chamber made uneasy rumbling sounds.

Feeling Megan's urgency, Bannor put his back into the effort of flinging as many bodies through the opening as he could. It was a race with an unknown amount of time. That indescribable feeling was getting stronger.

The last Baronian was cleared out. Megan dismissed the portal with swing of her sword. "Damn, get ready--"

A host of voices were raised in concern looking around. The others could obviously feel that underwater, ears under pressure sensation that oppressed the atmosphere.

"Oh-- *frell*," Corim let out in a tired voice a short distance away.

Bannor looked and saw the smoky distortion in the rocks of the citadel wall as huge metallic humanoids began stepping out with thunderous footsteps. He heard mecha weaponry spinning up to velocity and the high-pitched whine of energy reserves charging.

"Do these guys ever bleeding give up?" Arabella murmured pulling out her sword.

As the mammoth constructions leaned forward weapons poised, glowing red eyes pulsing, Bannor doubted they ever would...

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Chapter Fifteen

Internal Conflict

Me, frying pans and fires have an unhappy working relationship...

**-- Bannor Nalthane Starfist,
Prince Conjugal of Malan**

What the Baronians had to gain other than revenge, Bannor didn't know. Perhaps they hoped to take him prisoner along with the others. What the alien war-planners actually wanted to accomplish was irrelevant because he didn't plan to go along with any of it. The sizzle of weaponry, the rasp of magic, and the growls of the figures poised around him said that no-one else had any intentions along that line either.

Combatants faced each other across the minimal expanse of the northern council room. The opposing forces stood less than ten paces apart. The T'Evagduran defenders could be considered nothing less than an army; dragons, elders, valkyries, Kriar warriors, and Shael Dal numbering close to a hundred.

Bannor felt a crackle of energy rippling around Sarai as she pulled the shaladen from its sheath at her side. Eternity's essence licked and surged across her exposed flesh like a second skin of liquid light. Fire burned in her green eyes and a halo scintillated in her golden hair.

"What are these things?" she whispered. "They look like golems."

"Kriar war machines," he answered.

Neither group attacked. Weapons readied and bodies tight, the defenders confronted the dark horde of constructs. Several of the enemy appeared to be much larger versions of the combat frames like Hiram and Yamah that he met in Quasar's tower. He noticed other smaller entities closer to man size in the back of their formation. There appeared to be six or seven types that ranged from something that looked an armored wagon to a thing like looked roughly akin to a metallic canine. One thing they all

had in common--weapons, most were armed; blades, barrels, and missiles.

Bannor found the enemy's hesitation puzzling. It wasn't like the Baronians or their assigns to shy from a fight. Why give them time to think?

As Bannor scanned amongst the intruders, he didn't see a single organic creature. Every one of them appeared to be synthetic.

Shaladen bow nocked and poised, King T'Evagduran shuffled as he stared into the flat expression of the enemy contingent. "Steady," he murmured. "Tarkath Chauser, these look like some of *yours* ..."

A Kriar male in the back of the group with gold shoulder pad over his red uniform had his head down sighting along the barrel of one their big weapons. <They are not ours. These are Karanganoi designs.>

"All *right*, " the King said, drawing a breath. "Any idea why they're just *staring* at us."

<I am currently struggling with that speculation myself,> the Chauser responded.

"Maybe they want to make friends," Arabella said, blade braced in front of her.

"Maybe I'm a virgin," Sindra growled.

The D'klace's words sent a nervous titter through the group.

"Those are some frelling big guns," one of the Felspars murmured.

"All the better to shoot you with," another added.

"Tarkath," Bannor asked. "Are all these mecha self willed?"

<I don't recognize all the models, but the ones I do are.>

"What are you thinking, my One?"

"Defectors."

Heads turned toward him.

"Why?" Beia said. "They aren't defeated."

"They aren't exactly winning," Megan said.

"The mecha of Karanganoi Homeworld are as much slaves as their Kriar creators," Senalloy said.

"Maybe a cyber managed to hack the security protocols," Luthice remarked.

"Ladies," King T'Evagduran said. "If you know so much about these things, perhaps a little more action and a little less speculation. All those weapons make me-- *edgy*."

"He's edgy, I need to change my short clothes," Arabella remarked.

"I hear soda is good for those dark stains."

"All of you, hush," Megan ordered.

Senalloy drew a breath, she sheathed her sword. She took a few steps forward.

With a whine of mechanical artifices, several large weapons focused on her.

A collective gasp went through the defenders as breaths were taken. The Baronian woman winced to a stop with her eyes closed. After a moment, she opened one eye and then the other.

"So far, so good," Luthice remarked. "You aren't dead yet."

Senalloy glanced back at her sister with a frown. "You're the one with the bloody staff-- *you* should be doing this."

"You pulled the short straw."

The silver-haired Baronian woman growled. Under the intense scrutiny of the enemy mecha, she advanced to within arm's reach of one of the bigger humanoid machines.

The mecha's shiny black carapace shined in the flickering glow given off by torches, glowing weapons, and readied magic. The war machine's weaponry was not mounted like in the other creatures that Bannor had seen. It carried the three pace long gun under one arm, and held it steady with the other. A single shot from the device would easily vaporize a house.

Senalloy stared up at the creature over the barrel.

Bannor saw the glowing red of the creature's eyes narrow. It leaned its broad humanoid face down to where it was on a level with the silver-haired woman.

The elder tilted her head, brow furrowing. With a slow and deliberate motion she reached out and touched the face of the giant battle frame, and stroked its cheek. The huge mechanism shuddered, its red eyes fluttered, and it moved its head to rub against her palm. It made a sound like a sigh.

"That is one big frelling puppy," someone murmured.

"A puppy with a rail cannon in its hands-- *shhh*."

Senalloy drew a breath. "Bannor, I need you."

He blinked. "Uhhh, *me*? "

"Sheath your weapons and come over here-- *slowly*."

Sarai gave his shoulder a squeeze. He sheathed his axes and gripped her fingers briefly. Heart beating fast he took slow deliberate steps across the floor toward the silver-haired woman. Weapons of several different varieties tracked him with a low humming sound.

By the time he stood at Senalloy's shoulder a bead of

perspiration trickled down his forehead. He noticed the perspiration on the Baronian Lady's face.

"Bannor," Senalloy said keeping her eyes on the machine. "Let me introduce you to a Karanganoi interdiction assault frame. We just called them boomers for short."

"Boomer," he said, swallowing. "Appropriate. It's big."

"Big, fast, and *powerful* ," Senalloy said. "And he's got a problem."

" *He's* got a problem? I'd say *we* have a problem."

"Listen," she told him. "They're acting weird because it's like you said, they're trying to get away from the Baronians. I'm guessing they've been mounted with some kind of inhibitor."

"A what?"

"Never mind, I need you look for anything that might be interfering with his operating. Whatever it is, it's probably connected back to the ship that they came from."

He rubbed the side of his head. He studied the creature with his nola. He saw all manner of strange threads running through it. While he had thought these things were like the frames he saw on Fabrista Homeworld there was one huge difference. He scanned the other frames in the area.

"Sen, these things are alive. They aren't like the frames I saw at Quasar's place--there's living things inside them." He stared up at the boomer's face. It's brow furrowed and it stared at him with those glassy intelligent eyes. Such brutal power, and what appeared to be a keen intellect as well.

He felt the Kriar behind them mumbling.

"They have their hosts mounted," she said. "If you were going to run away, you couldn't very well leave your brain behind could you?"

"Nooo..." he drew the word out.

"Actually, the Baronians probably force them to run with their host intellect installed to act as a safeguard. It's difficult to discipline an uncooperative slave that doesn't die when you kill its body." She leaned toward him. "Do you see anything?"

"These things are *really* complicated," he tempered. "I--" He paused.

On the back of the boomer's humanoid neck was a tangle of threads that seemed to intertwine throughout its body. The thing seemed to be exerting a lot of energy that the rest of the boomer's body appeared to be *resisting*. That cylinder did seem to have a connection that extended to the other creatures around them and ran off into the sky.

"There is something strange on the back of his neck," Bannor advised. "He seems to be fighting with it."

"That would be it."

Senalloy drew a breath. "Big boy, I can take that thing out, but you have to let me."

The creature seemed to struggle with itself, but lowered itself down to one knee with a whirring and a thud as its bulk clunked down on the stone. It bowed its head, its body twitching.

Bannor pointed. "It's that triangular thing."

Senalloy carefully reached over the boomer's massive head and took hold of the object protruding from its neck. Her fingertips turned pale as she applied pressure. "Damn, it's in there tight."

"Let me," Bannor said. He looked down at the metallic creature. "Now, stay calm. I'm going to change." He willed himself into battle form. Energy crackled along the surface of his skin, and his flesh hardened with snap.

The mecha all focused on him; weapons retraining and eyes narrowing.

"Okay, I'm going to do this slow."

He reached across and took hold. The metal hardness and density of his skin made it difficult to know how much pressure he was applying. He tried to lift up, but all it seemed to do was pull the boomer.

"Try turning it," Senalloy suggested, indicating a left-wise turn with her finger.

The thing must have been locked in place somehow because it started to turn and stopped. Bannor applied more pressure and finally with a snap that made him and all the mecha around them jump, it turned free. After the tension of the creatures relaxed, he continued turning. The object, which was like a cylindrical plug, backed out of the boomer's neck.

The cylinder came free with a soft hiss. Bannor handed it to Senalloy who studied the object.

Bannor willed himself back to flesh.

The boomer blinked at them. The trembling of its metallic body had stopped. After a moment, it straightened up with a whine of mechanisms. The red illumination of its eyes faded and became a golden yellow. It let the huge weapon it was carrying fall to the ground with a rock-shaking clank.

It turned its head to one side and uttered a sequence of strange clicking melodic sounds.

Senalloy nodded, and responded in the same language.

Bannor saw the Kriar behind them relaxing and putting away their weapons.

"What did he say?" he asked.

Senalloy licked her lips and brushed at her silver hair. "They're asking for asylum..."

Chapter Sixteen

Heavily Armed Refugees

Where do a bunch of giant, heavily armored, intelligent weapons sleep? Well, duhhh...

**-- *Bannor Nalthane Starfist,*
*Prince Conjugal of Malan***

The defenders braced in the room relaxed, dropping their weapons, but still keeping ready. Many of the Karanganoi mecha still had the red glare in their eyes that said they were still fighting the control of the thing Senalloy called an 'inhibitor'. The giant assault boomer, leaned over the silver-haired woman and rumbled in that clicking language. She nodded apparently having no trouble following whatever was being said.

"So," T'Evagduran said. "If they are deserters. Why come here? Shouldn't they be asking the Kriar?"

Senalloy glanced up at the huge creature. "They aren't asking the Kriar. They are asking for refuge *here* ."

"Here?" Kalindinaï let out. "Why? We have no such-- *creatures* --amongst us."

Senalloy turned to the boomer and rattled something to it. The mecha responded giving a very human-like shrug as it spoke.

"It seems, they don't feel safe on Fabrista Homeworld," the silver-haired warrior explained. "The Karanganoi did not protect them, so they feel the Fabrista will do no better. Apparently,

they were impressed with the resistance put up here."

Kalindinai folded her arms. "That's all fine and well, but we have been harboring enough misfits--"

She stopped as her husband put a hand on her arm. "Senalloy," he asked. "Do they understand what they are asking? What's expected of a citizen of Malan?"

Senalloy conferred the question.

The mecha peered at T'Evagduran blinking with those glassy intelligent eyes. It pressed its massive hands together, dropped to one knee, and bowed its head. It rumbled something to Senalloy.

"To acknowledge the sovereign ruler, to be productive contributors of society, to obey the letter of the law, and to defend the country when needed," Senalloy translated.

King T'Evagduran rubbed his chin and looked speculative.

"Father?" Ryelle said looking over.

"Jhaan," Kalindinai said his name in a tentative tone. "You aren't actually considering allowing them to stay? We have enough problems with the houses now--how could we possibly explain..."

"Golems," T'Evagduran responded. "We use golems in many places--you yourself made many of them."

"Yesss--but--" Kalindinai said.

"The houses accept them."

"There's nothing to accept--they are magical creations--they aren't citizens... they don't expect rights. This creature is smart enough to know what being a citizen is."

"Yes, and speaks to it better than many of our existing citizens," the King responded. "Given our recent problems, I believe we

could be forgiven if the castle guardians were supplemented by some new upgraded *intelligent* golems." He focused back on Senalloy. "Can they learn our language so we can speak of this?"

Senalloy nodded. She turned toward the Tarkath Chauser and held out her hand.

Frowning, the gold-skinned commander came forward. He pulled a black box off his side. He narrowed his black eyes. <I am not sure we can support this.>

"They aren't Fabrista citizens," Senalloy said with an arch expression.

<Yes, but they are Kriar technology,> he said. <Technology that does not belong on this world.>

"They're already here," Senalloy said. "It's not like they can take them apart and figure out how they work." She took hold of the device in his hand.

The Tarkath and Senalloy eyed each other for a moment then he let go. <I will take this up with the Vatraena. I do not accept responsibility.>

Senalloy made dismissing motions and punched on the device for a few moments. She turned to the boomer and held it up to him. She indicated something on it, and spoke in that other language.

The boomer turned its huge arm over so its wrist faced up. A rectangular panel opened in its thick limb. The metallic creature took the device from Senalloy and placed it in the opening with a clunk.

The boomer leaned its head back for a few moments with its glassy eyes closed. Less than a breath passed and it straightened up, and removed the box from its arm and handed it back to Senalloy.

"I assimilated the trade language, and the three dialects of Elvish," he echoed in a deep bass that made the floor hum. The

language was the common tongue. Kriar artifices were indeed amazing. "I assume this will be satisfactory for basic communication, yes?"

"It's sufficient," Senalloy said, handing the device back to Chauser.

The Kriar took the item back with a sour expression.

Megan came forward. "Could you reiterate your intentions?"

The boomer hummed and turned its head. "You are a Protectorate officer, yes?"

"I am the commander in charge," she answered. "I am Megan Vinax. Representative for eternal Koass."

The boomer lowered its head then fixed its golden eyes on her. "Karanganoi forward interdiction assault frame Nomar, Zersis legion elite-- retired. There are others," he looked back to the mechas behind him. "Better at negotiating. However, they must be freed from the restraining hardware."

"Nomar is it?" Megan repeated.

The boomer nodded.

"Are there more of your kind?"

"I am not aware of any that managed to override the control protocols as our subnet did," he rumbled. "We managed by chance, during a maintenance cycle. Our directives were in the middle of being changed when the overseers in our section were slain by something they were controlling in the battle here. It gave one of the infiltrators an opportunity to weaken the directives."

"Guess that confirms the covens being killed when the dreadnoughts went down," Bannor said.

King T'Evagduran shouldered his bow and walked slowly toward the group with his hands behind his back. Sarai came from the

spot where she'd been standing to join him.

"Nomar, do you know who I am?" the King asked.

The boomer lowered his head slightly. "Shal'kar Senalloy informed me that you are the acknowledged monarch of this principality."

The King raised his eyebrow, apparently impressed by the creature's speaking ability.

"I wanted to verify the request you made earlier."

The metallic construct made a thrumming sound. "My initial request was for myself and the rest of my subnet to be given asylum. The Karanganoi people are no longer a cohesive political entity, and we have no desire to serve the Baronian warlords. Fabrista Homeworld, while it is more familiar to us, faces a similar threat of incursion. It is therefore our desire to seek citizenship in a neutral territory."

"You could hardly call this place neutral, Nomar. They are attacking us."

"We would be helpful in keeping it neutral," the boomer said. He bent down and picked up his massive weapon and slung it over his shoulder with a clank.

<That's what concerns me,> the Tarkath said.

The King glanced at Chauser. "Nomar, your request intrigues me. However, what assurances of good conduct can you give me?"

The boomer tilted its head to one side with a whirring sound. "We are rational creatures. In order to have satisfactory lives, we must be productive and serve a purpose. To be detrimental to a society where we wish make our homes is illogical."

The King raised his chin, a glint in his amber eyes. "Are your kind always logical?"

Nomar blinked. "The majority of the time."

"There are exceptions then?"

"Well," the boomer tempered. "It is not always possible to be logical when dealing with emotional and often *unstable* organics. Logic is not always effective with them."

"Organics?" the King wondered.

"Us," Senalloy said. "We're organic--another way of saying naturally born--not manufactured."

"Technically, we are not manufactured," Nomar said. "Super-alloy nanolathing is a growth process."

"Your kind are grown?" the King asked.

Nomar nodded. "In your world, metal is not grown. In our world, it is."

King Jhann glanced back to the Queen, then looked up at the boomer. "Nomar, pending further review, we tentatively accept your request for asylum."

"Our thanks," Nomar responded. "I must begin freeing the rest of my subnet from restraint."

"Nomar," King T'Evagduran said. "Please coordinate with Lady Senalloy, she is our head of security."

"Acknowledged," the boomer said, turning one of the smaller mechas. "Lady Senalloy if you and..." He looked to Bannor.

"Bannor," he supplied.

"Bannor," Nomar repeated. "Would assist in freeing one more of my subnet, we can do the remainder." He held out a massive hand. "One of the disadvantages of such a large frame is that manipulating small objects is quite difficult." Nomar gestured to a smaller mecha and murmured in that other language.

The metallic entity strode forward and stopped in front of them. It was only slightly taller than an average man, but broad across the shoulders. The metal of its frame was polished to a mirror gleam. It carried two large weapons, one in either hand and glared at them with crimson eyes. Bannor saw the conflict inside of the creature.

Nomar put its huge weapon in a rack on its back, reached out and picked up the smaller mecha and turned it to expose its back and neck.

Bannor glanced at Senalloy. The Baronian glanced back and shrugged.

He assumed battleform again and broke the bolt loose in back of the mecha's neck, and let Senalloy finish turning it free.

Once pulled from the body of the smaller creature, the mecha seemed to relax. It dropped its weapons, turned to them and nodded with golden eyes.

"With your permission," Nomar rumbled. "We will continue."

She nodded.

"I want to know what they used to get in here," Megan said when Nomar was out of earshot amongst the other mecha. "Why didn't the Baronians use that route?"

Luthice walked up. "I see some transversal interception mechas." She pointed to some odder-looking members of Nomar's *subnet*. "Their function is to detect and ride gate paths. We probably gave them their way in when you opened that gate to incarcerate the prisoners."

"Why didn't we get a flood of Baronians too then?" Sarai asked.

Senalloy shook her head. "My people are using stolen technology, they use it without completely understanding it. Magic is our field of study, not machines."

<And how is it, *you* know about such things?> the Chauser

asked with narrowed eyes.

"I had a very close working relationship with an engineer, that's how I learned to speak Kriar. I helped him and several others in an underground movement to resist the Baronian incursion on Karanganoi Homeworld."

"Is there a way to prevent that from happening again?" Megan asked. "I would be very concerned if the Baronians could start using our gates against us."

"Yes," Luthice answered tapping the black staff on the ground. "There is a way to conceal the gate juncture in such a way that an interceptor cannot tap into the pathway."

"Good," Megan said. "We will discuss that later, and make sure such precautions are taken in all future gating activities." She turned to King T'Evagduran. "I believe the worst of the incursion is over. I wish I could say that it's done and they won't be back--but one can never be sure with these people." She glanced at Luthice. "They can be damnably stubborn at times."

"Understood," the King answered. "To you and everyone who has assisted on our behalf we are thankful. We will make an effort to compensate you for your time and energy." He looked at the Tarkath. "Belkirin Dulcere lauded our gardens, the sunlight, and winds. Perhaps your contingent may wish to partake as some small reward for their efforts."

The Kriar commander blinked. He hadn't smiled in a while. He let out a sigh and nodded, finally seeming to relax a little. "That's generous. I'm certain my squads will appreciate the gesture."

Sarai looked around the damaged chamber. "Damn we have a lot of cleanup and repair to do before we can let the regular staff back in."

Hands behind her back, Kalindinaï strolled over. Bannor saw her gaze lingering on the mecha busily releasing one another from the Baronian controls. Janai and Ryelle followed her also watching the synthetic life forms with some trepidation

"Jhaan, I hope you know what you're doing," she said.

The King glanced over his shoulder. "Kal, the irony is that I can get elves to accept a magical man of metal far more easily than I can a human of flesh. If we can get them to accept a human prince; a few intelligent golems running around the citadel grounds will be easy."

Kalindinai stared at him. "I wish I could refute that logic." She focused on Bannor. "Do you know anything about these creatures, Bannor?"

"I met two on Homeworld," he answered. "They are very-- *alive* ." He frowned not knowing if he had the proper words. "They have a refined sense of who and what they are. Better than many people I know." He let out a breath. "One of them sacrificed itself to protect Daena and I. It put itself between a dread and us, and got..." He paused. "It wasn't pretty."

The Queen seemed to take that in. She glanced back to the growing number of golden eyes wandering around the far side of the room.

Tymoril and Kegari had turned and were peering at all the activity with apparent interest.

The Felspars, Kriar, Shael Dal and valkyries had gathered into groups and were obviously discussing recent happenings.

Kalindinai took her attention off the mecha and focused on him. "So, Bannor, this new you--how long does he plan to remain with us?"

He glanced at Sarai. "Well, probably until we're sure the Baronians have gone away."

The Queen approached him and reached up a long nailed hand to his face and turned her head. "I like it. You're quite handsome--for--whatever you are."

He looked down at himself. What was he? He kept referring to

himself and the other ascended savants as first ones, but they really weren't. This was a body created by the Kriar to simulate joining with his beta self. Marna had even said she had improved on nature. Who knew the extent of what that entailed? He did know it had helped him to protect Sarai and others, and for that he was thankful.

"I guess you would call us ascendants," he said. "I wasn't the only one, all of the savants accept Daena went through it. When I saw Wren last she..." He shook his head. He looked down at his hand and flexed his fingers. "Leave us just say she is probably giving the Daergons and Baronians nightmares."

"Well deserved," Ryelle murmured. "Their tactics are foul, and their beasts indiscriminate..."

<Bannor?> a voice asked in his head.

"Speak of the lady," he said. "And she telepaths to me; one moment."

<Yes, Wren,> he answered, focusing on sending his thoughts to her.

<How are things going there? Daena's getting a hazy report from Janai that things have settled down?>

He looked around at the huge forces still around them, and the mess in the chamber. <Settled down might be a bit strong,> he answered. <We definitely broke the back the back of assault and caught the Daergon collaborators who were after the T'Evagdurans.>

<Good. They reached for us and pulled back a bloody stump. I think they've retreated to rethink their strategy. So, how is everyone there?>

<Some injuries, we didn't lose anyone.> He focused on Sarai. <Can you see through my eyes, Wren?>

<What do you want me too--oooh, who's *that*? >

<That's Sarai.>

<Damn, Bannor, who will she look like next scoreday?>

He shook his head. <Wren, I just don't know.>

Sarai noticed his attention and frowned. "What is Wren saying?"

"Oh, she was just admiring the new you," he said.

"She can see me through your eyes?"

He nodded.

She glanced back at her wings and ruffled them self-consciously. "It's only a *borrowed* shape. I don't think Adwena wants someone walking around as a duplicate of her." She drew a deep breath and her eyes fluttered. "No matter how *nice* it might feel."

<She sure does like it, doesn't she?> Wren remarked.

<Yes,> he answered. <How are you feeling?>

There was an uncharacteristically long pause. <Too good,> she answered. <I'm trying not to breathe too much.> She laughed in his mind.

He laughed with her but sobered. <Are you going to be okay?>

<I--don't-- *know*,> she said. <It's going to be hard going back to being an ordinary mortal after being-- *this*. I mean, look at you and I. We're standing a universe apart, but it's like we're leaning over a fence and having a morning chat. Think of that. It's...so *fantastic* . I keep telling myself it's not the way I was born. Another part of me says this is how I was always intended to be.>

<I understand.> He did. An unknowable distance away on Homeworld, he knew that Wren could feel his understanding. Since he met Sarai, he had lived to protect her and their friends. He had never been better suited to do that than now. The sense

of power, the strength, and near invulnerability were all so intoxicating. He understood Wren's feelings all too well. How could he go back to being plain Bannor again? <I guess we'll both deal with that hurdle when we have to jump it. I'm certain the others are feeling the same way.>

<Yeah.>

He drew a breath. <Oh yes, and tell Marna we have some complications.>

<Complications?>

<Yes, look.> He swung around to look at the Karanganoi mecha gathered in the far part of the room. Tymoril and Kegari were leaned down and blinking at some of the closer metallic creatures, possibly having a conversation.

<Uhhh, where did they come from?>

<They say they ran away from the Baronians. They've asked for asylum *here* in *Malan* . King T'Evagduran has tentatively granted the request.>

He felt Wren's surprise. <He *did*??? >

<Jhaan says getting elves to accept some golems is easier than getting them to accept humans.>

Bannor felt the blonde savant roll her eyes. <I suppose he has a point. What if these mecha are some sort of elaborate trap?>

<I'm hoping that Marna will be able to help us on that count before something unfortunate occurs. There's some powerful machinery standing on that floor.>

<There sure is. I'll pass that along. We'll be holding station for the time being. There's no real reason for the Baronians to come after that commander now. The Daergonian collaboration has been uncovered. I don't know where we go from here.>

<Neither do I. I guess we'll let the leaders figure that out.>

<Yes. You know, despite how kick arse this body is, it still can get tired. I'm going to go find a bed--> she chuckled. <And try not to breathe too deeply.>

He smiled. <Take care.>

She broke contact.

Bannor sighed. "Wren says everything went well on Homeworld, and that for the time being, the Baronians have withdrawn. They plan to dig in and wait a bit to see what develops."

"I fear a wait-and-see approach is about all that is open to us as well," the King said with a frown. He turned to Megan. "Can we really afford to stand down?"

The rainbow-winged air maiden shook her head. "I wish I could in good conscience advise that. We're still not completely sure of their objectives. Bannor remains a weak link in the Daergon coup. I believe it's likely that they will continue to look for leverage to take him out of the fight."

"Maybe not," Bannor said. "I taught a whole team to see through that stealth. Wren and the others have been banging away at them since I left. They didn't need me to spot for them."

Megan raised an eyebrow. "Really?" She brought a finger to her lips and chewed a fingernail in speculation. "That changes the character of things. Aarlen can confirm this?"

He nodded.

She turned to the King and Queen. "Maybe we can get the heat off you by demonstrating that the ability to see through that advantage has become widespread."

"You know," Senalloy said. "They may have wanted him not to prevent him being a spotter, but to devise even better stealth that he can't see through."

<That follows Kriar thinking more closely,> Chauser remarked.

<If the enemy discovers a weakness in your defense, you fix the weakness. You don't try to prevent the exploitation.>

"What Megan is saying may still work though," Bannor said. "The problem is, then that whole Homeworld team becomes a target."

Megan shrugged. "Shael Dal are targets, it's part of the job we don't pay them to do."

"They Protect the universe, but they don't get any kind of stipend?" the King asked with an incredulous tone.

"Well," Megan said with a smile. "You become immortal, get tremendous strength, telepathy and other special powers, and can live in paradise any time you want. We figure the benefits make up for the lack of pay."

"Those are some pretty nice benefits," Janai said with a nod. She looked down at the bow in her hand. "I feel really powerful and this isn't even a full shaladen is it?"

Megan shook her head. "Over the summers we've had to deputize people so often that every eternal now keeps four or five honorary shaladen weapons ready for when it's needed." She indicated Corim as he and Beia walked up to join them. "That's how this stranger came to be one of us. He had to stand in when we lost Aarlen and Beia." She came and draped an arm around Corim's broad shoulders. "When Aarlen came back we couldn't very well leave him with her shaladen--but he was too good to let go. So, he now has an honorary shaladen." She thumped him in the stomach causing him to buckle a little. "Sorry about scaring you. I hope you'll forgive me."

Corim frowned and rubbed his stomach. He sighed. "It was for the best," he murmured rubbing the back of his head. "Beia is right, I'm a terrible actor." He glanced over his shoulder. "Are we going to let those artifices move in here?"

Megan looked to King T'Evagduran. "Not our call."

Corim focused on the King. "Dom'Ista it did occur to you that

this could be some kind of elaborate ruse?"

The elf leader nodded. "It did." He put a hand on Kalindinai's shoulder. "By a happy coincidence, I happen to be married to extremely powerful sorceress and diviner, who also conveniently, just gained a shaladen to help her cast her divinations."

Kalindinai looked at her husband sidelong, amber eyes narrowing. "A happy coincidence am I?"

King Jhaan raised his chin. "I don't think it was coincidence that you were the most beautiful maiden I had ever seen. I married a maiden with many virtues, among them her skills in magic."

Kalindinai bit her lip for a moment then leaned over and kissed him in a rare public show of affection. "It was just a coincidence that I felt like kissing you right then."

The King nodded, a smile teasing the corners of his mouth.

"Apologies Matradomma, Dom'Ista," Beia said stepping up next to them with a little bow. She turned to Bannor. "Bannor we were over there talking and had a question."

He put his arm around Sarai's waist and looked at Beia. "Sure."

"What was the trick with the dreads? I mean we saw you kill one, I've heard from others you killed like four or five by yourself."

"It's not really a trick," he answered. "I forget who said it, but it was true. The Baronians have spent so long fighting the Kriar that everything, including those dreadnoughts is aimed at being effective against Kriar weapons and tactics." He let out a breath. "On Homeworld, we saw a mecha much like those big ones over there." He pointed to the frames on the other side of the room. "It practically destroyed itself trying to kill one. Thousands and thousands of shots and all it did was make the dread angry. That gold skin is designed to withstand Kriar weaponry, including the swords their mecha use." He leaned forward. "Now, a sword with magic on it--different outcome."

"Yes, we saw that, that was the only way we could kill one. It takes forever--unless you get lucky."

Bannor let out a breath. "Luck is a factor." He rubbed Sarai's shoulder and looked down at her. "It was when I thought this girl was in trouble that I learned they could be killed. I got mad, assumed battle form and punched it with everything I had." He shrugged. "Enough power behind a single focused strike and I think it overloads the armor. I think when the armor overloads, the shock kills the dread."

"It doesn't hurt that its face gets mashed at the same time," Senalloy added.

Bannor shrugged. "That too."

"So, no trick, just brute force in a small spot with a magic weapon," Beia said. "I assume pantheon lord's battle form would be like using a magic weapon."

He rubbed the back of his head. "I guess."

Megan blinked. "Based on that, the most effective weapon we could have employed against them were the Shaladens in bow form and using some good strong magic arrows."

"Something we didn't even try," Corim said, shaking his head.

"Be assured," King T'Evagduran said, holding up his bow. "If there is a next time with these creatures, that's going to be tried."

Janai opened her mouth to add something and stopped her gaze tracking to something coming from where the mechas were working.

Hulking Nomar approached with slow thundering footsteps. Ahead of him, was what looked like a female elf with purple hair, and luminescent gold eyes. She was dressed in black skin-tight cloth the same as Bannor had worn on Homeworld, revealing the female's slender outline.

She stopped before the King and Queen and bowed. She spoke in Elvish with a strange breathy twang. "Peace. Field medical frame Wysteri responding for aide. May I be of service?"

The King stared at her. "You're flesh, and you appear Elven."

"Is this appearance not suitable, Dom'Ista?"

"Your appearance is fine. I did not expect any of you to appear-- *normal*."

"Part of my function as a medical frame is interacting with those who need treatment. I assume the semblance that is most soothing and relaxing for them in order to make procedures go more smoothly."

"So," Kalindinai said. "You can take any shape then?"

"Within limits, yes. Are there injuries in need of treatment?"

"There is a triage downstairs," Megan answered. "We have perhaps twenty or thirty injured. I will get an escort for you."

Wysteri inclined her head. "Very well." She started to turn away then paused. She focused on Sarai. Her eyes narrowed. "May I approach?"

Sarai stared at the medical frame for a moment then nodded.

The lady mecha stepped forward. She drew a breath and crouched so that she was at eye level with Sarai's abdomen.

"Second trimester," Wysteri said. "Signs of recent energy deprivation, and trauma. Have you sought treatment for your fetus?"

"Treatment?" Sarai said, reflexively covering herself. Her wings fluttered in agitation. "Is there something wrong?"

Wysteri turned her head and brushed a strand of purple hair away from her glowing eyes. "Did you recently receive a strike

or series of strikes?"

"Was I hit?" Sarai's green eyes widened in alarm. "I don't remember being hit. I did need to fight out of a couple presses. There were a lot of things swinging at me. I thought I avoided all of them."

"She's not used to having an air-maiden's body," Megan said, concern written in her features. "It's very possible she took a hit without knowing it. Our bodies are made to minimize pain when we engage in battle. It's automatic-- *instinctive*."

"Wysteri was it?" Kalindinaï said.

The medical frame looked up at the Queen. "Yes."

"How well do you know medicine and this sort of thing?"

Wysteri stared at her with a puzzled expression. "I am a class two field physician with specific expertise in treating seven million hominid species, with broad knowledge of biology, physiology, and chemistry."

"Matradomma, she's a mecha with the equivalent of thousands of libraries in her head," Senalloy said.

"Thousands?" Kalindinaï said.

"Probably hundreds of thousands," Luthice added. "Kriar medical frames are the highest evolved of their mecha."

"Bannor?" Sarai said gripping his arm. She was starting to look scared. "Do you see anything?"

He looked at little Vhina. Her threads did seem slightly weaker, but she was still a long ways from being fully formed. Thread sight was so general at times, and their baby was still relatively small.

"There might be something. I can't really say. I don't know enough to say what I'm seeing."

"Lady Megan," Kalindinai said. "Can you oversee the cleanup and the renewal of our defenses? I trust your judgment."

"Yes, of course, Matradomma," Megan answered. The air maiden reached out and touched Sarai's shoulder. "She'll be okay."

Sarai drew a breath and looked at the medical frame Wysteri. "I hope so."

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Chapter Seventeen

The Meaning of Life

Living things are not made from metal, or so I believed. It's difficult to hold to such a belief when the thing keeps blinking at you, and cogently addressing all the pragmatic aspects of life and consciousness...

**-- Kalindinai T'Evagduran,
Queen of Malan**

At the mention of a possible complication with Sarai's baby, the entire T'Evagduran family rallied around the third princess. Wysteri pushed a hand through her purple hair and gazed at each individual with luminescent gold eyes, apparently finding them all quite interesting. Nomar, the giant boomer, loomed behind her like a protective shadow. Megan, Corim, Beia, Arabella, Senalloy and Luthice stood by with concerned expressions.

"All right," Kalindinai said. "We should go someplace a little cleaner and more private." She looked to Megan. "Any place you would prefer?"

The Protectorate commander shrugged. "You all have shaladens

and we're in the council shielding. Any place is as safe as another. Please do check in and keep us apprised of any developments."

Kalindinai nodded and faced the medical frame. "Wysteri, come with us."

The mecha nodded.

Bannor thumped Corim on the shoulder. "We'll talk later, okay?"

The man nodded and leaned close to Sarai. "Arminwen, I hope everything is okay."

Sarai drew a breath and nodded silently.

The family including Senalloy and Luthice moved as a group. Nomar, the boomer turned to follow.

Wysteri looked back. "Nomar, I will be all right."

The huge creature's brow furrowed and his shoulders slumped in a very real and human disappointment. "Are you sure?" he rumbled.

"Nomar, they need time to explain things. You might get attacked."

"I can be--discreet..." he said in a voice as tentative as four pace tall metal man could manage.

Wysteri rolled her eyes. "You're about as discreet as those dragons." She gestured to Tymoril and Kegari. "Help them clean up."

He pressed his lips together, obviously not happy. "Are you--"

The medical frame cut over his words. She folded her arms. "Nomar, I am positive-- *please*."

The boomer hung his head. "Acknowledged." He turned away in apparent dejection, and strode off toward the other mecha.

Wysteri watched him go then looked back to them. "Please proceed."

Kalindinai stared at the frame for long moment before heading off.

Fluffing her purple hair, the mecha fell in step beside them, hands behind her back.

Sarai like her mother seemed to be adjusting to what she had just seen. A huge metal creature-- *pouting*. Janai and Ryelle glanced back at Sarai, the two princesses had speculative expressions on their faces.

His fiance glanced back to council hall, then focused on Wysteri. "Nomar seemed upset."

The mecha female rolled her eyes. "The warrior types are very protective of us squishies."

Sarai raised an eyebrow, and her mother glanced back.

" *Squishies*?" she asked.

Wysteri's mouth quirked into a smile. "Squishy. You know-- *soft* , easily damaged." She held out her hand. "I am not made out of metal like they are."

"Why is that?" Bannor asked. "I met some combat medical frames and they were quite burly and *really* well armed."

Wysteri shrugged. "The key word is *combat* . They provide emergency care in forward areas where soldiers are under fire. While they can treat patients, you could hardly call any of their work *delicate* ." She tilted her head and gazed at Sarai. "I am a caregiver."

"You know," Janai said. "I was thinking that Nomar's concern was a little more personal..." She let her voice trail off as if troubled by her conclusions.

The medical mecha pushed out her lip. "It is a new environment... and we just escaped enslavement... Concern is understandable, yes?"

"Right," Janai responded with a roll of her eyes.

Ryelle twiddled her fingers together turning them back and forth. "He is quite large and you are..." Her brow furrowed.

Wysteri shot a frown at her. "We are just *friends* ."

"Ouch," Bannor pressed his hand over his heart.

"My One?" Sarai looked up at him concerned. "What?"

He sighed. "Nothing, just an empathy pang. Poor sod."

"Huh?"

"Nevermind." If that wasn't a sign of them being living creatures, Bannor didn't know what was.

They went down the hall in silence. Wysteri gazed at every piece of art, tapestry, and coat of arm with obvious fascination. She ran her hand along the stone, touching fabrics, ceramics and weapons.

They turned a corner and started down the stairs to the second level.

"You find this interesting?" T'Evagduran asked Wysteri.

"Indeed," she answered. "Long ago the Karanganoi were under the mistaken impression that non-technical cultures could not be evolved. I suppose it took being over-run by such a culture to learn the error of that thinking." She sighed. "The Baronians are barbaric, but in that barbarism is a purity of focus, an enviable determination and spirit. It is something the Kriar lack. It is why Karanganoi Homeworld remains in their hands."

"Because they aren't as vicious as the Baronians?" Kalindinai asked. She glanced back to Luthice and Senalloy. "No offense."

Senalloy shrugged. "None taken, we *are* vicious."

Wysteri frowned. "Viciousness does not win wars--courage does. The Kriar had been bullies so long they'd forgotten how to strive. When pressed, instead of meeting the challenge, most gave up. We were weak. We deserve the fate that took us."

"You include yourself?" Kalindinai asked. "It doesn't sound like you gave up."

"When a society fails, all its members are culpable, not just its leadership. After all, does not the populace choose its leaders?"

The King and Queen looked at one another. To them that was probably a refreshing point of view. After all, much of the maneuvering plaguing them of late was due to how they, not anyone else, were responsible for events that happened within Malan's borders.

"Sometimes, the people don't choose their leaders..." Janai said in wistful tone.

"If an entity or group seizes power, again it is the failure of society to nurture harmony," Wysteri remarked. "In a society such as yours, there may not be enough resources to provide equally for all. Thus, stratification of haves and have-nots is inevitable; especially given a variation in each person's levels of ingenuity, ambition and drive. The Kriar have had no such limits on their resources for hundreds of eons." She looked to Bannor. "You have been to Fabrista Homeworld, yes?"

He nodded. "I found it strange, parks, cities, entire worlds that were empty. The one Kriar we went to see had an entire world to herself."

Wysteri nodded. "Exactly. Unlimited resources, unlimited space, everyone has everything they need. Artifices provide all the menial labor. Each Kriar can dedicate their lives to the pursuit of personal and spiritual gratification."

They stopped at a side-hall and Kalindinai fished around in a

pocket for a jewel that she placed in the recess in the middle of the door. The large wooden valve unlocked with a clank.

Wysteri watched this process with unblinking gold eyes. She seemed fascinated by everything.

They stepped across the threshold. Kalindinaï gestured and magelights illuminated a stairwell leading down. Bannor had not seen this place, but then much of Kul'Amaron was still new to him.

"So," King T'Evagduran said, his voice echoing in the tighter confines of the passage as they proceeded down. "Let me see if I understand where you are going with this. Without strife they became complacent."

"Yes," Wysteri said. "Our people were wise enough to recognize that intellectual and physical stagnation would set in, so social programs and schooling were put in place. Still, there is a difference between academic exercise..."

"And actual fitness through real hardship," the King finished. He reached the bottom landing and looked up as Wysteri came down. "Interesting. Still, that begs the question why your-- *subnet*--would want to live here."

Wysteri stopped at the bottom and looked up at the tall pale-haired King. "Here there are people who need us. On Fabrista Homeworld, they have as many frames as they want. They have no need of more, especially a misfit subnet that had the ingenuity to run away." She tilted her head. "Besides, I served Kriar for eons. I have been a slave to Baronians as long as I care to. This place is different-- *intriguing*--and there is opportunity for challenges."

"I see," the King said with a nod. He gestured everyone ahead of him.

Through an archway was a large chamber. It was obvious from the pallets and shelves of various herbs that it was a private infirmary. On one side were two stone slabs probably used for actual treatment. There were racks of tools and implements

obviously intended for surgery.

Wysteri glanced around running her hand along the crystal containers of herbs, and leaning close to look at the various blades and cutting tools.

She put her hands behind her back and peered around with an expectant expression.

The Queen glanced at the mecha, took Sarai's arm and lead her to a pallet and pushed her down.

The hardened wood let out a startling creak. Bannor grabbed Sarai's hand and pulled her back up before the wood gave.

Kalindinai growled. "Damn, sorry Mimi, I forget about the weight. I guess over here." She pointed to the stone operating table.

With a sigh Sarai arranged herself on the edge of the table, it took effort because of the wings.

Kalindinai touched the rainbow feathers. "However do those valkyries lie back?"

"Perhaps if you would allow me?" Wysteri said.

The Queen frowned at her and nodded.

She stepped in front of Sarai. "Arminwen, your name?"

"Sarai."

"Sarai, I want you to cross your arms over your chest with your fingers on your shoulders." She demonstrated.

Sarai complied.

"Now," the mecha intoned. "Clear your mind."

Sarai closed her eyes and let out a breath.

"Don't be alarmed I'm going to touch your forehead, I'm going to put a picture in your mind. When you see the picture, focus on that image and repeat it in your thoughts."

Sarai nodded.

Wysteri reached out and pressed her finger above the bridge of Sarai's nose.

His fiancée tilted her head as if whatever she saw confused her. Her brow furrowed. With a crackle and a shower of sparks, Sarai's rainbow-colored wings shimmered and faded out.

She jerked and opened her eyes. "Whoa. How did I do that?"

"Your body naturally has that ability," Wysteri said. "Commander Megan said you were unfamiliar with this shape." She brushed at her purple hair and glanced back at Kalindinaï. "Help with controlling all of a form's natural capabilities is typical service physicians provide for those who like to joy-form."

"Joy-form?" Kalindinaï said.

"Kriar can live for eons," Wysteri explained. "They get bored with the shapes they were born with. So, a common pastime is to get various form changes. Gender changing is the most common. The older they get, the more extreme the morphisms they tend to experiment with." She shrugged and gestured to Bannor. "His body is an example of a custom design done by a class seven or higher physician. I could even tell you their name by reading the signature in his microstructure."

King T'Evagduran massaged his throat and eyed purple haired mecha. "I am glad we've had this opportunity to talk Wysteri. You have provided a great deal of insight into a large number of things."

She bowed to him.

Kalindinaï glanced sidelong at her husband. She concentrated on Sarai. "Well, since we don't have to worry about the wings,

we can get this armor off so I can look at you?"

Bannor rubbed Sarai's thigh, and then stepped over with her father to honor her modesty. He noticed Senalloy and Luthice stood by the entrance to the room, apparently involved in a silent conversation.

Wysteri stepped back and observed as Kalindinaï, Ryelle, and Janai helped Sarai remove the chain-mail armor and various plating that were part of a valkyrie's 'uniform'.

When Sarai was stripped down to only a silken slip, the three Elven ladies started examining her.

"Here," Ryelle said touching Sarai's back. " *Carellion*, Sarai, you didn't feel this?"

Janai leaned back and her brow furrowed. "Aie."

Sarai twisted instinctively trying to see but obviously unable. "I felt nothing. I feel fine."

Kalindinaï frowned fingering a couple locations on Sarai's side and spine. She looked back to the armor. "Apparently, her skin was tougher than these links. They're mashed flat."

The mecha blinked. Even though she was in front of Sarai, her expression was as though she were seeing the wounds.

"Redistribution and compression of the subcutaneous kinetic flesh armor indicate three impact zones," Wysteri paused.

"Bladed weapons across the left scapula, sixth rib, and middle lumbar. The underlying bone filament endostructure distributed the majority of the force. Micro displacements of bone have taken place and there is some bruising of the left kidney.

Nominal regeneration of all hard and soft tissue damage will naturally occur within two to three bells."

"You can tell all that standing over there?" Janai asked.

Wysteri's brow furrowed. "I am a class two physician. It's what I do."

Sarai rubbed at her back. "I could have sworn nothing touched me. There are marks back there?"

"Trust me, Sister," Janai said. "Judging from these welts, without that shaladen and that body, I'm thinking those hits would have cut you in half."

"Given typical Elven anatomy, three shattered bones and incidental organ damage," Wysteri determined. "Without immediate emergency treatment, shock and blood loss would have resulted in death in a tenth of a bell."

Bannor felt his heart skip a beat. His gaze met Sarai's across the room. She looked bewildered. She had been in that much danger and didn't even know it.

"Well, if she can tell all that without even seeing Sarai's back, I'm convinced she knows what she's talking about," Ryelle said.

"Yes," Kalindinai said. "So, about the baby?"

"That means I pass?" Wysteri asked with a raised eyebrow.

The Queen frowned. "Yes. Please examine her."

The King put his hands behind his back. "Impressive."

Wysteri came forward. "Arminwen, if you would please lay back. Please pardon that I must touch you."

Sarai nodded and did as the physician requested.

The purple haired mecha pushed a hand up under Sarai's slip. She closed her eyes and stood motionless for a long breath. The Queen and Sarai's sisters watched her intently.

Wysteri opened her eyes, and pursed her lips. "The unborn is very sturdy, and despite the knocking around and deprivation remains within nominal health parameters. She is, however, at the extreme the lower edge of what is acceptable in terms of healthy development."

Sarai sat up and stared at the female mecha with wide green eyes. "What does that mean?"

"It means, no more getting hit in battles, for one thing," Kalindinai snapped. "I swear child. What were you thinking?"

"Mother," Sarai said with a roll of her eyes. "I had more than a dozen Kriar, Shael Dal, and valkyries around me. The battle was in front of me the whole time. I have *no* idea how I got hit in the back."

"Three times," Ryelle added. "Sister are you sure you were not facing the wrong direction?"

Sarai growled. "Yesss."

Wysteri held up a hand. "There is no lasting harm. Malnutrition has done the unborn more damage than the battle." She frowned. She glanced at the King and Queen. "Arminwen, these are your hereditary parents, yes?"

Her brow furrowed. "Correct."

"You obviously did not conceive in your natural form or this one."

"Yes."

The mecha pressed her fingers together and her brow furrowed. "Have you given thought to the child birthing process and nursing?" She asked. "This baby will weigh more than a stone at birth."

"A *stone*?" Kalindinai coughed.

Sarai clutched her abdomen. "You jest."

"That's minimum healthy weight actually," Wysteri remarked, tilting her head. "For optimal postnatal development of a fetus of this type a birth weight of a stone and a half is recommended."

"No way," Janai gasped with wide eyes. "Sarai will explode!"

"Recall," Wysteri said. "The tissue of the baby in question is approximately three and half times as dense as average elf flesh and blood."

"Oh," Janai said with a sheepish tone. "I was envisioning..." She defined a large round space with her arms.

"All told she'll put on nearly three stone of baby and fluid," Kalindinaï shook her head. "This is a mess."

"I won't be able to move," Sarai breathed with wide eyes.

"She can't bring this baby to term in her hereditary body, can she?" Kalindinaï said.

Wysteri winced. "Is she approximately your height and weight?"

Kalindinaï frowned. " *Hereditarily*--shorter, slimmer--a little taller than Janai. Because of an incident--she's since worn a much bigger body--a little more than 17 hands and six stone."

The mecha shook her head. "There would be an unacceptable risk of complications. Twenty-five percent birth / body weight ratio is healthy. Fifty percent could be potentially harmful." She pressed her lips together. "And certainly not comfortable. She would end up confined to bed." She leaned forward to Sarai and put a hand on her shoulder and looked with her toward Bannor. She pointed to one of his arms. "See those muscles? Imagine when she weighs a stone and starts *kicking* ."

Sarai hugged herself. "Okay, all right, I get it. Ow. "

Kalindinaï massaged the bridge of her nose. "So, I am almost afraid to hear this. What do you recommend?"

Wysteri drew a breath. She looked sidelong at Sarai. "She needs to settle on one body. No more joy-forming. I recommend a good pre-natal customized body to carry her through the rest of the pregnancy."

"This is her body we're talking about, not a set of clothes. We

can't just pick a color and style and put it on her."

The physician looked confused. "Then how did she get in that body?"

"Well, it's a copy of someone else. An eternal did it for her as a disguise and to help her with the pregnancy."

"Matradomma," Bannor said. "The Felspars have a physician like Wysteri. I bet she could do this body thing that Wysteri is talking about."

"Really?" Kalindinaï said.

Wysteri focused on Bannor. "A physician like me? Do you know what class she was?"

He shrugged and shook his head.

"A class fourteen," Senalloy said looking up from her conversation with Luthice.

Wysteri turned to Senalloy. "Fabrista Homeworld is letting elites wander around?"

The silver-haired Baronian shrugged.

"Well, you don't need to go to that other physician," Wysteri said. "I can perform the optimization for you."

"You can?"

"Yes, I simply need the equipment is all." The mecha female pushed a hand through her purple hair. "Of course. I am considered only a class two because I do not have all the tools available to me."

"How can we get you those tools?" T'Evagduran asked.

Wysteri smiled. "Introduce me to this other physician. She can help me get them."

"Maybe she can," Sarai growled. "Her mistress is a witch." She turned to her mother. "We saw Bronawyn Shadowstalker at a local tavern, she's married to one of the Felspar boys. I'm not sure how, but the Felspar physician apparently belongs to her."

"Shadowstalker? Xenos' daughter?" Kalindinaï asked. At Sarai's nod the Queen shook her head. "That's interesting. Is she as arrogant as her father?"

"Worse," Sarai growled. "I was ready to slap the little trollop sideways."

"Senalloy and Eclipse had to intervene to prevent blows from being struck," Bannor said. "Bronawyn hit me as rather mercenary, but her husband Caldorian was a good enough fellow, and the physician, Mercedes, was quite helpful."

"Mother, just ask Cassandra," Ryelle said. "Let's not deal with the little snot."

"Snot?" Kalindinaï said.

"I met her a few times while we were negotiating in that debacle with Corwin and the Drakmourn mercenaries," Ryelle answered. "She has all the diplomacy of a slitherbelly. I found her extremely *irritating*."

"Sister," Janai stepped back with hands on hips and looked at her as if she didn't recognize her. "Someone irritated-- *you*?" She licked her lips. "Now, I simply must meet this wretch."

Bannor raised his hand. "Maybe I should handle this? Bronawyn doesn't know me, so I think I might have a little success persuading her to let Mercedes help Wysteri."

The King folded his arms. "I think that's an excellent suggestion. We know the effect you have on the ladies--married and not."

"Father," Sarai growled.

"Don't 'father' me," the King said. "This mess is *entirely* your

fault. You acted on impulse and didn't think the consequences through. Now, you and your unborn are at risk. I expect *better* thinking from one of my daughters."

"Dom'Ista," Bannor said. "I will take Wysteri back upstairs and see if I can get this arranged. We should probably do it as quickly as possible before the Baronians send something new at us."

"Go," the King said.

He turned to Sarai and gave her a kiss on the cheek. She hugged him.

"I won't be long," he told her.

"We'll be up shortly."

Bannor turned to Wysteri and offered his hand.

The physician smiled and put her fingers in his. As they stepped toward the archway, Luthice brushed back her dark hair and leaned toward them. "Take me with you, I have some pull with the Felspars."

"Pull is good," Bannor said. "Let's go."

The three of them retraced their steps, heading back up the stairwell to the corridor. Luthice drifted along with them, hands behind her back, swaying with willowy grace. While she shared a great deal in common with Senalloy in terms of appearance, Bannor felt something different from the dark-haired Baronian woman. What was it exactly? Was she more confident? As if that were even possible.

"So, Lady Luthice, how is it you know the Felspars?"

"Cassandra helped get me off Karanganoi Homeworld," the woman answered with smile. "I work with she and Dorian in the court of Isis. I've been training Desiray. My most recent project has been a musical collaboration with Arabella, Sindra, and Drucilla."

"Music?" Bannor glanced at her. "Arabella I understand, but Aarlen's daughters? That doesn't seem like something they'd do."

Luthice chuckled. "Bannor, when you get old enough you'll do anything to keep from being bored. As it happens, they are quite talented musicians and have excellent voices."

He sighed. "Why wouldn't they? They don't have a natural bone in their bodies--it doesn't make sense not to have made everything perfect."

"The best bodies money can buy," Luthice said with a nod. "The results remain impressive."

"I suppose," he said. "Not that I can throw stones at the moment."

"I was about to say," Wysteri remarked, looking up at him. "You wear a rather synthetic body yourself."

"There was need," he said, feeling a trace of self-consciousness. "Without it, I would get beaten to a pulp..."

"You don't need to sound apologetic," Luthice said. "You don't think we Baronians got this way by accident do you?" She ran a lacquered fingernail down her front. "The masters designed and bred us. There are eons of research and testing behind our instincts, social tendencies, and heredity." She shrugged. "I was *designed* to be a weapon. It's what I am."

"I have heard of singing swords, Milady," he said eying her. "But I suspect you have considerably more to offer than that."

Luthice smiled. "I see why Sen likes you."

By the time they returned to the northern audience chamber, the destruction of the battle had been cleaned up, even the divots in the stone had been repaired. The restoration efforts had moved to the passages and adjoining chambers.

A least a dozen of the Karanganoi mecha, those small enough to

move easily in the halls, worked alongside the Shael Dal, Felspars, Kriar, and valkyries. Though the chore of cleanup was nothing short of grisly, the different groups seemed to work smoothly together. The members chatted amiably amongst each other. Millicent, Kylie, and Megan were in a deep discussion concerning service to the pantheon lords as they searched and examined the hallways. A few of the Baronian lady specialists had come up from the second level and were among those laboring. Luthice touched hands and nodded to the ones they passed.

"The camaraderie is quite refreshing," Wysteri said looking around with a smile. "Even amongst themselves, the Baronians tend to be rather taciturn and dour..."

"There's Bronawyn," Luthice pointed, indicating the dark-haired dusky-skinned Silissian princess. She was with her husband, directing the labor, and obviously trying hard not to get her hands dirty. Another couple worked with them, the other man looked enough like Caldorian to be his brother.

The three of them walked up behind them.

"Lady Bronawyn," Bannor said. "Might I have a moment of your time?"

She swung around a growl starting in her throat. "What do you--" Her dark eyes widened, and the rasp in her voice vanished. She stared up at him and swallowed. "What can I do for you?"

Her husband finished dumping some debris in a sack and swung around. The man smiled, smacked the dust off his hands on his breeches. He whipped a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his palms. "Well met, Lord Starfist," He stepped forward and held out his hand.

Bannor shook with him.

"Seb, Jol," Caldorian said. "Come meet this fellow."

The man addressed as Seb dusted himself off and turned. The

two men didn't just look alike, they were identical twins. The other tall Felspar came forward and shook hands. "Well met," he said with a nod. He gestured to the tall woman with him. "This is my wife Jolandrin." He nodded in acknowledgement of Luthice. "Lady Luthice." He turned his head, stepped forward, took Wysteri's hand and kissed it. "And perhaps you would introduce this vivacious lady?"

Bronawyn frowned at her brother in law.

The purple-haired mecha colored but smiled at the attention.

"This is Wysteri," Bannor said. "In fact, she is why I've come seeking your assistance."

"She's not sick is she?" Bronawyn said with a frown.

"No," Bannor said. "Lady Bronawyn, I do however come requesting a favor."

The Silissian princess folded her arms. "A favor is it? Didn't I already do one of those for you?"

He bowed. "Indeed you did. You have my appreciation and thanks for that. It was quite helpful."

"I would have preferred money," the woman said with a dour expression.

Caldorian gripped her arm, she winced and flinched away. "Apologies," he said with a dip of his head. "The battle was very stressful for my wife."

Bannor wondered what it would be like if he had to constantly apologize for Sarai. That certainly appeared to be Caldorian's full time occupation.

"No apologies are necessary," he said keeping his voice level. "I acknowledge the favor." He leaned forward. "Perhaps there is something I can do to balance matters?" He rubbed his hands together. "I may be in position to offer something of value."

Bronawyn blinked at him, dark eyes appraising. "How intriguing. So, assuming we reach an accord, what is this other thing you wish of me?"

"Wysteri is physician much like your Mercedes. She wishes to consult with her."

Wysteri bowed.

"Consult?" Bronawyn's eyes narrowed. "Bannor, you do not know these cybers do you?"

"Cybers?" He shrugged. "I didn't realize they were called that, but, no, I admit my experience with them is quite limited."

Bronawyn leaned back and put hands on hips. "Cybers like those," she nodded to a couple of the mechas helping two valkyries carry some large broken stones. "They're quite simple--very direct-- *honest*." She tilted her head. "Now mecha *physicians* ," she leaned forward and fixed Wysteri with a level gaze. "They're different. They have goals and *ambitions* and they're smart-- *really* smart. They are quite manipulative actually--and they have this *irritating* habit of helping one another."

Bannor found Bronawyn's mention of irritating rather ironic. "Milady, I find their chief goal to be helping others, especially the sick and injured."

Bronawyn waved her finger. "No. You are mistaken. Mecha physicians *fix* things. They have this compulsive need to make things perfect. It bugs the spit out of them when something isn't just so ." She blew out her cheeks. "The more sophisticated they are, the more driven they are to improve every bleeding little *thing* ..." She tilted her head. "Anyways, I'd wager what little Wysteri probably wants is a free upgrade. You see, only an elite class physician can do upgrades. It's the only reason she'd be here. What, did she tell you she didn't have the equipment she needed to do a procedure?"

Bannor frowned. He glanced at Wysteri, who by coincidence, was looking the other way. He pressed his lips to a line. "Yes, as

a matter of fact, she *did* ."

"Another thing about these physicians--they love attention. Cedes always wants me to spend money on gadgets she'll use once an eon. She's already the best healer Homeworld ever made, what does she need more junk for?" The woman rolled her eyes. "Attention. Wysteri can build anything she needs as long as she has access to a matter converter. I saw some builder mecha in that group--so it's a certainty she can get some moon-eyed field engineer to fabricate everything she needs. If you didn't notice, the other mecha worship the ground the physicians walk on. They'd take themselves apart if she asked with a smile."

"I noticed that."

Wysteri folded her arms and pushed out her lip.

"Did I mess up your plan, Honey?" Bronawyn said with fists on hips. "So, sorry. I'm done being kiss-arse for you and all your prima donna physician friends."

Bronawyn might be coarse and annoying, but she definitely seemed to be experienced with the mecha and the healers in particular. She spoke with the voice of authority and in this particular instance without any attempt to deceive.

Bronawyn rubbed her chin. "So, what are you? A class one?"

Wysteri put hands on hips and scowled. "Class two."

The Silissian woman smirked. "Whoring an upgrade. I love it when I'm right."

"Darling, it's not polite to gloat," Caldorian said.

Bronawyn rubbed her hands together. "All right, I tell you what. This probably has to do with Sarai's pregnancy, right? I heard Mercedes mumbling something about that."

He nodded.

"Wysteri will do a better job for you if she gets what she wants *first* . So, here's the deal. I'll let Mercedes and little miss purple hair scheme to their hearts content. I'll even call the other favor repaid. All I want is *one* thing."

He felt a chill go down his back. What would this dark-haired nasty woman want? "What?"

She licked her lips. "A position for myself and my husband in the front row at the wedding."

A little knot twisted in his stomach. It was such a simple-sounding innocuous request. Knowing this woman, it was anything but.

He knew next to nothing about the politics of the wedding seating, best to just forward the request to the Queen.

He remembered how Sindra had called to Senalloy. He made the space in his mind, envisioned Kalindinai's pattern in that space, and projected his words onto it.

<Matradomma?>

There was burst of confusion and shock, then realization.
<Bannor?>

<Yes.>

<What--what's the matter?>

<Nothing, I'm negotiating with Bronawyn. She revealed some interesting things about these Kriar physicians. Anyways, in return for access to her physician she wants something.>

Bannor felt Kalindinai's instant unease. <All right, what is that?>

<She wants front row seats at the wedding for she and her husband.>

He felt the Queen's face heat up. <Oh, that little *snot* .> She

felt the elf woman draw on her resolve, obviously calculating.
<Damn her, all right, tell her it's a deal--but she has to guarantee the work and her *behavior* .>

<Yes, Matraddomma,> he answered.

<We're almost done taking care of things, we should be up soon.>

<Okay. Speak with you then.>

He blinked and focused on Bronawyn. "Queen Kalindinai says it's a deal but you must guarantee the work and your behavior."

Bronawyn looked up at her husband and bit her lip. "Bannor, I will be a perfect *saint* ..."

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Chapter Eighteen

A Favor Abhorred

I find this whole idea of being independent of one's physical shape to be quite intriguing. The casualness with which the Kriar physician spoke brought home to me how truly different the society and mores of our gold-skinned guests really are. To even have a name for it--joy-forming...fascinating indeed.

**-- Jhaan T'Evagduran,
King of Malan**

The promise was made and the deal was done. All that remained was to get the players to do their parts. He frowned and looked around the stone corridor, and at Luthice. Hands behind her back, a bandage wrapped around her head, the dark-haired Baronian, dressed in red leather had a speculative

expression on her face. The negotiation went better than he hoped, it simply didn't go quite in the direction he had expected. Bronawyn, the dusky-skinned Silissian princess looked extremely pleased with herself. He knew that didn't bode well. No doubt, just her sitting in the front at the wedding would nettle Sarai. Bronawyn's husband Caldorian was eying his wife with an uncomfortable expression, apparently not quite sure what to make of the situation. Seb, the man's twin brother, had his lips pressed together and his brow furrowed. Seb's wife, tall willowy Jolandrin with the muscles and build of warrior, brushed at her armor and looked on with a lost expression. Wysteri, the purple-haired mecha didn't seem to know how to feel. She had plotted to take advantage of a situation, promptly lost control, then ended up getting what she wanted anyway.

Bannor guessed he better just move this thing along. "So, what's next?"

Bronawyn smiled. "Why we toddle off to Mercedes so she and Wysteri can have their little chat." She focused on Wysteri. "Why don't you get your host? I see you don't have it with you."

Wysteri's brow furrowed. She was obviously not used to someone as assertive as the Silissian princess. The mecha looked up at Bannor. "I will be back in moment." She walked back down the corridor toward the chamber where the mecha first entered the citadel.

Bannor looked after the physician for a moment then glanced back to Bronawyn. "Her host?"

The princess shook her head. "You didn't think that was her real body did you?"

"Well, yes..."

"That's not anymore her real body, than a sock puppet would be your real body," Bronawyn told him. "Think about it, did you see a purple haired elf when they first entered the council area?"

"No, I just assumed I missed her because of all the bigger machines in the front."

Bronawyn sighed. "The first clue is that when she appears... she looked like an elf. Her host is probably in a stealthed case that's being carried by one of the other mecha. After it looked like the negotiations were going well, she determined the best form to take, and imaged herself."

Bannor glanced back at Luthice.

The dark-haired Baronian nodded. "She's telling you straight. It really isn't that much different than the other mecha. Physicians simply project themselves into a flesh and blood body instead of a metal frame."

"I remember that being explained on Homeworld," Bannor said. "It's just not an easy idea to adjust to."

"No," Caldorian agreed. "It took us a while to come to grips with it. They actually can have several bodies at once--like avatars. They just generally prefer to keep it to one."

"Mercedes is creepy," Jolandrin said looking at the others. "But she's nice."

Wysteri appeared in the corridor again, this time carrying a slim black case about a pace long, and about half that high. Different colored jewels blinked along its surface. He looked at the device's threads and discovered that there was indeed something alive about it. Strange.

The purple haired mecha stopped next to him, she clutched the box's handle with both hands. Shoulders rounded down, she studied the floor looking uncomfortable and embarrassed.

Bronawyn looked down at Wysteri. "My but what a *little* brain you have."

The mecha looked up with a scowl. She didn't say anything but obviously wanted to.

The princess seemed to derive considerable pleasure from Wysteri's discomfort. Bannor guessed that, for the mecha, it was

like being forced to walk naked in front of strangers.

"Well, we might as well go," Bronawyn said. She turned and took a few steps, pointed her finger and drew a door-sized rectangle in the air. As she moved her hand, a glowing white trace remained hovering in the corridor. When the end of the line met the beginning, crackling rasp echoed in the passage. Air gusted over the princess, ruffling her dark hair. Revealed in the space was a silvery portal similar to the ones he had seen Luthice make. Reflected in the gap was what appeared to be a carpeted sitting area.

Bronawyn stepped through and gestured to them from the other side. Her husband, brother and sister in-laws stepped into the portal without hesitation. Bannor gestured Wysteri ahead of him.

The mecha drew a breath and stepped in.

He glanced at Luthice who hadn't moved.

"I'll stay here," the Baronian told him. "You have things in hand. It doesn't appear my pull was needed. I'll make sure everyone knows what's going on."

He nodded. "Thanks." He turned and stepped into the portal. There was brief twisting sensation, and the compression of threads like he experienced on Homeworld. He rubbed at his arms feeling a chilly sensation from the actual transition. He noticed the others rubbing their arms in similar fashion apparently experiencing the same brief chill.

Bannor glanced around as the portal sighed closed behind him. The chamber was fairly non-descript and plain, two doors were situated on opposite sides at the end of the room. Long divans sat along smooth white-washed walls with nature paintings centered above each. The air had a caustic over-clean smell that made him wrinkle his nose.

Bronawyn wiggled her fingers. "One of the few augmentations I let Mercedes do to me. Pretty-- *heh*--handy, eh?"

Caldorian rolled his eyes.

She frowned at him. "It's clever."

Wysteri studied the ceiling.

Bronawyn led them across the chamber to the left door and down a hallway. Their steps echoed on the wooden floor. Like in the outer chamber the walls were white, smooth and featureless. There were no windows or any kind of decoration to even indicate where they were. The sterile smell seemed to be everywhere in the structure.

"Normally, I would keep Mercedes with me," Bronawyn explained. "That whole situation was too dangerous."

The doors in the passage walls bore gold numbers emblazoned on them from six counting down to one. The princess ran her hand down the wall. "Examination rooms, in case you were wondering. This is a medical treatment facility that Mercedes insisted I build for her so she could do her *charity* work." The woman blew out her cheeks. The word charity was like a curse on her lips.

At the end of the passage, Bronawyn let them into a posh office. Almost hidden behind a huge desk stacked with papers, dressed in a filmy blue shift, pale-skinned petite Mercedes reclined in broad overstuffed chair reading a book. Starscapes, nature scenes, and anatomical studies were hung in glass enclosures on the walls. Strange lilting music issued from somewhere overhead.

The physician looked up at their entry, she looked around the group and fixed Wysteri with intense gray eyes. She put down her book and leaned forward with her elbows on the desk. The woman's long face lit up in an expression of delight. "Mistress, is this a new toy?"

Wysteri frowned.

"She's not for you," Bronawyn said. "Her subnet offered their services to the T'Evagduran family."

"Ah," Mercedes said, her demeanor growing more subdued. "We get to be neighbors at least." She looked to the case Wysteri was gripping. "My, that's an old style enclosure. I remember those--stuffy--not much cooling."

"Bannor and I made arrangements," Bronawyn said. "I promised him that Wysteri could get any treatments you were willing to provide free of charge. Whatever agreements you make with her are between you two."

Mercedes' brow furrowed. "An open ended agreement? I can do whatever I want?" She leaned forward. "Mistress, do I need to examine you?"

"I am fine, Cedes. I got an absolutely marvelous concession from Queen Kalindinai. I dare I shall be in a good mood for score-days." She bounced on her toes. "So, shall we let you two have your privacy?"

"Yesss," Mercedes said, looking somewhat uncomfortable. She turned her head to one side. "No special conditions--no contract?"

"Nope," Bronawyn said with a shake of her head. "Whatever you want."

The physician blinked at the princess as if she had grown a second head. She glanced at Wysteri, then back to Bronawyn. "Just have fun?"

"Live it *up* ."

Mercedes placid face broke into a grin. "Thank you, Mistress!"

"Think nothing of it. Call me when you're done."

"I will." Mercedes looked to Bannor. "Is this for Arminwen Sarai?"

"Yes, Wysteri is going to create an optimized body for her."

"Good, then we will work it out together." She paused. "That is

quite an augmentation you received. Vatraena Solaris' work is it not?"

He nodded.

"She is among the best, many of my augmentations are based on her designs." She stood and came around the desk and put an arm around Wysteri. The purple-haired mecha looked up at Mercedes with wide-eyed reverence. "Our arrangements should not take more than a bell or so. We'll come to Kul'Amaron and speak with Queen Kalindinaï prior to making final arrangements with Sarai."

"I appreciate it," Bannor said. "I just want our baby to be healthy. I worry about Sarai."

"We'll do our best," Mercedes told him. "I have Wysteri's diagnosis. She and I will go over it carefully. I will make sure we take into account the hostilities, stress, and other factors when we create a solution."

Bronawyn looked up at Bannor with an arch expression. "Satisfied?"

"Yes."

"Uncharacteristically generous of you, Sister," Ceb said with arms folded.

"Darling...?" Caldorian's brow was furrowed like he didn't recognize his wife.

"What are we missing, Bron?" Jolandrin asked.

"Nothing." Bronawyn smiled at Bannor. "I can put on my lace gloves and politely thumb my nose at Sarai from the front row of her wedding. I just did their family a huge favor. She will *have* to be nice to me..." She wiggled her eyebrows. "...and she would rather spit *blood* ." She waved a hand in front of her face and took a deep breath as if she were smelling something sweet. "Ahhh. *Delicious*."

Bannor scrubbed his face, realizing the painful irony of the situation. Half the royal family disliked Bronawyn intensely--for good reason--she was just plain *mean* . Being beholden to this coarse ex-princess would be like choking down bile.

He stared at Bronawyn, threatening this woman would be useless and she was within her rights. He would have to think of a way to put her back on her heels so she didn't make Sarai any more cross than she would already be.

"Shall we go?" Bronawyn asked.

Bannor nodded.

The ex-princess did the same trick as before, drawing a glowing doorway in the air that opened back into same passage they had left. The return experience was the same icy step across through space.

He looked around and felt Sarai's presence nearby. He nodded to Bronawyn, Caldorian and their two in-laws. "I guess we'll meet later."

Bronawyn gave him an evil smile. "Count on it."

He so appreciated what Ryelle had said about Bronawyn being a snot. Like Sarai said, he would have enjoyed 'slapping her sideways' if it would have accomplished something.

Returning to the northern council chambers, he found the King and Queen conferring with Cassandra. The three princesses stood behind them. Kylie, Jhord, Millicent, the real Adwena, and Megan stood in a group nearby speaking in hushed voices. The largest of the Kriar mechas, eight in all including Nomar, stood in a circle on the far side of the room. Tymoril and Kegari, back in their humanoid forms stood with them. They seemed to be giving some kind of briefing. He noticed a collection of perhaps a dozen other mechas, sitting, standing or reclining around the main circle apparently listening to whatever was being said.

Bannor's attention went back to the valkyries. He was glad he saw Sarai and Adwena together, it would have been quite

embarrassing to have walked up and hugged the wrong valkyrie!

Bannor stopped by Sarai, leaned in and gave her kiss. She smiled pushed her shoulder against him and rubbed his arm. He bowed to the King and Queen and nodded to Cassandra who acknowledged him, dark eyes glinting.

"You're back," Kalindinaï said. "Is everything arranged?"

"Yes," he said, knowing he wore a serious expression. "Wysteri is getting everything she needs, and Mercedes will be helping her figure out all the details so everything is accounted for."

"Accounted for?" Kalindinaï asked.

"Well, the needs of this situation, and our--uhhh," He glanced down at Sarai who looked up with a furrowed brow. "--hectic lifestyle."

The Queen frowned, her expression like she'd eaten something sour. "Ah. So, when can this be done?"

"Mercedes said they'd be ready in about a bell," he answered. He let out a breath and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

King Jhaan looked at Bannor sidelong. "It appears dealing with the *Keshira* is taxing even for an ascendant."

"Like Ryelle said, she is a spiteful little snot," he said. "It took every bit of restraint I had not to spank her." He rubbed his throat. "The meeting did have its value, she knows a lot about these Kriar physicians."

"Absolutely," Cassandra said, fingering a strand of her auburn hair. "When she first purchased Mercedes' contract, she made Bronawyn crazy. Mecha physicians are, how can I say it, very *creative* in their needs and desires. They can be quite manipulative."

"Pardon, Lady Cassandra," Kalindinaï said. "But how did the little snip get a hold of such a valuable creature?"

"Land," Cassandra answered with a scowl. "She sold land to the Kriar. Land on Titaan, or any of the magic-rich realm worlds fetches an extremely high price on Homeworld."

The King and Queen exchanged glances and raised eyebrows.

Cassandra stared at them. "Please, I know you're in a position to do the same thing. *Don't* do it. The Kriar need to stay on Homeworld."

The King's brow furrowed. "Pardon, but aren't the Kriar your people? Why, would you not want them to be here?"

The gold mage closed her eyes. "It's complicated. We need to keep artifices and magic *apart*. Where artifices proliferate, magic starts to dwindle. I dabble with artifices, I enjoy using them in their own domain--but I am a mage at heart. I want to keep magic pure-- *healthy*."

Kalindinai drew a breath. "Well, that is a sentiment that I can grasp. Do you truly think the Kriar pose a threat to magic?"

Cassandra rubbed her forehead. "Technically, *I* am a threat to magic. I am my own worst enemy. I give in to temptation. My daughters, they are making the heads of magocracy crazy because they have reduced spell bindings and combining to a kind of math."

The Queen's amber eyes widened. "Spell blending--with a calculation--spells as raw formulae?"

"See?" Cassandra said. "You see the possibilities, the potential. It's the worst part of the temptation. You--I--we *love* magic. To be able to work it without bounds, to unlock it beyond rituals...is something we dream about. That dream will spell disaster. If we let this *other* kind of magic proliferate, how will the old ways survive? If the Kriar are allowed to study magic, if their artifices somehow decode and synthesize it, anyone could become a mage. The art we slaved and bled to learn will die." She put a hand over her heart. "I love my Kriar step-mother, and her mother. Yet, if I let the Kriar take root on the magical ring worlds it is only a matter of time before the Fabrista's close

contact with magic enables them to disassemble it and make it into something they can control. They have a strong motivation to do it, and the Baronians are pushing them hard in that direction."

"Lady Cassandra," the King said. "What you say makes sense, but it hardly seems practical. If you deny them access here, if they are truly determined they will simply look elsewhere--there are dozens of worlds in the magocracy. Someone will give them access--as we have seen--they can do miraculous things--simply the services of a healer like Wysteri could buy-- *much*."

The gold-skinned mage nodded. "Dom'Ista, truly, the feats they are capable of is..." She shook her head. "Nearly any kind of price you can imagine, they will pay it with smile."

"Wysteri mentioned something to us about infinite resources. I found it somewhat hard to credit."

"The foundation of their artifices is the ability to convert material to energy and back. That is how Wysteri and Mercedes will shape Sarai. They simply calculate the microstructure they want and their artifices transform the components of her body to conform." She gestured to Bannor. "That is how his body was created. It is similar to a mage's ability to morph creatures, or transmute lead into gold. The big difference is when done by these Kriar devices the change is permanent and they can perform the changes on a vast scale." She leaned forward. "I have seen them create an entire city the size of Corwin in the matter of a bell or so."

The King's brow furrowed. "And they can create anything?"

Cassandra shrugged. "Virtually anything."

"What you say is quite alarming, Lady Cassandra. So, they could for instance create a hill of precious jewels?"

"Easily," she answered with a nod. "And some leader somewhere will be stupid enough to ask for it. That Kingdom buys up everything, and eventually destroys the surrounding economies." She shook her head. "That's just one example of the

mischievous the Kriar can unintentionally create. The Baronian invaders are bad; they are violent, destructive and cruel. Long term, the Kriar pose a worse threat because they don't actually mean any harm--they just want some places to raise their children. They ask for a little land, we ask for a rope, they gladly give it to us--and we cheerfully hang ourselves with it."

"Truly, an insidious threat," Kalindinaï said. "Surely, having the ear of the Vatraena you can prevent these things from happening. If, as you say, it is not their intention to create chaos, they can be persuaded not to do so."

"Marna is sympathetic and she has put some safeguards in place; requirements to 'study the long term effects on economies and balance of power' but you know how it is." She sighed. "A government can create all the laws it wants, but someone will bend or break them."

"Indeed," King Jhaan said rubbing his chin. "This is a fancy gorgon to be engaged to. Having accepted the Vatraena's hand, it would be bad form to slap it away after they have negotiated in good faith; even so much as giving us the tools to defend ourselves." He cast a look at Bannor.

Bannor looked to Sarai. "I don't know. It seems simple to me."

"Oh, how is that?" Cassandra asked with an arch expression

"Just be careful what you wish for."

Sarai smiled looked up at him through her eyelashes. "Didn't you wish for me?"

"Yes," he kissed her on the cheek again. "And see all the trouble it's gotten me into...?"

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Chapter Nineteen

Revelations Whilst Reclined

Mecha, or cybers, or living machines whatever you want to call them are an integral component of Kriar society. They exhibit all the emotions of humans and some of them are capable of some tantrums that would make even a prima donna look twice. I've never gotten any of the Kriar engineers to own up to it, but I think they made them that way just to keep life on Homeworld from getting mundane.

**-- Cassin Kel'Ishtari Felspar,
Searga Engineer Grade Third Mitaka Legion**

Bannor's words echoed in the northern council chamber. It had been a fairly witty remark, given the timing, Cassandra, the King and Queen smiled politely. Sarai thumped him in the shoulder for his trouble. Even in his normal body, that slight rebuff shouldn't have done anything, but the nudge sent him off balance and he had to catch himself. He blinked and the room grew fuzzy. He tried to take air, and nothing happened.

"Bannor?" Sarai took hold of his arm. "What's the matter? I didn't hit you that hard."

The dizziness passed and he blinked it away. "Nothing. Guess I'm a bit fragile after all that fighting."

The King eyed Bannor for a moment as if waiting to see if he would fall down. When it seemed apparent he wouldn't, he focused on Cassandra. "Dama Felspar, I understand the problem with the Kriar, but as you say, it is long term. I am more immediately concerned with the Baronians and our status with that problem. I have displaced the citadel staff and created a hubbub in the city that will take a century to settle."

"I consulted with Megan," Cassandra said. "We are in agreement

that the magical defenses are as strong as we can make them without making them opaque. Luthice is working with me on a more efficient gate destabilizer, but they are damnably hard to prevent once the enemy have gotten in and fixed a landing spot." She massaged the bridge of her nose. "As to whether they will be back. I guess that depends on whether they want the stealth penetration techniques that Bannor and now the others represent. With the Daergons cooperating, they actually have easier access on Homeworld... I guess it depends on whether they think they can make a dent in that team. They lost tremendous resources here."

"In other words," the King said. "The only way we're certain to have peace is to wipe out both the Daergons and the Baronians."

Cassandra pressed her lips to a line. "Simply put, yes."

"I don't see us as having quite the resources to swing that," Kalindinaï murmured.

Bannor rubbed his forehead. "If I could just get a clue about that genemar thing--I could end all of this. The problem is I don't know where to start."

"We shall work this problem from different angles," Cassandra said. "For the time being, we can add the mecha--ahem-- *golems* , to the standing defenses. I have some ideas for making them more effective against the dreads."

"Magic weapons?" Kalindinaï asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Exactly," the gold mage said. "After talking to some of them, I am convinced they absolutely don't want to go back to serving the Baronians so they have a lot of incentive to fight tooth and nail to keep them out. Another thing to make them more effective is to decouple their host intellects. Then they can fight at one-hundred percent."

"Decouple?" the King said.

"Yes," Cassandra answered. "Their intellect, their spirit, for lack of better words, is in a detachable artifice that can be placed

somewhere for safe keeping."

"Like a mage's soul stone?" Kalindinai asked.

"Exactly like that," the mage confirmed with a nod. "And like a soulstoned mage who doesn't die when their body is killed. To put them back in the fight, all that's necessary is for their frame to be repaired. The great part is they brought their own field engineers, so they have everything they need to repair, fit and customize their frames."

The King looked back to group of huge boomers. "So, they can have smaller bodies as well?"

"That is the power of Kriar artifices, and why they are designed the way they are--they can serve in any role needed. You can even put them in flesh bodies like you saw Wysteri in."

"Truly?" the King said with a raised eyebrow. "Interesting."

Cassandra glanced back to the boomers and leaned in close and lowered her voice. "The only problem is *ego* . It's tough to convince a big bruiser who can knock down castles that suddenly he has to be a little wimp that gets knocked over by an arrow."

"You just get Wysteri to persuade them," Bannor said.
"Bronawyn was just talking about that."

"Right, but you still have to be careful." She leaned back and made a coming gesture with her finger. "Cassin?"

In a flash of light, the gold girl in the red Kriar armor was standing next to Cassandra. The abruptness of it made King and Queen sway back. It made Bannor's heart jump, even though he was starting to get accustomed to such things.

"Yes, Mother?" Cassin said, blinking her black star-filled eyes.

"You did an inventory of the Karanganoi subnet, did you not?"

"Yes," the girl said. She pulled a black device and glanced at it for a moment. "This is a standard forward battalion subnet. They

have eight main assault boomers." She gestured to the circle of huge black humanoids. "They have four reconnaissance units," she pointed to some mecha that were sitting much like a canine might. "That's those ones that look somewhat like a wolf. There are two infiltration snipers..."

King Jhaan held up his hand. "Sniper?"

"It's not widespread in warfare on Titaan yet," Cassandra advised. "They are armed advanced scouts that use extremely long range weapons. Usually they're employed to demoralize troops and assassinate enemy commanders."

Kalindinai leaned close to her husband. "Talonbows."

"Ah, yes, that makes sense, proceed."

Cassin put her hands behind her back. "There are nine multi-role infantry, and three squad leaders. They are supported by three field engineers, three combat medical personnel, three warp/gate specialists, and one class two battalion physician."

"So, thirty in all," King Jhaan said.

"What condition are they in?" Cassandra asked.

"Pretty good, no major damage," Cassin said. "I didn't check them out in detail. These are not the newest models, but certainly nothing anyone with any sense would try to sniff off. They can be upgraded to latest specs in a few bells, all I have to do is get the engineers tied into the Fabrista datanet."

"Lady Cassin," Kalindinai said. "I am to understand you have thorough knowledge of these artifices then?"

"I repair them," Cassin said with a shrug. "I am learning to design them."

"I am concerned with temperament and integrity. Your mother was speaking earlier of separating their spirits from their bodies. In essence, making these things free to do anything they want without consequence to their own lives. What controls are there

to prevent these things from running amok?"

Cassin laced her fingers. She leaned forward. "Understand, Matradomma, I am somewhat biased. So, weigh what I say with that in mind. What prevents them from running amok is *conscience*. The Kriar spent eons breeding and rebreeding minds for their flexibility, stability, and rationality. They then created stable communities where these intellects and personalities complemented one another and could interact on a very intimate level. The Kriar knew the mecha society had the potential to create havoc, so they integrated them into their culture. They can fill any social role a Kriar does, and in fact there are two counsels who are high order mecha."

"If that's true, why would they become these battle artifices?" Janai asked.

"Why does any patriot join their nation's army?" Cassin asked. "To defend the people. The big difference is they, unlike the Kriar warriors they serve with, are not at risk because destroying that metal shell doesn't mean losing their lives."

"A reusable soldier who cannot die," King Jhaan said. "It is astounding. We spoke with Nomar. Are they all that smart?"

"Yes," Cassin confirmed. "Very intelligent, extremely pragmatic, and quite social; the warrior types tend to be a bit edgier. I mean you cannot afford to be squeamish in war."

"No," the King agreed. "So, Lady Cassin, would you advise letting them become citizens and trying to find a productive way to add them as family retainers?"

The gold girl looked at her mother with a raised eyebrow. "A whole subnet? *Retainers*? You mean on a permanent basis?"

The King nodded.

Cassin's brow furrowed. She glanced at the boomers. "That's a lot of power. You could take over Sharikaar, no one could even slow you down."

The King raised his chin.

"Well, Dom'Ista, it sure wouldn't be to your detriment. Even though they don't seem like natural creatures. Mecha have a great appreciation for natural things. They are very conscious of the environment. I imagine they would get along well in elven society, loving trees and living things the way they do."

Cassandra put her hands behind her back. "Cassin raises a valid point. We can't very well help you get this subnet up and running if you're going to turn around and use them against Ivaneth or Coormeer."

"What about Corwin?" Kalindinaï asked with an arch expression. "Or Stonewood?"

"Blow them to the abyss if you want. Just no stepping on toes in the south," Cassandra said with a serious expression.

"It wouldn't do for us to upset the Felspars, especially when you now have such an intimate working knowledge of Kul'Amaron's defenses," the King said with a smile. "I am more interested in honest servants who do not have outside allegiances; smart, capable, individuals who can be counted on."

"Well, they can be that," Cassin said with a frown. "My first instinct is to try and stop them, but I have nothing better to offer them and they need--" The gold girl stopped at Nomar clomped up beside the T'Evagdurans.

As the boomer overshadowed the King, its gold eyes blinking, it was hard not to flinch a little. The hands that it laced in a gracious greeting were big enough to engulf a one-stone melon.

"Pardon," Nomar rumbled. "Dom'Ista, Matradomma," He made a little dip of his massive body to them. "Arminwens." He nodded to the princesses. "Sorry for the intrusion, might I interrupt briefly to ask Bannor a question?"

The King stared at Nomar, apparently he was still adjusting to the dichotomy of the creature's size and mild mannerisms. He waved toward Bannor. "Speak."

Nomar leaned down. "Sir," Nomar's voice deepened. "What has become of Wysteri? She left with you and did not return. She took her host and is now offline. I am--" The metal creature's jaw worked side-to-side. " *Concerned*."

Bannor blinked. Good thing he got concerned before he got *angry* . He stepped away from Sarai, trying to be subtle in the way he just happened to get between Nomar and the King. He thumped the alloy of Nomar's arm in what he hoped would be reassuring. "Wysteri is *fine* ." He stressed the word. "She went to visit with another physician. She didn't tell you?"

Nomar rocked his head. "No." He narrowed his golden eyes and he leaned toward Bannor. "She is safe?"

"Really," Bannor bent away from the huge creature. Those hands could smash blocks of steel if he chose. "She's with a class twelve physician getting an--" He frowned at the word. "Upgrade."

Nomar's stern countenance broke, and he relaxed. "An upgrade? How could she afford--" His head turned to Cassin.

The gold woman raised an eyebrow. " *Searga* Nomar, truly, she is with our family cybermed. She will come to no harm. She is not being bound or inhibited."

Nomar rubbed his bald metal pate. "I apologize, I get concerned and--" He hung his head. If the creature could color he would have.

"Mercedes promised to have her back in a bell," Bannor told him. "It's been half that now, so she'll return soon."

Nomar pressed his hands together and made a little bow. "Yes. My apologies. Thank you for your time."

The big creature swung around and withdrew with ground-shaking steps.

The Queen folded her arms and licked her lips. She shook her

head.

Ryelle leaned her head back with a pained expression. "Mother, are we sure the citadel is ready for metal creatures in love?"

"I don't know," Janai said eying her older sister. "I think it's kind of cute. He's like a big five hundred stone puppy..."

Sarai tilted her head watching as the boomer rejoined its comrades. "A really protective puppy with great *big* teeth."

King Jhaan looked to Cassin. "Didn't you just finish saying these creatures were *stable* ."

"Being concerned and in love isn't unstable," Cassin shrugged. "If he got violent and threatened-- *that* would be unstable. Honestly, to evoke more than a 'harsh talking to' takes serious provocative action."

"Kidnapping his girlfriend wouldn't qualify as 'provocative'?" Sarai asked.

Cassin frowned. "If he felt his life or hers were threatened he might thump somebody. In the decade I have worked with them, I have never seen them act irrationally. Violence is not how they express themselves or solve their problems. As you noticed, they are too smart for that."

"Yes," King Jhaan said rubbing his chin. "Your mother was saying that we should allow them to separate their hosts. Would you recommend that?"

"Well, it would make them less jumpy," Cassin answered. "If you plan to keep them, that would be a gesture of good faith."

"How much space would they need?"

"Since they are all from the same subnet, the only one who will want a separate host chamber will be their physician. A good secure room with a high roof about ten paces square. One of the ghost vaults would be optimal, because that would keep someone from accidentally stumbling over all the strange

artifices."

"A good point," King Jhaan said with a nod. "There is plenty of room in the lower vault. Lady Cassin, might we impose upon you to supervise that activity?"

The gold girl glanced at her Mother. She bowed. "Of course. Megan can get me access, yes?"

"Yes," Kalindinai told her. "In the vault, go through three arches, on the left you will see an open space adequate for what you described."

"May I have permission to take two of their engineers down there to fabricate the necessities?"

"Granted," the King said.

Cassin bowed. "After the hosts are arranged, I will consult with them about acceptable frame designs. With their physician getting an upgrade, we should be able to swing something a little more discrete and Elvish."

"That would be greatly appreciated, Lady Cassin," Kalindinai said.

Bannor blinked as his view of the room grew fuzzy. He felt a wave of weakness and had to lock his legs straight. The dizziness passed but he knew he needed to find someplace to sit down and regain his strength.

Cassin nodded to everyone and stepped over to speak with Megan.

Kalindinai watched Cassin walk away. She looked to Cassandra. "Your daughter seems quite capable."

"I depend on Cassin for a lot," Cassandra said, pushing a hand through her auburn hair.

Bannor let out a breath. "Well, believe it or not, I need to lie down."

Sarai came and put a hand on his arm. "My One?"

He shook his head. "I had five dreads pummeling me, I got stabbed with a sword, and I used a *lot* of power." He let out a breath. "As awesome as this body is, it's telling me to lay down for a bit."

The Queen looked around. "The east antechamber should be undamaged. There's a good sturdy divan in there where you could lay down for a bit."

He bowed. "Thank you, Matradomma. Mercedes says she will come to you directly, so--"

"Bannor, rest," the Queen said interrupting him. She put a hand against his chest. "You've done a lot in the last few bells. I'm not surprised it's starting to wear on you a bit." She looked to Sarai. "Take care of your One, would you?"

Sarai sighed. "Yes, Mother." She looked up at him and took his arm.

He nodded to the King and Queen, then Cassandra and Sarai's sisters, then let Sarai lead him across the chamber toward an archway. The room on the other side was obviously a place for petitioners to wait for the consultation with the royal council. A large crystal chandelier hung in the middle of a rectangular room with posh cloth-covered walls. Two large divans and accompanying sideboards occupied each side of the room.

Sarai pushed him down on one of the divans, which protested with a loud groan.

She shook her head. "These immortal bodies may feel great, but they sure are a torture on furniture."

Bannor smiled. "There's a downside to everything." He started undoing the buckles and straps on the Kriar battle armor.

He looked at couple of the plates and shook his head. "This stuff is incredible."

"Oh, how's that?" Sarai said.

"Those dreads were hitting me hard enough to crush rocks and bend steel." He held up one of the black shoulder pads that still had a mirror sheen to its surface. "Not a mark."

"Didn't help much when that monster stuck you with the sword. It scared the life out of me!"

He rubbed his stomach still feeling the soreness after the healing. "It has to have joints or you can't move. That guy was just insanely good, and me lumbering around like a drunk statue... I might as well have posed for him."

She put her hand over his. Her warm fingers caressed his knuckles. "Does it still hurt?"

"Some," he answered with a frown. "I feel great for being dead though."

Sarai leaned in and gave him a kiss. "You look great for being dead to." She turned her head. "I like the gold eyes. This face, somehow it's more *you* ."

He leaned back. "I can't believe you just said that."

Her brow furrowed. "What? Why?"

"When Arabella was you, she said the same thing."

Sarai frowned and let out a breath. "Bards. I guess she knew her subject."

"Star, I'm still embarrassed I didn't see through the disguise sooner."

She stroked his face. "Bannor, it was a deception done by an eternal. I don't feel bad at all because you *did* see through it. It wasn't like there weren't distractions."

"I suppose." He finished taking off the chest plate, thigh guards,

and greaves and put them aside. He pulled off the gauntlets and arranged his weapons where they would be out of the way but within reach.

Sarai sat down on one end of the divan and he swung his legs up and put his head in her lap.

The drained weak feeling and the dizziness just barely kept at bay vanished after a few deep breaths. "Mmmm," he said. "That's better. I love you."

"I love you too," she tilted her face and stroked his brow. She hummed a little tune.

He smiled. "You're in no big hurry to get changed again are you?"

"Not hardly," she answered. "I like these tough hardy bodies. They don't get tired, they heal fast--and to my dismay--don't feel pain in a battle. If there's something not to like, I don't see it."

"It's not you. Not the you I met. Not the you I know."

She frowned down at him. "I know how I look doesn't matter a whit to you. To some other man maybe, but not you."

He closed his eyes. "True. The only thing that matters to me is that you are happy, safe, and healthy." He drew another breath. The feeling of strength and euphoria was slowly creeping back. "Can I at least keep the violet eyes and those cute ears?"

She brushed at her hair. "I didn't realize you liked the ears."

He grinned. "I know nibbling on those little points makes you randy."

Sarai put a hand on his chest and sighed. "I knew there was a reason I was marrying you."

He covered her hand with his. He looked at those fingers. It was a strong hand, a hand that had gripped a sword and fought many a battle. Still, the nails were long enough to be considered

feminine and well tended. It wasn't Sarai's hand, but as she said, what shape she was in really didn't matter, as long as she was there with him.

They were both quiet for a while. With his head next to her abdomen he could hear the beat of her heart, and feel each breath she took. Just being near her was soothing.

"Bannor?"

"Hmmm?"

"Do you think the Baronians are coming back?"

He didn't hesitate. "Yes."

She was quiet for a few moments. "I'm afraid I'll lose you."

"Star, I feel like that every day. I wonder if you won't just give up the madness, and take some safe, boring, accepted elf instead of me."

"My one, safe has never been my style, I would rather eat dragon doo than be bored, and doing the accepted thing is how one fails to innovate or inspire change."

"Inspiring change are we now?"

"Yes, our little Vhina is going to change a lot of things."

"She's going to change our lives to be certain," he said. "I just hope we can end this and can make a safe place for the three of us to live together."

"Bannor, you can make our home safe, you have the power."

"Yes, but I--" He paused. "What did you say?"

"You have the power."

"No, before that."

"You can make our home safe?"

He let out a breath. It should have occurred to him sooner. That had to be it. "Sarai, let me ask you a question."

"Sure."

"If you had to fight a prolonged battle with an enemy, where would you hole up?"

"The most defensible place, the area where I was most familiar with the terrain."

"Okay, and if you're looking for something where are you least likely to look?"

He felt her nails scrape along the surface of his chest. "Someplace I already looked."

"Or someplace it shouldn't be," Bannor said. "The Kriar are looking for the Baronians. Where are they not going to look?"

Sarai's hand pressed down on his chest. "On their own Homeworld!"

"Right. The Baronians have been fighting Karanganoi Kriar for millennia on *their* Homeworld. It's familiar, defensible territory. If the Daergons let them on board, they could disappear, the place is so huge you could search for a thousand years and never find them."

"It's such a brazen move."

"You admit it sounds like the Baronians though, doesn't it?"

"We have Senalloy as our model, it's definitely something they'd do."

"See, all along it was bothering me. The more I saw of the Kriar artifices, the more I wondered why they hadn't been able to find a million man army. Then Cassin and Annawen brought out this thing with Kriar insurgents helping the Baronians. Then it just

occurred to me... all that unused space--whole cities just standing empty. To effectively hide the Baronians, all they had to do was bring them on board."

"I doubt any of the Kriar thought the Daergons would be crazy enough to ally with the very people that enslaved the Karanganoi Kriar. To invite them in... that's just..."

He opened his eyes. "It doesn't matter what it is. What we have to do is convince the Kriar to search there--and figure out a way to find them if they're using that magical stealth to cover themselves."

"So, what do we do?" she asked him, green eyes gazing into his.

Bannor reached up and touched her face. He really had changed, not just on the outside. "Right now, we're going to rest here together until Mercedes calls us."

"After that?" Sarai asked.

"After that..." Bannor's voice trailed off. "I'm going eat something. I'm hungry!"

"That's it?"

"No, I think I'll go back to our quarters and get all this dread blood off me... I stink."

"What about the Baronians?"

"Oh, I suppose I might call Wren in there someplace and see if I can't convince the Vatraena to start an investigation."

"I don't understand. Why are you suddenly so relaxed about it?"

"Star, they'll be back, but they won't be back in a hurry. That commander saw me punch out that dread. I saw his threads, I shook him--and these Baronians don't shake easily." He stretched out, crossed his legs, and put a hand behind his head. "This citadel is already a tough nut, and there's elders and Kriar

out there putting their minds together to make it even tougher. The Baronians threw what they thought was total overkill at us, and we stopped them cold. They stuck their hand in the larder and pulled back a bloody stump."

Sarai looked down at him. "You're scaring me, Bannor. Why are you confident all of sudden?"

He drew a breath and pressed his face into her middle. "Star, the known I can deal with, it's the *unknown* that scares me. The Baronians may have worse things in store, but Marna gave me something I've never had in all the fights we've had before this."

"What's that?"

"An advantage."

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Chapter Twenty

Kriar Confession

Maybe being in that first one body made me cocky, but it's hard not to feel a little bit of confidence when you can kill a rhinotaur with a single hit...

**-- Bannor Nalthane Starfist,
Prince Conjugal of Malan**

Bannor roused to the feel of someone pushing against his shoulder. The waiting room was dark, and all he could see was a silhouette and a pair of glowing amber eyes. He heard Sarai murmur and he realized she had stretched out next to him and had her head on his chest and her legs tangled with his.

"Brother-to-be, come, you and Sarai must be hungry."

It was Janai's voice.

"Hmmm?" He blinked. How long had they been asleep? He ran a hand through Sarai's hair. "Star?"

She moved. "Mmmm comfortable."

"Sister," Janai nudged her. "Mother and Father are waiting for us in the banquet chamber."

"Uhhh?" Sarai pushed herself up. "I must--urrr," she stretched. "I must have fallen asleep." She pushed a hand through her hair blinking in the darkness. "Damn, I can barely see anything. What time is it?"

"Around seven bells."

"Seven?" Sarai let out, disentangling herself from around him.

Bannor sat up and rubbed his face. The time came as something of a shock to him as well. "Why didn't someone call us?"

Janai snorted. "This would qualify as a *call* ." The princess went to a wall sconce and uncapped the mage-light, bathing the room in a golden illumination.

The second princess was dressed in a Malanian military uniform, complete with armor and sword. Her dark hair was battle braided and set with diamond combs.

"Ewph." Sarai flinched away from the radiance, shielding her eyes. "He means why not earlier?"

"You two were exhausted, so Mother said to let you sleep."

Sarai stood up and eyed her sister. She fingered the rank insignia on Janai's shoulder. "A militia uniform? Since when?"

The princess put hands on hips and glared at her. "Since we started fighting for our lives inside the walls of our own citadel!"

His fiance tilted her head. "Is that all it took? Father should have arranged for an invasion sooner."

Janai stuck out her tongue and made a puttering sound.

He stretched and unkinked his neck, then smiled at Janai. "Sister, I think you look *stunning* in a uniform."

Janai made a little bow to him. "Thank you, Brother. At least, *somebody* appreciates the sacrifices I make." She cast a look at Sarai.

Sarai rolled her eyes.

He started fastening his armor back on, and the two sisters helped him.

"These straps are interesting," Janai said, snugging up his shoulder plate. "No catches, just tighten and fold it over." She picked up the other pauldron and weighed it in her hand. "And this armor is so light, it's like leather."

"The Kriar make some wizard equipment to be sure," he said.

He sheathed his weapons and made sure he had everything, then held out a hand to Sarai. She stepped close and put her arm through his.

"Lead on," he said with a nod to Janai.

The princess led the way back out to the council chamber that now looked completely untouched. Nothing about the broad audience hall indicated that it had been the site of a vicious battle. Every piece of cratered stone, ripped cloth, and broken furniture restored to their original state. The mecha were no-where in sight.

"So, did Mercedes bring Wysteri back?" he asked.

"Yes, about a bell after you went to rest," Janai answered, looking back. "Mother has been keeping her and Mercedes busy. They've been acclimating our new--" The princess paused. "Our

new retainers."

They turned down the hall. It looked like in the bells they had been asleep that all the renovations had been completed. He felt guilty. He should have been assisting.

"Mercedes is helping?" Bannor asked.

"Yes," Janai said. "Mother cornered Bronawyn, and said that for a seat in the front row that we should get Mercedes for the day."

"And I missed it?" Sarai groaned. "I so much would have liked to have seen that!"

"Mother had on her best spurs too, let me tell you. With Cassandra there, Bronawyn just couldn't squirm out of it, not with half their family looking on."

"So, is Wysteri happy?"

"Oh, she's preening like a newly crowned princess," Janai answered with a flip of her hand. "Something about being class eight. All the mechas are bowing and scraping like she's their new savior or something." The princess rubbed her cheek. "I must admit though, she is a potent healer. Although, upon seeing them work, it's considerably more than healing. More like a *shape former*."

"We only saw a little of what Mercedes could do," Bannor said. "I think we both got the idea of what she was capable of."

As they headed down the stairs, Bannor heard the murmuring of a large crowd of people. The smell of baking bread and roasting meat touched his nostrils. He tilted his head back and sniffed. His mouth started watering. "Food," he murmured. "Damn, that just reminded me of how hungry I am."

Sarai licked her lips. She rubbed her stomach. "My One, I will join you in that vote of hunger."

Janai took them in through the west entrance of the same tiered hall where the party had been held the night previous. Tables

had been set up on the various stepped levels and from appearances everyone involved in the defense of Kul'Amaron was present. There were at least a dozen elves that he did not recognize that he assumed were the mecha in their new forms as retainers. Though they looked like elves, he saw from their threads that while they looked like flesh and blood, they retained some of the characteristics of artifices. There were some mecha that still looked like artifices, but their shapes were now more stylized with flourishes that made them look like Elven constructs.

With valkyries, elders, Kriar, and the Felspar clan, it was a full hall indeed. With none of the non-combatant staff present in the citadel, the gathering was a serve-yourself affair with a huge buffet of different foods. Bannor didn't know who cooked the feast of breads, cheeses, and other dishes but it smelled just fine.

Having spent time with the Millicent, Kylie, and Jhord, it was no surprise to Bannor that the valkyries were having a good time. The hall echoed with their laughter. The Aesir maidens of battle fought and partied with equal intensity. What surprised him was the Kriar men and women. The ancient creatures were so reserved, it seemed a stretch for them to even smile. Not tonight, not only were they smiling, they were laughing. More than one of the males had the female companionship of a valkur maiden. Scattered through the assemblage he saw other faces he recognized. Corim, Senalloy, and Luthice sat together with Cassin, Annawen, Sindra, and Drucilla. Cassandra, Dorian, and a blond man he didn't know, Elsbeth, Gabriella, Megan, and Ryelle sat at a table with the King and Queen. Bannor noticed three empty chairs probably meant for them.

Bannor nodded to Corim as they walked by and the burly warrior raised a cup to him. The dark-haired fighter had his feet up and seemed to be enjoying himself.

Bannor looked around. Perhaps he wasn't the only one that had come to the conclusion that they had some time to recoup their strength.

The three of them turned to climb up to the King and Queen's

private table, and Bannor felt a tug on his arm.

He looked back and saw Wysteri. The gold-eyed, purple-haired mecha was dressed in a glossy red silk court robe with silver chasing. Though there was no actual visual difference in her appearance there was definitely a new shine in her glowing eyes.

"Bannor?"

He nodded to her. "Lady Wysteri."

He noticed Mercedes, dressed in a lavender colored wrap, was still with her. Four rather formidable looking elves hovered just a few steps behind her.

"I wanted to thank you for helping my subnet and I." She lowered her head. "I tried to deceive you, and you didn't get angry with me."

He shrugged. "It was a white lie." He lowered his chin. "Just don't do it again."

Wysteri focused wide eyes on him and nodded solemnly. "After the meal or any time you're ready. We're ready to consult with Sarai. We have already discussed at length with Matraddomma what she wants."

Sarai put hands on hips. "What about what I want? Do I get a say?"

Wysteri colored. "Of course, Arminwen. I--" She glanced up to the platform where the King and Queen waited. "She is your mother *and* the Queen. If we fail to listen quite attentively it could be-- *unpleasant*."

He nudged Sarai. "She's been here less than a day, and she knows exactly how things work around here. Do what you're told and you don't get hurt."

"Bannor," Sarai growled.

He leaned close. "I understand about Matraddomma. She scares

me too."

Wysteri colored again.

"Brother," Janai said with a shake of her head. "You're funny."

"Janai, someday I hope you get a mother-in-law half as scary so we can compare notes."

Sarai slapped his shoulder.

"Ladies," Bannor nodded to Wysteri and then to Mercedes.

"Sarai and I will talk about it during the meal, and decide when is best to consult with you. Thank you for your courtesy, I hope you enjoy the evening."

Wysteri bowed. "Enjoy your meal."

The three of them climbed the stairs to the platform.

"You are getting better at your manners, Bannor," Janai remarked. "To hear you speak them in Elvish is something I never thought I would see."

"I had a *lot* of help," he answered as they took the last step. He bowed to the King and Queen, took Sarai's elbow and led Sarai to the second position from Ryelle.

"Ladies, Lords," he greeted everyone.

"You look much better, Bannor," Kalindinaï said to him as he seated himself carefully.

"Thank you, Matradomma, I *feel* much better. I guess there are limits even for an ascendant."

"Bannor, Arminwen Sarai," Dorian said. "Let me introduce my husband. This is Archmage Brin Ishtarvariku."

The blond man rose part way from his chair at Dorian's right and made a little bow to them.

He and Sarai greeted the new individual. Who, if Sarai's expression were any indication, was extremely handsome. He looked somewhat girlish to Bannor, not enough angles to him. He did have a broad set to his shoulders and corded arms that suggested strength.

Bannor looked around. "This is a pretty amazing show of strength isn't it?"

"It is indeed," the King said taking a sip from his goblet. "I had thought the party yesternight to be a memorable assemblage, this one is its equal if not its better."

"I am just thankful that we did not lose anyone," Ryelle said at the Queen's side. "It is quite amazing that we did not."

"I think we can thank the teaming for that," Megan said, making a little salute with her cup. "And the warning given to us by Bannor." She nodded down the table to him.

"Simply trying to do my part," he answered. "In keeping with that, while I was resting, I think I may have an answer to location of our adversaries."

"That must have been inspiring rest!" King Jhaan said with smile. "Pray, what is the answer?"

Bannor took the cup beside his plate and took a sip. His throat was parched. They had already brought some things to eat from the buffet for them. He was eager to get to it. "I think the Daergons are hiding the fox in the henhouse."

"On Homeworld?" Megan said. "Talk about clasping a snake to your breast. Can even the Daergons be that crazy?"

"I thought about what Bannor said," Sarai offered, swishing wine around in her chalice. "The Daergons may not even know themselves. Bannor rightly told me that these Baronians are experienced at combat on the other Kriar Homeworld. They know their artifices and weaknesses. If this world of theirs is as big as he says--they would be virtually impossible to find."

Cassandra chewed on a lacquered nail. "It may even have occurred to the Kriar military advisors, but they wouldn't conduct a serious search--not without stronger evidence--it would panic the populous."

"You know," Dorian said. "We've never really dug out of Luthice how they took Karanganoi Homeworld. It may have been something like this. Hide in plain sight, fight from the inside and strike at vital locations. The fact that the Kriar tend to spread themselves so thin makes the tactic viable."

"So," Kalindinaï asked. "What evidence pointed you in this line of thinking?"

"No evidence really, just the fact that the Kriar can go anywhere and anytime they want. There's this giant army being ferried around on these titanic void craft. How could the Kriar *not* find them unless they were somewhere the Kriar didn't *want* to look?" He looked around the table. "From Marna's description their ruling council is in denial about this threat. I doubt their leadership is ready to face the idea that the enemy are not only at the front door but already in residence."

Red-haired Elsbeth who was sitting next to Megan put a hand on the air-maiden's shoulder. "He's right, they are so confident in their defenses, they wouldn't seriously entertain the thought. It would bring too many things into question."

"The question is," Gabriella said, twirling a finger in her dark hair. "How do you conduct a search in a place where you can hide a hundred million planets? Especially when the keepers are conflicted and even have insurgents who would actively work against the process."

"A hundred *million* , Lady Gabriella?" Kalindinaï said with a frown. "You jest, where do you get such a preposterous number?"

"Research. If you go entirely by volume, it's more, but there's the necessity for artifices that make the different sections habitable. That and even after millions of generations the Kriar simply haven't been able really utilize the space, so there are

probably still vast areas that are just empty voids."

"She's right," Cassandra said with a shake of her head. "It's so huge it's ludicrous. It really reinforces Bannor's theory. The Baronians can hide anywhere in the universe, but under the noses of the Kriar is one of the safest because of the silly politics of the situation, and the fact that their Homeworld is practically a universe unto itself."

"Shall we call up Tarkath Chauser and inquire?" the King asked.

"Yes," Queen Kalindinai said. "I want to hear his response."

The rest of the people at the royal table nodded.

"I'll call him," Megan said.

The air maiden didn't visibly move or do anything, but the Kriar officer stood up from one of the nearby tables, nodded to the two valkyries with him, and floated up to their platform.

He nodded to the King and Queen and to the others.

"Tarkath, might we consult with you a moment?"

The Kriar made a little dip of his head and put his hands behind his back. The sparkles in the Kriar's eyes dimmed. He seemed to feel the tension of the people at the table.

"Our friend Bannor mentioned the possibility that the Baronians might be operating out of Homeworld itself. Has that possibility been seriously considered?"

Chauser, who had a perchance for sour faces, made a particularly pained wince. <Yes.>

"Yes?" the King leaned forward, his cheeks starting to color. "No more elaboration than that?"

The Kriar gritted his teeth. <Yes--certain inquiries along this line have been entertained.>

"Is Counsel Solaris aware of these inquiries?"

<She is,> Chauser answered. <She ordered an analysis of the possibility to be performed by Sabre legion.>

"What were Sabre legion's findings?"

<That there was significant statistical probably given the psychology of the enemy, the current evolution of their stealth techniques, and the number of unmonitored zones on Homeworld.>

"So, given that, it has not been pursued?"

Chauser scrubbed his forehead in a very uncharacteristic display of agitation for a Kriar. <King T'Evagduran, I wish I had an acceptable answer for this. I am merely a soldier, I answer to higher ups. All we can do is make recommendations. When the bureaucracy starts making statements about sufficient foundation, resources, and public confidence we in the military know that rational discourse has--> He drew a breath and seemed to draw on his resolve. <That rational discourse has left the building.> He looked around to the faces at the table. <There is no official search ongoing, but there is an unofficial one. The problem is one of limited resources and other *political* barriers.> He leaned close to the table his thoughts growing softer. <There is a high-ranking councilor who used to be a supporter of the Daergons. It was anonymously suggested that he had recently played host to a rather large number of guests. It's a sensitive issue that's being probed-- *delicately*.>

"I like not the delicacy of this matter, or the harboring of a murderous horde," Kalindinai snapped, coming to her feet. "If they are indeed there. Then the military should get a firm grip on its genitals, set matters straight, then deal with the political fallout."

"Kal, behave," the King said, pulling her back down to her chair. "You know as well as I do that this situation is not so different from a similar one that we must handle." He focused on Tarkath Chauser. "While our resources are also limited, some elements of them are very effective, especially at seeing things otherwise

hidden." He cast his gaze toward Bannor.

Chauser let out a breath and folded his arms. <Since we became aware of that possibility, that has been discussed internally. The most effective way to make use of it is under unofficial consideration.> He looked around. <We would have informed you when a plan of action had been formulated.>

"I sure hope that's true," Kalindinai growled.

King Jhaan frowned at his wife. "Tarkath, we apologize for confronting you on this, but we *do* have a vested interest in the success of this mission."

The Tarkath looked side to side like he might be overheard. <I understand. I share your concern.> He let out a breath. <You see my people?> He gestured to the male and female Kriar around the room enjoying themselves. <They came to this fight with great concern. The defeat of the Karanganoi is well known. The Vatraena told us to trust the powers of Shael Dal, the Felspars, and this family--that if we treated you like our own that we would do well.> He pressed his hands together. <We had a few serious injuries, but no-one was lost. One hundred and twelve died on the way-point against a force significantly weaker than what we faced here. We demonstrated that the Baronians can be defeated, not only by a narrow margin, but soundly--by simply putting our hands in yours.> He reached across the table to the King.

Jhaan T'Evagduran rose and took the offered hand and shook. "Let us hope cooperation will continue to yield such promising results."

Chauser nodded. He swung around and floated back down to the table where he had been.

"Well, that was a dignified end to an otherwise ugly situation," Ryelle said. "I had no idea they were so impressed by the success of the battle."

"If they acted impressed, it would reveal the false confidence they showed during the planning meetings," Cassandra said.

"They were prepared to get slaughtered."

"So, Brother," Janai said with a grin. "How does it feel to be right again?"

He took a sip of wine. On another occasion he would have enjoyed the flavor a great deal. Now, it merely quenched his thirst. "It's not for certain. It just shows that it occurred to smarter people than me bells ago."

"Chauser's statement about one of the ex-Daergons hiding them just has a stink to it that must be true," Cassandra said. "Especially, if they are collaborating to overthrow the council."

"Well," King Jhaan said. "That's enough battle talk. We digested enough war. Let us feed our bodies and rest our minds. There will be plenty of opportunity for grim speculation later."

Bannor was glad the King dropped the subject for the time being. He knew they would have to take some kind of drastic action. He just didn't want to confront it before he'd had a chance to gather his strength and focus. Strange, when he wore a fragile mortal body he used to throw himself at the problem even when the danger was great. Now that there was less risk, he found himself wanting to take his time. The possible reasons for that were disturbing.

He pushed the troubling thoughts out of his head and focused on food and drink. Both he and Sarai consumed a prodigious amount of both. The talk of the table was light and entertaining. He found the Felspar matriarchs, Megan, Gabriella, and Elsbeth all to be fascinating conversationalists. He found himself simply listening to their voices. Mages, especially mages as talented as these ladies, simply had a mesmerizing way of speaking.

Sarai fielded a few questions concerning the wedding, things like what they would wear, what kind of entertainment was planned, and what they would do to celebrate the sealing of their nuptials.

"Thinking of the wedding, that reminds me," Kalindinai said turning to Bannor. "We had an agreement."

Lost in the moment, he stared at the Queen with a perplexed expression.

Kalindinai gestured and a set of jeweled pipes appeared in her hand. She held them up. "Remember?"

He blinked. "Oh. Ummm, now?"

"When better?" the Queen asked with an arch expression.

The others at the table gave him a little polite applause of encouragement.

"Uh, okay."

The Queen handed the pipes down the table to him. He took them in his hand and massaged the smooth metallic surface. He glanced at Sarai. She smiled and nodded to him. He longed to see those glowing violent eyes again.

He fingered the pipes and looked around the table. "Pardon my not being very good at this yet."

Bannor closed his eyes and thought of the pipe song he had played for Sarai in Malbraion hall. He remembered the tears that glistened on her cheeks. Sometimes it was amazing how something so simple could make the princess-who-had-everything happy.

He blew a pure unwavering note, not really thinking about the tune so much, but simply letting instinct guide him. The breaths were easy, and his fingers pulsed over the reeds as the ceremony song rose and fell. He stared into Sarai's eyes, and then into the eyes of each of her sisters, and finally at the Queen. As the tune rose and fell through the scales of groom's commitments, he looked at each of those fine ladies and played for each of them, adding flourishes and emphasis, Sarai's determination, Ryelle's wisdom, Janai's passion, and Kalindinai's power. The song trilled to its conclusion and head bowed he pulled the pipes from his lips.

He realized that the whole room was silent. A knife clattered on a plate. He looked up. Everyone in the chamber was staring at him.

Bannor blinked. Was it that bad? It didn't sound like he messed it up too much.

Somewhere behind him someone started clapping. "Damn, Bannor, get any better and you'll put me out of a job!"

He glanced toward the sound and saw Arabella on the tier below looking up. She brushed back her red hair and raised her cup to him.

Slowly others around the room started applauding, including the King and Queen.

Bannor felt his face grow hot. "Uh, does that mean I pass?"

Kalindinai rolled her eyes. "Yes, Bannor, that is sufficient."

Sarai kissed him on the cheek. "Even better than the first time, my One..."

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Chapter Twenty-One

Incarnations

I have been an elf, an elemental, an immortal, a first one, and a valkyrie. Now, I'm going to be a bride, a wife and a mother as well. I am just glad that my One loves me in all my guises...

**-- Sarai T'Evagduran,
Third Princess of Malan**

The supper eventually wound down, and after Megan's arch inquiry as to how long Sarai would be staying in her sister's shape, they decided to approach Wysteri and do the consultation.

They waited for the healer at the exit as people filed out, going to different berths that the King and Queen had established for them. Several of the valkyries who knew him from Gladshiem nodded to him and thumped him on the shoulder as they passed.

Wysteri and Mercedes and what had obviously become their mecha honor guard came out near the end. He noticed that mild Mercedes had a rosy glow to her cheeks that was far more than the product of being in a good mood.

"Good evening, Arminwen--Bannor," Wysteri said to them with smile. The Karanganoi healer seemed in high spirits herself. "Am I to take it that you've decided to go ahead?"

"We have," Bannor said. He looked to Mercedes. "Milady, are you all right?"

Mercedes leaned forward, made a sodden grin and raised a finger. "I am better than all right, thank you," she slurred. "You know--" She blinked. "You know, fermented--fermented drinksh can affect your judgment?"

Sarai looked at the pale-skinned healer with a tilted head. "You don't say."

"Yesh," Mercedes peered around with an owlish expression. "Ale, beer, stout, dry wines... bah, dain bramaging gear lubricant!" She held up a green flask. "Now thish..." She wavered and one of the mecha steadied her. "I never--I--it--it's... *goood!*"

Sarai leaned over and peered at the label. "My father's Dolondil stock."

Bannor glanced at Wysteri. "Is she going to be okay?"

"She will be fine," Wysteri said, rubbing Mercedes' shoulder.

"Sometimes we let our interface body succumb a little just for feel."

"I don't think she can feel anything," Sarai said with a laugh.

Mercedes pointed a finger. "And feelsh great, thanksh for asking."

"I take it she doesn't get to let her hair down often?" Bannor said.

Wysteri leaned close. "Milord, please don't mention it to Lady Bronawyn, she would be very cross."

"Brat," Mercedes mumbled. "Silver pin-- *hic*--pinching little troll. She's so mean sometimes. I tra--tra--treat her like my own daw--daw--like my child." She sniffed. "She could show some--appresh--appresh--could be nice once in while."

"I think you should take care of Mercedes first. We can wait."

Wysteri bowed to them. "Come Mercedes, let's get you someplace safe."

Mercedes stumbled up to Sarai, and patted her on the shoulder. "Yer--you're--not like that brat. You're a goo--ghood girl. I can tell. I did--I did a great job on yo--your shape. Some--some of my bestest work."

Sarai leaned back from the healer's breath a bit. "Is that so?"

"Tippy--" She gestured with her finger and swayed. "Tippy... top. Cause--" She blinked. "Cause I like you. You didn't take--didn't take any of Bronawyn's doo-doo." She leaned in close to Sarai. "Ban--Bannor loves you a lot you know? Wha--what doesh that feel like?"

"Mercedes, come along," Wysteri insisted, pulling on her.

"Oh o-okay." She patted Sarai's shoulder again and pushed away. "You en-enjoy that body. Wysty she--she'll do a good job." She thumped Wysteri on the back. "I taught her--taught

her everything she knows."

"Riiight," Wysteri said, massaging Mercedes shoulders. "Come on." The Karanganoi healer with the help of the two guards lead the sodden physician away.

Sarai stared after them until they were out of sight. "They are getting more and more human every time I encounter them. It's starting to scare me."

Wysteri returned a short time later and bowed to Sarai. The purple-haired healer's face was flushed, she was obviously embarrassed by the display. "Arminwen, I hope you do not get the idea that such things happen often."

Sarai looked at Wysteri with one eye closed. "Dealing with *Keshira* Bronawyn on a daily basis would drive anyone to drink."

Wysteri led them to another part of the Kul'Amaron, one that Bannor had been to many times, the royal infirmary. He had spent altogether too much time there recovering after his battle with Odin. Even though magical healing had sealed his wounds, it was many treatments and foul tasting medicines to get a measure of his strength back. Even as recently as two days ago, simply climbing over a fence had been painful.

The contents of the infirmary didn't appear to have changed much, there were still a dozen pallets arranged in the long rectangular chamber. A couple of large stone operating slabs sat at the further end where books, herbs, and apothecary equipment were all arranged on shelves and counters. The one thing that stood out as different was the floor and walls. The stone gleamed as if the dull gray surfaces had somehow been polished to perfect smoothness. If there was a single spot of dust in the chamber, Bannor felt that even using the powers of his nola he'd be hard pressed to find it.

"My," Sarai said looking around with hands on hips. "You sure cleaned up in here."

"Some of the artifices I use are very sensitive to dirt."

"So, I take it Mother plans to use your services in an official capacity?"

Wysteri nodded. "General medical consultation, nothing too far in advance of the healing already performed here. My *special* services will be more private." The mecha moved down to the far end of the room, gesturing them to follow.

As they approached the blank wall, a bluish-light pulsed in the healer's golden eyes. A door-sized piece of the wall faded out revealing a short passage ending in another door.

Sarai ran her hand along the edge of the opening. "Was that an illusion covering the opening? I know this space didn't exist before."

Wysteri shook her head. "A little Kriar *magic* ." She pointed to a pair of black boxes that protruded down from the middle of the passage ceiling. She gestured them in.

When all three of them were across the threshold she looked up at the boxes and the light flickered in her eyes. A beam of red light lanced out from the boxes sketching back and forth across the opening in rapid lines. Where the light moved, the wall reappeared. In only a few heartbeats the opening had been replaced by solid material.

Bannor ran his hand against the surface. It was cool to the touch and solid. Sarai knocked on it with her knuckles. The material made a clonking that must be metal and not stone.

Sarai looked back at Wysteri. "That's a pretty secure door."

The mecha bowed. "It is meant to be. The stone in this area has been augmented by a hand's worth of metal that is four times more durable than Elven mithril."

"A hand's worth?" Bannor held up his fist. "What are you trying to keep out?"

"The dreads could be back, could they not?"

He closed his eyes. "Good point."

"I had the engineers integrate gate distortion and teleportation prevention within this lab," Wysteri said as she stepped to the door. She placed her hand on a black square near the threshold and the metal slid aside revealing another chamber considerably smaller than the outer area.

As Wysteri stepped in, an eerie greenish light illuminated the room. Tiny bluish traces shot back and forth across the glossy surface underfoot as she stepped out toward middle of the chamber. The whole room hummed with potential. Clear crystalline disks, each about a pace across, were situated two to each wall. Thousands of filaments ran up the walls from them and across the ceiling to a black hemisphere that hung down from the ceiling over an elaborate metal table. Aside from the table there was a cylinder that was, to Bannor's eyes, almost identical to the ones that had created his body and those of the other ascendants. Along the back wall was a counter with shelves above it. Three rectangular crystals with lines of glowing symbols scrolling through them sat on stands protruding from the flat surface. Raised grids of buttons were situated in front of each of the crystals. In the far corner stood a black cube, out of which ran thousands of glowing filaments that seemed to connect into everything in the room. Multicolored jewels pulsed in the machine's surface.

Sarai looked around the chamber with an uncomfortable expression. It did look and feel-- *alien*. There could be no doubt about the power in this place though.

"Wysteri," Sarai asked. "Didn't my mother request to see this?"

The healer looked back. "She said she would come hold your hand if you wanted."

His fiancée folded her arms. "Mother said that? She was so adamant about being involved earlier."

Wysteri rolled her gold eyes. "She watched me perform three or four dozen procedures. To be honest, I think she grew bored of it. It's really only interesting if you're designing or doing

diagnosis."

Sarai looked around, still obviously uncomfortable but not wanting to show it. Bannor put his arm around her. She immediately snuggled close.

"So, what are these things?" she asked indicating the table, cylinder, and the crystals with a wave of her hand.

Wysteri gestured to the metal table and touched something on its side. With a humming whine the table pivoted up so that it was standing nearly perpendicular. Bannor noticed that the bed was slightly concave and that tiny blue jewels laid out in a grid covered its surface.

"This is the diagnostic table," Wysteri told them. "For most general analysis, the artifices built into my eyes and my hands are sufficient. For when I must view particularly complex structures or deal with scan resistant materials and entities I have the table. Typically, the table is my way to double check what I diagnosed with my personal sensors." She swung around and pointed to the cylinder. "That is the matter/energy treatment chamber--where we put you to give you your new body." She turned toward the back of the room. "In the back are the design and analysis consoles. That's where Mercedes and I worked out your new shape."

Bannor could tell Sarai was just building up her courage, and this show of curiosity was her way of delaying. "What's that there?" She pointed to the black box in the corner.

Wysteri looked over at it and then back to Sarai. "That's *me*. "

"Huh?"

"I would wave, but as you can see, I don't have anything to wave with." Wysteri saw the frown on Sarai's face. "Here, I'll wink at you." All of the jewels on the side of the box turned green went dark then glowed green again.

She shook her head. "So, what I see here--is *what?* "

"Oh this is me too," Wysteri said pressing a hand to her chest. "My personality, my *self*, is in both places. These two forms can exist independently. They have to because sometimes their communication can be blocked. The main difference between this body and one like yours is that most of this body's resources are dedicated to actual function. It has almost no long-term memory. Instead that space in my mind is for things like refined coordination and other purely physical things that my other body," she gestured to the box. "Doesn't need."

"I hope you don't take offense, but it seems odd to me," Sarai said. "Besides the obvious benefit of an avatar. What other advantage is there to being stuck in a box?"

Wysteri chuckled. "For one, that box and its self have a nominal lifespan measured in thousands of eons." She lowered her chin. "How many different problems can you consider at once?"

Sarai pushed out her lower lip. "Two or three probably. I mean I might have a dozen things going on in my head, but I can only focus on a few a time."

"That box, that self, can do hundreds of thousands of tasks at once. While I am speaking with you, I am having conversations with twenty-six members of my subnet. I am tracking the movements of the citadel defense forces and monitoring their status. I am also calculating the three variant shapes for each of the members of the subnet, and assimilating the knowledge from the seven libraries on Kul'Amaron's premises."

"Whoa, and you can do thousands?" Bannor said. "You must get terribly bored."

Wysteri let out a heavy sigh. "Terribly, horribly, mind crushingly bored. That's the life of most Kriar artificial entities, and the higher-class mecha have it the worst. That's why we need communities, so we have each other to talk to. Otherwise, most of us would just expire out of pure frustrated ennui."

"So, that was another reason you didn't want to go to Fabrista Homeworld. You wanted to experience something different," Bannor speculated.

"That's true enough I suppose," Wysteri admitted. "So, Sarai, have you changed your mind? Want to do it later? I assure you it is absolutely painless. There is no risk to Vhina, and like Mercedes said... it *is* a very good body."

"What will I look like?" Sarai asked glancing up at Bannor.

"Mercedes had very complete maps of your appearance in all of your incarnations, from when she was in Bannor's memories. Our goal was to meet your mother's requirement of you 'looking like the daughter she raised', while still retaining some of the cosmetic changes that you favored in your different forms--the length and color of your hair were fairly consistent but different from your birth shape."

"I--" Sarai held out her arms and looked down at her hands. "I know this isn't how I was born--but I like it."

Wysteri raised an eyebrow. "Can valkyries be elf princesses in Malan?"

She frowned. "No."

Wysteri came back and leaned close and put a hand on Sarai's shoulder. "You should have faith in Mercedes. She--" The mecha glanced up at Bannor. "She seemed to have a good sense for what you like. You would be surprised what is possible when an elite physician designs your body. Even if you don't like it--we can change it again. That's the advantage of having me as a retainer of your parents. You can have a different shape for every day and turn of the season if it suits you."

"Really?" Sarai said with wide eyes. "It's that safe?"

"Please, the Kriar have been joy-forming for a thousand eons. It's safer than coming down the stairs to eat breakfast. Besides, if you like to change a lot." She shrugged. "It gives me something to do."

Bannor felt a tiny quiver of unease. Her sure hoped Sarai didn't get attached to the idea of changing her shape often. One part of

him found the idea appealing, but another said that it would end up causing problems.

Sarai seemed to steel herself. "Okay, what do you want me to do?"

"Let's start with a preparatory diagnosis," Wysteri said taking Sarai's elbow and leading her toward the table. "Turn your back and step up on the lip, there you go, now relax back on the grid and take hold of the handles there. I'm going to tilt the table back."

Wysteri pressed something and the table hummed and returned to a horizontal position.

"Okay, I'm going to put you in an operating symbiote. This will tingle."

The mecha looked up at the black sphere and a band of purple light shot out and pulsated down the length of Sarai's body. As the light moved from her face down toward her feet, all her armor, jewelry, clothing were either removed or replaced by a black stocking similar to the one Bannor wore under his armor. On the back counter he noticed all the items removed by the light had appeared.

"Now, that's pretty wizard."

Sarai rubbed her middle, feeling the stretchy parchment thin material. "What?"

"All your stuff is over there now."

"Oh."

He came and took her hand. Her fingers squeezed down tight on his.

"All right," Wysteri told her in a gentle voice. "I will do a deep scan to verify Vhina is okay, and that everything is set for your treatment. This is going to feel somewhat cold, and your skin will itch, all right?"

Sarai nodded.

A flickering went through Wysteri's eyes, and another ray of light shone from the black sphere overhead, tracing back and forth across the surface of Sarai's skin. His fiancé flinched, surprised but obviously not hurt or in discomfort. In fact, it was the toughness of that immortal body that had put their unborn child at potential risk.

"Vhina is doing better," Wysteri noted. "The valkyrie form has been accommodating her needs quite well."

Sarai sighed. "Good."

The green light winked out. "I have you mapped out in detail," Wysteri said. "It will be possible to do the transformation without shock to Vhina." She put a hand on Sarai's shoulder. "I will tilt you back up, hold onto the handles." The table slowly whined back up to its perpendicular position and Sarai stepped off.

"Now the last part," Wysteri said. She stepped over to the cylinder and pressed something. Unlike the ones in Marna's lab, this one pivoted upright like the diagnostic table did. She flipped a latch in the bottom of the case, which dropped the lower edge to the floor.

Sarai eyed the thing. "Just get in?"

"Just like the table," Wysteri said.

"It's okay," Bannor said rubbing her shoulder. "I've been in one."

His fiancé puffed out her cheeks and blew out a breath.

Wysteri didn't rush her, she busied herself with other items in the room apparently tidying up from visitors earlier in the day.

Sarai looked in his eyes. He put his arms around her, and kissed her on the cheek. "It will be okay."

She hugged him and nodded. She pushed away, stepped to the case, turned and fitted herself inside.

Wysteri returned to the case without remark, flipped up and locked the lower panel. "Okay, I am closing the lid. It is vented so breathe normally." She closed and locked down the clear crystal lid. "Tilting you back." The tube whirred and hummed returning to its horizontal position.

Bannor looked in through the lid. Sarai had a stoic expression on her face. He pressed his hand to the crystal and smiled for her. She made a forced smile and put her hand up to match his.

"It's okay," he soothed.

She nodded.

"Ready?" Wysteri asked.

Sarai acknowledged.

"All right, the case will light up, there will be a vibration and it will get warm inside," Wysteri recited with rote familiarity.

"These things are all normal. The transformation will occur in three phases. A green, a blue, and a purple. The green will feel just like what you experienced on the table, that is the third safeguard, to make absolutely sure everything is okay."

Continuing to speak, the mecha moved around the cylinder, pressing jewels and checking little crystals in which symbols were displayed. "The blue will make you feel hot and tingly inside. That's the mapping phase. A unique charge is placed in each element of your microstructure. It's not uncommon to see your skin glow or spark when this is going on--it's normal. The purple is the change catalyzing phase, your body is prepared for the actual transform procedure. During this, you may feel a kind of a floating sensation and euphoria. You will start to get groggy and feel as though you are falling asleep, that's what is supposed to happen. When you awake, the transformation will be complete." Wysteri tapped a few crystals on the front of the cylinder and it began to hum. "We'll begin as soon as you say

'go'." She patted the crystal. "Take your time."

Sarai took a while, staring into his eyes. "Go," she finally said.

"Beginning failsafe diagnostic," she intoned. Sarai twitched as a green light shined down from the lid of the case.

Bannor watched, feeling his heart beat fast. He knew the whole unnaturalness of the process was unnerving for Sarai. Add to it the fact that she liked the form she was in didn't make it any easier. He felt the case shivering under his hand. Sarai writhed a bit in nervous discomfort.

The green illumination winked out. "One moment," Wysteri said. "Verifying and cross-checking."

Bannor looked into Sarai's green eyes. Focusing on his wife to be and the woman he loved.

"No anomalies discovered," Wysteri informed them. "Beginning mapping."

The case trembled and the humming changed pitch. Blue lines laced the cylinder's insides and Sarai twitched. She clenched her eyes shut and balled her hands into fists.

"You are doing okay," Wysteri advised in a soothing tone. "It will not be long now."

The mapping seemed to take a long time, and Sarai fidgeted during the process. Finally, the light winked out, and she relaxed.

"One moment, analyzing map data," Wysteri said. "Try to breathe normally; deep breaths."

After about a fifteen count, Wysteri pressed some different jewels on the case's side. "All right, beginning catalyzing process."

A single needle thin ray of purple illumination began stitching its way back and forth across Sarai's face, going across,

dropping down a little then going back the other way.

His fiancée winced at the feeling at first but seemed to relax after a few moments. The procedure continued and Sarai's movements grew less and less and her breathing gradually became more shallow. After a few heartbeats she went limp.

"Initiating stasis and form regression."

A grayish light filled the cylinder. Bannor sensed an odd twisting of the threads within the case as if all of them were suddenly knotted up. A hard white radiance seemed to emanate from Sarai's body, forcing him to shield his eyes.

Beams of reddish illumination played within the glare and the cylinder whirled and thrummed with energy. Within that scintillation, Sarai's threads changed. Some threads vanished altogether, new ones appeared, many more than she had originally had it seemed. The new form was magnitudes more complex than the valkyrie shape whose strength came primarily from its brute simplicity.

As the light faded Bannor was greeted with a familiar sight.

Sarai.

The Sarai like he remembered her. Her angular face was perhaps not as severe as it had been several seasons ago. Her skin appeared a little more tan than it had been and clear.

"A few more moments," Wysteri told him. "We need to do a post transform diagnosis to make sure it all went okay."

The green light played over the new Sarai, illuminating her body. It was tough to determine with her in the case, but she looked like she might be slightly taller than she had been when they first met. In those early days she had seemed painfully thin. This form looked trim and sleek, with lines of muscle clearly visible through the sheer black fabric of the body stocking.

The diagnosis ended and Wysteri nodded. "Everything looks good."

He admired Sarai through the lid of the case. "She looks excellent from here."

Wysteri tilted the case up, opened the lid, and unbolted the bottom into a ramp. "Give her a few moments to wake up."

Bannor stepped close and admired the newly reformed third princess of Malan. Mercedes did indeed design a wonderful body. However, there were a few details that while he certainly wouldn't mind them, his wife-to-be was certain to object.

Sarai roused by stages, her eyes blinked, revealing the glowing violet orbs that were synonymous with the woman he loved. She drew a deep breath and made a moaning sound. "Mmmm."

"Welcome back," he said.

Her eyes cracked and she focused on him and smiled. "Mmmm, I feel good." She drew another deep breath and her eyelids fluttered. "Oh, yes." She reached out and touched his face. She flexed her fingers, opening and closing her hand. Her brow furrowed.

"Is something wrong," he asked her.

"I--don't--know," she said. "It's different. My immortal and valkyrie bodies had a kind of solid positive feedback when I moved; probably those dense muscles. This is more smooth." She moved each of her fingers one at a time then moved her whole arm. "It sure *feels* good, better than the valkyrie body. I hope you can put up with me grinning like an idiot all the time."

He shook his head. "I'll cope somehow."

"Let me stand up and see how this feels."

Sarai leaned forward to lever herself out of the case and her mass shifted. With a gasp she had to catch herself on the side of the case.

"What the--???" She shifted her shoulders and looked down to

see what had caused her to go off balance. Her voice dropped. "Carellion." She put her hands to her chest and cupped up two hands-full and glared at Wysteri. "What in Hades are these?"

The purple-haired mecha tilted her head. "I believe they are called *breasts* ."

"I *know* that!" Sarai growled. "Why are they so big? Where was looking like a cow part of the design?"

"But--" he started.

"Ahht!" She pointed a finger at him. "No. I already know what you think, they could drag on the floor and you'd be happy."

He rolled his eyes. "Well, not the *floor* ."

She dismissed his remark with a wave of her hand and glared at Wysteri. "Well?"

Wysteri shrugged. "I am sorry that feature distresses you. However, when you discover how much your baby nurses, you will be grateful for it. That and the amount milk production can make the process quite painful if you do not have sufficient volume."

"Sufficient volume," Sarai repeated in a sour tone. She stepped away from the case and stood up. Rolling her shoulders she moved her neck side to side. "This whole body is smooth. No kinks or catching. It's nice except for these *things* ." She glared down at herself.

"You're not that much bigger than your sister," he remarked self-consciously.

"My sister is a frelling *flirt* . She used magic to make herself get bigger when we were growing up."

Bannor raised an eyebrow. He was certain that was a detail that under normal circumstances that never would have reached his ears. He had no idea Sarai resented it so much.

Sarai wiggled her hips side to side. She rubbed her hands on her thighs. "There's something else different here."

He stepped back and studied her. "Well, now that you mention it, yes. You have hips now... errr," he corrected himself. "A lot *more* hips."

She frowned at him with narrowed eyes. She focused her attention on Wysteri. "To make childbirth easier?"

"Right." Wysteri answered. "There are number of form acclimations to make the pregnancy, childbirth, and post childbirth easier."

Sarai looked down at herself, felt her skin and rolled her shoulders. "I admit it feels nice, and aside from this--" She shot a look at Bannor. "Deformity. It is okay. I don't see or feel what Mercedes was making such a fuss about."

Wysteri sighed. She walked over to the examination table and opened a drawer underneath its surface. She pulled out something small and round. "For proof of the quality in your design, look in that crystal right there." She pointed.

Sarai turned to look.

The mecha healers were typically so deliberate and methodical that he never thought of them as being able to move fast. Wysteri whipped something straight at Sarai's head. Gasping, Bannor lunged to intercept the hard-thrown missile but was simply too slow.

The object impacted with a crack that made Bannor cringe.

"What did--!?"

Sarai looked back, her hand was up and wrapped around whatever Wysteri had thrown so fast he hadn't even been able to move half the distance to intercept the object. It was phenomenal, she hadn't even been looking at Wysteri to even have a hint something was coming at her.

She turned her hand over and looked at what Wysteri had thrown. It was a hardened cork ball flattened on one side. They were used around the quarters usually to keep parchments from blowing around.

"That would have hurt," Sarai growled.

Bannor looked at Sarai's hand. "That was damn fast. Too fast for me to even see it."

She looked at him and then at the ball. "I didn't even think about it."

"What Mercedes was proud of was the various subtle refinements and touches in the overall design. For instance, which is better; resisting damage or avoiding it altogether?"

"Avoiding it, of course," Sarai answered.

"Hence, the design decision to favor speed over durability. It is an Elven hallmark anyways, correct?"

Sarai's brow furrowed. "Yes."

"Our shared consideration was to embrace what you are, a gray elf noble, so your abilities should distinguish you as a paradigm of Elves--not some other species."

His fiance tossed the ball back to Wysteri, who put it back in the drawer. "Okay, you made your point. So, what else?"

"This form has a strong natural telepathic ability. You will still have to be trained, but once you are, you will be able to communicate freely as much of the Felspar family already does. We set up an affinity between yourself and your baby. Once she is old enough to form images and understand concepts you should be able to communicate with her."

Sarai's eyes widened. "Speak with my unborn baby?"

"Yes," Wysteri answered with a nod. "Mercedes and I discussed this at length. It is something the Felspars have been doing with

their children, essentially beginning their baby's education even before they are born."

His fiance blinked. "That's-- *possible?*"

"Of course," Wysteri glanced between the two of them. "We also took some pains to make the childbirth itself less traumatic for you and the baby."

"You mean besides these hips?" Sarai asked patting her thighs.

"Yes," the healer responded. "Sarai do you know much about childbirth?"

"Not a lot--no. Elves don't have many children."

"Well, think of the size of a new born, and think of the size of the cavity through which you must push it."

She swallowed. "I'd rather not."

"That tissue does stretch some, but rarely is a woman able to accommodate the baby's girth during their first pregnancy. Without treatment, the baby tears that tissue when it is forced out."

Bannor cringed. "Ow."

Sarai winced.

"Because that tearing is so unpleasant, and takes a long time to heal, experienced midwives will perform what is called an episiotomy."

"An episa- *what?*" Bannor repeated.

"It's an incision to widen the opening so that it doesn't tear during childbirth."

His wife-to-be shuddered. That didn't sound pleasant at all.

"So," Sarai said slowly. "You have a way *around* that?"

"Indeed. This body will not require such measures, nor will you scar. In fact, one of the finer points of this body is that none of your wounds will leave a lasting mark. While you won't heal as fast as a true immortal, you will recover from injury at an accelerated pace. You will fatigue more slowly and require a relatively small amount of time to recuperate."

The princess drew a breath. "All right, I need to apologize for what I was thinking. Obviously, a lot of thought went into this."

"Yes, and there's many more subtle things that you will grow to appreciate later. I leave them for you to discover." She pressed her hands together. "I trust you are satisfied now?"

"It seems so. And I can carry the baby to term without anymore hassles?"

"No hassles, no special treatments. Your body will actually be generating and storing surplus biophase energy, the results of which you can feel."

Sarai drew a breath and nodded.

"Despite that," Wysteri was quick to amend. "You should still consult with me or another physician at least once a scoreday in case there are unforeseen complications."

"Understood."

Wysteri came and put a hand on Sarai's arm. "I need to go tend to Mercedes now. Unless there is something else?"

"No, this is fine. Thank you, Wysteri. Actually, it's better than fine, and tell Mercedes thank you as well. We will thank her ourselves later when she's feeling better."

Wysteri smiled and nodded. She went to the back of the room and retrieved Sarai's shaladen, and jewelry. After Sarai had replaced the equipment she led them back out to the infirmary, opening and closing the solid wall. She bid them good night and hurried up the corridor.

They stood shoulder to shoulder looking down the corridor, now empty, even the mecha's footsteps were no longer audible.

"We're alone," Bannor said.

"Yes, we are," Sarai said with a grin. She put her arm around his waist and pulled close. Her skin was warm and supple.

He leaned in and brought his lips down to hers. She pulled into him with a hungry kiss. She tasted sweet and felt more vibrant that he had ever recalled.

"Mmmm," she said. "You taste good."

"So do you." He bent and nibbled at the delicate tip of one of her pointed ears.

She leaned away, still grinning at him. "None of that now." She looked around. "We should find some quarters."

"Should we go back to Green Run?"

Sarai shook her head. "No, it's outside of the shield they put around the main citadel. To be safe, we should probably use my old chambers in the western extension. They haven't been used in a long time, but I'm certain the stewards have kept them clean."

Arm in arm they moved down the hallway, the sound of their footsteps echoing on the dark stone. Sarai leaned her head against him, pulling close.

They turned into the main audience chamber and crossed to the far side. As they headed toward western exit, Bannor saw a figure silhouetted in the flickering torchlight against the wall.

Arms folded, Senalloy leaned back against the stone. She looked up at their approach, and pushed to her feet. The big Baronian ran a hand through her silver hair.

She tilted her head. "So, this is the new Sarai?"

"The new old me," Sarai said, grinning.

The elder raised an eyebrow, looking her up and down. I'd say there's been some-- *augmenting* going on.

Sarai frowned. "Wysteri said it was necessary for the baby."

"Did she?" Senalloy chuckled. "Are you planning on having two?"

His fiance's brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

The big woman rolled her eyes. "I was teasing."

Sarai sniffed. "Well, it's not funny. I wasn't happy about it."

"You should be, women on worlds where I've visited pay large sums of money to get that done." She shook her head. "And it's not even natural."

"There are a lot of crazy people in this universe," Sarai said with a sigh.

"True enough I suppose," Senalloy agreed. "So, everything is all right with the baby?"

"We are good."

"Glad to hear that," the warrior woman said with a nod. "Your sisters wanted me to check up on you. From the looks of things, you are doing better than all right."

"I am feeling marvelous actually," Sarai said. "If anyone wants us we'll be in my quarters in the west extension."

Senalloy bowed. "Very good. I am making the rounds before finding myself someplace to sleep."

Sarai leaned her head to one side. "You aren't sleeping with Corim?"

The Baronian laughed. "If the boy woke up next to me, his heart would stop."

"Doesn't he care for you?" Sarai asked. "Doesn't he know how much you care about him?"

The woman shrugged. "He only has eyes for Dulcere. I suppose he'll wake up eventually."

"Lady Senalloy," Bannor said. "You're far too vibrant and too beautiful to be alone."

Senalloy shifted forward reached out and touched Bannor's cheek. She tilted her head to one side. "It's hard when all the good ones seem to be taken." Her violet eyes met Sarai's. "Timing is everything, I guess."

Sarai put her arm around Bannor in what was a not so subtle gesture of ownership. He pulled her close. "Thinking of good ones," Sarai said rubbing her throat. "Perhaps you should cast your eye on Wren's brother."

The Baronian lady raised an eyebrow. "Azir?" She pursed her lips. "He is fairly attractive. Not as pretty as my Corim though."

"He's also not in love with some Kriar lady."

She pushed a hand through her silver hair. "That is a big plus." She sighed. "Well, I won't keep you two. I need to make sure things are secure. Rest up. I have no idea when next something will come at us--or if they've already given up."

"Take care, Lady Senalloy," Bannor said.

"Good night," Sarai added.

The started down the corridor and Sarai glanced over her shoulder toward where Senalloy had gone. "It is a shame she doesn't have someone."

"I think she's infatuated with an idea," he said. "As I understand it, Corim freed her from slavery, he's her *hero* ."

Sarai looked up at him. "It *is* rather romantic to be rescued." She pressed against him. "I should know."

He sighed. "It's less romantic when I'm usually the reason you need to be rescued."

She shoved against him. "Sometimes, something-- *someone*--is worth taking a risk."

After a short walk down the western corridor, they found Sarai's old chambers. She opened the polished scale-wood door, letting torchlight into the sizeable chamber, which as Sarai assumed, had been kept clean. The appointments were not as complete as those in Green Run, but the bed looked comfortable, if a little small. After getting used to the huge thing that Sarai slept in now, everything seemed small except perhaps sleeping in the middle of a field.

Sarai walked in, examining the area. She uncapped the mage lights and walked around in the space running her hand along dressers and cabinets, and finally stopping in front of huge blood-wood wardrobe. She opened it up and thumbed through the many dresses, gowns, and blouses.

Pulling out a dark blue blouse she pulled it to her shoulders and draped it down her torso. She looked down and frowned. " *Not* going to work."

He put hands on hips. "Like anything was going to fit valkyrie Sarai? Any of that clothing have wing holes?"

"It's still annoying," she said with a sniff.

"You know, I think you just enjoy fussing sometimes. If you didn't like trying on clothes and having new ones made, you wouldn't have so many."

She put the blouse back in the wardrobe and turned to him with folded arms. "Fussing?"

"Fussing," he said. He came and put his arms around her and

kissed her on the neck. "I think that's your way of saying 'give me attention'."

Sarai hummed for a moment reaching up to pull him close then stopped. She flicked the metal plate on his shoulder. "Take off that armor, would you?"

He smiled. "As you command, *Arminwen* ."

Bannor took his time, releasing each strap and clip, and pulling off each piece of the Kriar battle raiment. Arms folded, head tilted, Sarai studied his every movement.

When he was down to nothing but the thin black stocking identical to what Sarai was dressed in he looked at his wife-to-be. "Anything else?"

She smiled and made a coming gesture with her finger. "Now, kiss me."

He stepped over, put his arms around her and put his lips to hers. It made a warm tingle go through him. She pulled back a little and put her cheek against his chest. He rubbed her back.

"Bannor," she said after a few moments.

"Yes."

"Do you have to go back to the old body?"

He felt a little chill in his stomach. "I should. Besides, it's not really my body. It's just my tao inside of something Marna made. My real shape is asleep in stasis on Homeworld. I don't think I can stay this way forever."

"Wysteri could make your old body like this though, right?"

Bannor sighed. "Probably."

"I don't know why. I just feel safe when you hold me."

"Didn't you before?"

"Yes, but not like now. There is another thing."

"What's that?"

"Like Wysteri said, I am a gray elf." She snuggled her face against his chest. "Ryelle had her first millennium birthday a few scoredays ago. Both my mother and father are double that age. Do either of them look like they are slowing down to you, Bannor?"

"Not hardly," he said.

"Bannor, I have seen you defeat gods and look death in the eye and survive." She looked up into his eyes. "But there's one opponent you can never beat and that is *time* ."

He drew a breath. "I thought you were okay with me being just a short lived human."

"Bannor, to be honest, I never thought we would have children. It is so hard for Elves to conceive. Don't you want to see our daughter grow up?"

"Of course I do."

"How? She will be fifty summers getting through school."

"Well..." His voice trailed off. He didn't know any eighty summer old men, much less any spry enough to mentor children.

Sarai didn't say anything she just stared at him with those expressive violet eyes.

"Star, I would stay with you the rest of your days if I could, you know that..."

Hands on his shoulders, she kept her gaze on him, expression smooth.

"And I guess I can do that if I... *cheat* ."

She raised an eyebrow, but that was the only change in her expression.

"Okay, it's possible, and we can do it... but this body," he put a hand on his chest. "It's too much."

"Too much what?" Sarai said.

He rocked his head back. "I am *dangerous* ." He insisted.

"Bannor, the only danger I sense is to our enemies. As I said in the hall I feel safe with you, not only because you will protect me, but because nothing can take you away."

He dropped to his knees, and put his arms around her waist, and pressed his cheek against her chest. Sarai put a hand behind his back and pushed her fingers through his hair.

"Star," he breathed. "I am scared. Being like this scares me."

"My One," she cooed. "What of? You have been in such control. I have watched you. In fact, you seem more careful, more thoughtful. Mother, Ryelle and even Janai mentioned how focused and confident you seem."

"Of course I'm confident, I'm a frelling *god* ." He gritted his teeth knowing how crazy--how *arrogant* --that sounded. "That Baronian soldier stuck a pace of sword in me and all I did was growl at him and break his neck."

"And you're still *with* me," Sarai moaned. "That's the part I care about." She pulled him tight against her. "Bannor, you have always had a terrible horrific potential to do harm. On a few occasions you have, but never with malicious intent. You are a good and honorable man, and the very first thing you did when you got that power was come half way across the universe to protect me. I don't think there's anything you could say that could convince me you would ever do me harm."

He just pushed against her. "Star, can I think about it? Maybe something else?"

"That's fine, my One. I don't want you uncomfortable and I don't want you to worry. I just want you to stay with me and I want you to be safe."

He nodded, still hugging the warmth of her body. He straightened up and looked around. "You know we slept all afternoon. We just ate and I don't feel tired. What are we going to do until morning?"

Sarai smiled and ran a hand through his hair and gave him a slow lingering kiss. "We'll think of something."

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Chapter Twenty-Two

Strategic Withdrawal

My first meeting with Bannor Starfist was under less than friendly terms. My youngest daughter, in a fit of rebellion had slipped out of Malan to avoid an arranged marriage. When we finally caught up to her, we discovered that she had been living with Bannor. I was less than pleased. Not long after the fall of Hecate, I discovered she was pregnant. He has perchance for trouble, that boy. Still, he attracts power the same way he does problems. The allies that have rallied around us are phenomenal and we are in their graces largely because of his involvement and those he has inspired with his admittedly heroic spirit...

**-- Jhaan T'Evagduran,
King of Malan**

Bannor blinked. He stared up into the dark room. Only starlight from the window, and the sliver of torchlight from the hall coming under the door provided any illumination. Next to him, Sarai lay tangled in the sheets, silvery-blond hair spilling across her face. Her chest rose and fell with the steady rhythm of

deep slumber. He glanced to the window. The darkness of night was just beginning to fade. With the windows facing west, it would be bells before any morning light entered this room.

Something woke him. Had it been a sound? Or a sense? In this body, his awareness was so much wider and more sensitive. Unfortunately, his senses had become so acute he now deliberately filtered his perceptions to keep from drowning in sensory information. Still, he felt certain that the feel of the citadel had changed.

He slipped out of bed, and pulled on the black body-stockings. He belted on the holster for the Mark VI, and picked up his axes. Padding across to the door he paused to listen.

Nothing.

Whatever he'd sensed wasn't nearby.

He drew a breath, feeling a surge of strength swell through his limbs. He pulled the door open and slipped into the chilly air of the corridor. He took a dozen steps back toward the main hall and hunkered down close to the stone, hands splayed flat against the surface.

Bannor calmed his heart and breathing and *felt* .

Vibrations.

People were moving around. Of course, that was to be expected. There were probably two or three valkyries or Kriar doing guard duty. Both had dense bodies and made heavy footfalls. The vibration seemed excessive to be only two or three.

He rose and jogged toward the main hall. As he moved he cast his thread sense ahead. It took only a few heartbeats to locate what must be the guards; two Kriar and two valkyries. They were spread out covering the main paths into the domiciles where the rest of the defense force were sleeping. That's where they were *supposed* to be.

While he couldn't be positive, those vibrations had seemed to

originate more south and east, well away from those defenders. Stopping at an intersection, he loosened up his sensitivity and cast about for any threads that didn't belong.

Nothing.

He dropped to all fours and pressed his ear to the stone. The vibration was distinct. There were several creatures moving around and their threads were completely hidden from him.

Bannor looked around the deserted hallway. Oil lamps, their wicks near to expiring, sputtered and danced in their sconces, casting wavering shadows on the smooth stone of the passage. He sniffed at the air, detecting the faint odor of weapon oil and perspiration.

Pushing to his feet, Bannor pulled out his axes and spun them to get them loose in his grip. He rolled his shoulders and limbered his arms as he stalked forward. How had the Baronians gotten so many through the shield? Already they had improved their stealth that their movement didn't leave a discernable trail.

He would discover the extent of this latest invasion and then alert the defenders.

Nearing the main hall he paused at a corner and felt for vibrations.

Strange, the emanation really hadn't moved much, and the group had only spread out a little. What kind of tactic was that? He couldn't feel their threads but the residual energy in the citadel had increased by a massive amount. Whatever this was, it had incredible magic.

Bannor pushed into his senses, willing more energy into his body. He felt Eternity's energies crackling around this skin. With creatures this powerful, he might have to scream for help sooner than he thought.

Padding up the passage he stopped at an intersection. They were close now, more than a score of them--every damn one of them concealed so effectively he might as well not have his nola

senses. He peeked down into main hall. Most of his view was blocked by columns and furniture. What little of the chamber he could see through the narrow openings were devoid of movement.

He drew a breath and spun his axes. This was not good. With radiations this strong, there must be more than a dozen elite. With a group this powerful, it might do more harm than good to sound a general alert and have the defenders run out into the maw of a meat grinder unprepared. He needed to assess the opposition then direct a focused and organized attack.

Bannor slipped forward across the intersection, at the far side he looked back toward the main hall. He could feel everything except the creatures themselves. Crouching down, back against the corner, he listened.

He heard a quiet mumbling, but the few sounds he heard didn't sound like language. His listened to the telepathic channels Sindra had taught him. He detected a great deal of discourse, but even that was being masked.

He peeked down the hall toward the sounds, and grumbled a silent curse. This field of view yielded no more information than the other side of the passage. He would have to take the hall around to the northern entrance and try to get a view from there.

Pushing to his feet he slipped up the northern servant's passage. He froze at a sputtering sound. Heart beating fast, he looked up and realized it was simply a lamp expending the last of its wick. Damn.

Leaning forward, he continued. As he approached a corner, a shadow outlined on the wall made him lurch back. He cast around for a panicked instant and leaped into the cover of an alcove.

Heart beating fast he squeezed himself into the crotch of the two walls. The notch afforded him deep shadow from the narrow passage, but wasn't deep enough to hide him from direct observation.

A presence paused only a few paces away. He felt a strong mind probing the darkness--listening. Had it detected him? The figure moved closer. An eerie quiet pervaded the hall, no footfalls, no breathing. Further away, he continued to hear the mumbles of the group in the main hall.

The presence slipped closer. At the very fringe of his hearing was a tiny hissing. He tightened his grip on his axes.

He dove deep into his nola, he needed a thread to grab hold of. He could only curse in silence. His nola senses revealed nothing but an empty hall.

His heart skipped to a faster tempo as the minute hissing stopped. Leather creaked. He held his breath. He wiggled his fingers to loosen the tension on his axes.

The figure in the passage which had been shifting forward stopped.

Spit. Had he made a noise? He would have sworn he hadn't. Did it hear his fingers move?

The entity took a step, then another. A silhouette appeared in his view. The creature wore layers of black that blended with the shadows. From the shape that passed his alcove, it was a tall humanoid wearing a cloak with the hood up. Whatever this thing was, it had keen hearing.

He stayed frozen until the creature passed out of his view. Listening intently he waited until the intruder moved on. He moved from his hiding spot, checking the shadows to make sure the entity had continued out of earshot.

Hugging the wall, he slipped toward the northern passage. He glanced back down the dark passage, probing the shadows for signs of movement. He hated leaving a potential opponent at his back. If all their enemies were that alert, the tiniest sound would give him away before he could gather any information on what they were facing.

He peeked around the corner and found the passage empty. He

probed the flickering shadows for movement and saw nothing. The intersection that would give him a critical view lay only a dozen steps away.

He glanced back behind him again, then slipped forward. He froze when it felt like something was staring at him. Something whistled at his back. He spun around the attack, grabbing and throwing. The person grunted and flipped.

Bannor sent a punch shrieking forward. At the same time, the figure twisted. He saw a glint of blonde hair and blue eyes. He hauled back on his punch at the precise instant a heel halted hairs from the bridge of his nose.

"Bannor?" The voice thrummed with the familiar echoing tone of a female ascendant. She dropped her foot back.

All he could think at that moment was how much that would have hurt. "Wren? You scared the spit out of me."

The blonde savant pulled her hood back. It was indeed his savant friend.

He let out a breath. "Damn, I'm not used to you being so tall. I couldn't feel anything from you. I thought you were a Baronian using the new stealth."

"Oh spit," Wren said slapping her thighs. She came and gave him a firm hug. "I apologize. I forgot, Daena stealthed us all to keep the Baronians and Daergons from detecting us."

He blinked as she stepped back. He was still adjusting to this magnified version of Wren, with that powerful physique and flowing gold-blond hair. That kick came around so fast. No way could he have avoided it if she hadn't stopped.

"Did something happen? Why are you all back here?"

"Strategic withdrawal." Wren said. "Marna and the others will explain it."

They started to walk back and Wren stumbled. He caught her

arm. "Hey."

She put a hand to her head. "Whoa. Dizzy."

"You need sleep," he said putting an arm around her waist and holding her up. "I was getting those spells too. It comes on sudden, you don't get tired, you just fall down."

She drew a breath. "Yeah."

They walked back to the main chamber. The whole rest of the assault team including Quasar were sitting on the petitioner's couches. They all looked exhausted, including the ascendants. He noticed that in their retreat they had brought a bunch of hardware with them, including the six cylinders containing the bodies of the savants who had spirit merged with their ascendant bodies. There was a seventh cylinder that he guessed contained the imprisoned Baronian commander.

As he entered, the members of the assault team rose to greet him. He noticed Quasar and Eclipse standing close to one another. Had something happened between those two? A reconciliation? He hoped so, that couldn't help but mellow the ancient Kriar's self-destructive urges.

Marna and her daughter stood shoulder to shoulder now wearing matching blue battle armor, their long hair braided in the same style. Both were looking at something on the side of one of cases and appeared to be conferring. When they stood close like now, the family resemblance was strong. Dulcere was taller and leaner, with the hardened physique one expected of a warrior. Perhaps it was just a coincidence, but the case they were looking at was the one with his body in it. He felt an icy tremor of unease.

Euriel, with her husband Vanidaar now towering over her, came forward seeing that he was assisting Wren along. Wren's brother Azir reached them first and put an arm around her.

A concerned expression on his face, the ascendant of light studied the blonde savant with glowing white eyes. "What happened, Sis?"

She put an arm around his neck. "Just a little dizzy," she blinked and drew a breath. "I'm already starting to feel better."

"You look well, Bannor," Euriel remarked. "According to Daena, things have been rough."

"It wasn't easy to be sure," he answered. "Leaving those fruits for Tymoril and Kegari was huge, they thrashed more than a dozen of those dreads. The Baronians weren't prepared for that. The rest was tactics, valkyries, Kriar, Shael Dal and the Felspars working together in teams."

"I am gratified that my plan was so successful," Idun said strolling up to put an arm around her daughter Euriel. The pantheon lady glowed, her gold hair shimmering and sparkling. "Though the threat posed to everyone is burdensome, I have much enjoyed the opportunity for a little rough and tumble. I so rarely get to cut loose."

Loric rose from the couches and joined Aarlen as the two elders added themselves to the growing conference circle.

"I know it will be something of an imposition," the gray-haired man said. "Do you think you could rouse someone so we can get some rooms? We didn't want to wander around and cause a ruckus."

"Actually, there's a bunch of rooms on the west side where Sarai and I are staying. You'll probably want to be down with your family though, I can get one of the sentries to lead you back there."

"Very good," Loric said with a nod.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Daena rise from the couches and come toward him. The girl was glowing, her auburn hair seeming to float around her like a nimbus. He felt a catch in his chest that hurt so much it made him tremble. Damn, she was beautiful.

She came around behind him and pulled him away from Wren.

"Bannor," she said, putting her arms around him in a hug.

He clutched her tight to him, and sniffed her hair. The smell of her alone made his heart skip a beat. He swallowed hard, and with effort managed to push back. "Good--" His voice cracked. "Good to see you, Daena. Missed you."

The girl studied him with glowing green eyes. She touched his cheek. "I missed you too."

Bannor reached up to caress her hand and forced himself to stop. What was the matter with him? He willed himself to take a step back and after a moment managed to do so.

Wren raised an eyebrow and looked between them. "Dane?"

Daena smiled at her. "Yes?" Her gaze went back to him. Those green eyes seemed to pull on him.

He drew a breath, feeling himself tremble.

The blonde savant focused on him and her brow furrowed. "You okay?"

He shook his head, and rubbed the side of his face. The terrible pull relented. "I--I guess."

"Hi," Ziedra said floating over. The dark-haired ascendant peered into his eyes. "So, how long before we can get to these rooms you're talking about?"

"I can take you--" His knees went rubbery, his view of the room turned fuzzy and he found himself sinking down. "Uhhh..."

Daena, Ziedra, and Wren caught his shoulders as he dropped to his knees.

"Bannor!?"

"Whoa." The room did a slow roll. "Ugh."

"What's the matter?" Daena asked shaking his shoulder.

"Dizzy," he muttered rubbing his face.

"Daena, let me see," Marna said, stepping into his view and kneeling down.

The Kriar Vatraena put the back of her hand against his cheek. "You're cold." She touched his throat and looked around to either side of his face. He felt a tingling as her glowing eyes seemed to dig into him. "What's happening?"

"Everything--went-- *fuzzy*," he reported. "Couldn't hold myself--up."

The Kriar woman frowned. "Is this the first time?"

"No." He took a deep breath, feeling some of his strength return. "Second--time."

Marna looked up to Wren. "I saw you leaning on him--did something like this just happen to you?"

"Yes," Wren admitted. "Out in the hall. I hit me fast, no warning. Like all my strength just vanished."

The Vatraena's eyes widened, she looked around to the other ascendants. "Anyone else have this happen?"

"Actually, I did get dizzy a few bells ago," Ziedra said with a nod. "I thought it was just backlash from all the casting I'd been doing."

The Kriar female pushed to a stand. "I apologize. This was unforeseen. So have all of you experienced this?"

"I did have a couple spells where I needed to sit down and regroup," Damay said gliding over to them. "It did not seem related to fatigue. I assumed it was just power backlash."

"Same for me," Azir said rubbing the back of his head. "Weird, it didn't happen when we were fighting or under pressure. What about you, Dad?"

Vanidaar rubbed at the corner of his mouth. "I confess I did have a similar bout of weakness, but we weren't doing anything, so I assumed it was just stress from our vigil."

"It's probably related to their taos trying to bind with these bodies," Loric speculated. "You did put some kind of inhibitor in them so that permanent attachment wouldn't occur?"

"Yes." Marna touched Bannor on the shoulder and then Ziedra and Wren, looking at each of them intently. "These bodies are experimental. I took precautions to make sure that a permanent bond would not occur, I recall the difficult time Wren had when in Euriel's body."

"Oh--uhhh--yeah," Wren glanced at her mother and colored a little. The memory obviously was of some embarrassment to her. In Euriel's body? Someday he'd have to hear that whole tale. Up until now, he'd only heard snippets of it. The blonde ascendant seemed eager to change the subject. "Dane," she said turning. "You don't get dizzy spells, do you?"

"No," the auburn haired girl said with a shake of her head. "In fact, since I was changed I have felt tired like three times. Once was right after I changed. I went to sleep and have barely needed to sleep since..." She shrugged. "The other two times I had my wheat thrashed bad."

Bannor drew another breath, and blinked. His view of the room cleared and he felt the weakness fade. He put a foot under himself and started to push back to his feet.

"Whoa," Ziedra advised. "Slow."

He nodded and let them assist as he stood. A few more breaths and his legs firmed.

"Marna," Wren said. "I think it has to do with a kind of settling in. That time when I was in my mother's body, I was adjusting that whole time. Same when I was in Desiray. If you've blocked that natural acclimation, it probably confuses our tao forms."

He rubbed his chest and straightened. "Ah. Better, that is so strange. Glad that hasn't happened in a battle."

"This concerns me," Marna said. "As you say, if it happened during a fight it would be very bad. Nobody has felt weak during the battles, though?"

The ascendants all looked at one another and shook their heads.

"I fear Wren is correct," the Vatraena said with a frown. "The locks on your bodies are more than to prevent binding, it's to keep them from being copied or having their characteristics altered.

However, your tao spirits appear to be trying to force changes in your bodies. I believe it is as Wren surmises, that when the change is blocked you experience weakness."

"Well, whatever you did," Ziedra said. "I love it. A little dizziness once and while I can live with." She rocked side-to-side and looked over toward her husband Radian. "Rad likes it too."

"She's always in a good mood," the gold man said with a grin. "What's not to like?"

"Bannor?" a bleary voice asked.

He looked over to see Sarai stumble in from the side entrance her silvery hair tousled. She wore only the thin body stocking and carried the shaladen in its sheath.

Wren leaned to one side. "Whoa. Sarai, nice... ummm, upgrade."

Sarai looked around and rubbed her eyes. "What--what are you all doing here?"

"Regrouping," Marna said.

His wife-to-be came and leaned on him. She looked Wren up and down. "You should talk about upgrades. What's with being

so tall? Tired--" She yawned. "Tired of being short?"

Wren gestured to Marna. "She just said, 'here's a body, get in'." She shrugged. "So I did."

"We were just discussing a problem with these bodies," Bannor told Sarai.

"A problem?"

"Yes," he focused on the Kriar elder. "It's like I thought, we probably won't be able to stay like this too long."

His wife-to-be blinked and stared at Marna. "Really?"

"Well," the Kriar said. "If I took off the shape-locks, the dizzy spells would probably stop occurring. Of course, then they might become permanently bound to these bodies, which I wouldn't recommend. I have no idea what the long-term consequences might be. Better to upgrade their born bodies before allowing that."

"If you're offering a permanent upgrade," Ziedra said with a raised finger. "I'm sold."

"Zee?" Radian said walking over.

"What?" she asked. "What's that tone for? You like this body don't you..."

"Well, yes, but..."

"But what?"

"I--"

Ziedra scrubbed her hands in her thick black tresses. "Rad, I am so sick and tired of being worried that some pantheon lord is going to *eat* me." She blew out her cheeks. "I've spent half my life being protected by other people. I am sooo ready to protect myself."

The gold man stared at his wife real concern on his face. "Zee, but what will happen to us?"

"Happen?" The woman was dumbfounded. She looked at Daena. "Daena how long have you been like that?"

The auburn-haired girl leaned back from Ziedra's intensity. "Around four scoredays."

"Did you suddenly stop loving the people dear to you?"

The girl blinked glowing green eyes that grew round at the question. "I--I well, I think I love them *more* ."

The ascendant of magic put fists on hips looked away from Daena and focused on her husband.

Marna raised her hand. "Let's take our time here. I am somewhat reticent to commit to that myself. At least, not without assurances."

"Assurances?"

"Miss Felspar," Marna said. "Please, I have been in those battles with you and the others. You are a weapon--a powerful one. Have you forgotten the disagreement with Gaea?"

Ziedra's brow furrowed. "No."

"Before I give Gaea back any of her children, I'm going to want some concessions." She drew a breath and let it out slow. "They are going to be good ones too, believe me." Her eyes narrowed. "And before I wrestle that dragon, I want to rest."

"Well," Sarai said. "We can accommodate everyone new over in the west extension. Bannor, you can show the Kergathas and the Felspars to Gold Run. Daena, you're rooming with Janai unless you object."

"No," Daena said.

"We can't leave this equipment here," Eclipse said, indicating

the containers.

"I've already called Wysteri," Sarai said. "She says that she has-- *engineers*--on the way. We'll put the cases in our ghost vault."

"Wysteri?" Marna asked.

"Engineers?" Aarlen repeated.

"Well, we had some other guests after the end of the battle," Bannor said. "A Karanganoi *subnet* escaped from the Baronians and asked for asylum here."

<You have an entire subnet in residence here now?> Dulcere asked.

To answer her question Wysteri swept in from the northern entrance flanked by what looked like three Elves pulling what looked like small wagons. The only thing that gave the Elves away as members of the subnet were the devices strapped to their arms and carried on their belts.

Wysteri stopped in front of Marna and bowed. She spoke in the musical language of the Kriar what Bannor took to be a greeting.

Bannor looked to Sarai. "How did you call her? I didn't think you knew how to use the telepathy yet."

She held up the sword. "Shaladen. Telepathy." She winked. "Easy."

"Ah."

Daena stared at the sheathed weapon. "Whoa. What did you do to get that?" She grinned. "I want one too."

"Lady Megan issued shaladens to the entire family," Bannor said.

"Really?" Aarlen said, raising an eyebrow. "Interesting it was not mentioned to me."

"It wasn't mentioned to Corim either and he was pretty hacked about it."

"Yesss," Aarlen drew the word out.

The three engineers with Marna's permission began situating the cylinders on the long carts obviously made to carry them.

Loric watched the operation for a moment then turned back to the group. "This situation is getting out of hand. Koass approving the deputizing of an entire family? It's unthinkable."

"Husbands and wives," Tal rumbled walking over with Terra on his arm. "Why not daughters too? They're all scrappers. It ain't protocol but it's smart, the eternal's can keep track of them." He turned his head. "So, who you avatar for?"

Sarai looked down at the weapon. "Areth."

Tal grinned. "Areth, now she's nice to work for. Gotta like a boss who loves to party."

Terra rolled her catlike eyes. She leaned around her husband. "*Arminwen*, if we could get those quarters. I am devil tired."

"Sure," Sarai said with a nod. "Bannor, I already called the guards, so you can just take them back."

He nodded, and the two families followed as he headed to the northern exit. Daena stayed at his shoulder.

"Are you going to be okay?" she asked. The sound of her voice made his heart speed up.

He swallowed. "That depends," he said.

"On what?"

He stared at her. Damn, she was attractive. It took effort to even be annoyed with her. "On you, Daena. On *you*."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Beguiled

I am a princess, I am beautiful, I am talented, and I am smart. I can have practically any man I want including those supposedly dedicated to other women. It's a function of a traditionally weak masculine will. Still, if one wants to live a long life, you learn which men not to covet...

-- Arminwen Janai T'Evagduran, 2nd Princess of Malan

Daena only gave him a blank stare, pretending not to know what he was talking about. As he walked her and the members of the two families into the north wing of Kul'Amaron and into the demesnes of Gold Run he felt certain that she had done *something* to him. His Garmtur could do a lot of things, but one of its weaknesses was looking inward. If she had done something, he couldn't see it. The girl had perfected that blasted stealth power to such an extent she could be tap dancing on his shoulder and he wouldn't know it.

After conferring with the valkyrie on guard, he lead Loric and Desiray to the rooms where Cassandra was staying. Then escorted the Kergathas to the royal guest suite where they had been staying.

Wren lingered behind for a moment, her blue eyes studying him. She glanced to Daena and nodded. "See you after a while."

"Get some rest," he advised.

The blonde ascendant shut the door and he heard the bolt clicked.

That left him alone with Daena.

He turned away. "You know where Janai's quarters are, you should get some rest too."

"Bannor," she put a hand on his shoulder, stopping him.

He winced. Her touch was almost painful now. He shuddered, trying not to move against her fingers.

He looked back. "What?"

"Are you mad at me for some reason?" she asked.

Bannor studied her expression. She gazed at him with wide green eyes. She acted so innocent. That feeling was too strong--too sudden to be an accident.

He tried to frown at her and found even that was difficult to do. "Is there some reason I should be mad at you?" he asked.

She raised her chin. Her fingers tightened on his shoulder.

"Stop--" He pushed her hand away and turned to face the girl.
" *Touching--me.*"

"Bannor, I don't understand--" There was a pleading tone in her voice. "What do you think I've done?"

He swallowed. He felt hurt, betrayed--resigned. She was just a kid; a kid in a grown up body. It was a grown up body with grown up feelings and god-like power. Dominique had been more right than she knew. This girl had a claw in him--he didn't know how--but at least he understood why.

"Daena," he said in a low voice. "You have to stop before one of us is hurt. I thought it was enough for you that I was your brother."

"Bannor, I don't--"

"Daena stop it," he interrupted. "You want me to treat you like

an adult-- loveyou like an adult--let's stop playing games shall we?"

At the word 'love' she had recoiled and put a hand to her chest. She stared at him with wide eyes. Part of the mask had cracked. There was a hardness in her gaze that hadn't been there an instant before. "Games?" she repeated.

"Daena, you won't separate me from my child. I love you like a sister, I will care about you--protect you--but there can't be anything more. Do you understand?"

She stared at him, eyes narrowing.

"Don't get angry at me for having my own mind, Daena. I'm not a toy despite whatever clever deception you used to get into my head. Girl, you don't *need* me. There is a universe full of partners that will worship the goddess that you are. You won't have to *force* them."

Her jaw worked side to side and she laced her fingers. "Bannor, you made me. I am yours."

"No." He hit his forehead with his fist. "No, Daena. You are your own person. You don't own me. I don't own you."

She closed her eyes and her lip trembled.

He rocked his head back. Seeing that expression on her face was like getting stabbed with hot needles. It felt like his heart was being crushed.

"Don't you see," she said. "You saved me. You rescued me. You made me immortal. I am what I am because of *you* ."

Bannor felt the tears run down his cheeks. "Daena you were born a savant. Gaea made you. All I did was come along and ruin your life, put a burden on you that would be heavy for someone a thousand times your age. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." Head down and eyes squeezed shut, he turned away. Damn, it hurt. He had tried not to hurt her and failed.

She threw her arms around him from behind burying her face between his shoulder blades. "Bannor. Bannor--I love you--please don't walk away..."

"Daena," an icy female voice said. "Let go of him."

The sound of that voice went into his heart like a blade. A feeling of dread stronger than when he had stared into Odin's unblinking eye clenched in his guts.

Sarai.

He looked up and saw his fiancée's hard stare. She stood in the corridor as still as a statue, hands at her sides and shoulders back. He knew that posture--that look--she was in control--but like a loaded crossbow with hair trigger she could go off at the slightest provocation. Sarai wasn't a first one, but she had an anger that could make the bravest man quail.

Behind him Daena tensed. The arms around him tightened.

"Daena," Sarai said with a frosty confidence. "Step back before you make me cross."

He felt auburn-haired ascendant gather energy into herself.

Sarai narrowed her eyes and hooked a finger as if to pull the other woman closer.

The young ascendant shocked back from him like she'd been burned and lurched forward a step before shuddering to a stop. She glared at Sarai.

His wife-to-be sighed and put a hand on her hip. "Daena, I refuse to have this discussion outside the Kergatha's quarters. At least have the decency to continue this in private." Her tone hardened. "Or do you plan to dishonor my sister as well?"

Daena jerked like she'd been slapped.

Sarai turned and walked back toward main hall. Guts churning he stepped past Daena and followed his wife-to-be. He didn't

know what to make of Sarai. She had to know the fire she was playing with. Daena was powerful. If she attacked Sarai, he would have to... Damn, he didn't want to do that.

He glanced back and saw that Daena was indeed following. The girl's head was down, shoulders hunched forward. She walked with heavy steps.

The third princess turned east at the main corridor and headed into the council chambers, she stopped at a pair of heavy scalebark doors and pulled them open. She turned and gestured him in.

He stepped into the private meeting room. A huge table surrounded by more than a score of chairs, smelled of citrus oil. He reached up and uncapped one of the mage-lights to illuminate the room.

Daena stopped at the threshold and stared at Sarai.

"I am not a child you can order about," Daena said in a dark tone.

Sarai folded her arms. "Did I suddenly stop being a princess of Malan? If you push me you will find yourself in a very uncomfortable position indeed."

Daena raised her chin. "Do you know what I am?"

The shaladen was out of its sheath and at Daena's neck so fast Bannor didn't even see it move. "Did you forget what *I* am?" She tilted her head to one side.

The auburn-haired ascendant shivered as a trickle of blood ran down the blade. Her eyes were wide. She obviously had no idea of the extent of Sarai's power. The elf princess had moved so fast that had she desired it, Daena would have lost her head before even being able to react. A fact the girl seemed to be aware of.

Bannor blinked. He had not really put in his mind that Sarai really was a Shael Dal. Koass, the Advocate Eternal, would have

given them all the powers of a protectorate enforcer, and they were significant.

"Step inside Miss Sheento," Sarai growled.

Daena swallowed and moved where directed. She rubbed the cut in her neck. The wound closed.

Sarai stepped in and closed the doors with a thud. She sheathed the sword with a clack. She placed the sheathed weapon on the end of the long conference table. She turned and put her hands behind her back. "We have some measure of privacy, now." She let out a breath and tilted her head. "Is there something you'd like to say to me?"

"Say to you?" Daena said with an incredulous tone. "What do you want me to say?"

"You could start by apologizing for trying to jeopardize my relationship with Bannor."

Daena raised her chin. "I--" She glanced back to him, hurt and confusion in her features. "Damn it, I *love* him."

Sarai snorted. "No you don't. You just think you do. You grew up in the streets. You don't even know what love is."

Daena's hands balled into fists. "And some stuck-up rich princess does?"

His wife-to-be took two steps and slapped Daena.

The auburn haired girl reeled back a step, gripping her face, obviously more startled than hurt.

"I have had enough impertinence from you," Sarai snapped. "To think you would dare to judge me. You know nothing about me. I may have been born a princess but unlike my sisters--I earned my title. I spent more decades than you have summers of life slogging through mud, standing watch and shedding my blood to defend my nation. At least, *I* know what it is to love my country."

Daena growled. "Love your country, what does that have to do with Bannor?"

Sarai shook her head. "Daena, you can't really love someone else until you learn to love yourself. You accept my sister's love, but you don't believe in it--because you don't believe in yourself. You still half-believe you're a monster."

"And you don't, I suppose?" Daena rasped.

"No, Daena, I don't--even with you trying to take Bannor away. I don't see a monster. I see a child who sees something precious to someone else and wants it for herself. I know your childhood was hard, and you feel a kinship with Bannor, that he makes you feel secure and accepted, but that isn't real love."

Daena stared at her. "No, dammit, I'm old enough to know my heart. I know what I feel."

Sarai shook her head. "Daena, what you feel isn't love. Real love is not selfish. You don't love Bannor because the only person you're thinking about is yourself."

The young woman shuddered like Sarai had stabbed her with a sword. She clutched her chest. She cast her gaze to him pleading for intervention or sympathy, he didn't know which.

"Did Bannor ever once say he accepted you before me?" Sarai said.

Daena's focus snapped back to Sarai. Tears started to well in her eyes. "He wanted to! You had him tied to you! I could make him happy--I know I could! He just needed to see--" She swallowed. "He couldn't see me for *you* . You were-- *you*--were in the way!"

He closed his eyes. It hurt. He wished Sarai would just stop. Daena was in agony.

"So, just push me out of the way, and take him?"

"Yes, damn it!" Daena cried. "You don't need him, you could--could have *anybody* . You--you're beautiful, you're not a monster--not a monster like me. I *need* him. He's the only person who--who *understands* me!"

Sarai's voice dropped to a whisper. "Daena, *I* understand you. I know what it's like to want something so bad it hurts. I know what it's like to have something you love taken away as well. Janai did that to me once. Took away someone I loved just for the sport of it. It wasn't until much later I realized it was for my own good, because if he could be tempted away so easily it wasn't something that would last. Still, it hurt--it hurt a *lot* ."

Daena stared at her, tears running down her cheeks.

"Daena, if I didn't have any regard for you, we wouldn't be having this discussion." She reached back and touched the hilt of her Shaladen. "I know you truly care, and that means something to me. When that bastard Odin tried to kill Bannor, you risked your life to save him. We have even shared each other's body. That's why this comes as such a shock that you would do this. Have I ever done anything to disrespect you--to give you reason to hurt me?"

The girl shook her head.

"Bannor is precious to me." Sarai leaned her head to one side. "Did you think I would just let you take him away? Were you thinking at all?"

The girl swiped at her eyes with her arm. "I--I don't know." She sniffed. "I just--" She shook her head. She glanced back at him with a lost expression.

"Daena, you know my sister made you her One. Do you know what that means?"

"It--" she sniffed. "It means someone--that--" She swiped at her eyes again. "You're dedicated to exclusively. That there--there's--no-one else."

Sarai nodded. "That's right. Did you know that Janai has never

had a One before?"

"It's just a jest to her," Daena murmured.

"No, it's not. My sister takes many things lightly, but that is not one of them. A One is forever. She is yours exclusively from now until she dies."

Daena scrubbed her hands through her hair. "What are you saying? I mean, I'm a girl. I don't--we--"

"That may be, but she has dedicated herself to you. She will have no others before you. That doesn't mean you can't have other partners, but for *whatever* reason, she was willing to commit to you and you only."

"I--" She stared at Sarai. "That's stupid. I mean, how can she be happy if--if--what is she *thinking*!?"

Sarai shrugged. "I guess no one is thinking here. You're busy professing your love for my husband-to-be, when you haven't even resolved the issue with my sister. Resolved--I should say *acknowledged* . You're not going to tell me Janai doesn't understand you. She knows you better than anyone."

"I--" Daena shook her head in bewilderment.

"And Janai loves you doesn't she?"

"Yes," Daena said without hesitation. "But we're both women!"

"Daena, since when do you have to be the opposite sex to give comfort and solace?"

"You don't..." Daena said in voice that trailed off.

"You love my sister, right?"

Daena blinked. "Of course I do. She takes care of me--cares about me--knows what--what I want."

Sarai laced her fingers. "I don't understand. If Janai loves you,

and you love Janai, and she understands and takes care of you... Why exactly do you *need* Bannor again?"

The girl frowned. "I--" She thumped down in one of the conference chairs. "I'm so confused." She rubbed the back of her head. "I can't believe she'd give up having children. I know she wants children."

"You're right. She wants children."

"If she's committed to me... then how? I mean it can't--"

"You are such a dunce," Sarai said shaking her head. "After a man you don't love. Having a love, and not recognizing it. Having all that power and not able to see the possibilities..."

Daena's brow furrowed. "Possibilities?"

"You have been changing your shape for scoredays, right?"

"Yes. So?"

"Are you saying you never considered taking a *male* form?"

"I--" The girl blinked.

"I know my sister has. Among other things, you're her One because she wants your baby."

Daena's jaw dropped.

Bannor's did to.

The princess sighed. She turned her back and moved across the room and turned around. "Imagine the child you'd have. Does it seem so ridiculous? With you and whatever children you bless her with she can rule the bloody planet if she wants." She rolled her eyes. "Girl, just realize your blessings. Who better could she find? You're young, smart, incredibly powerful, and *immortal* --you can look like *anybody* you want--male or female--you're like fifty partners in one!" Sarai rubbed her neck. "The best part of it all for my sister is she doesn't have to fake loving you."

She's in love not only with you, but the very concept *of* you. You are her dream partner. She's not married because the idea of tying herself to one unchanging static partner is about as appealing as a bowl of mush. No, *you* are what she wants. She's more than willing to bide her time, wait until you're old enough, comfortable enough with yourself and your identity. By that time, I imagine you'd have ideas like that of your own. She wouldn't even have to persuade you."

"But Sarai, it can't be true. She was willing to *help* me get Bannor."

Sarai's face hardened. "Daena, you're too willful and she knows she can't control you. She's going to be supportive of nearly anything you do, just so you look on her favorably. She knows me, I'm certain that she told you it was a waste of time. I bet she even told you could have anybody."

The girl rubbed at her eyes. "She did."

"Daena, I know my sister, she's aware that time is on her side. This plot was going to fail unless you dragged Bannor off under a rock in some godforsaken part of the universe. Someone would call you to task and put a stop to it. So in the end, your heart gets ripped out. Who else would you go to for consolation? There's no loss there for her, she looks good and you're tied to her closer than ever."

Daena gripped her temples. "Damn, I--I don't know what to think."

"I'll help," Sarai said. "Let go of Bannor."

The girl straightened and stared at Sarai. "But--"

"Let go of Bannor," Sarai said, voice growing dark. "And swear you will never try anything like this again."

Daena squared her shoulders. "Sarai you don't know that I did anything."

His wife-to-be stepped up to the table and grabbed the sheath

of the shaladen. "If you make this hard Daena, you will be admitting this duplicity to my parents and the rest of the savants."

"Why would I do that? How could you force me? Nobody outside of an eternal can force me to do anything."

Sarai lifted the sheath of the shaladen and caressed the jeweled scabbard. "Are you positive you want to put that to the test?" The elven princess brought the hilt of the weapon up to her lips. "Daena, admit the wrong doing--fix it--promise *not* to do it again. Do that, and apologize, and I will forget this ever happened."

"What about Janai?" Daena asked with a frown.

"Janai has nothing to do with this. She would never be so stupid as to cross me twice. What you do with her is your business. Make a million babies with her or not, as it suits you, as long as Bannor and I are excluded from your games in Coormeer and elsewhere."

This had gone on too long. Sarai had handled it masterfully, better than he ever could have. Still, he had to say something. "Daena please. Please do as she asks. I will always be your brother. Nothing will ever change that."

Daena turned to him eyes getting dewy again. "You're not mad?"

"I--" He paused. "No. I want you to be happy. I think she gave you good advice."

"What advice?"

"Were you listening? You are Janai's One. If you feel so lonely--go to her."

Daena rocked her head back. "I--" She frowned at Sarai. "I still think I am better for him. If love is so selfless, you should let him go where he'll be the most happy. You just finished saying what a good partner I make."

"You make a great partner for someone besides my husband-to-be. We have been to Hel and back-- *literally*--so we can be together. I will be damned if I'm going to give him up because of some girl's whim. Is that your choice Daena? Are you going to force me to be unpleasant?"

The two women stared into each other's eyes for long chilly moments. Daena's shoulders slumped.

"No," the girl said. She looked toward him and her green eyes flared white. He staggered back as a wave of dizziness made him grip the table. "I swear I won't try to control Bannor again," Daena said. She let out a breath and raised her chin, eyes fixed on Sarai. "And I--" Her jaw worked side to side. "I apologize to you and Bannor for trying to come between you."

Sarai let the shaladen fall to her side. "Apology accepted."

Daena rose from her chair, head down and shoulders slumped. "I need to go be alone," she glanced to Bannor, then looked up at Sarai. "Can I leave now?"

Sarai stepped back and opened the conference room doors.

Bannor stepped up beside Sarai as the girl hurried out of the room and headed down the hallway. Sarai watched the young ascendant go, fingers drumming on the scabbard of the shaladen.

"Do you think it's over?" he asked.

"It better be," Sarai said. "Because next time I'll kick her arse."

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Chapter Twenty-Four

Leaky Paladins and Accidental Mindscans

I never dreamed I would wield a shaladen. However, Koass said it was the best way for our family to defend itself against the Baronian invaders. So, I took the blade that was offered to me. Quite suddenly, the universe was revealed to me, and I felt strong enough to do anything. I will never be the same...

-- Arminwen Ryelle T'Evagduran, 1st Princess of Malan

Bannor and Sarai returned to their temporary chambers. He felt uneasy, afraid to touch her for the prickly hot threads of agitation that whirled around her. She wasn't exactly angry at him, but she was hairs from being that way.

At a little after six bells, a knocking came at their door. Bannor went and opened it. Senalloy stood in the hallway. She was dressed in a simple white blouse, close fitting blue breeches and soft walking slippers. Her long silver hair was doubled and tied into a tail. She carried a large leather satchel under her arm.

"Good morn, Lady Sen," Bannor said, bowing to her.

The Baronian lady returned the bow. She peeked past him to where Sarai sat on a hassock near the window staring out into the mists covering the western part of the citadel grounds.

"Morning Bannor," she said. "Is our Arminwen still grouchy?"

He frowned. "How did...?"

"Oh please, Bannor," Senalloy said. "The castle is full of telepaths now."

"Frelling nosy ones," Sarai growled by the window. "Come." She gestured.

Senalloy strolled in and set the case down beside Sarai. "It needed doing. I rather admire your restraint."

"Do you?" Sarai glanced up at the woman. "She's my sister's One. Not to mention the insult to Koass if I used the shaladen entrusted to me to trim the little fool's head from her shoulders."

"Janai warned me something might happen. I was prepared to step in, but you seemed to have things under control."

"She came so close..." Sarai shook her head, staring out the window again. "I don't know if I can ever trust her again."

"I think you handled it perfectly," Senalloy said. "She has to respect you."

"Maybe," Sarai said with a sigh. She looked around and found him with her gaze. "What are you hanging back for? You've been walking on eggshells all morning. I'm not mad at you."

He moved a little closer. "I was concerned about losing a limb."

She snorted and smiled. "Come here." She leaned forward and captured him around the waist and pulled him close. She rubbed her face against his middle. After a few moments she seemed to have gathered enough strength and looked up at Senalloy who stood patiently watching the two of them.

"So, what's in the case?"

The Baronian opened the satchel. "I know you don't like that body suit but you don't have anything that fits right. So I brought your favorites over from Green Run."

"So? All my measurements are so different they'll fit like sacks now."

"Sarai," Senalloy said. "What kind of grand lore mage would I be if I couldn't cast a few simple altering spells?"

Sarai brightened. "Really?"

"Stand up," the Baronian lady said. "The blue is your favorite, right?"

Bannor sat down behind Sarai, and complimented appropriately as Senalloy fussed over his wife-to-be, having her try the different outfits and adjusting them with incantations so they fit. It was such a simple gesture, but the activity worked in exactly the manner the elder obviously wanted. Sarai broke out of her fume.

The new body had some marvelous curves, and with magic to let in and let out the fabrics with exacting precision, some truly breathtaking results were possible. After about a bell, Sarai was humming and grinning as she turned and examined herself in the mirror with Senalloy looking on.

Hands on flaring hips, Sarai murmured as she examined her reflection in a brilliant red, low-cut gown chased with gold thread. A phoenix was stitched into the front, its stylized wings flowing up either side of her neckline and down her arms into angel sleeves.

She stopped and glanced back at the silver-haired woman, mirror apparently forgotten. "Since when is cheering me up part of a body-guard's job?"

Senalloy raised an eyebrow. "I'd like to think we were friends first. You have to trust me for me to truly guard you effectively."

"Hmmm." She looked back to Bannor. "What do you think of this one?"

"Magnificent," he answered carefully. "The gold dragon outfit is still my favorite."

"After Senalloy's adjustments, that is so brazen. There's more me than cloth."

"It highlights the brilliance that is you."

"Oooh, good answer," Senalloy said with a grin.

"Yes, over the scoredays he's gotten rather good at the finer strokes."

He tilted his head. "Self preservation."

"Well, I'm not wearing that to breakfast." She started unfastening the red gown. She looked to the Baronian lady. "Thank you, Sen."

Senalloy nodded. "I had fun. It's not often I get to be a lady's maid."

"You do a wonderful job."

The silver-haired woman bowed.

Sarai continued undressing. She glanced to the tall woman. "Sen, I do have a question."

"Sure."

"What do you think of Bannor being an ascendant?"

Senalloy looked to him. "I think he's your enemy's worst nightmare. I think he'll put me out of a job."

"I could never replace you, Sen," he said. "There's a difference between strength and experience."

The Baronian woman smiled at him. "I'm glad you recognize that." She looked to Sarai. "Was there something else you were wondering about?"

"It's about power itself. What happened this morning made me reflect on something about myself. Does power change you? Or is it something in you already that the power brings out?"

The tall lady folded her arms. "I think it's a little of both actually."

Sarai nodded. She stepped over to where the shaladen was leaned against the bed table, bent down and picked up the sheath. "You know, I don't know why, but I have always craved magic; as much of it as I could get my hands on." Her attention went to

him briefly and her cheeks colored. "Foross changed me into Adwena, and Koass gave me this shaladen. Suddenly, I had more power than I ever dreamed." She let out a breath. "Now--" She blinked. "Suddenly, I find it scares me. I nearly took that child's head off." She shook her head. "I knew her every thought. I sensed her life-force. I was prepared. She couldn't have stopped me." She looked back to him. "I was always so confident it wouldn't change me, now--I'm starting to doubt."

"It certainly *can* ." Senalloy asked. "I wouldn't worry about it. You two are pretty well adjusted. No matter how strong you get, you're going to need an old sneak like me to look after you and teach you what's what." She rubbed Sarai's shoulder.

His wife-to-be laughed. "Yes, I guess that's true."

Breakfast was much like dinner, held in the same large hall with a huge buffet to serve the tremendous appetites of the immorts. Bannor was surprised that after such a short time some of the assault team had already rested enough to join them. The Kergathas were already at the royal table with the King, Queen, Ryelle and Janai. It was not surprising that Daena did not come to breakfast. No doubt, the girl had a lot of thinking to do.

Shael Megan and Shael Elsbeth sat at the further end of the table conferring with Sindra and Drucilla who were with Cassandra's golden daughters, Cassin and Annawen. The new royal healer, Wysteri with her purple hair tied in court fashion sat at one corner of the table listening intently to the conversations.

Bannor pulled back the chair for Sarai and seated her, before settling in.

Queen Kalindinai leaned forward and appraised her daughter with gleaming amber eyes. "So, this is it? The new you?" She raised her chin. "I approve." She raised an eyebrow. "There seems *more* of you than I remember though."

Sarai rolled her eyes and sighed. She cast a look at Wysteri who chose that moment to be enjoying her juice. "Our physician

informs me it's best for our baby."

Janai coughed into her fist and said something so low that Bannor didn't catch it with the other voices at the table. Whatever it was made Sarai glare daggers at her. Ryelle elbowed the second princess.

Kalindinai turned her attention back to the Kergathas. "Ri, so how is the new family?"

Euriel shook her head. Studying the expressions of her husband, and two children, all of whom had the glowing eyes of the ascendants. "Not so much new, as made over. Shoulder to shoulder has taken on a new meaning for us this last day."

King Jhaan nodded. "Kidomma Idun, our table is blessed to have you for the first time. I trust your accommodations were satisfactory?"

Idun inclined her head and brushed back her glowing blonde hair. "I find the Freyr-kin of Titaan have even greater talent for bed-making than those of Gladshiem. I enjoyed my rest quite well. Thank you."

Kalindinai turned to Idun. "Kidomma, I am curious. You have been witness to these changes to your kin and the other savants. What are your thoughts?"

The goddess took a sip from her goblet and dabbed her mouth with a napkin. "I am wishing we had ascendants in the family seven scoredays ago. We would have settled the argument with Odin in a rather different way." She focused on Wren, reached out and stroked the savant's flowing blonde hair. Glowing blue eyes hooded, the Kel'Varan moved against her grandmother's hand with a comforted smile. "Truly, it concerns me that the courts of the outer realms will catch wind of this. What Lady Marna did in a mere handful of moments was create a new pantheon, and not something trivial. There will be consternation and there will be apprehension. Many were the wrongs heaped on the Ka'amok and manifold is their incentive to pay those wrongs back."

Azir looked to his grandmother. His radiant eyes narrowed. "I have about five years of paybacks due."

"Aye," Idun agreed. "And as my grandson alludes, the temptation to take up that standard while the opportunity presents itself is quite strong." She leaned forward. "But we will resist that temptation-- *won't*we?"

He gritted his teeth and sighed. "Yes, Nonna."

"So, Ri, how *does* one discipline a young immortal?"

Euriel laughed. "With a big club and a strong left hook."

Breakfast wound on, with numerous questions and information being exchanged. Wysteri was there at the table as a spokesperson for Karanganoi subnet now in residence. She reported that all the members were officially moved into their new roles, and for the most part all were happy with what they would be doing in the future. She also indicated that the cylinders containing the mortal host bodies of the savants had been safely ensconced in the ghost vault. She informed the ascendants at the table that she had examined their mortal hosts carefully and found nothing amiss.

As the morning sup seemed to be coming to a close, Bannor looked to Janai. "Jan?"

The second princess looked over at him.

"Is Daena all right? Have you talked with her?"

Janai pushed a hand through her dark hair and looked at Sarai. "No. She has that trait where she must go in the opposite direction she's pushed." She sniffed. "It's the red hair." She cast an irritated glance at Sarai. "If my sister had been a bit more *circumspect* in her revelations, I *might* have been able to smooth things over by now."

"Does anyone know where she is?" he asked.

Janai pointed up. "Battlement. It's where she goes to pout." She

touched the large black bracelet on her arm. "Nice thing about a Shaladen, you can use it to do something *besides* slay people. I'm keeping an eye on her."

"That's the Shaladen?" he asked. "I thought Megan turned it into a bow."

"She did," Janai said with a nod. "It can be *anything* . After I saw mother make hers into a staff, I started practicing. It's not so hard once you get the feel for it. Koass stressed to us vehemently that the Shaladen was never to get more than a few steps away from us. So--" She gestured to the band. "There it is." She gave Sarai an arch look. "Do you need me to teach you so you're not carrying a sword at the breakfast table?"

"It's *fine* ," Sarai said with a growl. "I can cut my meat with it." She turned to her sister. "I am sorry if I messed with your One, but what she did to Bannor really deserved a smack. A *hard* one."

Janai rubbed the bridge of her nose. " *Whowere* you trying smack again? I think *I* caught more of that swing than she did."

"For all her smarts, she's not very bright. It's not like you've made a secret of her being your One. Maybe if you'd made that *clearer* to her she wouldn't be making moon-eyes at *my* husband-to-be. I--" She stopped and looked at him when he pulled on her sleeve. "What?"

"You never explained that to me."

Sarai's brow furrowed. "I think I made it clear enough."

"Never a word."

She let out an exasperated sigh. "Fine. I didn't say anything *directly* . You knew what it meant--it was fairly implicit wasn't it?"

"Star, for a long time, I thought it was a pet name. Something like 'dearest' or 'honey'. It wasn't implicit at all--at least not as significant as it really is--a commitment for all time. That's not

something that you imply indirectly." He looked to Janai. "I think she didn't explain it to Daena because it would have scared her to death; she's only fifteen. Humans aren't very versatile when it comes to relationships. We *assume* a physical connection when you say a word like *commitment* ."

Janai sighed. "She'll be okay. Sarai, to be honest, I don't know any other tactic you could have used to divert her. The timing is simply inconvenient, but if I have to choose between you making her a couple hands shorter from the shoulders up or flipping her on her admittedly hard head--I'll take the latter. It will take a while, but she'll sort it out."

"I feel terrible," he said with a sigh. "I have tried to be firm the whole time. I thought I made it clear."

"Brother, it's not your fault," Janai said. "You can't help being the handsome prince that rescued her from that terrible life. She's young and those crushes die hard." She glanced sidelong. "Seems I recall a certain princess who became enamored of a rather *married* bow master..."

Sarai scowled at her sister.

"The problem is, what do you do when you're on the King's payroll and one of his daughters become infatuated? No doubt, bow-master Klevel spent many a sleepless night worrying about his head, his job, and trying to explain to his wife what those gifts were..."

Sarai sniffed. "I got over it."

"I dare she shortened the poor sod's life five centuries," Janai said with a laugh.

"I was young, and he was handsome, and nice, and talented and I just knew that old hag wasn't taking care of him..." Sarai said with wistful tone.

It was nice to hear stories about Sarai, to know that even though she was a princess that there were some familiar aspects of her life.

Breakfast started breaking up and Wren waited for them at the doorway as they were filing out.

"Bannor, can I have a word with you?"

He glanced to Sarai. She nodded.

"Sure."

Wren walked a few steps away from the portal and Bannor followed.

"What's on your mind?"

Wren drew a breath and ran her hands through her now long hair. Her glowing eyes grew dim. She bit her lip. "I'm trying to decide something."

"What? About being an ascendant?" He asked. "Are you having body envy?"

"That's certainly part of it," Wren said. "This whole problem though, I'm wondering if we shouldn't get Gaea involved."

"Gaea? The mother of the savants?" he said with a frown.

She nodded.

"Why?"

Wren rubbed the back of her neck. "For a lot of reasons. In all the times I talked to her. She never mentioned there would be a second coming. Suddenly, bam! We've got Daena. The eternal go positively loopy and lock her and me down. Then there's Kell. He does we-don't-know-what to her and she's cranked up another three notches--and we don't even know *why*. Then Marna does *this* ." She put a hand to her chest. "Bannor, that lady is so frelling dangerous... you cannot believe. Nothing is an accident, there's a plan behind everything."

"Well, I think the plan was to kick the spit out of the Baronians.

Based on everything that's happened--I think she succeeded."

"It cannot be that simple--" She shook her head. "That's what's got me chasing my tail. The fact that she would even suggest letting us have these forms permanently bothers me. We are too dangerous--we could turn on her."

He shook his head. "I doubt it. Wysteri showed us a little of what that Kriar shape magic can do. If Marna wanted, she could make it so your head would explode if you thought a bad thought about her."

"A control?" Wren said. "Of course."

He shrugged. "You know, Marna is too confident for something like that. Now, some kind of block--that seems more like her. She's the kind that motivates with carrots, when you already have everything it's easy to be generous. It goes together with a rather long lecture Cassandra gave us."

"Yesss," Wren drew out the word. "So, does that mean I should or shouldn't? Are we playing into her plan by going to Gaea?"

"I don't follow."

"Gaea won't say spit to Marna unless one of the savants is there. I'm pretty sure, I am the only one who can summon her."

"Take everybody then," Bannor said with shrug. "If you're worried about a trick then take the whole clan and all the Shael Dal. I mean it's no guarantee that anyone will see through it, but all the affected parties would be there then." He looked at her. "Do you suppose she would know anything about the genemar and those spells I was having?"

"Maybe," Wren said. "She's about as close to 'all-knowing' as you can imagine. If anyone would have a clue, it would be her."

"Well, then, what do we have to lose?"

Wren sighed. "That's what really worries me--I don't know. You're right though, if we bring the whole group, at least we'll

have all the benefit of those smarts." She nodded. "Okay, I'll lean on her to take us." She tilted her head. "Do you think we can get Dane to go? I *really* think she should see Gaea. I think it would do her good especially after that... uhhh, *argument* this morning."

"Do her good? How?"

The blonde savant bit her lip. "That would be tough to explain. Gaea just has a way of making us feel better about ourselves, and putting things in perspective."

"Hmmm," he glanced back to Sarai who stood at the doorway chatting with her sisters. "So, do you think Sarai should come?"

"Definitely," Wren determined.

"There isn't any danger is there?"

"No. No physical danger anyway."

"Well, I must admit you have me intrigued. I've heard you call her our 'Mother'."

"You will too," she said. "Trust me on that. Well, I better go make arrangements and start thinking about how to approach this. You see if you can't get Daena off the roof and willing to come."

"I will."

Wren nodded and waved to the princesses and turned back down the corridor.

He walked back to Sarai and put his arm around her waist. She looked up at him. "What was that about?"

"Savant stuff," he answered. "We were deciding whether or not to go visit Mother."

"Mother?" Janai repeated. "Who's mother?"

"Our mother," he answered. "Wren's and mine, well all of the savants actually, if Wren is to be taken seriously."

"And?" Sarai said, eyes narrowing.

"You are *all* invited. In fact, Wren thinks it's important we get Daena to come. Jan, do you think you can handle that?"

"Probably." The second princess' brow furrowed. " *Why* is it important?"

"The way Wren described it, it would help Daena heal. I don't claim to understand it. I've just learned not to discount anything Wren says."

Janai nodded. "I agree. Okay, I will see what I can do."

"So, what makes you think I want to see your mother?" Sarai asked with a straight face.

"Insatiable curiosity."

His wife-to-be smiled.

Bannor wasn't privy to much of the goings-on the rest of that morning. He and Senalloy acted as guards for the princesses while they made a court appearance to allay fears of the 'disease' that had infected the citadel. Rather than make things more complicated, they did not try to play him off as Sarai's One. He dressed in the robes of the Nightslash elite and looked tough. With the mask up and a sword in his fist, none would meet his eyes much less notice they glowed.

Ryelle did most of the talking during the bell long session. She made up mostly plausible explanations for reports for what witnesses sounded like explosions and the roars of monsters. The eldest sister told the court that some of the citadel's griffons had also gotten sick and their keening was what had been heard. The explosions were clothing and materials being magically burned to prevent the spread of infection.

After the session was over and the five of them were returning to the citadel, Kalindinai's brother Bertrand stopped them at the stairway leading down into the city.

The elder elf had four heavily armed Elven guardsman with him. Dressed in black court regalia, a gold amulet of state around his neck, Sarai's uncle looked in a foul mood.

"Nieces," he addressed them, brushing at his white hair.

"Uncle," Ryelle nodded to him.

He looked up at Senalloy and then at Bannor and his lip curled. His amber eyes narrowed. "Tell me, is my sister all right? She returns none of my messages."

Ryelle made a little bow to him. "Mother sends her apologies. She said if I were to see you, to say not to be concerned. She has been very busy, and the situation with the illness has been taking all her skills and attention to abate."

Bertrand frowned at her. "Child, I do not appreciate being lied to."

The eldest sister straightened. In a very uncharacteristic move, Bannor saw her reach to the sword on her side. The sister did it slow and with a firm deliberation. She blinked. "Pardon, Uncle, I don't believe I heard that clearly."

His gaze went to the hand on her sword. "Please, Niece, you don't have--"

A shaladen was naked in her hand and pointed at his crotch. "The stomach to pull my sword like this?" She finished.

Bertrand's guards lurched forward, but the deed was already done, had the first princess wanted to strike him down, it would have happened before any of them could move.

Ryelle sighed. "Lord Valharesh-- *uncle*--I believe you have the wrong impression of me. Mother bid me say what I have said. Believe it or not as you like. In any event, I will *not* tolerate

disrespect."

The elf lord stepped back eying the mirror polished blade that gleamed and crackled with magic power. "My apologies, Niece, obviously things in Kul'Amaron have been stressful for you."

A muscle in Ryelle's face twitched. Bannor had never seen the eldest princess like this. She was normally impossible to fluster. She glared at the lord with unabashed contempt. Her lip curled. "Obviously," she repeated. "Is there anything else? We have many duties to attend."

Bertrand focused from her to Janai. The younger sister was staring at Ryelle like she didn't recognize her. Sarai's jaw was hanging open.

"No," Bertrand said. "Good morn to you all."

"Be well," Ryelle growled the courtesy. She stormed down the steps and out onto the wooded lane.

Rays of the noon sun shined down through the boughs of giant scalebark and ironwood. Music chimed from somewhere deeper in the trees, and the smell of flowers was thick in the air. The winding path leading back to the citadel was laced with craft shops, open-air cookeries, and goods merchants. The princess moved fast, stepping around other elf pedestrians in her fuming hurry, boots crunching on the layer of dry leaves scattered across the lane.

The gap between her and the other two increased so rapidly that Bannor jogged after her and caught her shoulder. "Whoa, sister-to-be, slow down..."

The first princess slowed down, stopped and leaned against a tree. She stared at him in shock for a moment, then finally nodded. Janai and Sarai caught up with concerned looks on their faces.

"Rye," Janai let out. "What *happened*? You pulled a sword on Mother's-- *brother*."

The elf princess rubbed her forehead. She held up the shaladen. "I wasn't trying. I didn't intentionally read his mind. I looked at him and I *knew* . I saw..." Her voice trailed off.

"Saw what?" Sarai asked.

"Bannor was right. Uncle Bertrand is a traitor. It was so clear--gah!" She slammed a fist against the thick scalebark with a crash, causing a crack to shoot up the massive bole. "To stand there calling me a liar. How--" She stopped herself as a group of elves walked passed bowing to them. Her voice dropped to a forced whisper. " *Darehe!*"

Janai stared at the tree with wide amber eyes.

Ryelle noticed her sister's focus and stared at the cracked tree.

Senalloy stepped up and put a hand on the first princess' shoulder. "Let's get you out of here. Teleporting."

The Baronian raised her arms, her eyes flashed and Bannor felt the five of them pulled into nether space, their threads compressed as they fell down from the apex of infinity back into another place.

In a flare of light, the three of them were standing in the central council chamber. Bannor's stomach twisted from the transition, but the disorientation was brief. None of the sisters looked affected by it at all, probably something to do with their shaladens.

Ryelle thumped a fist against her thigh. "I'm sorry, that was unseemly. It just made me so *furious* ."

Janai put an arm around her sister. "We gathered that. I don't know why this surprises you. Sarai and Bannor have suspected for a while."

"There's a difference between surmising and *knowing* ," Ryelle growled. "I must go tell mother directly."

She started to stalk off and Senalloy grabbed her arm. "Wait."

The eldest princess looked back. "What?"

Senalloy stared at her with hard violet eyes. "Be careful. This is your Mother's brother."

"Yes, but I saw..."

"Ryelle, forget what you saw. Outrage is not the right thing to be feeling now. It's best to approach this thing as obliquely as possible. I suggest you say that in your inexperience with the shaladen, that you *accidentally* scanned him. During that scan, you caught wind of things that greatly concern you. Don't offer anything. Let *her* ask you. She has a shaladen now too. She can see in your mind or his if she chooses. Let her assimilate the information in her own way at her own speed."

The princess pushed a hand through her translucent hair. She glanced to Janai and Sarai.

"Rye, I think she's right," Janai said. "Mother will be angry enough. Confronting her with it definitely won't make it better."

Sarai nodded.

"Okay," Ryelle said with a nod. "Yes." She drew a breath. "I--I--I am not used to feeling like this." She looked down at the sword in her hand. "I think it's this sword."

"She's an avatar for the advocate eternal," Janai said. "It's no wonder it has her felled up; she's sharing her spirit with a silly paladin."

"Paladins are *not* silly!" Ryelle proclaimed, hands on hips. "And I'm not 'felled up'!"

"I didn't realize shaladens had side effects," Bannor said.

"Well," Senalloy said. "There is some euphoria like when you're immortal, and if you have some affinity for the eternal, there's a kind of a--leaking--I guess you'd call it."

"A paladin is leaking on my sister?" Janai said with a frown.

"Ryelle," Senalloy said. "After you speak with Kalindinai, you may want to consult with Megan. Just tell her that you're--"

"Edgy, emotional, *righteous* ..." Janai said with a roll of her eyes.

The Baronian frowned at the second princess. "Just tell her you're out of sorts. She'll understand."

Ryelle nodded, bid them well, and swept off toward the royal chambers.

"Well," he said looking to his wife-to-be. "At least we got to go into town and see the sun." He sighed. "And the thing with Bertrand was--uhhh-- *interesting*."

"If it wouldn't have made Mother so unhappy, she would have done everyone a favor by cutting off his traitorous lying head," Sarai growled.

"If you so much as touch him," Janai said looking off down the corridor after their older sister. "It will be the biggest mistake of your life. Sen is right, let Mother deal with it in her own way in her own time."

Lunch was served late as most of the members of the assault team didn't stir until well after noon. The King and Queen held court at the table but not a word was breathed about Bertrand. Ryelle seemed to have calmed down and ate with uncharacteristic zeal.

Several members of the assault team had been invited to the royal table for lunch. Loric and Desiray joined Cassandra, along with Aarlen, Dominique and Damay. Corim, Senalloy, Luthice, and Dulcere joined in along with Ziedra and her husband. Tal and his wife Terra dressed in court garb took seats as well. Though there were seats for them, both Wren and Marna were suspiciously absent.

The table bubbled as the different members retold their experiences on Homeworld, and themselves learned about events in the citadel in their absence.

When lunch was almost over, Wren and Marna entered the hall and joined them at the table.

The Kriar Vatraena bowed to the King and Queen before seating herself next to Dominique. Wren settled into her place next to her brother.

"So, what business did you and the youngest Kergatha have that kept you from lunch?" the King asked Marna.

"Wren was persuading me to return to the Gaea's domain. We had a small contention over who should go, but we resolved it."

Euriel frowned, gaze tracking from her daughter to the Kriar matriarch. "And who is going?"

Marna twined a finger in her long hair. "Anyone who wants to go." She turned to her daughter. "Between Dulcere and I, we can comfortably take forty, so that is the one limitation." She focused on Wren. "We don't want to take more than that, do we?"

Wren shook her head. "The only ones who for certain should go are the savants. Savant spouses should go too. I think at least one member of the Shael Dal should come along. We're going to consult with the oldest lady in the universe. Some may want to, some may not. Last time," she looked to Marna. "She stepped on a few toes."

"I'll go," Loric said. "Cassandra told me about her experience. I think it's a fascinating opportunity."

"If you're going, I'm going too," Desiray said.

"I will stay with Marna," Dominique said.

"Terra and I will go," Tal said. "This promises to be innerestin. Eternity's old lady. Bet she's got some stories to tell."

"Not all of them nice," Cassandra said with a frown.

"I for one, will *not* be going," Aarlen said. "I can do without being lectured."

Damay looked at Aarlen with a raised eyebrow. "How disappointing. I would have enjoyed that little encounter."

"I bet you would," Aarlen responded.

"When do you plan to take this trip?" the King asked. "I believe--" He turned to Kalindinai who nodded. "I believe we are interested to see this."

Wren leaned toward Marna. "Three bells?"

The Kriar nodded. "Acceptable."

"I will ask around to see who else is interested to go."

The Vatraena stared at Wren. "I am still unclear in what you hope to accomplish by taking so many to see her."

The blonde ascendant rubbed her hands together. "Think of it as a having a party for her."

Marna frowned but didn't say anything in response.

At a little before three bells, the 'visitation team' gathered in the council chambers. Wren didn't get forty takers, but she did get close. Bannor counted thirty-seven including himself. Everyone from the assault team except for Algernon decided to go. The entire T'Evagduran family were there as well. Cassandra, though she apparently had bad memories from the first time, decided to go. Dorian said it was too good an opportunity to pass up, her husband Brin was going to keep her out of trouble. Gabriella was taking part, according to her, to be able to recount the experience for something she referred to as story night. To his surprise, Quasar opted to take the trip, most likely to be with Eclipse. The two elder Kriar had been quiet and to themselves

which reinforced Bannor's belief that perhaps the two had mended their broken relations.

Megan and Elsbeth, the two elders from the Shael Dal, accepted the invitation. Corim insisted that he must go for academic reasons if nothing else. Sindra and Drucilla announced that they would be going as their mother's proxy, and Cassin and Annawen insisted they accompany both their mates and their parents. Senalloy and Luthice were the last two to join in, 'just for the experience' as the two of them put it.

Marna seemed a little taken aback that so many had decided to be a part of the mission, but she and her daughter agreed who would take whom.

Two circles formed, one around each Kriar lady. A moment of nervous trepidation hummed through all the bodies around them.

Bannor calmed himself and put an arm around Sarai. He had no idea what this trip would be like, but something in him felt good, like they were going home.

There were moments of conferring and adjustment as the two groups situated themselves. With a final nod and a chorus of assent, bodies taught, and throats working, the visitors flickered and leaped into the vaults nulltime...

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Chapter Twenty-Five

Blessings of the

All-Mother

I made two mistakes, one was confronting Gaea, the second was threatening her favorite, Wren Kergatha. The latter, I doubt I shall ever have the occasion to repeat. The former, all I need is a good enough reason, next time I shall be prepared...

**-- Vatraena Marna Solaris,
Supreme Counsel Dasta Fabrista**

The threads of the universe spun and whirled, focusing down into a single pinpoint. Bannor had not traveled with the Kriar many times, but this place, this destination was not like other places they had gone. They seemed to spiral down into the very depths of Eternity's inner workings, somewhere in-between the folds of the universe's self; a place where the threads of the cosmos grew as tenuous as gossamer.

The energies of the Kriar transport ability released them with sharp tingle that Bannor felt like hot poke behind his eyes. He staggered and caught himself, finding the material underfoot to be spongy and insecure.

The people around him swayed, gazes panning around the vast landscape. They stood in the middle of an empty plane, the substance underfoot resembling thick ebony hair. Strange scents that reminded Bannor of spice filled the air. The sky overhead seemed to be a solid thing, a rich bluish glow emanating from it. The atmosphere hummed, soft tones rising and falling in some unknown but soothing melody.

He rubbed at the spot in the back of his head where he usually felt his nola. It itched and tingled. His whole body felt strangely light, even lighter than it had been since becoming an ascendant.

As he looked around, he noticed one very bizarre thing.

No threads.

The people around him had threads, but nothing else did. The energies he felt, the life force he sensed, the whole aliveness of the place was contradicted by the total absence of the causal lines of Eternity.

"Here we are," Wren said.

Marna and her daughter looked around with unease. The ancient Vatraena's brow furrowed. "That was not like the last trip. I just transported on the fix I left here."

"You sound concerned," Megan said. She fluttered her rainbow wings and did a slow turn. "I feel no menace here. No danger or evil."

The Kriar woman looked up to the dome of the sky. "I cannot fix our position."

"Warping is being blocked," Quasar said, rubbing her jeweled face. She shifted closer to Eclipse, who put an arm around her. That gesture was the first confirmation Bannor had seen that something had happened between the two ancient mates. "The collapsed space around us is preventing getting an origin trace."

"You should never have ticked her off," Cassandra murmured. "It's an ant trap." She rubbed her face against Loric's arm.

"I'm not worried yet..." Desiray bent down and ran her hands through the dark substance they were standing on. "It's so soft."

"It's hair," Corim said, doing his own examination. "Or something very like it anyway."

"So, Wren," Gabriella said putting hands on hips. "Where is this Gaea? I see nothing here."

"She's all around us," Kalindinai said, stepping back from the group. "I can feel it. It's like being in the woodgod. So strong."

Bannor looked to the other circle where Daena stood with Janai. The auburn-haired girl stared around with obvious uncertainty. She didn't appear afraid.

As strange as this place was, he didn't feel uneasy either... he felt-- *safe*.

"It's pretty much like I remember it," Ziedra said floating up into the air. "The feelings are stronger though. That may just be

this body though."

Idun knelt down on the ground, hands on her knees and head down. "We are in the womb of the all-mother," the pantheon lady said in a reverent voice. "She that made us. We can only ask for forgiveness for the spites of our mothers and fathers."

"When everyone is ready, I'll call her," Wren said.

"Do you hear something, Bannor?" Sarai asked, hand tight on his arm.

"I hear that low humming," he answered. "It's like music."

She glanced at her sisters and to her mother and father. "No, it is not that. I must be getting it through the shaladen. I think they're thoughts... but not from anyone here."

Her words filtered through the group as others intrigued by what she said, stopped and focused. Perhaps, it was just habit but everyone went quiet as if they were listening instead of tuning their minds for thoughts.

"Yes, I sense it too," Elsbeth said, brushing at her red hair. "Intriguing."

Terra studied the sky and ran a hand through her husband's hair. "It's like images--" She leaned her head to one side. "Dreams?"

Dulcere knelt and pressed her hand to the dark surface. She looked to Corim. <The images are...> Her brow furrowed.

"Are what?" Corim prompted.

The Kriar woman shook her head. <Perhaps Terra is correct. They have the feel of--dreams.>

Tal looked around with folded arms. "So, like old lady Gaea is sleepin'? Don't seem so far out to me." He leaned toward Wren. "She ain't gonna be hacked if you wake her up, is she?"

"I don't think so," the blonde ascendant said. "Just in case, everyone back up a ways. I'm going to summon her, unless someone objects."

Everyone shook their heads but gave a Wren a respectable distance, forming a large circle some thirty paces across. Gazes intent, everyone watched the Kel'varan kneel down on the hair-like substance and place her hands flat upon it. She closed her eyes.

After a moment, she looked up and her brow furrowed. "Huh. Maybe she *is* asleep." She crossed her legs and placed her hands on the surface. She tilted her head back and focused.

The sky above them flickered, and energy crackled through the air.

Where there had been a complete void of threads, Bannor flinched back and shielded his eyes as the ground around Wren became a fountain of living energy as millions upon millions of primal threads whirled up around her.

Everyone staggered back with gasps as the black substance swelled up and engulfed the savant with a gurgling sound. The material pulsed and hummed, rolling over itself, becoming a shifting dark mound that continued to grow in size.

"Li!" her mother cried.

"Wren!" Ziedra yelled.

"Ah, spit," Tal growled, pulling out his shaladen.

"No!" Marna shouted, throwing out her arms in a warding gesture. "Nobody do *anything!* "

The mound bulged out into a sphere, the surface beginning to sparkle and glow. Divisions appeared in the shape, and the leaves of the sphere peeled back like the petals of a massive flower. Revealed inside was what looked like the upper torso of a giant green female, her skin glistening as though wet. The giantess had her arms around Wren, clutching her tight to the

creature's massive bosom.

Bannor had no preconceptions on what the mother of all savants would be like but she fit none of his possible imaginings. Everything about the all-mother appeared exaggerated. From the roundness of her doughy body, to the ebony hair that flowed down her shoulders and back like a cloak, to the huge jewel-like gleaming eyes that gazed out at them. Though he didn't know why, but he found her broad face to be the most exquisitely beautiful visage he had ever witnessed.

Gaea's brow furrowed as her head turned to take them all in. She then looked down to the savant clutched in her arms. < **Daughter?** > Gaea's thought voice resonated throughout the landscape, making everything tremble with its power.

The blonde ascendant stirred, still squished into the fleshy hollow of the all-mother's mammoth body. "Mother," she let out a sigh, and pushed back. "You surprised me."

Gaea stared at Wren, dark eyes widening. She took Wren's shoulders in her big hands. < **What-- is--this? It is close --but not your true form.** > She pulled Wren to her side and her gaze instantly fixed on Marna. < **Vatraena.** > Her eyes narrowed, the expression on her wide face was anything but friendly. Bannor felt the landscape around them begin to tremble.

Marna bowed to Gaea. "Domma prime, Gaea, I have come again to speak with you."

The giant goddess raised her chin. < **Is that so?** >

"Mother, in return for you and she being able to negotiate, I persuaded Marna to bring my friends, family, and colleagues."

Gaea straightened. < **I see that; so many of my children, grandchildren, step-sons and step-daughters. I have never had so many in my presence at once. This is-- marvelous!** > She looked around, her gaze stopping on Gabriella. < **Drakka'Tah, I am surprised you dared show your face to me.** >

Gabriella put a hand to her chest. "High Mother, what happened was done to protect Wren."

The green mother's lip curled. **<Keep telling yourself that. However, I refuse to allow my spirits to be dampened in a time of rejoicing.>** Her gaze stopped on Sindra and Drucilla. The two huge D'klace ladies stiffened as she pointed a finger at them. **<You two...>** Her eyes narrowed. **<I will speak with you later.>**

"Great Mother," Megan said with a bow and a flourish of her rainbow wings. "I come with greetings from eternal Koass."

<Well met, wed-sister,> Gaea said. **<Please approach.>**

The air maiden's eyes widened and she took a few steps forward and kneeled before the all-mother.

Gaea rolled her dark eyes. **<None of that. Come here.>** She beckoned her forward with a crooked finger.

Megan swallowed, rose and stepped closer.

The goddess reached out and pulled the winged woman to her. She very carefully kissed the golden-haired warrior on the forehead. **<I see my step-brother chose well. Tell him, you have my blessing.>** She let the tall woman go.

Megan blinked and only managed to stagger a few steps before Tal was forced to catch her. The avatar of Koass wore a dazed expression, apparently pleased and stunned at once.

"Megs?" Tal snapped his fingers in front of her face. "Heya in there, you okay?"

Megan nodded. "Fine. That felt--so-- *good*." She plopped down on the ground and sat there with a delirious smile, looking up at the blue dome overhead.

"She can have that affect," Desiray said with chuckle.

<There are so many of you,> Gaea said. **<It is difficult to choose who to greet and bless. Be assured I will address you all in time. Some of you I know so well, I never imagined having you here.>**

"So you didn't foresee this, Mother?" Wren asked.

<You jest, Child,> Gaea said. **<No. I sense that something terrible must have happened to motivate this particular visit.>**

"Well, you may want to wait on that. I think it would ruin your mood."

Gaea stared at Wren with those huge knowing eyes. She ran her hand through the blonde woman's hair. The savant relaxed against the all-mother's touch, eyes fluttering. **<Indeed.>** Gaea sighed, running her hand down Wren's back. **<My, I do like this new form of yours.>** She peered over at Marna who seemed to waiting patiently.

"Uh," Tal said. "Not that I want to disrespect nobody's mood or nothing, but can the whole lot of us just hang out? We left the whole citadel like undefended--heck, we left frellin everything undefended."

The goddess turned slowly and looked at Tal. **<Little Rinny,>** she said. **<You often call upon my blessings and commune with me. Know you so little of me?>**

Tal blinked. "Well, I--"

" *Rinny?*" Terra repeated, grinning with her hands on her hips.

Echoes of 'Rinny' went through the group as the other warriors familiar with super-tough Tal stared at the burly warrior with smirks on their faces.

"Hey!" he growled, glaring at everyone. "My mother called me that--deal with it." He focused back on Gaea with wary dark eyes. "Errr, meanin no offense, High Mother."

<None taken. To you-- *Talorin*--I am just 'Mother'.> She dropped her chin, and made a coming gesture. <Worry not about the consequences of real life, their sting cannot touch us here. Approach.>

The broad-shouldered warrior glanced at his wife. Took a breath, and walked up to where Megan had stood. He swallowed. "You ain't gonna do any of that mushy stuff are you?"

Gaea grinned. **<Dear Tal, I would never dare to offend the dignity of one who has fought so hard to protect my children.>**

"Well, I-- *urk!*"

The big man was interrupted in mid-demurral as the all-mother swallowed him up in a full frontal hug, his body almost lost in folds of green flesh.

Startled by the move, he kicked and squirmed and complained, but after only a few heartbeats quieted and leaned into it. She set the warrior back, hair and clothing tousled.

The normally stone-faced fighter colored and rubbed the back of his head. "Yeah, uh--I love you too."

The green mother looked around. **<Why is it, only daughter Liandra comes to me unbidden? Daughter Ziedra, daughter Damay, you at least know how much I miss my children. Come.>** She leaned toward Ziedra. **<Bring your gold spouse, such a fine young man.>** The all-mother glanced toward Cassandra. **<Cassiopeia, at least you are nice to your own children.>**

The gold mage frowned.

Ziedra floated down and Damay came forward and received hugs and kisses from the goddess.

Gaea turned to Vanidaar, and held out her hands. **<That invitation is not just to my daughters you know.>**

The red-haired mage stepped forward to receive the affections and attention of the all-mother. She waved to Wren's brother. <**You too, Azir.**>

The goddess paused and she turned to focus where Daena stood with Janai. The goddess' attention made the auburn-haired savant stiffen. Gaea stared at her in silence for a long while.

The air around them seemed to cool, and the atmosphere grew heavy. Bannor felt a pressure behind his eyes. The group around Gaea fidgeted in nervous anticipation as the silence went on.

The green mother sniffed and tears welled in her great dark eyes. <**Kumiko Danai.**> She put her hands to her face. Her mental voice dropped. <**You are-- restored.**> Gaea's brow furrowed, she looked down to Wren and pinched her.

"Ow!" The blonde savant reeled back a step, grabbing her arm. "Mother!"

<**Why didn't you bring her to me sooner?**> Gaea asked with a scowl.

"I didn't have a way to do that!" Wren complained.

<**Don't tell fibs,**> Gaea growled. <**When you wanted my help you found a way.**>

Wren sighed and hung her head. "Yes, Mother."

The green mother focused back on Daena, who had flinched at Gaea's abrupt attack on Wren. <**Kumiko, please don't hang back, it makes my heart ache. You are the first to return to me.**> She held out her arms.

Daena hesitated, glowing green eyes wide as she stared up at the all-mother.

Janai pushed on her. "Go."

The girl looked to the second princess, uncertainty on her face. Janai pushed on her again.

Daena drew a breath and took a few tentative steps forward.

Gaea smiled for her.

The youngest savant finally moved within reach and Gaea slowly gathered her close. Daena shuddered in the all-mother's embrace, and Bannor realized she was crying.

The goddess stroked Daena's hair making hushing sounds. <**Yes, Daughter, this mother more than accepts you. You are my cherished love.**> Still hugging Daena, Gaea's head came up and she focused on Janai.

The second princess of Malan blinked, her amber eyes going wide. She pressed her hands together and bowed.

The all-mother sniffed as she stared at the Elven lady. <**It is a good thing you have not taken advantage of her. I would be very cross.**>

Janai swallowed and nodded.

That powerful gaze swung to Sarai. His wife-to-be stiffened. She bowed like Janai had done. <**My all but wed-daughter. You don't want Kumiko to have your One?**>

Sarai's violet eyes widened. "No," she answered in a strained voice.

<**You don't think she would do a better job taking care of him?**>

She shook her head. "No."

Gaea's head tilted. <**Doesn't she love him more than you?**>

Sarai's voice cracked. "No!"

The all-mother raised her chin. <**Are you sure?**>

"No!!!" She yelled, then growled in frustration. "I mean, yes!!!"

The green mother sniffed. The corner of her mouth quirked up in a smile. **<Ah, just checking.>** Her attention swung to him. **<Little Nally, such a troublemaker you are.>**

He gritted his teeth.

Sarai looked up at him. " *Nally?*"

"Look, I haven't been that young for a couple decades, okay?"

<You will always be a baby to me my son,> Gaea told him. **<I would give you a hug but this one seems rather-- attached.>** She looked down to Daena who seemed to be clinging to the all-mother like her life depended on it. **<She seems to need a bit more time.>** Her gaze tracked back to Sarai. **<Your love is rather fiery in her devotion. I-->** She stopped. The all-mother leaned forward, brow furrowing. **<Wed-daughter, come a little closer...>**

Sarai glanced at Bannor. He took her hand and the two of them approached Gaea.

Daena was making tiny mewling sounds, face and torso buried in the goddess' flesh. The all-mother seemed to take no notice of it, but he was starting to feel concerned. From the affect it seemed to have on the others, Gaea's touch was obviously powerful. Daena was almost completely immersed.

The all-mother's chin came down, those dark eyes fixing on Sarai. Her eyebrows rose and a smile spread across her face. **<A grandchild? Wed-daughter Sarai, I take everything back. I should not have teased you, that is *fabulous* .>** Still holding Daena, she reached toward Wren but the blonde savant jumped out of range, avoiding the pinch on her arm.

Gaea frowned at Wren.

"Ow!" The savant grabbed her backside as some invisible force seemed to grab her.

<That's two,> Gaea told her. **<Is there anything else I**

should pinch you for?>

"Mother! You never implied I should come running to you with every little development!"

<You knew these things would be important to me. They aren't little.>

Wren rubbed the back of her head. "Yes, Mother."

Gaea turned back to Sarai. She frowned down at Daena. **<Dear Kumiko, I love you, but you need to let go.>** She stroked Daena's long auburn hair. **<You'll damage yourself. Daughter, please...>** She sighed, and took Daena shoulders and set her back. The green mother captured the girl's head in her hands and tilted her face up. **<Don't be afraid. You will never be alone. I promise .>** She kissed her on the forehead. The young woman went limp. **<Janai,>** she said looking to the second princess. **<Come take your One.>**

Janai who seemed small compared to huge Daena took the girl in her arms, apparently able to lift her with ease.

<She'll be fine.> Gaea explained. She tilted her head. **<Where were we? Yes--grand-children.>** Her brow furrowed. **<Wed-daughter, baby Vhina does not have your heredity, nor that of my son's current form. Yet, she will be a true child of the line. How--?>**

"I--" Sarai started to speak but the words seemed to stick in her throat. He looked to her, her violet eyes were wide as she stared up at Gaea. "We--"

Bannor squeezed her shoulder. "We don't know exactly," he said for her. "I was in my born body, Sarai ate some of Lady Idun's fruit..." He gestured to Idun who still knelt before the green mother listening to everything going on.

Gaea followed his gesture, gaze finding Idun. **<Step-daughter Idun, approach.>**

The pantheon lady rose and stepped close.

The green mother reached out and touched Idun's face. **<I hope you are as pleased with the family you have nurtured as I am.>**

Idun captured Gaea's hand in both of hers and sighed. "Yes Mother, I am very proud of all of them, especially Wren."

<Can you explain how the fruits of Yggrasil would cause a true child of my blood?>

"I cannot Mother, however, my daughter Euriel and Vanidaar had both eaten that fruit prior to births of Wren and Azir. I can only surmise that a true blood and one under Yggrasil's influence may somehow cause a true blood." She shrugged. "I am thinking there will be future opportunities to test the theory."

Gaea raised an eyebrow. She looked to Ziedra, Damay, and Azir. **<Yes.>** She focused back on Sarai. **<Apologies, Wed-daughter, I find this all very fascinating and exciting.>** She studied Sarai with those dark eyes. **<This form you wear, it is a made-thing, not done with my essence?>**

"Essence?"

"She means magic," he told his wife-to-be.

She shook her head. "It--it was designed by a Kriar physician."

<The design is quite sophisticated,> Gaea said. **<In many ways superior to my blood children.>** She looked to Marna. **<I see some of those improvements in the others of my children.>** The goddess drew a breath. **<The shaladen, how long will you have it?>**

Sarai turned to Megan and then back to Gaea. "I don't know. Until, the threat we're facing is over."

<Ah, the bad news that Wren said we should get to last,> Gaea said with a nod. **<The shaladen will affect Vhina's development.>**

Sarai instinctively shielded her abdomen. "It's not going to hurt her is it?"

Gaea shook her head. **<If you have the shaladen until she is born. She will grow up being very close to me.>**

"Sooo," she drew the word out. "That's--good?"

<Nothing would please me more,> Gaea said. **<Wed-daughter Megan, you can arrange it can't you?>**

"Great Mother, you know Koass can't tell you no."

Gaea smiled. **<No, he can't.>** She looked around the group. **<Please, all of you, sit and be comfortable. I know I have shown favoritism toward my children, those I know, and those I have met before--but I am interested to speak with you all. As you can imagine, I get visitors so very rarely. In eons, I cannot remember having so many in my presence. It is actually quite exciting.>**

Everyone began situating themselves around Gaea. As he turned to go sit with Sarai, Gaea took hold of his shoulder. He looked back.

<Where do you think you're going?>

"Uhhh..."

<Oh, come here, you didn't think you would escape giving me a proper hug did you? I think I'm owed two. One for you and one for Vhina, three if you count your love.> She focused past to him. **<Wed-daughter, you too, you rush away too quickly.>**

He looked back to Sarai who stared up at them. His wife-to-be pushed back to her feet. Her gaze tracked to her parents and sisters and then back to Gaea.

The all-mother gestured her forward.

Swallowing, Sarai came and stood with him. She was trembling.

Together they stared up into Gaea's great dark eyes as she held her arms out to them. He knew this creature meant neither of them harm. The fact that she was his mother could not be more implicit. Still, it remained daunting, Gaea was nothing less than the most powerful being in the cosmos--the creator-force.

Bannor relaxed and stepped forward, drawing Sarai with him into the waiting embrace of Gaea. The green mother pulled them close. For him, it was as if he were submerged in layers of warm velvet. A rich smoky sweet scent pervaded his senses, and the strains of some stirring harmony hummed in his ears. He had felt the power of Eternity flow through him and compared to this it was a cold and hollow thing. Gaea's essence surged into his body, pure life--pure love.

<Ah, Bannor, my first son--my brave noble boy. Always you have given more to others than you yourself take. It is something you carry with you so much later.> The all-mother hummed.

Next to him, Sarai murmured and twisted, arms spread and clinging to the goddess side, face nuzzling her flesh. As his wife-to-be admitted, she loved magic. Though she didn't say it, he knew it was the feel of magic she thirsted for, not the power itself. Now, inundated in magick's pure undiluted source, her face wore a rapturous expression. **<Ah wed-daughter, you do love me. Know me, be in me, let our child grow strong, teach her to be passionate, caring and brave.>**

Clutched to Gaea's bosom, drinking in her love, he understood why Daena had not wanted to let go. It was hard to imagine being cherished more or accepted nearly so completely. Here there was no pain, no ugly truth, no war or conflict. It was peace without end.

It was hard, but he pushed back as she let go. His legs wouldn't hold him up and he stumbled backward.

Gaea pulled a trembling Sarai from her side, leaning forward and placing her in Bannor's arms. His wife-to-be threw her arms

around him, pressing her face into the curve of his neck.
"So--beautiful..." she moaned.

<What she has always sought, I have given her--the mother of my first grandchild in too long,> Gaea said in a serious voice. **<She will now be content, because I will be with her always.>**

The goddess clapped her hands together, and looked around. **<So many questions, and so many answers, and all we have is an eternity to discuss them. Have no fear we shall get to the pressing issues. As Wren said though, I would rather enjoy this party a bit longer. Then we shall get to the serious bits.>**

It was clear that Gaea truly was in no hurry. She took time with each of her visitors, expressing interest, answering questions and offering insight. Bannor glanced to Janai. Daena lay with her head in the princess' lap, arms wrapped around her middle. How would that experience have changed her?

He nuzzled his wife-to-be, sniffing her hair, feeling and enjoying the warmth of her body. He stroked her silky soft tresses. She sighed and wriggled against him. If Sarai would no longer crave magic, it would be a profound adjustment in some of the forces that motivated and drove her.

Over Sarai's head he noticed Kalindinai watching him. The Queen had her head on the King's shoulder. He remembered how that powerful lady had practically terrified him the first time they met; so assertive, so confident, a driven leader with a powerful love for her children. He had nothing but admiration for Kalindinai's bravery, her integrity and spirit. Those qualities were reflected in her beautiful, brilliant, headstrong oh-so-passionate daughter. How could he not adore her?

He felt a touch on his arm. He looked over to meet Ryelle's eyes. The first princess had a concerned look. "She will be okay, right?" she asked in a whisper. "I didn't follow what Gaea meant."

He nodded. "She'll be fine," he answered, keeping his voice low

so as not to interrupt Gaea's audience. "She's just tired out. It's hard to explain. You get and give a lifetime of emotion. It wears you out."

Ryelle tilted her head and rubbed Sarai's back. "She makes me crazy."

He chuckled. "Think how it is for *me* ."

<**Chrysandil Lathan Diliaysus**,> Gaea said. Bannor saw Quasar who had been reclining against Eclipse sit up. The ancient female's glowing eyes were wide. <**Quasar**,> Gaea continued. <**There are few of the Kriar people that I know, and fewer I know well. You, I know like I know my children.**>

The gold warrior stared up at all-mother. "How can you know me?"

<**You used to talk to me. You shared your tears with me. I knew your fear, I felt your torment. I experienced your passion and your loss. It is because of you, I chose not to block the Kriar gates--though now I have grown to regret that decision.**>

The elder Kriar frowned. Concern written in her jeweled features, she stared up at Gaea. "How could that be? I don't remember..."

<**It was a time before there was a Quasar, when there was only Chrysandil, the bright star of the Kriar military. A gate and warp specialist, given the cruel task of trying to root the subspace paths of the Lokori ring. My Lokori grandchildren were most unkind. Violence and aggression were the only negotiating they knew, and they negotiated without mercy. Many of my gifts they wielded and they were truly the most relentless of my progeny.**> She sighed. <**I know you lost a sister, and three friends. I heard you request the build order be rescinded, only to have them send reinforcements instead. I saw colleagues and officers you had known for millennia slaughtered, even after you demanded the Daergons recall the**

engineering team. I listened as you sat in the darkness of the borehole begging the Lokori to come for you.>

Tears welled in the jeweled Kriar's eyes. Her normally stony face twisted in a mask of remembered torment. She shot to her feet. "That was you?"

<Aye, Child,> Gaea said with a nod. <The ethereal subpaths are my body. How could I not hear the little despairing animal that had crawled in my ear? She wanted so much for the pain to end. How could I not console her grief?>

Quasar was aghast now. "I thought--"

<Dreams?> Gaea provided. <Delusions from being in the ethereal chaos? No. Fortunately, unlike their forebears, the Lokori obeyed me. They were told not to touch you, or the one I sent to rescue you.>

Quasar looked to Eclipse who now had a very grave expression. The Kriar male rubbed the white tattoo on his face. "The eruptions at the boresite, I had no-where--"

<No-where else to go but the bore-hole,> Gaea said. <A little broken bird needed mending and you were the best choice. You both needed time to heal, so I convoluted the subpath.>

"We were lost for megarevs," Eclipse said, a look of dawning comprehension on his face.

<Megarevs with only each other,> Gaea shrugged. <The outcome was easy to predict with two people who admired one another from afar but for some reason felt each other unapproachable.>

"Mother, I had no idea you were such a busy body," Wren said with a grin.

Gaea looked at the blonde savant with one eye closed. **<Can you think of something better to do with eons spent**

alone?>

Eclipse and Quasar were staring at one another. Obviously, neither had any inkling of how profoundly Gaea had affected their lives. Bannor was certain there was more to the story, and whoever the Lokori were.

"Mother," Wren asked. "I know time doesn't pass for you, and you speak of eons. Does it seem long to you? I mean do you feel lonely?"

<That's more of a philosophical question, Daughter. Objective time, subjective, intervectoral, transvectoral, they are about quantifying decay and rates of decay. What I perceive outside myself are many aspects--possibilities--of you at once. I focus on a particular 'now' when that instant is crystallized for me. The between moments...> Her thought voice trailed off. For a profound instant, Bannor saw a great sadness in the all-mother's eyes, and it made him cold inside. **<Yes, Daughter, I do get lonely. Perhaps that is why I cherish my children so much.>** She brushed a hand through Wren's hair.

Marna tilted her head and narrowed glowing eyes. "Gaea, what are you hiding from? Or should I say, 'who'? If you understand time that well, and can control your awareness that effectively, you could exist in any whence or place you chose." She put hands on hips. "When we last bumped heads, you bragged to me about ousting Jyril nobles. I wondered then if that was a bluff to frighten us. It occurs to me now that your children, the first ones, those war-like violent powerful creatures are not unlike evolved Baronians." She glanced to Senalloy and Luthice. "We have long suspected the Masters that Senalloy and Luthice have described to us are a rogue sect of the Jyril."

Gaea frowned at the Kriar high council. **<Vatraena, is there an accusation in there somewhere? It was too convoluted even for me to follow.>**

"I am wondering if you're something the Jyril made that got away." She glanced to Senalloy and Luthice again. "Their creations seem to do that."

<Aren't I a bit old for that?>

"And I'm a bit old to be diverted by rhetorical questions," Marna said with folded arms. "You live out of time. You could arrive a thousand centuries from our current now and come backtime. In fact, living in transition, there's no need to move in time at all. Space and time would be the same for you. So, what exactly are you?"

<Vatraena,> Gaea said. **<Remember where you are when you start questioning me.>**

"Are you afraid to answer the question?"

Bannor saw Gaea's jaw tighten. The bluish light overhead flickered and threads spun around her.

"Hey, you know," Tal said. "Let's not tick her off when we're like inside her or wherever the frell we are where we can't get out."

"Let me make a point then," Marna said in conversational tone. "Just this morning I reviewed a recording of Bannor fighting a rather powerful Baronian weapon--something they call a coven dreadnought. The creatures are nightmares almost impossible for us to slay. Yet, your son there, with a body based on the original first one forms took them on in ones and twos and dispatched them with such ease it was almost as if his powers were designed to fight them. The coincidences are getting thin, don't you think?"

<Vatraena, you are so reaching,> Gaea said.

"Am I? The first ones, your 'children' were originally to protect this universe--you have told others as much yourself. What you never said--was from *what* ."

<Mother, please stop antagonizing her,> Dulcere told the Vatraena, taking Marna's arm. **<We are guests here.>**

The Kriar matriarch just stared at Gaea and the all-mother stared back.

Energy crackled and rasped around the goddess. Bannor looked around feeling uneasy.

"All right, forget that question," Marna said. The Kriar woman turned and thrust a hand out toward him. "Bannor, tell her, tell your Mother about your little spells... and those *interesting* words."

He felt a stab of unease in his insides. How did she know about them?

The growing anger in Gaea's expression, became surprise. Her dark eyes widened. **<Words?>** She looked to him. **<What words?>**

He swallowed. "Well, mother... a few times now I've felt this intense pain, and there's this--" His jaw dropped as he stared up at the all mother and her glistening emerald skin. "Green--light. I sense millions of life threads and there's a voice in my head that says 'creation', 'annihilation', 'perpetuity' and then everything turns red. I wasn't sure what that was about, then I started helping them look for this thing called the genemar and I got a sense they were somehow related."

His words seemed to rock Gaea back like a physical blow. Her body swayed and her massive form trembled.

"Mother?" Wren took her huge arm.

Gaea's hands balled into fists. **<No. It's too soon. They aren't ready.>**

Megan stood up, spread her wings, and raised her hands. "Whoa! Wait. You mean there's some *truth* in all this? Not just you two sniping at one another?"

The green mother's head dropped and her shoulders rounded down. **<The genemar, if it is here. The Chyrith, the ones you know as rogue Jyril, will come for it.>** She pushed her hands through the strands of her hair. **<My children aren't even whole, much less ready to defend against them, and**

the eternals and Shael Dal are too few.>

"Can't we just find this thing and give it back to them?" Wren asked.

<You could,> Gaea said. **<Then they would kill you with it.>**

Ziedra floated up from the ground so she was at eye level with Gaea. "Why?"

<As Marna suspects, I am something of a runaway project,> Gaea said. **<If they come, they will know I am here, and they will kill me.>**

"Hold on! Hold on!" Tal said. "I thought you created this universe or somethin'."

<No, I am responsible for much of its life, and for the evolution of much of its structure. Universal pockets are themselves cyclic in nature.>

"And these creatures can just come here and kill *you*? "

<The genemar is a device for creating and destroying creatures such as myself. It can do other things of course, but that is its main function.>

"I have a bad feeling about this," Corim said, stepping over by Dulcere and Senalloy. "What happens if this thing is used to kill you?"

<I am intertwined through all the sub-pathways of Eternity.> She looked to Marna. **<The Kriar anchorpoints hold me in place, so I cannot leave those pathways even were I to desire it. When a genemar's entropic reaction necrotizes my essence, every subpath in Eternity will collapse simultaneously.>**

"That don't sound so good," Tal rumbled.

"Our gate systems will chain react. Every world where there is a

primary portal will be annihilated."

"You have them damn things everywhere!" Tal growled.

"Yes."

"Is that it? A couple hunnert planets get blown out of existence?"

"What if we shut down all the gates?" Cassandra said.

"It doesn't help," Quasar said. "The boreshafts upon which the gates are built look into the subpaths. Even if the gates had never been created, there are billions of weak spots in the ethereal fabric that border subspace flows. The collapse she is describing will tear the fabric of space wide open which will in turn cause violent phase shifts and a disruption of the bonds that hold matter in a solid form. Thousands of cubic leagues of matter around the weak spot will instantaneously convert to energy. Such an explosion would easily annihilate an entire star system."

"Ouch, so like ten percent of the life in Eternity just goes poof."

"Then the timequakes start," Eclipse said. "Right before siderous chronous is sucked into a rip in time/space that will make the Daladarian rift look like a pinprick."

"Damn guys, don't paint such a rosy picture, I might start to worry," Tal scrubbed his face. "Holy spit."

Bannor let out a breath. His gaze went to the others around him. "All that discussion is moot. It's not going to happen. These Chyrith or whoever they are, they aren't going to touch Gaea. I just bloody got to know my mother and I'm sure as frell not going to let them kill her!"

"Friend, that's all fine and well to talk about, but these creatures made Gaea. How are we going to fight them?"

"First, we deal with their minions," he said. "I think with Gaea's help, we can do that. Next, we find the genemar. For every

offense, there's a defense. There must be a way to protect her from this thing's power." He focused on Gaea. "That's possible, isn't it, Mother?"

For the first time the goddess' voice was tentative. **<I don't know...>**

"I do," Wren said. "Starholme Prime. It has enough power to reshape the cosmos. Senalloy said this Genemar thing was small, so whatever it does is probably like a poison that starts in one place and spreads." She gestured to Dorian. "Lady Degaba taught me that you can create an anti-toxin that can take the teeth out of a lethal poison. So, Bannor is right--we find this weapon, the Kriar analyze it, and we use Starholme to apply the anti-venom." She looked around the group. "We always wondered why the first ones needed something with so much power. It may have been for this very thing." She hugged Gaea's arm. "Bannor is right, there is no way any weird creatures are touching our mother. Not going to happen."

Marna pressed her hands together. "Wren, you are truly a tribute to both your mothers and your entire family. That is a brilliant piece of thinking." She nodded to herself. "There is just one thing."

"What's that?"

The Vatraena drew a breath. "The Kriar have key role in this plan."

"Right, so?"

"You assume we are willing to help."

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Chapter Twenty-Six

Assurances

The day Gaea told me she knew about some of my more covert dealings with Eternity, I had a sinking feeling that my life would be changed. Then I found out she was the very wellspring of the art that I have dedicated my life to. It really reeks when all the truths in your world get turned on their ear...

**-- Cassandra Kel'Ishtauri Felspar,
Mage Council High Archivist**

Bannor turned as the atmosphere in this alien place seemed to grow cold. Bodies stiffened and eyes widened. The words of Marna Solaris, the Kriar Vatraena cut through everyone listening. Great Gaea, the green mother frowned, causing the sky to dim and the ground underfoot to tremble. Gazes turned to the Kriar lady. *You assume we are willing to help.* After what had been done to benefit the Kriar recently, Bannor couldn't imagine a much stronger slap.

A shrill piercing whistle so loud that it made Bannor grab his ears issued from one side of the group, making everyone jerk and look in that direction.

Cassandra pulled the fingers from her mouth. "Whoa! Hold that threat!" The gold mage looked around. She raised a hand. "Let's slow down a moment, things went kind of fast there. We went from genemar, to Gaea dying, to everything gets blown to drek." She swallowed as everyone including Gaea stared at her. "Now, great-mother you said something about your essence being destroyed by this Chyrith device. Didn't we establish earlier that your essence *is* magic."

The green mother sighed. **<Yes, Cassandra, my essence is the magic of Eternity. So?>**

The gold mage put hands on her hips. "No. Oh *frell* no. That genemar thing creates and destroys living magic! Even if Eternity were to survive these explosions and the collapse of subspace, all the universe's magic would be destroyed. No way. Marna you *are* helping her. You're not pulling any of that opportunistic dren

now."

Marna frowned, and brushed at her hair and glared at the mage. "Child, you're in no position to order me around."

"The magic of Eternity is what *healed* the Kriar," Cassandra snarled. "I'm sure as frell not going to let it be destroyed, and neither are you."

"Are you threatening me?"

"It's a threatening atmosphere," the woman raised her chin. "Knowing what you know now, I can't believe you'd try to pull this spit."

"Child, you don't have an entire race to think about. I do. These Chyrith--they are hostile--and they have all but wiped out half my race already. If we help her--" She pointed at Gaea. "It will ensure that we must fight them."

"Oh yeah, like were not fightin' them already?" Tal rumbled. "You got those damn Daergons shacking up with their agents. You're already committed."

"Their collusion does not automatically mean that hostilities with the Chyrith will ensue."

<Mother,> Dulcere spoke into everyone's mind in an icy tone. <I've held my tongue until now, but now we are on a slippery slope. If these Baronians, who are agents of the Chyrith, are helping the Daergons to overthrow the Kriar government--to kill *you* --that is war. To take it any other way is just-- *reckless*. This is an age-old tactic, find a dissatisfied faction and help them to overthrow the government, then while the nation is in disarray, move in and conquer.>

"I agree," Quasar said.

"A more than reasonable assumption," Eclipse said.

Marna clenched her hands into fists. "Don't you see? There's still a possibility of avoiding engagement. If we obstruct them,

fight them, then war is assured. Perhaps none of you were paying attention, but the Jyril *won* the last war--and not by a narrow margin."

Quasar sighed. "Vatraena, how long have you been pretending to be a warrior?"

"I never claimed to be a warrior, Quasar," Marna said with a frown.

"Then let warriors worry about winning the war," Quasar told her. "We lost to the Jyril because of arrogance and bad planning. They beat us because they had weapons we had no defense against..." She gestured to Gaea. "It's a leap of faith, but I wager the protection we needed is here. Let's drop all the pretexts here. The Chyrith will kill or enslave us if we let them. The protectorate needs our help--we need theirs. All we really need are some assurances..."

<**Assurances?**> Gaea repeated.

"They don't like being threatened," Wren said with a frown. "Even when they deserve it for going in places they knew they shouldn't go."

"High mother," Cassandra said. "Marna's nose has been tweaked ever since you hinted about the Jyril curse, and the gates getting closed."

<**Oh, *that*,**> Gaea said. <**Gave you a bit of a stomach ache, did it? It was supposed to.**>

"Don't patronize me by acting so nonchalant," Marna growled.

<**Vatraena, recall that you had just threatened Wren with worse.**>

"Hey!" Bannor snapped. "This doesn't get us anywhere. I understand what's going on here. The Kriar are scared of you. Anybody with any sense would be. Both of you, just lay it out. Marna, what do you need to feel safe?"

"An agreement that neither of those things will happen," Marna said. "I came here with incentive to seal that deal. Then these other things came to light."

<Incentive?> Gaea asked. **<What incentive?>**

"I know that part of what you wanted from Wren was to help band together the savants, and eventually rejoin them." She gestured to Daena who still lay in Janai's lap. "Eventually, she might get the savants to work together, as this group is evidence of. However, getting them to join with their pantheon counterparts was not likely to happen. So, what I wanted to present to you was evidence that the rejoining was not necessary."

Gaea pursed her lips. She reached over and stroked Wren's hair. She looked toward Ziedra, and to Bannor. Dark eyes hooded she stared at Marna for a great while. She straightened.

<Perhaps we should sweeten the deal.>

The Kriar matriarch eyed Gaea. "Sweeten how?"

<Assurances, concessions, agreements, truces--all very altruistic--it doesn't have any meat on its bones. It's nothing you can win support with. What you need is something tangible. Something you can show your other council members that will make them back you, and not continue to issue lame counter-productive measures.>

Marna didn't seem concerned as to how Gaea knew about the conflict of interest going on in the conflict with the Baronians. She just nodded. "Go on."

<The thing that scares your people is the death-curse that the Jyryl put upon you. The same curse that Cassandra, using Eternity's--or should I say-- my--power removed.>

The Vatraena raised her chin. "A defense against it?"

Gaea steeped her fingers. **<It will not make you happy to**

know that the death-curse is *not* unique. It is one of a large class of similar magical effects. To make you immune to the death-curse, would not protect you from any of dozens of other enchantments, some of which are worse .>

"I see where this is going. There's something that can defend against all of it?"

Gaea nodded. **<There is indeed. Is that something worth dealing for? Something you can win support for?>**

"Of course," Marna said. She narrowed her eyes. "If such a thing exists."

<Trust is a wonderful thing,> Gaea responded.

The ancient Kriar leader stared at the green mother.

Sarai, who hadn't stirred, even with his yells, sighed and raised her head. She blinked and looked around. "Bannor?"

"Shhh," he hushed her. "I'll tell you in a bit."

His wife too be looked around in obvious confusion and disorientation. He noticed that Daena too was starting to show signs of regaining consciousness.

"So," Marna finally said. "What did you want specifically in return for that much larger piece of information?"

<I want protection for my children--recognition--cooperation--and a fourth thing that I will mention in a moment. Protection would be from outside forces as well as the Kriar insurgency. Recognition, I am aware that there is a registry on Homeworld that lists peoples and cultures officially deemed as sentient and accorded particular rights under Kriar law. I want all of my hereditary descendants and any extended family placed on that list, and given favored culture status. Cooperation--I think that speaks for itself.>

"So far, all quite reasonable. The protection? Can we define that a bit."

<Easily defined, the same protections accorded any Kriar civilian citizen.>

"I notice you made no mention of the bodies."

<My children have already been instrumental in the defense have they not? The better equipped they are, the safer they, you, and I shall be. If you made it possible for those that wanted it to have those forms permanently, I would look on it favorably as cooperation between us.>

"No doubt," Marna said with a frown.

<Do you think you're getting so little out of the deal? They have already helped you a great deal.>

"Yes." Marna said. "All right. That's acceptable for my part. Your children have to promise never to fight against the Kriar unless attacked first, either in person or by proxy. *All* of your children. There are more than a few of your wayward sons and daughters and they are dangerous. We expect you and your devotees to police them and make them behave. I would like the assurance of an *adult* --say Idun--to enforce this."

"I would agree to be responsible for such enforcement," Idun said.

<That is reasonable,> Gaea responded.

"Hold up," Megan said. "We don't want the Shael Dal working at cross purposes to this."

"Why would they?" Marna said. "Aren't Gaea's problems the Protectorate's problems? Wouldn't she be like your main client? She is Eternity and you get your power from her."

Gaea leaned over and peered at Megan with a raised eyebrow, obviously curious as to how she would answer.

The rainbow winged air maiden cleared her throat. "Well, Koass makes policy, I just communicate and enforce it." She looked up at Gaea and winced. "Eternity never really asked us to do anything before. Koass knows about Gaea and the two of them have a sort of tacit agreement..." She scrubbed her forehead.

<Wed-sister,> Gaea said. <Don't give yourself a headache. I understand the potential conflict of interest. The Eternals and the Kriar do not have a concrete peace accord--am I right?>

"Yes," Megan answered. "It's not too much of a stretch to foresee with some of your family married to some of our family what might happen if certain goals diverged. That is one clash none of us want to face."

<Then I will speak with Koass and we will make sure that it doesn't happen,>Gaea said. She focused on Marna. <The Shael Dal and all their assigns will be considered my extended family for purposes of this agreement. They must abide by it and be recognized equally. I will have Koass deliver to you a letter of confidence stating his intentions to abide by these terms.>

"But Gaea," Megan said. "You--"

<Little sister,> Gaea interrupted. <You said yourself he can't tell me no. He's not going to this time either.>

The air-maiden sighed and nodded. She shook her head.

Daena sat up out of the cradle of Janai's lap, rubbed her head and looked around. She drew a breath. Looked up at Gaea and smiled. He had been a while had seen a genuine smile on the girl's face. The auburn-haired girl scooted back, draped her arm around Janai's shoulder, and relaxed her head against the princess. Janai ran her fingers through the girl's thick hair.

Seeing Daena with Janai made something click in him.

"Mother," he said. "I know this matter with Chyrith is important, but there is one other thing that happened to us that you should

know about."

<What concerns you my son?>

"We met another garmtur, and he, well--he was more powerful than all of us put together."

"That's right," Wren said, snapping her fingers. "Kell."

<Kell?> Gaea repeated with a furrowed brow.

<When we first saw him,> Dulcere said. **<We thought he was Bannor, his energies were so similar.>**

"He kicked us to the curb," Ziedra said. "It was pretty scary."

"He did something to Daena and disappeared."

<The interesting thing is that when I scanned him,> Dulcere added. **<It seemed to me that he had some Baronian heredity.>**

<Baronian?> Gaea said with concern in her voice. **<I have sensed nothing like that on the winds of the past or your future.>** She focused on Daena who was awake, but barely seemed aware of anything or that she was being talked about. **<I sensed no taint in her. She is the purest child I have seen since my original progeny.>**

"So, it's a mystery to you too," Wren said. "That's scary. The guy comes out of nowhere, kicks all of our arses, and just disappears. He seemed to know all of us too."

<I feel your concern,> Gaea said. **<How long ago did this happen?>**

"Just a few days ago," Wren said.

<I will see if I can discover anything, Daughter. I find it perplexing that one can wield the same gifts as my children and not be known to me. The remark as to him having Baronian blood, would suggest a grandchild. Perhaps the child of a rejoined and a Baronian.> Her brow

furrowed. **<I will think on this.>** She turned to Marna. **<There is one last matter Vatraena, pursuant to our agreement.>**

"Yes?"

<What are the limits of these bodies you create? How well can you control the affinities and microstructures?>

Marna shrugged. "We can design at the helix level or at the micro structure level. Affinities take a little more work but we can usually get them adjusted within a few tries unless they are really unstable."

<So, if you had a detailed microstructure template you could build the body?>

The Vatraena narrowed her eyes. "Of course, it would be simple unless there were some radical elements of the design."

"Mother, why are you asking about a body?" Wren asked. "Who would the body be for?"

Gaea leaned down close to Wren. She looked around the group as if confiding a secret. **<For me.>**

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

The Avatar Plan

The audience with Gaea changed me in more ways than I can name. That plethora of differences burgeoned from a single thing. I no longer questioned who and what I was. I knew the name the great mother gave me at the beginning of time, Kumiko

Danai. The name humans gave me, 'Daena', was a shortening and a corruption of that original name. After talking with Wren, I learned an interesting fact; that through a magic I cannot imagine, that the parents of savants somehow give their babies a name close to the original name they had from their lives in the beginning times. It is just one of the miracles that savants sometimes too easily take for granted...

**-- Kumiko Danai "Daena" Sheento,
Ward Prodigal of Malan**

In the wan blue light of the other realm Bannor blinked. Perhaps they had been out of time too long and he was hearing things. The all-mother, the creator of everything that he knew had made a statement that seemed too stunning to contemplate. As he looked around, he realized he must have heard correctly because the other savants had the same startled incredulous looks on their faces. He had come to understand that for a being of cosmic power, Gaea had something of a queer sense of humor. She had to have been joking--a *body*?

Wren who was clinging to the all-mother's arm looked up at her with surprise. "Mother, is that possible?"

Gaea looked over at Wren. **<You tao transferred into that body didn't you?>**

"Well, yes, but I'm, uh, *smaller* than you." She gestured to the sky and swung her arm around to include the vastness that seemed to spread into infinity. "Isn't all of this-- *you*?"

Gaea rubbed her stomach and gave Wren a hurt expression. **<Daughter, are you implying I've put on weight?>**

Wren coughed. "Not exactly."

<Obviously, it is not practical or even possible for me to transfer my entire essence into a body. However, I can create an avatar. You have seen one.>

"In Starholme," Wren said with a nod. "I remember, but you were only able to stay for a short time."

<And even that short span is limiting and painful. I do not do it often because the bodies don't last long--it's really not worth the energy it takes.>

Wren frowned. "I'm sorry, Mother. I never should have asked you to do that."

Gaea pressed her broad lips to a line. She bent a little and looked in Wren's eyes. **<I didn't mean it that way, Daughter. Still, to keep my promise to the Kriar, and to assist my children, I must be able to have a concrete link in your time and space.>**

Marna was staring at Gaea. "You would trust me to make a body for you?"

Gaea looked at Marna sidelong. **<Vatraena, you are trembling with anticipation. You so want me where you can keep an eye on me and learn my secrets that you're practically leaping out of that golden skin of yours.>**

Marna sniffed. "Well, it *is* an intriguing prospect..."

"I think it would be wizard for Mother to have a body," Ziedra said. "Easy access to hugs."

Gaea raised an eyebrow. **<That works both ways.>**

Vanidaar looked up at the all-mother. "How do you get inside the body? You can't turn yourself inside out. So, bringing it here is no good."

"She has a place where she can manifest in Starholme," Wren said. "A portal made to commune with her." She looked up at Gaea. "Right?"

<Correct.>

"So, I get to go into Starholme Prime as well?" Marna said with an arch expression. "When do we start?"

<So predictably eager,> Gaea said with a nod.

"You already know it, no point in trying to conceal it," the elder Kriar admitted.

Bannor glanced over to Megan. The air maiden seemed to have developed a tick, and she rubbed her forehead like it hurt.

Gaea seemed to notice her expression. **<Is there a problem, Wed-sister?>**

Brow furrowed and wings starting to droop she didn't look up. "Is there any danger to you as an avatar? Any repercussions?"

<No more so than to any other creature that uses avatars I suppose.>

A vein seemed to pulse in Megan's forehead. "Pantheon lords have died because of the loss of an avatar they were occupying."

<Oh, well I suppose that is a possibility,> Gaea said with a shrug.

"We just established that you dying is a really *bad* thing." Her voice hardened. "You take a *third* of Eternity with you."

<Your point being?>

Megan's jaw dropped. She stared at Gaea, throat working and hands twitching.

Around the circle, others were starting to twitch a little too.

"I--" Cassandra said. "I was thinking this was a wizard idea right up to 'oops, Eternity gets blown to dren'."

"Yeah," Tal rubbed the back of his head. "I mean I am all-over that thing about you taking a vacation with the kids 'n all. I'm just a little uncomfortable with the idea of you falling off a ladder and fifty-trillion critters get wiped out."

Gaea rolled her eyes. **<Tal, you are funny. I rather doubt a poor moment of bad theatre is going to result in my**

demise.>

"The point remains," Elsbeth said gripping her staff. "If you manifest, it gives us a single very *vulnerable* point of failure. There are magicks to kill the host through an active avatar. You know that."

Gaea waved a hand. **<Children, would you have a little faith? I don't want to die any more than you do. First, the body design I plan will be very durable. Second, I don't plan on getting in the middle of any battles--at least intentionally--I am no warrior. Third, I will have all of you to protect me, will I not?>**

"Saw that one comin'," Tal murmured.

"We aren't going to talk you out of this are we?" Megan said.

Gaea shrugged.

Megan massaged her forehead. "Koass is going to have a fit."

"I foresee--much--babysitting," Tal said with a sigh.

The air-maiden looked to Marna. "Maybe you could be persuaded to not help her?"

"Megan," she pointed to the King and Queen. "They just obtained their own subnet. A subnet not bound to the Fabrasta. They don't need me to do this. They have ample incentive," she swung an arm to Bannor and Sarai, "to go along with whatever she wants. Better to be dragged along and make sure that body is *really* hard to kill."

Gaea folded her arms and raised an eyebrow.

"I still think this is going to be wizard," Ziedra said with a grin.

Loric who was sitting with Cassandra and Desiray stood up. "Great-mother, our clan is favored by your family. Wren and Ziedra, troublemakers though they be, are prized by us. We will help as we always have."

The green mother nodded. **<Thank you, Loric.>**

"Mother," Damay said. "This is actually quite exciting."

<Yes, I am looking forward to it.>

"Mother," Wren said. "I'm going to need the key to the house or we can't get in."

<Ah, yes.> Gaea gestured and a strange curved device appeared in her hand. She handed it to Wren. The blonde savant slid it over her fingers and around her palm. Bannor noticed a large reddish jewel flashed on the back.

Wren wiggled her fingers. She looked over to Loric's white-haired wife. "Hey Des, think I have enough energy now to work this thing?"

"You're funny," Desiray answered.

<Sil'Vaya,> Gaea said. **<I would like for you to go with Wren. You are one of a few who are recognized by Starholme. Also, your cloak will make transport of Marna's materials easier.>**

Desiray stood up and bowed.

<All of the savants will go to Starholme with Wren, I want her to familiarize the prime source with each of you. Bannor,> Gaea turned to him. **<Bring Sarai with you. Wren, please get her and the baby identified as well.>**

Wren nodded.

<Ziedra,> the goddess continued. **<I have enchantments for you to perform. While Marna's artifices are capable, there are some preparations that are beyond their capacity. That and those elements will be our little secret.>**

The dark-haired savant clapped her hands. "Sweet. New magic."

<Vanidaar, Euriel is of course welcome, as is step-daughter Idun.> She focused on Loric. **<Loric, I would like you and Cassandra to accompany them as well.>** She leaned forward. **<Bring Mon'istiaga. I have a special task for you.>**

He bowed his head.

Gaea looked to Marna. **<I know you can do this alone, but would you like assistance?>**

"Yes, I would like for my daughter and Corim to come along."

<Corim?> Gaea looked at the burly warrior. **<I have to ask.>**

"He's over there splitting at the seams wishing he can go so hard it's giving me a headache." Marna tilted her head, eying Corim and then looking to Dulcere. "He's something of a chronicler and it will be good to have a Shael Dal be witness to this--" She glanced to Megan. "They would insist on having someone there anyway."

<Very well, granted.>

"Uhhh," Daena said, standing up. "Does that mean I *have* to go?" She looked to Janai and back to Gaea.

<Daughter, you are free to do as you wish. Starholme is your legacy as much as Wren's. I simply want you to know it as she does. If it will make you more comfortable you are free to bring Janai.>

"I'll come with you," Janai said. "You need to go."

The auburn haired girl seemed uncertain. After a moment, she nodded. "Okay, if you're coming, I'll go."

Gaea scanned the assemblage. **<I enjoyed speaking with all of you. It now looks as if we will be interacting in the future. So, I will not say good bye, only 'until later'.>** She bowed.

"Mother, how soon do you want to do this?"

<As soon as possible,> Gaea said. <Bannor's 'spells' are whoever has the genemar attempting to activate it. So, time is of the essence.>

That riveted the group. Eyes widened and jaws dropped. Several people leaped to their feet and there was a profusion of words and thoughts.

"Mother!" Wren let out. "That was an important detail to leave out!"

<Daughter, I didn't leave it out. I left it for last so the lot of you could think coherently while we discussed preparations. I trust now, you will all move at best speed?>

"Uh, yeah."

<Enter the complex as you did last time. I will have Hyperion greet you and lead you to the audience chamber. Marna will set up her equipment there and I will communicate the design specifications. I trust it won't take long after that.>

"No," Marna said.

"Mother, I do have one dumb question."

<What's that?>

"How are we going to fit you in one of those tubes? They aren't that big."

Gaea grinned. **<For you daughter, I will go on a diet.>**

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

Starholme Prime

After an audience with Gaea, so many things in the "real" world just seem trivial.

**-- Kalindinai T'Evagduran,
Queen of Malan**

Gaea let them go and the huge group reappeared in the council chambers in Kul'Amaron just as they left it. To Bannor's eyes it didn't seem as if a single instant of time had passed since they departed. Time might not have passed but everyone was profoundly affected as a few people fell to their knees and others gripped their hair.

"Damn," Megan growled. "I must go to Koass immediately. Tal, you're in charge."

"Aye," the burly warrior rumbled in response.

"We will go get what we need," Marna said, she turned to her daughter. "Dul let's..."

"Stop," Quasar said. "Eclipse and I will escort you. The Daergons are waiting around every corner."

Marna raised an eyebrow. "Quasar? You--protecting-- *me*?"

The jeweled Kriar frowned. She hooked a thumb over her shoulder toward Bannor. "You should bring the dread-beater too. Just in case."

"That's a good name for you, Bannor," Wren laughed.

He rolled his eyes. "Let me get my axes and armor."

"Here." Quasar held out her hands. In a flash, all of his

equipment was stretched across her arms. "Anything else?"

He blinked and took the armor and weapons from her. "Uhhh, no."

She raised an eyebrow. "Need me to dress you too?"

"That's okay," he answered. "I'll dress myself, thank you." He placed the stack on the floor and started strapping on the pieces. Sarai started assisting.

"We'll make preparations to go," Loric said.

"Desiray," Marna said. "Can I impose upon you to come? We can put the items we need into your cloak straightaway."

The white-haired woman looked to Loric who nodded. "Sure."

Wren looked around. "Thanks everyone for coming, I hope it wasn't too upsetting."

"It sure wasn't boring," Dorian said, putting an arm around her husband. She swallowed and let out a tremulous breath. "I'm going back to my rooms and hyperventilate now."

"Child, I really must learn to stay away from you," Gabriella said. "You are bad for my heart."

Arm in arm with her mate Cassin, Sindra ducked close to Wren, looking down at her from the woman's sky scraping height. "Fun as always. We even managed to avoid getting yelled at. That's a plus."

Wren leaned close and lowered her voice. "You haven't gotten away yet."

Sindra frowned at her. "Certainly, you don't hold any grudges against us. We're *friends*. "

"Oh Sindra, that still doesn't stop me from wanting a nice *friendly* rematch *now* ." She laced her fingers and gave them a crack.

The elder tilted her head. "Wren, I can think of much more entertaining things to do with that gorgeous new body of yours." She wiggled her eyebrows. "Give us a little private time and we'll be glad to show you."

" *Not*what I had in mind," Wren said with a frown.

"Hey, is that offer open to me?" Azir asked, bouncing on his toes.

Wren elbowed her brother.

Sindra raised an eyebrow and looked him up and down. She bit her lip. "There's only one way to find out."

Wren's father Vanidaar cleared his throat.

The young man looked over. He coughed. "Well, maybe some other time."

"A few decades from now," Euriel said with a frown.

"Well," Cassin said rubbing a finger on her golden cheek. "Annawen and I still have duties to perform. We've become the engineering team. We're still tweaking the T'Evagduran subnet." She looked back to Queen Kalindinai. "Unless you have new duties for us?"

"Let me come with you," Kalindinai said. "I have some more ideas that we can work on together."

The Queen and the four twins walked off.

Ryelle and Janai stood with Daena who still appeared a little lost. The King put a hand on each of his daughter's shoulders and looked at auburn-haired girl. "How is the prodigal feeling? It seemed like the all-mother gave you quite a jolt."

The girl swallowed. "I--I'm still sorting it all out." She rubbed Janai's shoulder. "I'm feeling much better though."

"Were you feeling bad before?"

"I was-- *angry*." She looked over toward Sarai. "It wasn't justified or deserved, but the feelings were there."

"And you're okay now?"

She drew a breath. "I was so anxious, so--so *desperate* . Gaea helped me to realize how silly that was. I was frantic to possess something, as if owning that thing would validate me." She pursed her lips. "It was foolish."

The King leaned close. "You *do* possess something. You are my daughter's One."

Daena colored and bowed her head. "Yes, *Dom'ista* ."

He turned to Bannor. "This place where you are going. It is not dangerous is it?"

He looked to Wren. The blonde savant shook her head.

"Well," the King said. "I suppose my daughters will be safe enough. They both have shaladens in addition to you and Daena. I can summon you home if needed."

Both Sarai and Janai bowed.

Bannor sheathed his axes, the battle knives, and the Kriar weapons. He gave Sarai a kiss. "Guess I'll be right back. It sounds like we're just going to go grab these things and return."

"Less than a quarter bell," Marna promised. "Homeworld isn't the safest place for me until the Daergons in this coup are rounded up."

"Vatraena," Eclipse said. "Nothing will touch you. Not with us around."

Marna nodded. She looked to Quasar. "You know, you're going to have to be punished. Wren's mother had every right to want you prosecuted. Even though it didn't end up being what we

thought, your intent to let hostiles into Homeworld remains."

"I don't want her locked up," Euriel said from the back of the room. "That would be a waste. She's too good a fighter."

"I concur," Idun said with folded arms. "She didn't injure either of my grandchildren or put them at immediate risk. She should do some other penance. For now, it is best for her to assist Eclipse. They obviously work well together."

"Indeed," Marna said. "Then we'll table that matter for *later* discussion." She looked around. "Bannor, Desiray, are you ready?"

The two of them stepped close and nodded.

Dulcere, Eclipse, and Dulcere gathered close around Marna. In a heartbeat, Bannor felt the universe compress around them. Threads whirled and converged into a single probability; a moment of darkness, and then a flash as they appeared in another place.

They stood in the confines of what appeared to be an interior corridor looking at a pair of large red doors with a flower pattern painted on them. Windows further down the passage appeared to look out into the vast expanse of Homeworld's interior. The air did not have that sterile scent that he had begun to associate with the inside areas of the Kriar living spaces. Instead, there was an odor vaguely like dry needleleaf mixed with some kind of spice. An odd rhythmic sound came from overhead that Bannor guessed was some strange kind of music.

"The privileges of rank," Quasar noted. "Straight in access. Why are we at Eladrizzle's domicile?"

"Because there is little doubt there are enemies three ranks deep around mine," Marna said.

The Vatraena stepped up to a crystalline panel on the wall near the door and pressed something. A heartbeat later, a female Kriar, somewhat older looking than Marna appeared in the crystal. She spoke in the singsongy Kriar speech which Bannor

understood as a greeting. Marna responded and the doors swung inward for them.

The six of them stepped in. Eclipse and Quasar stood by the doors until they had completely closed. A short distance away were another set of identical doors.

The Kriar lady that Marna called Eladrabelle greeted them in the entranceway after the second set of doors.

The Kriar woman was small for her kind, a spry and wizened imp with the energy of a lady far younger than her apparent age. Long black hair brushing the floor, seamed hands glittering with jewels, she bowed to Quasar and Eclipse with apparently sincere regard. She greeted Desiray with pressed together hands and a nod, black-black eyes glistening with stars. She turned to Bannor and froze. She raised an eyebrow.

<Whoa,> the elder Kriar said taking a step back with hands on hips and looking up at him. <Rena, what *have* you been up to?>

<Bannor,> Marna said, using thought speech. <This is Eladrabelle Delarn, the lady who taught me everything I know about medicine and the creation of bodies.> She turned to Eladrabelle. <What do you think? He's what has the Daergons so frantic.>

Eladrabelle looked up at him, her creased golden face quite attractive despite its apparent age. She pursed her lips. <So,> she asked him. <How did Rena--> She glanced to her colleague. <Vatraena Solaris, talk you into being her test subject?>

"Wasn't much talking to it," he admitted. "I looked at the body, saw what it could do." He shrugged. "And transferred to it."

<Oh, you didn't modify his original body,> Eladrabelle said with a nod. <So, this is one of those 'savants' you were telling me about?>

Marna nodded.

< *Fascinating.* All of you, come.> She turned. <So, what brings

you here?> she asked as they walked out of the entry way and down a flight of marble steps. Open arboretums opened off to either side, the areas more like small dense forests than interior gardens. Flutterbugs and birds flitted through the branches and what looked like rays of sunlight filtered down through the canopies.

<I just need to borrow some equipment--the good cyber and builder apparatus. I have a really important create to do. Level eighteen work.>

<Fah,> Eladrazelle scoffed. They came to an intersecting passage and turned right down it. Glowing windows looked out of the passage into what appeared to be some kind of underwater display. Huge fish, rays, and crustaceans swam, drifted, and crawled in the views of a half dozen different circular windows. Desiray like him peered at the sights with obvious interest, unlike the five Kriar who hardly seemed to notice the displays. <Rena, there's no such thing as level eighteen project. I never used over level fifteen capacity.>

<You never made an avatar for the life-force of an entire universe,> Marna said.

The older Kriar stopped and looked up at Marna. <Is this that Gaea creature you discussed with me?>

The Vatraena nodded.

Eladrazelle pursed her lips. <Isn't that a dangerous creature to let run around?>

<I would object, but Bannor's family just recently acquired a subnet and a level eight physician. If I didn't do it, they'd try to hack something together. Seeing as how if Gaea dies, every subpath in Eternity is going to collapse, we have some interest in making sure it's done right.>

The other Kriar's jaw dropped open. She blinked those big dark eyes. <Octavia is *all* yours. Can you do this remote, or will you need to take her host?>

<We better take her host,> Marna responded. <We're going to be doing this in a pretty secure location.>

They were led to a giant laboratory and introduced to Octavia, a level twenty mecha physician. Like Eladrazelle, Octavia was rather small and unassuming. One wouldn't have known the creature's power simply by looking at her. Pale and thin with a shock of blood-red hair, the only truly unusual thing about the mecha was her eyes. They were larger than normal and constantly changed color, cycling through a rainbow of hues. Her pupils were quite strange as well, rather than being round, they looked something like a cat's eye doubled with one pupil turned at a right angle to the other, forming a kind of cross shape.

The mecha frowned at the mention of her host being moved, and looked as if she would refuse to do the task. Then Marna told her that the project would be making a body for Gaea, and that the creation would be performed in Starholme Prime. The mecha needed no more persuading and led them straight away to her host box.

They stepped into the secure vault holding Octavia's host.

Having seen Wysteri's host, he knew what to look for. The knowledge wasn't necessary, Octavia's host box took up most of a wall, easily ten times the size Wysteri's had been. It was taller than he was and easily twice as wide. "Ummm, that's, uh, *big*."

"Not a problem," Desiray said. "My cloak can hold twenty of those if we need to."

"Those must be some pockets in that thing," he said. "I saw you pull swords and things out of there, I didn't realize the magic was that powerful."

With the other Kriar assisting, the mecha's host was disconnected and made ready for transport. When it was ready. Desiray gestured and her white cloak seemed to come alive like one of the boneless sea creatures they saw in the windows on their way here. The cloth stretched out, gathered around the huge device and in a hiss it disappeared.

<I do so admire the abilities of magic at times,> Eladrabelle said. <That is such an elegant albeit *disturbing* interface to a portable dimensional locker.> She looked toward Marna. <There's a matter converter built into her host, so you should be able to build the construction chamber and all your consoles on site.>

<Thank you, Elle,> Marna said, giving the smaller woman a hug. <I promise to bring back Octavia in one piece. If she pulls this off she should be pleased with herself for a good while to come.>

The mecha frowned at Marna and sniffed. Her voice was soft but had a little edge to it. "I am certain it will not be overly difficult." She leaned over and kissed Eladrabelle on the forehead. "I will be back directly, Mother. I will record everything in detail so you can review it."

<Thank you, Dear,> Eladrabelle said.

They gathered close and in a few heartbeats they were standing back in the council chambers in Kul'Amaron. As he looked around for Sarai he located her sitting with the other savants at the huge conference table set on one side of the room. Several large baskets filled with loaves of bread, wheels of cheese and fruit now sat on the table, and the remainder of the team Gaea had selected to go to Starholme were busy indulging their appetites.

Eladrabelle's physician, Octavia glanced around the environment with mild interest, her shimmering rainbow eyes glinting in the torchlight. She brushed at her blood-colored hair as she peered around. Her gaze stopped on four figures near the hall entrance.

Bannor focused to see who it was. Cassin and Annawen seemed to be having a discussion with Wysteri and Mercedes. He was somewhat surprised that Bronawyn's physician was still being allowed to wander about. He wondered what turn of events had made that possible.

Wysteri and Mercedes seemed to feel Octavia's attention. They looked over. Wysteri turned her head to one side, apparently

curious. The placid Mercedes stiffened, her jaw dropping in apparent dismay. She put a hand on Cassin's shoulder to stop her from talking. Octavia raised her chin.

For the second time, he witnessed Mercedes doing something out of character. She patted her clothing and brushed at her hair like she was under the scrutiny of a visiting dignitary, which Bannor guessed, among mecha physicians, Octavia probably was. Wysteri practically worshiped Mercedes who he had heard was a level twelve. They were told Octavia was a twenty. So, this physician was as far above Mercedes, as the elite physician had been above Wysteri.

"Vatraena," Octavia said in that cool voice. "Will you be needing me immediately?"

Marna looked around and found the source of the mecha's interest. "No, it looks like there will be a little time before we leave."

Octavia nodded. Hands behind her back she strolled over to the flustered and wide-eyed Mercedes. He watched the mecha's studied grace, the set of her shoulders and the line of her body. They might not be born creatures, but they certainly had every other aspect of sentient creatures--especially ego.

"Come sit for a bit," Wren called to them, gesturing them over. "One bad thing about these bodies is you're always hungry."

The six of them walked over. Desiray went and sat in her husband's lap and began teasing him, snitching pieces of cheese and bread out of his hands. Dulcere went and settled with languid grace next to Corim, who was there with Senalloy.

Bannor sat with Sarai and rubbed her shoulder. She smiled for him, brushing at her silvery hair, and enjoying a piece of bread.

"So," Wren asked as she bit into a large red crunchfruit. "Who's the new girl?"

"Octavia," Marna answered.

"Another mecha like Mercedes?"

"Yes, the most skilled on Homeworld."

"Whoa, you're taking this pretty seriously."

"While the Kriar reside here, Eternity is our universe too. Since it appears we won't have one to live in if something untoward happens to Gaea, it is wise to use the best tools available."

"Can't argue with that." She looked around. "Marna, I hope you don't mind being transport. I don't think Des or Cassandra can take this many."

"Not to worry," Marna said. "I rather prefer the responsibility. I feel I am taking my life in my hands every time I let you youngsters handle the transport." She tilted her head. "Where exactly are we going?"

"No place specific actually, we just need a big open space away from civilization. I can handle getting us the rest of the way there."

"I finally get to see one of these keys opened," Cassandra said with a frown. "I've managed to miss every other time one was opened."

"It's pretty wild," Desiray said with a grin.

Marna turned to Quasar and Eclipse. "You two should rest while you can. I will be safe with Dulcere and these youngsters to protect me."

Eclipse bowed to her and Quasar nodded. Together the two of them glided off. Marna watched them go. "I'm glad those two are back together. I was beginning to fear something drastic would be necessary to bring Quasar under control."

<She had Cassin and Annawen scared senseless,> Dulcere said twisting a finger in her long hair. <Not that I blame them, she scares *me* .>

Together with the others, Bannor enjoyed a small repast of bread, cheese, and fruit. That was one of the things about the synthetic bodies provided by Marna. He didn't realize how hungry he was until he started eating, then it seemed like he couldn't get enough.

Sated, he pushed back from the table along with the others.

Wren rubbed her hands together and walked to the center of the council chamber. "Let's do this thing."

"Take care of Corim," Senalloy told Dulcere with a grin. "Sarai, Janai, behave. I'll look out for Ryelle."

The two princesses nodded to her.

Bannor rose to follow, noticing that Octavia's audience had grown in number. Several other mecha had also gathered around and they along with Cassin and Annawen were listening to whatever she was saying.

"Octavia," Marna said.

The physician looked up and sighed. She nodded to the other mecha, said some words of parting and walked over to join them.

"So, where are we going exactly?" Marna asked.

Wren shrugged. "Anywhere, as long as it's big and open with no one around. The gate is pretty scary."

"Most of the places I know are Kriar installations," Marna said. "Hmmm," she fingered her lower lip. "Ah yes, I know a beach here on Titaan that will serve. Prepare yourselves. Three--two--one."

The council chambers flickered around them. In a tingle of collapsing universal threads they fell through reality into another location. Kul'Amaron's pastoral silence was replaced by the rumble of ocean breakers. They stood in an expanse of sand about fifty paces from the tide. The smell of salt and kelp came

strong on the senses carried on a cool ocean breeze. Late afternoon light shone on the rocky beach, the horizon just starting to tinge toward orange behind gray ridges of clouds. A headland rose in a steep ascent behind them, the rocks striated in deep reds and oranges.

"Oooh, nice spot," Cassandra complimented looking around. "It's been too long since I've been to the beach."

Bannor took in the scene with a somewhat sour sensation in his stomach. The last time he'd been near the ocean in a place like this he almost drowned. He noticed from Sarai's expression that the same memory impinged on her. She and Wren had nearly killed one another in a brawl amongst the breakers.

Wren looked out into the ocean waves for a moment, a far off look in her glowing blue eyes. She brushed back her blonde hair and turned away. "Let's go a little further away from the water," she said. "Our traveling companion doesn't like wet stuff." They moved up the beach a dozen steps and Wren pulled Gaea's device out of her pocket. A narrow loop was made to go over the index finger, while the lower half was bent so as to fit between the thumb and forefinger. A wide flange stretched to the center of the palm ending in a flattened grayish hemisphere about the size of a coin. Around the back of the hand, the metal became thicker and formed an irregular oval. In the center was a large amber gem that pulsed as she slid it onto her hand.

The ascendant of forces raised her arm, and the gem started to glow brighter.

Behind them near the water, Bannor felt a sudden twisting of threads. He turned to look as a huge humanoid creature with black scaly skin flared into being. It looked something like a man but had a canine's head, and carried a massive battlestaff made of glossy black stone topped with a skull. Bannor's guts twisted and he felt the taint of something powerfully evil. This thing was an avatar!

"Wren Kergatha!" the creature boomed. **"Finally, you show yourself. Turn and face Xygon of Set!"**

She didn't turn around, in fact she barely reacted. Attention still on the device she growled. "Kiss off, Peon, we're busy."

"You dare!" Xygon blared. He raised a dagger. **"You will feel the kiss of my master's--"**

The weapon exploded in his hand.

He staggered back. **"Who did that?"** His head jerked left and right. **"Tricks will not avail you!"** He lowered his staff. **"Now you will--"**

The staff snapped in half, the pieces bursting into fragments of molten smoking rock that dribbled in the sand.

The avatar glared around the group. **"Fools. You only delay the inevitable!"**

"Damn, Wren," Loric moaned with hand over his face. "You've killed so many of Set's avatars he's down to recruiting *imbeciles*."

"I heard that!" Xygon snarled, pointing a finger. **"Feel the folly of insulting the great Xygon!"**

He gestured to the sky. The atmosphere darkened and clouds began swirling overhead.

"Is this guy for real?" Radian asked.

"He obviously hasn't been keeping up with current events," Desiray remarked with a shake of her head.

"That's a pretty good conjuration he's got going there," Cassandra commented studying the sky. "Tenth order abyssal summoning. Nice atmospheric theatrics. He's done his homework."

"Isn't anybody concerned?" Janai said clutching Daena's arm. "That's an avatar!"

"Jan, Idun is a pantheon lady," Sarai said.

"Oh, right," her face reddened. "I just forget because she's so nice."

Idun raised an eyebrow. She raised a finger and started to point at Xygon. "Shall I?"

"No, wait," Ziedra hushed, lowering Idun's hand and grinning. "Let's see what he does."

Lightning crashed down all around them. Where each bolt struck down, a monstrous six-armed creature with red skin and a dragonhead appeared. Each demon was easily half the size of a rhinotaur with armor plates on their bodies thicker than Bannor's fist. Scaly arms ended in massive clawed hands big enough to wrap around a barrel. The charnel smell of death flooded over the beach.

Over twenty of the creatures roared and beat their chests.

"Now!" Xygon blared. " ***Kill--!***"

Ziedra rolled her eyes and made a dismissing gesture. " *Scythe of oblivion.*"

It was as if the demons were bubbles of soap and someone pricked them with a pin. In order around the circle the demons each imploded like a squashed fruit, grisly remains bursting into blue flame and vanishing.

"Oooh, nicely done," Idun lauded.

The canine-headed avatar's red glowing eyes widened and its fanged mouth hung open.

"Somebody just get rid of him," Wren said with a sigh. "I can't concentrate with all that yelling."

"Xydumb--" Idun yelled.

"That's Xy gon!" the avatar bellowed.

"Whatever," the pantheon lady said. "Just call Set. Bring him here. Don't even *bother* to manifest. Then, we'll just kill you *and* him and save a little time."

"**Errr**," Xygon looked around. "**Well...**"

Idun put hands on hips. "Can't summon him?"

"**Of course I can!**" Xygon bristled. "**I don't *need* his help to defeat the likes of you!**"

"Can't manifest either, huh?"

"**Well...**" he toed the sand.

Idun rocked her head back. "Oh please." She flicked at hand at the avatar. Everyone winced as the creature exploded in a burst of blood, smoke, and broken bones. "Come back when you're a threat." The goddess shook her head. "Set should slit his own throat for even succorring such an embarrassment."

"It was kinda funny," Azir said. "In a sad way..."

Wren concentrated on the key again, the light from the amber jewel growing gradually brighter until a lance of light shrieked out and hit the base of the cliff. The ground rumbled as gold, red, and blue sparks churned in a growing whirlpool of light.

Tongues of flame erupted upward out of the surface, resolving into two gigantic upraised wings. A sound so loud it made the cliff shudder blasted across the landscape. Then in a plume of fire and molten lava an enormous winged bird appeared.

Bannor reeled back, putting Sarai behind him as the heat from the creature rushed over the group and the monster soared into the sky above them and wheeled around. Its bright feathers lit up the entire beach and illuminated the cliff side. Even colossal Tymoril and formidable Kegari would be small compared to this titanic creature.

"A phoenix!" Corim breathed. "I never thought I would ever see one. It's incredible!"

The phoenix hovered above them, shield sized dark eyes flashing as it stared down. It slowly lowered itself until Bannor could hear the crackling of flames around the creature's mammoth body.

< ***You have summoned us,***> it intoned in an immensely deep thought voice. < ***We respond.***>

Wren drew a breath. "Sentinel of Prime, child of fire, light of rebirth," she spoke the words in a halting rhythm as if reciting from a page or memory. "Grant me the way, open thy path and be at peace."

The phoenix dipped its head, massive beak clicking with the sound of logs smashing together. < ***We will comply.***>

The giant creature dropped to the ground with a boom, and a golden light spread down its form. With its wing tips, it drew a circular arc, where the tongues of fire went they left a white cut in the air. Rays of light spilled from the slashes in the ether, accompanied by a gust of air that stirred clothing and caused hair to flutter. The light around the phoenix changed color and the atmosphere pulsed and flexed as though they were seeing the creature through a giant sphere of water. In a crack of thunder, the creature folded out of sight leaving what looked like an opening leading into a tunnel.

"Step lively, it doesn't stay open long," Wren said gesturing everyone to follow as she ran forward and hopped in.

"That was frellin *wizard!*" Daena breathed, pulling Janai along behind her and leaping in.

Bannor took Sarai's hand and together they stepped into the portal. As they crossed the threshold, a tingle shot across the surface of his skin as though he was splashed with icy water. There was a twisting and sense of taking an infinitely long step.

The two of them emerged from what appeared like a solid wall, landing with a gentle thump as if they had stepped down off a tall stair. Bannor pulled Sarai down the long hexagonal corridor

to make room for the others appearing behind them.

In ones, twos, and threes the nineteen-member team crossed into the ancient smelling passage. Loric came through last, landing with a thump. Instants later, the glossy, mirror-like surface of the portal dwindled to a pinpoint and vanished.

Bannor stared down the long passage. The walls slanted away from the floor to either side then angled up to an apex at the ceiling. The stone had a shiny reflective sheen that made distorted reflections. Every thirty paces or so a thick ridge etched with gold runes acted like a support.

"So this is it, Wren?" Cassandra said. "That place you came *without* me?"

Hands on hips, Wren glanced back from the head of the group. "Yup." She sniffed, and her brow furrowed. "Feels different."

Rubbing her arms, Desiray glanced around. "Yeah, it does."

"Perhaps it is because you locked it," Euriel offered, running her hand along the smooth stone.

"There are definitely some high order warp screens in place," Marna remarked.

<Did Gaea not say someone would meet you?> Dulcere asked.

"He'll probably meet us in the creation lab where Des and I first met him." She looked around. "I probably don't need to say this, but try not to touch anything. This is only the second time I've been here. Make sure you keep one of the savants near you just in case."

"Creation lab?" Cassandra said with a raised eyebrow and grin.

Wren shook her head. "You'll see plenty of stuff that will amaze you."

"She's not kidding," Desiray said.

The gold mage clapped her hands together and rubbed them together. "Lead on! Lead on!"

Wren strode forward with Idun at her shoulder.

As the blonde woman walked forward, the segments of the corridor lit up around her. Behind them as the last members of the group left each segment the area went dark again.

Bannor glanced back to Octavia, the mecha physician. The cool red-haired female studied everything with intense interest, walking along next to Marna her arm hooked through the elder Kriar's elbow.

"You can feel the age in these walls," Sarai said leaning close. "How does it feel to be here? This place is where your ancestors first lived."

"I don't know. Part of me feels like I'm coming home... there's another part that just feels... *threatened*."

Wren looked back from the head of the party. "Yeah, that's exactly how I felt--there's still a little of that feeling left."

They walked for a long ways, came to an intersection and turned right.

"What's with the long passage and no doors?" Daena asked.

Wren waved a hand. "I didn't design it. I won't tell you the pain Des and I went through just finding the bloody door in."

"You mean you don't know where the front door is," Marna said.

"That too. So, bare with me, it's a little bit of a hike yet."

It was over three hundred steps from the intersection before the corridor turned. Wren walked down about a hundred steps and stopped. She looked down at the floor.

"Huh, I guess something cleans up in here," she looked to Desiray. "Your revealing sand isn't there anymore."

She stepped toward the wall and vanished.

"Whoa," Daena said.

Idun frowned at the wall. "A very sophisticated illusion. I cannot see through it."

Wren's arm extended out of the wall to Idun. "Step carefully." The goddess took Wren's hand and disappeared through the wall. "I'll pull you all in one at time. Just watch your step and don't move fast. There are security things in here that will zap you."

Bannor and Sarai waited as Wren lead Daena and Janai through, then Ziedra and Radian. With his arm around Sarai's waist he took Wren's hand and pushed into the solid appearing wall. Where the surface began there was something that felt vaguely wet that tingled as it passed over his skin.

The team bunched up on the other side of the illusion. The passage had a different feel now. Powerful threads of energy flickered in the walls.

"Okay move slow," Wren said. "I never did figure out why it zapped me the first time."

"Those black spheres overhead are the security nodes, yes?" Marna asked.

"Right," Wren said. "They open up, something sticks out, and *pow!* So, keep an eye on them."

Nothing untoward happened as the blonde savant escorted them into a rectangular chamber that looked like some form of common area. Passages headed off in two directions. Counters of a slate-like material lined two walls. Cabinets for storage lay directly beneath them. Though the shape was unusually rounded, there were two of what the first ones must have used for couches. Tall cylinders of what looked like glass stood in opposite corners, and flecks of green light spiraled slowly inside.

Cassandra was humming a little tune. "Oh I so want to pinch you two, coming here without me. This is beyond enormous. Nothing was known about the first ones and here you have a whole intact living area."

Wren pointed to a cabinet where what looked like black scraps of cloth hung. "You want one of their symbiotes? There's three more."

"Symbiotes?" Daena repeated.

"Remember that black thing you were dressed in right after you merged with Hella?"

"Yeah, it was misery getting out of that thing, I remember you had to do something to get it to come off."

"You have to scare them off," Ziedra said. "I had to teach miss wise-arse there how to do it." She winked at Wren.

The Kel'Varan shot a wounded look at her.

"Li, do you know what are in those green cases?" Vanidaar asked.

"No clue," she responded.

"Something alive," Marna remarked, looking at it.

"Yes, I thought as much," the red-haired mage said. "It is not life-force that I would associate with something sentient though."

"They are control systems," Octavia said. "Or what serves the same purpose--probably for the security devices. These creatures use an amalgam of techniques, what I can only call pseudo-artifices."

"This way," Wren said, taking one of the archways out of the chamber. The passage became a round tube. The walls had a crystalline appearance, the surface shimmering with light and shadow as if they were underwater.

Cassandra reached a finger toward it.

"Cass..." Loric growled.

The gold mage pulled her hand away with a sheepish frown.
"Just curious."

"I know you can breathe water, but I don't relish having to go out and get you if you get sucked in."

"It does have the appearance of a transition membrane," Marna said. "It's an awfully big interface though."

"It's a big place," Wren said over her shoulder.

"What's a 'transition membrane'?" Daena asked.

"A way to go in and out of place that's underwater," Cassandra explained. "Usually only the very advanced non-magical cultures have them though. There are some magical equivalents."

"How did we get under water?"

"You'll see," the Kel'Varan said, still moving forward.

After about a hundred paces the crystal passage ended, giving way to a grayish material that looked like cloth. As they moved, Bannor began to feel a pulsing. It seemed to make his bones vibrate.

"Does anyone else feel that?" he asked.

"We're getting close," Wren said stopping at a hexagonal depression in the wall. She raised her hand upon which she still wore Gaea's key.

Bannor saw different colors flash in the jewel of the device. The section slid inward with a hiss and ground aside. Beyond was a chamber some hundred paces on a side and toward the center it stair-stepped down. The air that rolled in their face was cold and smelled like it did after a thunderstorm.

"Watch your footing," Wren said stepping in. "The floor is kind of bouncy."

As they moved in, Bannor glanced around feeling uneasy. There was so much power in here, primordial threads ran through everything. The walls had a jade color and glistened as though wet. Cylinders like the ones they saw in the entry area lined one entire wall. In that same area, stood waist high pallets with metal tops.

"This is it, the creation lab," the Kel'Varan said. She pointed to a doorway on the far side of the chamber. "Last we were here, Hyperion was in that--"

The door indicated slid open and a tremendously burly humanoid male swayed out. The creature wore a white bodysuit like those used by the Kriar. The tight fitting cloth only called attention to the ancient's truly massive build. It was nearly as wide as it was tall, with arms and legs like bridge supports. Its bald head pivoted on a neck thicker than Bannor's thigh, glowing green eyes focused their direction and narrowed.

"At least he has clothes on now," Desiray said. "If you can call that thing clothes."

The ancient stomped forward across the chamber and stopped in front of Wren. A thought voice so powerful it seemed to rattle Bannor's skull echoed in his mind. < ***This entity designation: Hyperion, prototype one, reporting as directed. New directives received, escort to primary commune chamber. Execution of directives will commence upon the authorization of entity designated Liandra Kergatha.***>The giant male turned its head. <***Recognition of fraternal member Liandra. Statement: Welcome back, the Fraternity of Starholme Prime greets you...***>

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Preview of Gaea's Legacy: Infinity Annihilator Making a Goddess

..."Loric, are you ready?"

He frowned. He chanted a few words and his body left the ground and floated up to where he was within arm's reach of Gaea's essence cage. With a rasp, he drew Mon'istiaga out of its magically concealed case. The blade of the destroyer sparked and flared with reddish light, the material shimmering like the surface of water illuminated by a bright sun.

"Ready," the elder said.

Below they had backed well away from the case. Bannor's heart was thumping. They were going to witness something truly unique.

"When you strike," Gaea said. "I would get back a good distance." There was a pause. "I am prepared. Go, when you are ready."

Loric looked down to Ziedra. "Ready Zee?"

"Yes," the ascendant of magic said, leaning on her gold husband.

"Ready Octavia?"

"I am prepared."

"Okay, here we go."

Loric gestured and a sheen of golden light swelled around his limbs, then another dimmer light seemed to fold around that, and then a series of dimmer illuminations layered themselves overtop those. After that was done, he landed on the upper side of the globe, and took hold of the thick support that held it in place and braced himself. He took a couple of test swings, getting the path he wanted. Bannor noticed he was bracing his feet not only to get leverage to make the attack but lunge away from the construct as well.

"On three, two, one!" The elder drew back the weapon of the first ones, focused, and brought the Mon'istiaga's edge shrieking down on the side of the sphere.

Bannor had been expecting a big impact but the whole room shook with the power of the blow. Apparently, Loric had known exactly how sturdy that sphere was, even with the tremendous force the elder put behind it, Mon'istiaga only knocked out a small chunk.

Loric leaped away as a burst of darkness erupted from the opening, causing the whole room to shudder and fluctuate. The cloud of lightlessness swirled around the sphere, energy arcing and crackling.

Ziedra yelled a single indescribable word, something beyond sound but less than thought. It hit the air like a hammer ringing a gong. She clapped her hands.

Octavia gestured and the case flashed.

The air in the room roared to a howl as the cloud of darkness around Gaea's communing sphere spiraled down toward the case with growing speed. Tongues of magic and heat flicked out into the lower bleachers with crashes that made the whole room quiver with their force.

Threads of truly unfathomable depth and reach began to gather around the goddess; strands of reality so primal that they made Bannor's eyes ache to look on them.

A fountain of golden light fanned out from where the darkness touched Gaea's waiting body. The case top melted and fragments of the cylinder itself sheared away into the maelstrom of titanic forces boring downward into the green-skinned form.

Bannor glanced toward Marna, her daughter, and Octavia. The three of them stood on the steps, fists clenched and bodies twitching as each roll of thunder and flash of energy smote the room.

"Lords," Sarai breathed next to him. "That's her life force?"

"Creation incarnate," someone murmured.

With a last crack that died into silence, the light and darkness winked out.

It felt to Bannor like his heart stopped along with the display. Smoke and vapor obscured the whole dais, so it was impossible to tell if Gaea's body even held together under the massive onslaught of the all-mother's life force.

"Dark," Marna muttered. "I--" The always articulate matriarch stumbled, apparently at a lack for words.

Loric floated down to land on the steps next to Cassandra and Desiray. He rubbed at his arms. "Damn, I got a sun-tan right through my shields." He sheathed Mon'istiaga with a clank and looked toward the dais. "Did it work?"

"I can't tell," Cassandra breathed.

Wren drew a breath and started down the steps.

Ziedra followed close behind, hands laced and held to her lips.

Bannor swallowed and started down, Sarai held onto his hand and followed. The platform was devoid of threads. It looked--*dead*. The thought made his stomach twist. He looked up to the sphere overhead. The massive outpouring of Gaea's essence had peeled the globe open like the petals of a flower.

Why couldn't he detect that monstrously powerful life force? All that energy had just vanished like it never was.

They reached the bottom step. Nothing remained of the Kriar transformation cylinder. Bannor felt the heat of the floor of the conference circle through his boots. The metal and crystal had been literally boiled away by the gigantic forces of the merging. A burned caustic smell hung in the air. Gaea's body lay on its side in a melted crater of stone several paces across, long black hair lying across her torso and the floor like strands of shadow.

Octavia who was behind them made an incoherent choking sound. No doubt, she, like the rest of them, had not anticipated anything nearly so violent.

"How did her body even remain intact?" Cassandra wondered. "Damn, it's hot."

Wren ventured into the still smoking crater, her aura flickering brighter as she dissipated the energy away from herself. "Mother?" She bent down and touched Gaea's shoulder. "Mother?"

The goddess didn't move...

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Glossary of Terms

-- A --

Aesir-- (also Aesirian) The name given to the Lords of Asgard. There are two clans in Gladshiem consisting of pantheon lords and their issue. There are the more well-known Aesir, and their often rival brothers the Vanir.

Alostar, Damay-- Eldest of the Kel'Varans and reputed to be

the most powerful. Damay fought many epic battles against Mandrimin (c.f.) the Ta'arthak Nola (savant of matter) in her time. About 6000 years ago she fell to Aarlen Frielos in a duel of magic, she was approximately 2900 summers old at the time. It is unknown exactly how or why, but Aarlen trapped Damay's tao essence in an amulet of shael-dal metal. It is surmised that the amulet was an experiment to create a magical item fueled by the essence of a savant. Apparently, the item was never completed. In 1091 N.I.S., Wren Kergatha came into possession of the amulet. She later resurrected Damay by rejoining her tao with a suitable body.

See Also:ascendant, Frielos, Aarlen, Kergatha, Liandra {Wren} Idun-daughter, magic

Alpha-- Alpha is the name given to the entity, which procreated life in the body of Gaea and is thus the progenitor of the elder races that diversified to become the various forms of life throughout Eternity. Many scholars speculate that Alpha and Gaea are merely metaphors for the burgeoning of life. Others cite differently quoting texts that indicate that both Alpha and Gaea were actual creatures that pre-dated all other forms of intelligent life. The Alphaforce is the spark said to be carried by savants. This spark is sometimes referred to as a 'tao'.

See Also:ascendant, Eternity

alphas-- Alphas (plural) is general reference to creatures that possess a 'tao' and have the potential to merge with their 'beta' match. All savants are considered 'alphas' while the pantheon lords are considered 'betas'. It is theorized that each living alpha savant has a corresponding beta who is their reciprocal.

See Also:ascendant, betas

Arabella-- Bard hailing from Corwin, renowned through Sharikaar. Many of the epics of the Ring Realms are translations written by this red-headed lady bard. The number of adaptations attributed to Arabella seem excessive considering her relatively young age (around 50). While most famous for her ability with instruments, song, and pen-- Arabella has a notorious history. She was associated with some of the more nefarious thieves

guilds in Sharikaar, and purportedly involved in many kinds of violent mayhem.

Arabella was renowned for her temper, and was involved several known public duels that resulted in the death of her opponents. Certain sources cite that they find it unusual that in more than half of these fatalities, the slaying blow appeared to be inflicted from behind.

A number of reliable witnesses claim that Arabella is currently no longer among the living. With a town full of onlookers, a red haired bard, purportedly Arabella, was accused, tried, and hung for murder in northern Ivaneth. The credence of this report is in doubt however, because new songs and written materials with Arabella's distinctive flair have since appeared. Whether they are actually the work of Arabella, or simply the works of another bard publishing under her name is unknown.

See Also:Corwin, Ivaneth, Tunespinner, Arabella

archmage-- A term to classify the highest order of magely skills. When a magic-user attains archmage status they are said to be "master" mages and can utilize all common schools of magick.

See Also:magic

Ariok, Dominique Kalan-- Daughter of Gabriella Sarn Ariok and Sarok Ariok. Like her mother Dominique was turned to vampirism to survive in the Silissian campaign against the servants of Kali. Dominique was trained from birth to be a warrior specializing in the destruction of the minions of Kali. She is a renowned blademaster and with her extended lifespan, she turned to magic and became a loremage as well. Unlike her mother, Dominique was not a willing vampire, she was forced into it by her mother. Centuries later when this condition was removed, it remains a point of friction between them. (Ah, the drama of having an evil dragon-draining vampire for a mother!) As a result, Dominique was always closer to her father, who as one might imagine was no angel either if he took a vampire as his wife.

Through a complicated series of events, Dominique attempted to free her mother after she had been captured by Dorian and Cassandra, and the evil purified from her. Not knowing what had been done to her mother, Dominique was quite surprised when her mother turned on her and assisted in her capture. Dominique too was turned from the darkness, and the vampirism that had been forced on her reversed. Many cycles later through a gradual campaign of persuasion, Dominique has slowly become friends with members of the Felspar clan. Though no-longer a vampire, she is still a 'vamp', and characterized by her smooth and lascivious dialogue, it goes without saying that she still likes whips and chains... but that's another story.

For a number of cycles, Dominique and Tal Falor were an "item" and both did a tour of duty in the Shael Dal where the lady began to like the role of the hero. She and Tal split up on friendly terms in 1087 N.I.S. Dominique's exemplary contributions to the Protectorate were significant enough that she was asked to continue being a contributing member.

It was through her involvement with the protectorate that Dominique came into contact with the Kriar high counsel Marna Solaris. She and the Kriar became fast friends in the wake of her recent separation from Tal. Later, she and the Kriar lady became lovers. They eventually married when Marna underwent renewal. (Kriar periodically change sexual identity-- so Marna took on the identity of Marn--a male Kriar). Dominique has one child by Marna which she foathra'd when Marna was still female, a boy named Celaesh.

Dominique has been teaching the Kriar matriarch magic, in return she has been learning Kriar warp-science and gate control. The woman's already formidable mastery of magic intertwined with Kriar super-technology make her one of the most dangerous creatures in the Ring Realms.

See Also: Ariok, Gabriella Sarn, dragon, Eternity, eternal, Ishtarvariku, Dorian Degaba, kriar, magic

Ariok, Gabriella Sarn-- The Dragon Queen of Silissia. This great elder's true name (Drakka'Tah) is known only to a few. Gabriella was born sometime during the infancy of the Silissian

old world, approximately 14,000 cycles ago. She was the sole survivor when the Kali cult over-ran her village and staked out her family. Swearing vengeance, she undertook a campaign against the followers of the death goddess that lasted close to five millennia.

Early in her history, Gabriella turned to vampirism to get the strength and lifespan to continue her vendetta. Gabriella is known as the Dragon Queen because unlike typical vampires who feed on humans, her targets were typically dragons both for the amount of blood and their power. It is unknown how she gained the power to prey on dragons in such a fashion, but it is surmised she gained this ability (curse?) from one of the three orbs of dragonkind.

In her later years, Gabriella had the misfortune of crossing some of the Band of the Crescent Moon. After a number of clashes, the elder was eventually captured by the combined efforts of Dorian Degaba and Cassandra Kel'Ishtauri. With the power of grand magicks, Gabriella was turned from darkness to serve the light. Regardless of her new 'outlook', Gabriella is uneasy ally of House Felspar and the regime of Isis. After her 'conversion' Gabriella shared a close bond with Dorian, and two are fast allies. Dorian, along with her daughters Cassin and Annawen, serve as Gabriella's magical apprentices.

Gabriella has four living daughters: Dominique, Gabrin, Sabella, Sarokirin. Her only son, Sarok, died in a conflict against her. Before her capture and conversion, Gabriella acted occasionally as an agent for Aarlen Frielos. Gabriella plays a significant roll in the story of Savant's Blood.

See Also:dragon, Frielos, Aarlen, Isis, Ishtarvariku, Dorian Degaba

arminwen-- Elvish. Respectful way to address a princess when your caste and rank are inferior.

See Also:elvish

ascendant-- Term coined by Bannor Starfist to describe savants who have access to their full immortal powers.

"Ascending" can take place in one of three ways. The first (and intended) way is when a savant alpha joins with the pantheon lord who is their beta body. Daena Sheento joins with Hella to become the first ascendant in 'Neath Odin's Eye. As an ascendant she had the physical potential of a pantheon lord coupled with the mastery of a universal force.

The second way ascendance can take place are when a savant uses their tao-form or astral-body to overlap a creature with immortal characteristics. Wren Kergatha did this with both Desiray Illkaren Felspar and with her mother Euriel Kergatha. In the events of Gaea's Legacy, several savants do this with bodies created expressly for this purpose by Marna Solaris.

The third and last way a savant can ascend is by having their original physical body modified to take on immortal characteristics. This happens to Bannor during the course of Gaea's Legacy after his tao-inhabited body created by Marna is destroyed and his original body is heavily damaged.

Ascendants gain power over time and with experience. Daena, though her body was technically inferior to those possessed by the created ascendants was more powerful because her tao was in complete synchronis with her body.

See Also:Felspar, Desiray Illkaren, Kergatha, Liandra {Wren} Idun-daughter

avatar-- A creature who has been bonded to another through avatarism (c.f.)

-- B --

Baronian-- A race of created warriors whose true origins remain unknown. They are humanoid in nature but appear to be the product of an extensive breeding and isolation program. Baronian warriors and mages are renowned for their physical endurance, pain tolerance, and mental faculties. In addition to simply being physically strong and durable, Baronians also possess the ability to metabolize raw energy which can be used to power spells or even heal wounds.

Accounts of Baronian culture is that they are a slave race to a group of beings known only as the 'masters'. Within the Baronian hierarchy, females are primarily considered chattel, with certain prominent members able to earn free status through outstanding service to the various war causes. What little is known about the Baronians was gleaned when a party of Protectorate warriors accompanied Vatraena Marna Solaris and her aides to the Kriar Homeworld of the Karanganoi. There they discovered a force of Baronians had over-run and enslaved the entire Kriar civilization. In return for information and cooperation, Tal Falor made an agreement with a group ten Baronian slave women to help them escape. Tal kept his word and these slaves were broken free. These females now work in the employ of Isis. Notably among this group is a female warmage named Luthice who is the blood sister of Senalloy who Corim Vale frees from Rakaar.

See Also:Corresont, Senalloy Moirae, Eternity, energy, eternal, Isis, kriar, magic

battleblade-- Something of a misnomer, all swords are designed for use in combat. A battleblade is a weapon designed for PROLONGED use in battle. Typical swords have a lifespan of only a few serious combats before breaking (or the edge blunting). Only specially tempered metals have enough resilience to retain their edge and rigidity for any significant amount of actual abuse. This is historically what set Saracen steel and the folded designs of Japanese samurai swords apart. A battleblade is weapon that has these resilient qualities.

See Also:battlesword

battleform-- A shape that can be assumed by certain high order immorts. Mass is accumulated from interdimensional storage, and the body of the immortal becomes extremely dense (like metal). The immortal becomes immune to most forms of normal weaponry and many bodily functions operate on different rules (the need to breathe, bleeding is greatly decreased). Battleform grants incredible physical strength, but the mass and insensitivity make it unweildy and useful only in a select number of situations.

battlestaff-- Used to describe a staff that has been fitted with heavy metal shods, often installing cudgel balls, blades, or spikes into the ends of the weapon to make it more effective in combat.

battlesword-- This is an alternate usage for battleblade. See battleblade.

belkirin-- Combat grade rank in the Kriar military equal to a commander. See also Kriar Ranks.

See Also:kriar

Bertrand Kirnath Valharesh-- See Valharesh, Bertrand Kirnath.

betas-- Betas (plural) usually refers to one of the pantheon lords. See Alphas.

biophase-- A form of energy that can be tapped by the proper magical rituals. This energy is often used to dispel fatigue and reinforce the body. Mages utilize it to boost the efficiency of their spells.

Utilization of biophase has a strong euphoric effect that makes its use dangerous. Despite the hazards, biophase is one of the commonly manipulated powers in "carnal energies".

See Also:energy, magic

boreshafts-- A term used by the Kriar when discussing the places where openings were made (or bored) from realspace into subspace for purposes of placing an interspacial/interdimensional gate interface.

See Also:kriar

boresite-- To the Kriar, this is a location where a gate is destined to be placed.

See Also:kriar

Brondheim-- A mountain peak in Asgard used as point of reference before the great battle with the High Jury.

-- C --

Cassiopeia-- A name used by Gaea to address Cassandra Kel'Ishtauri Felspar. It is assumed that this is Cassandra's birth name as opposed to the name she goes by.

chimera-- A monster found in various parts of the realms. It is a composite winged creature with three heads, that of a goat, great cat, and serpent.

Chrysandil-- Quasar Lathan Diliaysus' trueborn first name. Gaea addresses her with this name instead of her alias Quasar. Gaea typically doesn't use nicknames or aliases. For Quasar, this was particularly significant because it showed a relationship between her and Gaea that other Kriar do not share. Kriar being from outside of Eternity wouldn't normally have any bond to Gaea but in Quasar's case one did exist due to some events in Quasar's past.

See Also:Eternity, kriar

chyriith-- An alien race said to be an offshoot of the Jyrii. The Chyriith (allegedly) created the race of Baronians. These mythical creatures theoretically have the power to enslave and even destroy entire universes. See also Jyrii.

Coormeer-- A small Kingdom to the south and east of Ivaneth. Coormeer is known for its moderate climate and the fertility of the hills spread through the heart of its territory. Coormeer makes most of its income as a nation that barter trade. They have a large seaport and a sizeable overland freight industry. Coormeer is also known for its vineyards, and kingdoms from all over Titaan import the different wines made there.

A few notable figures have dealings with or are part of Coormeer. The Justicar Sir Laramis De'Falcone hails from there and his family owns one of the major vineyards. Lord Mazerak Duquesne the savant of storms also hailed from Coormeer.

Lastly, Princess Janai T'Evagduran of Malan holds the title of Baroness in Coormeer, and owns extensive lands there as a widow of one of the Kingdom's nobles.

See Also:Ivaneth, Malan, Titaan

Corresont, Senalloy Moirae-- Baronian battle-nurse originally serving Rakaar Hespian Steelsheen. Senalloy's true origins remain a mystery, however it is certain that she spent quite some time on Karanganoi homeworld (c.f.) gaining the trust and confidence of the Kriar indigenous there. She speaks the Kriar high tongue fluently which requires some ten to twenty cycles of study. Her knowledge of Kriar technology indicates a close relationship with someone possessing engineering skills.

As a battlenurse, Senalloy has extensive training in the treatment of magical and mundane wounds. As with most Baronians she has a fair degree of both magical and martial training. Even in her weakened state, she proved herself more than a match for Meridian Arcturan and would have killed him had Rakaar not interfered with her.

Baronian age is difficult to judge, and their race has a nominal lifespan measured close to five thousand cycles. Usually by the time they reach the upper limits of their effective life spans they have gone through renewal or otherwise extended their lives. Senalloy's confidence, knowledge, and ability make her at least a millennium old. She could however be far older. Her blood sister Luthice (c.f.) who works as a covert operative for Isis is speculated to be close to 30,000 cycles old. If this is true, then it is likely that Senalloy is close to that age and thus ranked as a member of the elder elite.

See Also:Isis, kriar

Corwin-- Kingdom on the western border of Ivaneth. Biggest Kingdom (in terms of territory) on the continent of Sharikaar. Corwin is also the oldest settlement in Sharikaar. Corwin's capital is Corwin city, a seaport with a population of just under 2 million people.

See Also:Ivaneth

Cosmodarus-- Two major cities in the Ring Realms bare the Cosmodarus name. The great city wherein the goddess Isis rules is often called Cosmodarus the city of magic. Another city bearing the same name is in the ribbon realms of the purple plains. It too is called Cosmodarus the city of magic. It is rumored that at one time Isis lived or hailed from the Cosmodarus out in border realms. She may have simply brought the name with her and forgot the other existed. There is often confusion when a person claims to be from Cosmodarus, as both places are home to some of the most skilled and talented adventurers in the Ring Realms. Wren Kergatha was born in the ribbon realm's Cosmodarus. The Kergatha family are the manor lords of Cosmodarus.

See Also:ascendant, Isis, Kergatha, Liandra {Wren}
Idun-daughter, magic

Crowninshield, Elsbeth-- Prime Counsel of the 27th Magiocracy of the Ring Realms. Elsbeth is one the two acknowledged living members of the elder elite. Elsbeth is the long-time foe of Aarlen Frielos, and the primary head of an isolationist movement that is fighting to keep magic and technology separate. Elsbeth joined the Shael Dal shortly after Koass made the decision to allow Aarlen Frielos work off her debt to society within the ranks of the Protectorate. Elsbeth claims she entered the Shael Dal in order to maintain certain standards, but it's most likely she wants to keep an eye on her hated enemy. If Aarlen is caught in a breech of probation, it is likely Elsbeth will be there to make sure Koass knows.

Elsbeth is one of the most skilled mages known, and specializes in psychic manipulation otherwise known as 'mind bending'. Like Aarlen, Elsbeth has the ability to time dive, but her skills are quite a bit less refined. Exact details are sketchy, but Elsbeth's millenniums long feud with Aarlen is rumored to originate with the razing of one of the four core Ring Realms planets (presumably Elsbeth's birthplace). The planet was subjected to a bombing that infected the inhabitants with a crippling disease. If this is indeed the case, it would also explain Elsbeth's hatred of technology. There is some support for this story because it is rumored that in Elsbeth's earlier days before she could alter her

shape, she was both crippled and disfigured. The truth of this matter may never come to light as Elsbeth does not speak of her past but in generalities. As with Aarlen, Elsbeth's exact age is difficult to pinpoint, but it is surmised she is about four to five millennia younger than Aarlen hence the difference in their powers and abilities.

See Also: bit, Eternity, eternal, Frielos, Aarlen, magic

crunchfruit-- A sweet juicy fruit with smooth red or green skins. Green ones tend to have a sour flavor. On earth, if someone saw you with a bag of these, they'd ask you for one of your apples.

cyber-unit-- A cyber-unit is a portable computer typically carried in the field a cyber usually has an uplink to a more powerful 'true' cyber on Homeworld, but if communications are impaired they can function in stand-alone (non-networked) mode. They do not have personalities or any of the other features typical of Kriar organic 'cyber' life-forms.

See Also: kriar

cybermed-- Several types of cybermeds exist in Kriar technology. There are portable cyber-units whose specific functions are medical diagnosis and treatment. These are merely scaled down versions of the 'noble class' cybernetic entities which provide medical care on Homeworld. Cybermeds are the 'upper upper class' of cybers usually having the most advanced hardware (8096 - 32,768) dedicated cpus. These specialized computerized doctors can do nothing short of miraculous healing, and can perform cellular and genetic alterations at the atomic level.

A few cybermeds have become notable in Ring Realms history for their interaction with humans (and healing of same). One named Christians has been the 'family' doctor for house Felspar and Techstar for several decades. Another 'retired' cybermed named Dralthon has been instrumental in softening the technical assault by the Elsbeth's Magocracy. It is said that Dralthon and Elsbeth are friends, but the Scarlet Mage denies this vehemently. Other people cite that Elsbeth has in recent years become

extremely organized and no longer seems to rely on books or maps for reference. This suggests that she may even possess a cyber interface. Even if true, it is unlikely that anyone will ever get the technology hating mage to acknowledge the fact.

Mercedes, a privately owned cybermed, has made significant contributions to the political situation in the Ring Realms Trade Alliance.

See Also:cyber-unit, Crowninshield, Elsbeth, kriar, Mercedes, magic, magocracy

-- D --

D'klace-- The D'klace are actually a guild of assassins for hire. They are retained by the various kingdoms usually in a deterrent role much the way weapons of mass destruction are stockpiled in the modern world.

The D'klace are actually a branch of the "all-world's" or "masters" guild lead by half-god drow Adorne Doonweir. Membership in any branch of the overworld guild is a measure of status because of the rigorous initiation that must be passed in order to join. There is a close association between the masters guild and Dream Merchants. The rogue Kriar, Theln Azygos, is said to have ties in both organizations.

See Also:kriar

D'Shar, T'Gor-- Active member of the Shael Dal wielding the Shaladen blade Korvel.

See Also:Korvel, shaladen

D'Shar, Tigress-- Active member of the Shael Dal wielding the honorary shaladen Swiftwind.

See Also:shaladen

D'Tarin, Algernon-- Active member of the Shael Dal wielding the Shaladen blade Warstar. One of the nine Lords of Ivaneth, and master of the East wood. One of the core members of the

Band of the Crescent Moon dating back to their first treks in Silissia. Algernon has one daughter, Val'Siden, currently married to Bertram Tarrantil.

See Also:Ivaneth, shaladen

daergons-- The Kriar political group who followed the warrior Daergon Surr. This group was in power when the Kriar first came into conflict and consequently lost a war to the Jyril. The tactics of the Daergons were also the cause of the Protectorate war. Though technically the Kriar did beat the eternal while under the command of the Daergons, the victory is considered a loss because of the unacceptable cost of Kriar lives.

See Also:Eternity, eternal, kriar

dasta-- Kriar word that has no literal translation. It is used interchangeably in context when referring to named cliques, organizations, or groups of people. Dasta Daergon was the political affiliation of followers loyal to Daergon Surr. In another instance, Dasta Fabrista is the entire host of people and creatures who live on the Fabrista Homeworld.

See Also:kriar

Delarn, Eladrzelle-- One of the highest counsels on home world and personal friend of both Vatraena Solaris and Dame Gwensulin Techstar. Eladrzelle is a 2nd generation Kriar and one of the oldest Kriar on Fabrista Homeworld. She is a scientist specializing in genetics, and essentially the 'mother' of the matrix technologies relied upon by almost all-living Kriar.

See Also:kriar

demon-- A generic term referring to any of a number of outer planes dwelling creatures created and utilized by the pantheon lords to wage war and intimidate lesser creatures.

dom'ista-- Elvish honorific. Proper form of address for the King. The translation is 'Father Star'-- or 'Stellar Father'. In this regard it is similar to the common Term-- "sire".

See Also:elvish

draconians-- The dragon race. In Gladshiem there are enough dragons to form a "community" structure. Tymoril and Kegara the two dragons which accompany Bannor on his adventures refer to dragonkind as a collective community.

See Also:dragon, Tymoril

dragon-- These magical reptiles take many forms, colors, and sizes and live throughout the Ring Realms. What more can be said about them that whole volumes of material haven't addressed?

Draline Valharesh-- See Vilesilencer, The.

drek-- Drek (along with dren) are slang terms in the Ring Realms which refer to less than desirable material. A common usage: *The drek has hit the windmill.*

See Also:dren

dren-- Dren (along with drek) are slang terms in the Ring Realms that refer to undesirable material. A common usage: *That's a bunch of dren!*

See Also:drek

-- E --

eh'san-- Kriar language that has no literal translation. It is a military specific term that a subordinate uses to address a higher-ranking official. It is used in the same way as 'sir' is used to show respect. 'Sir. Yes, sir!'

See Also:kriar

elder-- Used to describe creatures (usually humanoids) that have lived far longer than normal human life span. Any creature with more than 500 cycles of living is considered an elder. Many elves fall into this category.

elemental-- In the broadest sense a creature that is manifestation or embodiment of one of the four elemental forces (stone, air, water, fire). Note that this extension is more or less metaphorical. Races such as Djinni and Efreeti are considered elementals (air and fire respectively). What gives them this distinction is their mastery of magicks which manipulate their respective element.

Elf-- Elves are a race of creatures seen throughout magically endowed worlds of the Ring Realms. It is popularly believed they are the descendants of the elder race called the Silcanna (also known as the silver elves). The patron of the elves, Carellion Lothlarian, is rumored to not be a pantheon lord but is instead one of the Silcanna. This has not been substantiated however. The elf race is noted for the longevity of its members and their close relationship to magic and nature. The elves themselves are split into several distinct hereditary branches (sub-races) that each have their own language and customs. These are the Gray-elves, the High-elves, Wood-elves (faeries), Mountain or 'Valley' elves, and Sea-elves.

There is no particular racial bias or prejudices between these races and their dialects are derivative enough from each other that all of them can understand and communicate at a rudimentary level. Of the five, the aquatic semi-amphibious Sea elves are the furthest removed from the original hereditary strain and by necessity are the group that has the least interaction with both other elves and humans.

Elves are typified as having the same approximate stature as humans, but having a tendency to be slimmer and more fine boned. Their ears and eyes are slightly larger in proportion to their faces than is typical for a human. The ear cartilage is upswept and pointed, this trait being most noticeable in Wood-elves. The eyes of elves have a luminous phosphorescent quality that is noticeable even in daylight. This 'glowing' quality enables elves to have exceptional vision at night, being able to resolve reasonable details in approximately half the light necessary for human viewing. Elven vision is tuned to longer ranges (being able to resolve at 40 feet what a human does at 20). This trait is at the sacrifice of close-up vision. As a consequence, Elven script tends to be quite large and their books

rather thick. They often employ vision aides when it is necessary to read smaller print in any volume.

The other characteristic of elves is their lifespan, which is typically over five hundred cycles. The gray elves are the most long-lived of elves, their lifespans extending well beyond two millennia. In fact, it is unknown exactly how long they do live because few that become great elders ever die of natural causes.

See Also:magic

elven-- Of or being related to Elves. see Elf.

elves-- Plural of Elf. see Elf.

elvish-- The language of Elves. Elves have several distinct dialects, most notable among these being the high tongue spoken by the gray elf nobility. The most widely spoken dialect is called Dikeen or Dikeeni which simply means 'dialogue' or 'speech'. The various tribes of wood, sea, and mountain elves speak variants of Dikeeni.

energy-- (generic) of or pertaining to any spectral force which can perform work (change states in matter).

eternals-- The seventh generation Eternals were evolved for the purpose of fighting of invasions of 'foreign bodies' and the cancerous infestation of germane life (temporal 'trouble makers'). Each entity was imbued with complete mastery over a certain element, energy or power, and lesser control over other forms.

Since the matrix provided more raw power than even than Eternals could control, the eternals were given the ability to surrogate their powers to other creatures. This surrogation is commonly referred to as avatarism. This same technique is practiced by the deities of the outer planes, and in some instances by grand magi. The surrogates of the eternals were dubbed the 'Shael Dal'. The number of surrogates each Eternal can have is unknown. The time guardians, who also possess this power, and have been known to have as many of sixty-one functioning surrogates at one time. See Eternity. See also time

guardians.

Roster

Name: Koass Vinax
Title: Prime Commander
Shaladen: Sharonsheen
Power: Reality

Name: Foross Kerall
Title: Strategic Commander
Shaladen: Stellaraac
Power: Shape Shifting

Name: Nethra Argos
Title: Tactical Commander
Shaladen: Nova
Power: Space

Name: Garn Ellon
Title: Tactical Leader
Shaladen: Warstar
Power: Time

Name: Sroth Mephista
Title: Covert Ops Leader
Shaladen: Korvel
Power: Life Energy

Name: Areth Jalt
Title: Intelligence Ops
Shaladen: Starsong
Power: Sound

Name: Aurra Levon
Title: Psych Tactics
Shaladen: Starwind
Power: Mind/Control

Name: Yi Esperantil
Title: Chronal specialist
Shaladen: Krelstar

Power: Time

Name: Zarthel Benwarr

Title: Magic/Tech spc

Shaladen: Pulsar

Power: Mind/Forces

Name: Jarella Kepsforia

Title: Security specialist

Shaladen: Cataract

Power: Dimensions

Name: *Culavera Sajaer

Title: Tactical specialist

Shaladen: Jemfire

Power: Reality/energy

Name: **Leto

Title: Satieroth Tactical specialist

Shaladen: Cybersong

Power: Fire/energy

*Culavera is one of the oldest living beings in the universe, and the only creature surviving of the third generation of the Protectorate. Her powers are in actuality greater than those possessed by the prime commanders. Unfortunately, she cannot exert herself at those levels for very long.

**Leto is a product of the fifth generation of the protectorate, and, like Culavera, much older than the rest of their peers. Leto suffers from energy 'seizures' as a result of not being sufficiently synchronized with the eternal's power matrix.

Roster of Shael Dal (surrogates)

Name: Koass Vinax

Title: Prime Commander

Shaladen: Sharonsheen

Surrogate(s): Megan Vinax

Name: Foross Kerall

Title: Strategic Commander

Shaladen: Stellaraac, Snowfire*

Surrogate(s): Aarlen Frielos, Beia Targallae, Corim Vale

Name: Nethra Argos
Title: Tactical Commander
Shaladen: Nova
Surrogate(s): Talorin Falor

Name: Garn Ellon
Title: Tactical Leader
Shaladen: Warstar
Surrogate(s): Algernon D'Tarin

Name: Sroth Mephista
Title: CovertOps Leader
Shaladen: Korvel, Swiftwind*, Blightscythe*, Flameripper*
Surrogate(s): T'Gor D'Shar, Tigress D'Shar, Vulcindra Skybane, Suda Nightrhmer

Name: Areth Jalt
Title: Intelligence Ops
Shaladen: Starsong
Surrogate(s): Arabella

Name: Aurra Levon
Title: Psych Tactics
Shaladen: Starwind
Surrogate(s): Elsbeth Crowninshield

Name: Yi Esperantil
Title: Chronal specialist
Shaladen: Krelstar
Surrogate(s): Adwena Swiftwing

Name: Zarthel Benwarr
Title: Magic/Tech spc
Shaladen: Pulsar, Darkbane*, Golnir*
Surrogate(s): Zedar Cloudseeker, Aleesha Cloudseeker, Bertram Terrantil

Name: Jarella Kepsforia
Title: Security spc
Shaladen: Cataract
Surrogate(s): Gwenafra Tristar

Name: Culavera Sajaer
Title: Tactical spc
Shaladen: Jemfire
Surrogate(s): Terra Karlin-Falor

Name: Leto Satieroth
Title: Tactical spc
Shaladen: Cybersong
Surrogate(s): Damrosil Terranath

***Shaladen names so marked are "honorary" imbued weapons.**

See Also: D'Tarin, Algernon, Falor, Talorin {Tal}, sharonsheen, shaladen, Targalle, Beia {Regaura} (Queen)

Eternity-- The name 'Eternity' is only a concept. However, it is popularly addressed as a living, breathing creature, and is often worshipped as a god. Eternity itself is actually a composite consciousness. It is the pooled psychic resonances of all living things. It is suspected that, after the first expansion, outside influences planted the seeds that would eventually develop into the super-consciousness that is Eternity.

One speculation points to a "Father" and "Mother" force (Alpha and Gaea) as being the originators of these seeds. These two beings are cited throughout the records made during the early development of the Protectorate, but their actual presence is never recorded. These two creatures are also cited as the progenitors of the First Ones, the race from which the original stock, and many later generations of universal protectors originated.

During the earliest stages of evolution, Eternity was little more than an infinitely large amoeba with a few basic responses. The thoughts of the myriad forms of life that were evolving began to etch neural paths on this receptive blank slate. At some point, the populations of life grew large enough that the resonances activated the 'seeds'. These twelve gigantic gems began to pick up and enhance the neural responses, and themselves take on the sophistications necessary for stimulus and response.

As Eternity evolved, lifeforces were drawn into the matrix of gems. A residual imprint of these first primitive creatures created the first evolutionary steps in Eternity's progress toward awareness.

A billion cycles ago, both Eternity and life had diversified to a point where major changes could be undergone. During these changes, creatures began to be physically drawn into the matrix. From that point, these creatures became Eternity. The composite awareness saw all of time and space as a body. The body lacked defense mechanisms, and this fusion of living and unliving essences could sense wounds that threatened the health of 'the body'.

Forces brought the 'seeds' to a central 'womb' to focus the consciousness. With this centralization, further powers became realized, and development increased in speed. Hosts were cultivated from the vastness of evolving creatures; these would be the anti-bodies that would attack and destroy infestations, and heal wounds.

The matrix continued to assimilate living creatures; its power multiplying as it grew.

Initially, twenty-four hosts came into being; two were linked to each seed. These hosts were incubated, forged, and evolved to fulfill special roles in the universal defense. These were the first Guardians.

These first creatures were far less refined than the Eternals and Guardians that evolved later. They did have a purpose and a design. They built defenses around the womb, and created the pocket dimension Siderous Chronous.

These first defenders oversaw the choosing of their predecessors. They learned ways to make them stronger and more durable, having longer life-spans and broader capabilities.

The second-generation Guardians were more in tune with the matrix, capable of tapping into its now-immense powers themselves, physically and mentally superior to their parent

races. Their life-spans were greatly extended, some ten times that of their parent races. These were the generation of savants that would eventually shape the 'seed-womb' into Eternity's Heart. The 'seeds' were faceted, and refined, to amplify their consciousness-projecting powers. They amassed the knowledge and powers to build defenders far more advanced than themselves. At this time, the defenders were broken into two groups: The savants and the warriors. The savants were to evolve mentally, with consciousness that extended through time and space. The warriors would tap directly into the cosmic forces now funneling through the matrix.

The Protectorates third generation was fraught with disappointments. Many forms of life did not survive the rigorous incubation processes, or the radical alterations in their physical and mental structures. The projects of this generation were shelved as too ambitious after 47 of 48 subjects died through body failure or instability. The sole survivor (Culavera) was stasised as a borderline case, and took part later in the scaled-down mutations.

By the time the scaled-down projects were underway, the second generation Guardians were nearing the end of their lives. The survivor of generation three, and two other volunteers, underwent the fourth generation treatments. All three came through alive, but mentally shattered. Only Culavera, who was the result of the far more ambitious 3rd generation group, was salvageable for further treatment. Culavera was put into stasis pending further review.

Three of the second-generation guardians had died by the time the fifth generation process went into affect. One volunteer (Leto) went through the process and survived physically and mentally intact, but undershot expectations for the desired matrix synthesis. The subject was put in stasis for review by his predecessors.

All but three of the second-generation guardians were dead when the sixth evolution forging was undertaken. Five subjects underwent the rigorous process, and all survived. Only one second-generation guardian survived to see the seventh evolution, which birthed five time Guardians and ten Eternals. He

died before the final annealing of the subjects was completed.

The seventh generation Eternals and Guardians was a near perfect synthesis of power, longevity, and durability. Possessing hardened mindsets, expanded mental power and flexibility, they evolved into the Eternals and Guardians known today, about 10 million cycles ago.

See Also:eternals

ether-- The somewhat dated notion of a fundamental fabric that binds matter together-- in other words the vacuum where things AREN'T. (The author notes that its a dated concept in light of quantum theory. However, since most of the readers don't have a doctorate in physics-- we'll stick with easier concepts.)

ethereal-- Typically it means to be insubstantial. It however can be used to indicate 'out-of-phase' state. The Ethereal plane is an alternate interpretation of real space much like the astral. See astral plane.

etherlock-- An etherlock is caused when a time-driver, mage, or device causes the probability fields in a specific area to become static. Essentially all matter in the target area is forced to assume the same inertia, temporal phase, and energy potential as designated by the 'lock'. This has the effect of rooting an area in time and space absolute to either a specific set of coordinates or a given vector. The etherlock prevents any kind of matter or time transference within its confines. The process takes a tremendous amount of power, and is the most demanding discipline practiced by a time-diver.

See Also:energy, magic, temporal

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Fabrista-- The race of Kriar occupying the 'Fabrista' Homeworld.

See Also:kriar

Falor, Talorin {Tal}-- Talorin Falor is one of the more storied figures in the Ring Realms, a warrior with a truly mythical ability

to find himself in the 'hotspots' of legends in the making. Tal's history is a complex knot of twists and turns that involves many enterprises and tragedies. After a few seasons spent treasure hunting, Tal retired while still young to invest his gold and become a businessman. He ended up in the unlikely role as the proprietor of a brothel, an enterprise he shared with his adventuring partner Kaas Windsbane. The two men, while running a house of ill repute, were known as the 'softest touches in town'. They never bound their girls to contracts, nor did they ask more than a token percentage of any fees collected. In fact, the two men even helped their 'girls' get 'legitimate' work should the seamy life no longer appeal. Perhaps it was this low-pressure approach that made their business so successful. The endeavor was not to last, Tal grew bored and started looking for adventure again. He took up with king Tradeholm's eastern front regulars as an experienced captain. It was during this tour of duty that he met and fell in love with an Elven woman named Deirde Silkere. Tal continued his borderland tour and kept house with Deirde for several seasons. What might have been an idyllic life for the warrior turned tragic when raiding parties from the east realm overran several villages and cities along the border. Tal and the troops under his command were quick to respond, and over a period of days drove back the enemy. It was during this conflict that Tal showed mercy to one of the enemy commanders. An act of altruism which would see an entire village of elves sacked as revenge, and result in the loss of his wife of only a few seasons. This experience would harden the man for the many adventures to come.

After this harsh lesson, Tal's tactics and demeanor took on a darker tone, the bitterness over his loss one not quickly forgotten or left behind. He went back to active adventuring and campaigning now in a more serious vein. It was shortly after that he met up with members of the Band of the Crescent Moon, and learned more of the Death Spectacles run by Meridian Arcturan. He met Beia Targallae and T'Gor D'Shar and began assisting them in shutting down the arenas. It was during this time that Tal began adding to his fighting skills, learning to combat the arena pit fighters on their own ground. He began studying and mastering the harsh art of the Dan Sadad.

During the cycles that followed Tal would be involved in the

recovery of the amulet of Tarkimaar, he would fight all manner of creatures from adamantium golems to skellar. He would take part in the revival of the Eternals slain by Garfang, and help organize many of the quests to recover the Shaladen swords. He himself would recover the shaladen blade Warstar. He would foray repeatedly in the cities of Dream Merchants and even fight the rogue elements belonging the deposed Kriar leader Daergon Surr.

Tal's hard heart would soften and there would be romantic interludes with Desiray Illkaren (then single) and Dominique Ariok. However, it was a fellow Shael Dal, Terra Karlin whom he often adventured with that eventually captured his eye and heart. After a courtship of several seasons, they would become the second married couple in the Shael Dal (T'Gor and Tigress being the first).

Tal's adventures would continue. He became a key figure in the Shael Dal, the indomitable spirit to succeed against all odds. He would prove instrumental in several missions including a special cooperative mission with the Fabrista Kriar to Karanganoi homeworld, where they would learn of the Baronians and their mysterious 'masters'.

Tal remains active in the Shael Dal and few would dispute his being their spiritual core. He and his wife Terra continue their efforts to remove all traces of the Arcturan death spectacles. Tal created several schools for adventurers, that serve as sources of income as well as recruiters for the various causes that he takes part in.

See Also:eternals, Felspar, Desiray Illkaren, kriar, shaladen

Falor, Terra Karlin-- Active member of the Shael Dal wielding the Shaladen blade Jemfire.

See Also:shaladen

Felspar, Annawen Kel'Ishtauri-- Annawen is the silent sister to Cassin. The two sisters are as different from one another as they are alike. Where Cassin represents restraint, logic, and intellect, Annawen represents hedonism, creativity, and passion.

Annawen is extremely promiscuous, outgoing, and spontaneous. While Cassin plans things down to the last detail, Annawen simply makes it up as she goes. Each sister represents the pure forms of the extremes that might occur in a normal personality. This is why Annawen is so good at magic. It is a skill that requires confidence, the slightest shred of doubt can ruin or cripple a spell. Annawen literally has no worries, and no fear or compunction about the consequence of her actions. By that token, she has nothing holding her back. This is, of course, why she has problems with control.

Though law and rules are not the kind of thing Annawen would normally like, she finds the idea of twisting rules to her own ends intriguing. Her creative and exhibitionistic nature is extremely well suited to both a courtroom and the stage. She would be perfectly suited to them except for the fact that she does not speak aloud. This of course, keeps her out of trial law in all but the most sophisticated territories where telepathy is tolerated as a means of communication. She does on occasion call on Cassin to be her 'voice' as she is in most of their everyday life. Cassin typically refuses most of her sister's requests because she feels Annawen should 'find her own voice'. Being the eldest, they are the big sisters to all the Felspar family children. They are often bailing their brothers and sisters out of trouble. Annawen's interest in law is quite valuable for resolving many of the situations that arise.

Annawen feels that Cassin is an errant part of her that has run away. The fact that she cannot function overlong without her troubles her. She harbors a secret (not so secret to her sister) desire for them to unify into one person. Cassin is extremely bothered by this desire in her sister, likening it to being 'consumed'. Despite their oppositeness, they are as close as two sisters can be and NOT be one person. Becoming married to Sindra and Drucilla Frielos has been an extremely satisfying experience for Annawen. Her pairing with Drucilla provides a balance in her life that Cassin was unable to provide.

The Frielos twins are specialists too, but it is not along the right-brain left-brain aspects. Drucilla represents the passive aspect of their pairing (to Sindra's aggressive) which is well suited to Annawen's personality and tendencies. Cassin and

Annawen are extremely active and well traveled. They are adored on Homeworld. Elsewhere they are regarded with respect, and in many cases with fear and suspicion.

Elsbeth Crowninshield considers the twins, and Annawen in particular, two of the greatest threats to the integrity of magic. Despite herself, Elsbeth has been unable to view these two as enemies though they embody the very essence of what she fears (the merger of magic and technology). Whether by luck, or through their empathy, the twins knew it was essential to make sure they became close to this elder elite. A campaign several years in the making got them into the good graces of the red-haired woman buying them safety from her war on technology.

After an encounter with Corim Vale, and his metaphathic talent, Annawen has become rather fixated on the handsome man. The fact that he's in love with Dulcere Starbinder is not at all troubling to her. She knows she'll get her way eventually... she always has in the past...

See Also:Crowninshield, Elsbeth, Frielos, Drucilla, Frielos, Sindra, magic, telepathy

Felspar, Caldorian-- Son of Desiray Illkaren Felspar and Cassandra Kel'Ishtauri. Cassandra is the "Foathra" or the surrogate of a female / female coupling who provides the male genes. Caldorian is has an identical twin brother Sebenreth'Kar Felspar.

Caldorian is currently married to Bronawyn ShadowStalker and has two daughters: Cassopia and DonaRae.

See Also:Felspar, Desiray Illkaren, Shadowstalker, Bronawyn

Felspar, Cassandra Kel'Ishtauri-- Cassandra is one of the only surviving members of the first incarnation of the Band of the Crescent Moon. She has traveled and adventured extensively throughout the Realms during her 91 years of life. At one time she was engaged to be married to Gondor Degaba who, by a quirk of fate, was changed from a male to a female by the Aesir pantheon lord Loki. In Gondor's new identity as a female things

got pretty complicated as he and she had already managed to conceive children. Cassandra ended up not being able to handle the relationship and the two of them grew apart but continued to raise their daughters Cassin and Annawen. Cassandra went on to marry the elder mage Loric Felspar.

After the adoption of Cassandra Kel'Ishtauri by house Techstar, it became a fashion among the Kriar nobility to start interacting with the humanity and skilled mages in particular. The ability of magic to overcome something Kriar science could not opened many eyes, and sparked intense interest in learning the secrets of magic. Also, humans being young and impressionable, made them excellent proteges. The Kriar being empaths, derive a great deal of satisfaction being around creatures who still experience excitement and passion. They can feel 'vicariously' through their empathy, emotions and sensations that they themselves have become numb to due to hundreds of millennia of life.

The Techstar family has profited enormously by Cassandra's addition to their ranks, as the mage's 'star status' among Kriar is worth a great deal in favors, media deals, and other 'celebrity status' benefits. This, of course, certainly hasn't hurt Cassandra's popularity among the members of her adoptive family.

See Also:Felspar, Loric, kriar, magic

Felspar, Cassin Kel'Ishtauri-- Cassin is the steadfast twin of the union. She represents all the things that Annawen is not. She is steady, logical, and dedicated to rational thought. Cassin is extremely close to her Mother (Foathra) Dorian. Dorian is Cassin's paternal progenitor. Early in her life, Dorian was in fact Gondor (a man) and engaged to Cassandra Kel'Ishtauri. A extremely unfortunate encounter with a vampire and a the humor of a Loki resulted in a man being placed in woman's body. By shape changing, he could regain his normal male form, but the magic would eventually wear off and he would again become 'Dorian'. It was in his shape-changed state that Dorian (Gondor) fathered the twins Cassin and Annawen. As a way of keeping things from getting confused, they coined the term 'Foathra' for a female that had sired children.

There are other Foathrings in the Felspar family, but Cassin and

Annawen were the first. Initially, Cassandra thought she could deal with her husband-to-be having become female, but later found she couldn't handle it. Gondor also had problems having thought like a male for 50 odd years, now being a female and (via hormones) beginning to think like a female. The two of them grew apart but raised Cassin and Annawen as a family. Cassin married Sindra by 'default'. She thought the pairing with the Frielos twins was a bad and unsafe endeavor. Only later did she come to really appreciate the benefits of being spoiled by an elder. Now, many years into the marriage, she has fully embraced their relationship and enjoys all of its benefits. Cassin plays the passive role to Sindra's aggressive one, and is content to satisfy the needs of her sometimes demanding mate.

Cassin is much more involved in technology and more technically savvy than her sister. In that aspect, she complements her sister well, who is extremely magic savvy. Working together the twins can excel in practically any culture.

See Also: Frielos, Sindra, Ishtarvariku, Dorian Degaba, magic

Felspar Clan-- The structure of the Felspar clan is a complicated enough subject to merit its own entry. Loric Felspar's permissiveness, the pervasiveness of telepathy, the extended life span of immorts, and promiscuousness created by the ability to shape change and empathically "reverb" (see empathic reverb.) have created a tangled knot of a family tree that would have the most dedicated genealogist weeping. The root of the family's complexity primarily comes from the three house matriarchs: Cassandra Kel'Ishtauri, Desiray Illkaren, and Dorian Degaba Ishtarvariku. Immediately, one wonders why Dorian is included on this list because she is not married to Loric. Dorian went through a permanent gender change. At an earlier point in her life, she was a man, Gondor Degaba. During that time she married Cassandra (technically, she is still married to her?). So before this explanation starts, it's already taken on complications!

Three Squared To understand the primary complexity one must understand that our three matriarchs are really not gender specific. They can be female or male, able to sire or birth. This is exactly what has happened. Dorian has fathered (or foathrad)

children with both Cassandra and Desiray. Each of them has done the same with her and each other for a total of six combinations as depicted below:

=====

- (f) Dorian + Cassandra
- (f) Dorian + Desiray
- (f) Cassandra + Desiray
- (f) Cassandra + Dorian
- (f) Desiray + Cassandra
- (f) Desiray + Dorian

=====

There are children from each of these unions. In the "official" histories, these children retained the surname of the foathra. This created unnecessary complications in creating a chronicle, so the surname Felspar was attributed to all of them. One can see this issue from both sides, saying the making the name the same complicates differentiating who belongs to whom. Granted. However, tracking fifty odd names is hard enough without trying to untangle relationships at the same time!

Take it from the top Since Loric is the house patriarch, his direct descendants should be listed first. With two wives he has two lines of inheritance:

Loric as Sire

Cassandra Desiray

=====

+ Celek Farveth

+ Lorrik

+ Radian

=====

+ = Triplets

As one can see, Loric's part of the tree is quite modest (in comparison to the rest). It's from this part on that the mind begins to swim:

Matriarchal Interrelationships

Cassandra as Sire

Desiray Dorian

=====

Caldorian+ Kassandra+

Sebenreth+ Dorrian+

=====

Desiray as Sire

Cassandra Dorian

=====

Maarina Darin'Kel*

Eviria*

=====

Dorian as Sire

Cassandra Desiray

=====

Annawen + Leandra

Cassin +

=====

+ denotes identical twins

* denotes paternal twins

One might note that there is an inordinate occurrence of twins in this family. That is neither accidental or natural... in most of the cases the condition was egged on by magic.

But wait there's more... Further complications are added to the tree when Dorian takes a husband (Brin Ishtarvariku) and Desiray takes a second husband (Bertram Terrantil). Bertram was already married to Thamara Narrimar. Add to this, dalliances with two Valkyries (Megan and Adwena), Marna Solaris (the Kriar matriarch), and the pantheon lord Isis. Now, the picture takes on truly Dionysian characteristics. ((We haven't even gotten to grand children yet!!!)) Was everyone sleeping around??? Well, in a word...yes. Didn't this cause problems...??? Well, of course. Jealousy and drama abound. For those following along, do remember that most of these people are in their 70's and 80's. At the time when most of the stories of the Ring Realms take place Dorian and Cassandra are celebrating the 50th anniversary of their marriage. Despite this advanced age, through various magicks these individuals are still physically in their 20's and as typically randy as beautiful talented brilliant people usually are.

Another factor to consider is that everyone discussed so far has telepathic ability. This factor alone instills a level of trust and permissiveness not experienced in ordinary mundane relationships. Partners don't have to wonder whether they are still loved--the emotion can be discerned, confirmed, and so on. Also, its really, really tough to cheat in house of telepaths. It is

far easier (and safer) to get permission than it is to ask forgiveness. [Granted, this is the opposite of how it ordinarily goes... but you've probably never had a loremage with immense magical powers pissed at you. She *will* make you pay for your transgressions. She has the imagination, the desire, and inclination to make life intensely uncomfortable. Worse, there's nowhere you can run... she can teleport, and she'll find you...] Anyways, over the course of five decades sharing was not an uncommon occurrence. It helps to understand that at different times Desiray, Cassandra, and Dorian each maintained separate identities as males that essentially had their own distinct relationships. Ah, the benefits (complexities) of shape shifting...

Miscellaneous Couplings

Dorian / Brin

=====

Rindar+

Jaraed+

(f) Desiray / Adwena

=====

Siriena

(f) Dorian / Megan

=====

Ralani

Silvia

With fifty cycles invested in relationships, children are bound to find partners, get married and have children. In this genealogy, you will see a number of female / female marriages. This is something of a side affect of the interrelationship of the

matriarchs. Shape changing creates a lot of potential in partners... in a world of magic and star hopping, the choices are many and varied. However, it just works out that sometimes the best person to understand a woman is another woman... and when that woman can also be a man (or the partners can take turns in the male role...) the imaginative readers can fill in the blanks...

2nd Generation Couplings

=====

(1)Cassin +

Drucilla (f)

=====

(None yet)

=====

(2)Annawen

+ Sindra (f)

=====

(None yet)

=====

(3)Caldorian

+ Bronawyn

=====

[Cassopia]

DonaRae

=====

(4)Sebenreth

+ Jolandrin

=====

(None yet)

=====

(5)Darin'kel

+ Gwynned

=====

Xander

Tristam

=====

(6)Everia +

Luthice

=====

(None yet)

(1):If there can be said to be any contention between the twins it is grounded on the issue of children. There has been considerable pressure from Grandma Frielos to see some bouncing half-Kriar / half-Teritaani babies. However, both Drucilla and Sindra being playgirls (boys?) they really aren't child-rearing types. Being independently wealthy, ultra-pampered grand elders, the likelihood of them changing a diaper is all but non-existent. Cassin in particular is adamant that BOTH parents should be INVOLVED in child rearing. Drucilla of course wants Cassin to bare the burden of carrying the baby

to term (she's MUCH too busy to be bothered with being pregnant...) that is the second part of the issue. There are other considerations that further complicate the discussion. It remains a sore point, and is the source of the first real friction this long running relationship has experienced.

(2):Annawen is the twin upon whom the real pressure is being applied by Aarlen to have children (mostly because she's more easily swayed than Cassin). It is also because Annawen has a stronger desire for children. However, she agrees with Cassin (though to a lesser degree) about the issue of involvement of the parents in the raising of the children. Both sisters are aware of the cold and loveless upbringings fostered in the Frielos family, which is a stark contrast to the extremely close-knit Felspar Clan with multiple mothers fostering overlapping affection on all the children. It is that paradigm by which they gauge how their own families should be raised. Something that would be difficult with only partial participation of the parents.

(3):The decision to bare children was sparked largely by Bronawyn. The dark Silissian princess has always taken issue with her in-law Gwynned, the nosy, judgmental, stuck-up, cleric of Isis living down the hall. This contention grew out of a basic argument of how such a "plain ordinary commoner" would rate one of the most beautiful men a woman could set eyes on i.e. Darin'kel (whom Bronawyn had always fancied but was never able to get the attention of). The ongoing upwomanship between these two would make a good story thread in a soap- opera. One of the requirements of Gwynned's allegiance to the church of Isis was to bear at least one child, and teach them in the ways of the church. Gwynned and Darin were having problems conceiving. During one sharp- tongued dinner conversation Bronawyn was nettling Gwynned, suggesting that the reasons for their problems was simple frigidity and her not being "woman" enough to bear children. There were undertones about boyishness, etc. This trading of barbs escalated, with the remark about "wondering what a reptile knew about having babies anyway-- they lay eggs after all..." Through a course of events one could only attribute to soap opera dynamics it became a race to see who could conceive first. Gwynned had a head start, but Bronawyn was determined to show her up... *reptile indeed!* Bronawyn did conceive first, a fact which she lorded over Gwynned for some

time thereafter. This was also a source of kidding between the brothers about who had more of the "right stuff" but it was not taken as seriously as between the two women.

(4):Seb and Jol are a very laid-back pair. Jolandrin is a simple girl used to being in the wilderness and has still has a way to go develop the sophistication of the others in this wild family. She has a good heart though and plenty of libido. There's no rush (in their mind

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About The Author

First published in 1983, Will Greenway started his creative career wanting to draw and script comics. After a number of years, he found writing better suited to his skills. Aside from writing and art, Will is a self-taught programmer, PC technician, and network troubleshooter. He enjoys skiing, racquetball, Frisbee golf, and is steadfast supporter of role-playing games. To date he has completed eighteen novels more than twenty short stories, and numerous articles on writing. He resides in the Spring Valley suburb of south San Diego.

The Ring Realms, the shared universe his novels take place in, has an online presence at <http://www.ringrealms.com> (which has a LOT of detailed information about the universe and its inhabitants).

As Will's "universe" is so complex the following is some information that may help with timelines:

Wren Kergatha (whose story line starts earliest of the three series) interacts with many of the characters depicted in the Chronicles. She also is the savior savant who befriends and helps Bannor in the Reality's Plaything series.

So the chronological order to the events of the novels roughly follows the list below.

(Numbers specify the summer cycle N.I.S [New Ivaneth Standard]):

- 1100 Savant's Blood: Shadow of the Avatar
 - 1102 Savant's Blood: Hecate's Bounty
 - 1103 Aesir's Blood
 - 1108 Shaladen Chronicles: A Knot In Time
 - 1108 Shaladen Chronicles: Anvil of Sorrow
 - 1109 Reality's Plaything
 - 1109 'Neath Odin's Eye
 - 1110 Gaea's Legacy: Eternal's Agenda
 - 1110 Gaea's Legacy: Savants Ascendant
 - 1110 Gaea's Legacy: The Infinity Annihilator
 - 1111 Shaladen Chronicles: Who Mourns the Creator
 - 1111 Gaea's Blood
 - 1112 War of the Genemar
- * N.I.S = New Ivaneth Standard.

Since the initial conception, the idea for the War of the Genemar has been broken into a multi-book series. What I have in mind for that story will not fit into a standard novel length. There are simply too many characters and too many side plots.

If you are more inclined to follow a particular character's storyline and not care to read chronologically the series are:

Reality's Plaything Series -- Tales following the adventures of Bannor Starfist:

1. Reality's Plaything (<http://www.readerseden.com/product.php?productid=181>)
2. 'Neath Odin's Eye (<http://www.readerseden.com/product.php?productid=182>)
3. Gaea's Legacy: Eternal's Agenda (<http://www.readerseden.com/product.php?productid=630>)
4. Gaea's Legacy: Savants Ascendant
5. Gaea's Legacy: The Infinity Annihilator

Savant's Blood Series -- Tales following the adventures of Wren Kergatha:

1. Savant's Blood: Shadows of the Avatar (

<http://www.readerseden.com/product.php?productid=586>)

2. Savant's Blood: Hecate's Bounty (

<http://www.readerseden.com/product.php?productid=598>)

3. Aesir's Blood

4. Gaea's Blood

Shaladen Chronicles Series -- Tales following the adventures of Corim Vale.

1. A Knot In Time (

<http://www.readerseden.com/product.php?productid=183>)

2. Anvil of Sorrow

3. Who Mourns the Creator

You can keep track of all Will's books on his author page:

<http://www.readerseden.com/manufacturers.php?manufacturerid=91>

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