



ARIEN

By

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To Brett Buckley and Heather Gammage

Chapter One

Ikara squinted against the harsh sodium lights that surrounded the snow-covered tarmac outside the cave. Mist flowed from her mouth when she exhaled. Shuffling from one foot to the other to keep warm, Ikara wrapped herself tighter within the confines of her cloak.

Of all the healers who could have performed this task, Ikara had insisted she be the one to do it. The truth was she had been ordered to do so by the Emperor. Very frail and within days of death, Kreth needed his young wife to be safe from his ambitious son, Pherus.

None of the other healers had argued. She could understand their reluctance. If a patient died by their hands, there were repercussions. Nobility seemed to think healers could perform miracles and were unforgiving when a healer failed.

Mira, the Emperor's young wife, was another matter. Ikara had to take this task. Mira was not going to return home, regardless if she lived or died.

Her blood ran cold as she recalled the Emperor's message.

Her life will be in danger after my death. Save them both from the virus if you can. If not, make sure you ferry Mira to safety.

Mira must have no idea of her condition, or what was about to happen to her. Poor woman. An innocent caught by the cruelty of men in power. Ikara feared Mira might not live, if the Emperor's suspicions proved true.

The truth of the virus Mira carried was all too real, and lethal, for Ikara to discount those suspicions. When Maric, the Emperor's most trusted pilot arrived, he'd be able to provide more news as to who had done this to Mira.

The distant hum of an approaching shuttle brought her back to the present. The tension between her shoulders increased as the shuttle began its descent near the cave entrance. Flakes of snow swirled beneath the craft as it landed, some stinging Ikara's face. The motors cut, leaving silence after the echoes finally died.

Ikara directed the hover-stretcher beside her forward, until it gently tapped the hatch that opened a moment later. Inside the shuttle, mechanical arms levered a cocoon, surrounded by pulsating waves of blue fire, onto the metal surface.

Mira, enclosed by the fire – the same fire her god Asiel produced in the lake to heal her patients – flickered in and out of view.

The pilot climbed down, his face haggard in the bright light. "Ah. Ikara. Are you alone?"

She nodded.

“I hate these fighter crafts. They may be fast but...” He rubbed the back of his neck. “They’re not comfortable.”

She picked up the bottle of water she had brought for him, drawn from the lake, and handed it to him. “Drink. It will restore your energy.”

After he drained the bottle, she asked him, “How long does the Emperor have to live?”

“Days.”

Even though she had expected this, hearing it out loud increased her uneasiness.

She gazed fondly at Mira’s pregnant body. She was in stasis, her chest barely moving. “Who did this to her?”

“The Emperor believes Pherus knows something about this, although probably not the truth.”

Pherus was considered ambitious, even ruthless, but a killer? Surely he’d not condone such an act if he knew the truth. “Who does the Emperor suspect?”

“His adviser, Anum.”

A prickle of warning fell between her shoulders. Anum was her father, one of the revered immortal Mandrakes, who, according to her mother, had lost his humanity. A man she had never met, and one certainly capable of creating such a terrible virus.

“What would Anum gain from this?”

“One theory I have is that Mira’s unborn son is a risk to Pherus’s rule in the future. Another is that Anum is as corrupt as all the other Mandrakes are, and is using Pherus and Mira as pawns for his own agenda, whatever that is.” He paused. “There is one more thing you may not be aware of, which makes all this a lot more worrisome.”

She didn’t like the worried expression on his face at all. “Tell me.”

“Anum has had a great deal of influence over Pherus in the last five years. Pherus has changed, and I don’t like what I’ve seen. It’s as if he were under Anum’s thrall.”

That she could believe. Her father had similarly ensnared her mother when they met.

Of course, Mira mattered more, now, than any of this. What was she thinking? She gazed at the cocoon. No wonder the Emperor wanted sanctuary for Mira. The poor woman was doomed either way.

As for what Anum had done to her... She had seen it before. It sickened her that anyone could stoop to such an act.

The culprits themselves were usually nobility, generally men who wanted to be rid of an inconvenient wife or lover. Those women arrived near death and Ikara rarely succeeded in saving them. While some of the afflictions they suffered had been genuine, others had been artificially created, just

like this lethal virus. These women were reminders of what one human could do to another for political convenience. In such a civilized society, it still unsettled her that human nature had not really progressed from the barbaric times of two thousand years ago.

Maric handed the recorder to her. “The Head Physician concludes Mira’s illness is incurable. You’ll also find details on the type of virus.”

She turned the recorder on. Most of the jargon left her baffled, but it didn’t matter. It was the pattern of the virus she needed, so she could manipulate it and then, with Asiel’s guidance, destroy it.

She zoomed in on the cup-like shape of the virus. It seemed vaguely familiar. The earlier report mentioned a virus the physician had not seen before, and looking at this, Ikara knew why.

A chill slowly crawled up her spine.

Ikara began to tremble as the fearful image of the virus built in her mind. Below the cup-shaped hood were tendrils that connected to healthy tissue. Its grip was lethal, sucking away the life force of its host. The architect who had done this to Mira was just as frightening as his creation. No man with any sense of humanity could do this to another—it had to have been a Mandrake.

“I’ll wait for you, no matter the outcome,” Maric said.

Maric always did. He cared about her patients as much as she did.

Now all Ikara had to do was rid Mira of the virus, never a simple task. Few survived, once released from stasis.

“Will you be able to save her?”

Ikara handed the recorder back to him. “I have to try.” Or die in the attempt. She swallowed. Asiel would guide her as he always did. She had to trust that he wouldn’t demand that she sacrifice her life to save a patient.

Ikara ran her finger over the cocoon’s pulsating energy. A trickle of blue fire ran over her body, easing her nervousness a little.

“May Asiel guide me,” she said in a not-so-steady voice.

The pilot hesitated at the name of the god of the lake. He smiled weakly, placed two fingertips to his lips and bowed to her, a superstitious gesture of good luck. “I’ll pray for you.”

Ikara guided the hover-stretcher beside her as she walked back into the tunnel. She thinned out the energy of the cocoon to get a closer look at Mira. She looked so peaceful, as if asleep. One would think she suffered no ailment at all. Usually Ikara didn’t perform a healing on her own, but the Emperor had insisted that the matter be kept as private as possible.

Solar lanterns lit the long tunnel, casting a soft glow on the smooth walls. Her footsteps were the only sound. Ikara coughed, and it ricocheted around the wall, jarring her until it faded away. All of her

concentration would be needed for what lay ahead.

She stepped into a massive cave, its walls covered with white crystals that glowed like stars. Light reflected over the surface of the mirror-smooth lake. Some had said the cave was part of Asiel's creation, for the interior was different to every other cave on Arien. It didn't matter if the legends about Asiel were true or not, now that she was back where she belonged. She stood in her sanctuary, a place where she could perform miracles.

She loosened her cloak and it fell to the ground. As she stepped into the lake, the water flowed around her ankles in a caress, tugging at the hem of her robe, like gentle, invisible hands urging her towards the center of the great lake. She guided the hover-stretcher across the surface.

Ikara waded deeper until the water reached waist level. Energy flowed up between her legs, inside that place where few men had ventured, and up her spine, until it trickled at last through her fingertips. She sighed as the familiar, blissful sensation enveloped her.

She lowered the hover-stretcher to just below water level. The cocoon shattered into pools of liquid that were quickly absorbed by the lake.

Mira floated before her.

Ikara remained standing. She ran her hands above Mira's swollen belly and estimated the baby to be at least seven months into term. She read the baby's aura. Shades of blue swirled around his body, a sign all was normal.

Relieved, she began to check the mother.

A presence, no more than a whisper in the air, brushed her shoulder. Asiel was with her, invisible except by touch. Another subtle caress across her cheek took any remnants of doubt that may have lingered.

How could she doubt Asiel? If Mira was destined to die, it was his decision, not hers. All she could do was be his conduit.

Ikara began at Mira's head. A tendril of blond hair caught in her fingers. Ikara removed it, then continued over Mira's breasts, leaving one hand between them. The other, she rested over the juncture between Mira's legs. Her aura flickered unevenly. Not a good sign at all.

Cords of energy formed between them where Ikara had placed her hands. Ikara had linked into Mira's life-force.

Mira's body rocked in sync with Ikara's heartbeat. She was ready to begin.

Asiel. I entrust myself in your hands.

Patterns began to appear over Mira's body, matching the shape of the virus that Ikara had seen on the recorder.

Asiel. Guide me.

His response was immediate. Blue lines, twisting in an uncontrolled web, appeared from a deep chasm in the middle of the lake. The familiar lines of passage never ceased to hold her in awe.

Long tendrils flowed between Ikara's legs and followed the same course as the energy had taken before. The intensity increased, similar to what she experienced near the height of passion, drawing her towards an exquisite sense of oneness. Ikara drew upon the energy until she could endure it no longer. Ready, she poured the lines of passage into Mira. There'd be only one chance to save her and the child.

Usually, she experienced an overwhelming rush of release. An intense wave of nausea struck her instead. As each pattern receded, more appeared in their place. The virus was more widespread than she'd feared. There was no hope for Mira or the baby. She had to break free or she'd die.

The darkness crawled onto her fingers, leaving a chill in its wake. Sweat poured down Ikara's forehead, stinging her eyes.

Let me go, she mentally ordered Asiel.

Hold still.

The euphoria of hearing Asiel's voice barely registered as blackness threatened to devour her. She had to pull back. *Now!*

His voice entered her mind. *Trust me. With you as my channel, we'll heal both mother and child.*

Asiel. How can I hear you?

Do not question me now. Let her go.

She did so and felt herself sinking into the lake. The lines of passage swirled around her, embracing her body in a cocoon. Like the baby in Mira's womb, she felt safe. She never wanted to leave this place; nothing could touch her here.

As if Asiel had heard, the warmth faded and his embrace loosened, although not completely.

The Emperor will be dead soon, but it will not be the end of the matter.

She reeled. A god was speaking to her about politics.

He's forced my hand sooner than I planned.

His words tore into her, demanding her undivided attention. Ikara fought euphoria and another, deeper need – just to die in this wondrous place.

The Emperor is an old fool lured by the advice of another, who was determined this virus would threaten your life.

Why me?

Anum arranged this attempt on your life so I would be forced to reveal myself to you.

Why? He barely knows of my existence, and cares even less.

That is where you are wrong. It's his game and you are now part of it. He is so predictable after a few thousand years.

Why me?

Asiel did not answer. He appeared instead.

His face changed with each ripple of the water: an old man with eyes of black pools, a young man with a strong kind face and brown eyes that gazed at her with love.

Awe filled her. She was seeing a god.

Now I have revealed myself to you; tell no one.

And he was gone.

Torn from the wonder of his embrace, she was yanked to the surface.

Cool, life-giving air found its way into her lungs. Ikara opened her eyes.

The surrounding light in the cave returned to white. Ikara grasped her robe, twisted the soaking cloth in her hands, clinging to it with whatever sanity remained.

"My baby?" a voice said.

Ikara turned around. Mira stood before her.

"How is my baby?" she asked again.

Ikara had no recollection of curing Mira. She placed her hand over Mira's belly. A kick greeted her. Mira looked at Ikara, smiling.

"You have a long life ahead of you," Ikara said softly. "Do you have any idea what was done to you?"

Mira's eyes filled with fear. "What was wrong with me?"

As casually as she could manage, Ikara said. "That virus was meant to kill you."

Mira clutched her belly. "What? I thought the physician forged the recording."

Forged? "It was real Mira," Ikara said, using Asiel's reassuring presence to keep her calm.

"Pherus," Mira hissed.

Ikara tried to put recent events into focus. Anum played a double game, not only infecting Mira to kill her, but also, it seemed, to force Asiel to reveal himself to her.

How Asiel knew this, she did not question. He was a god, after all.

"It was Anum."

She looked at Ikara, horrified. "My husband's adviser?" Mira squeezed her eyes shut, then reopened them. "Anum always wandered alongside me, to see if I was all right. I was a little in awe of him." She wiped a tear from her cheek. "I thought he cared for me."

"Anum is a Mandrake; he's beyond caring. Are you fool enough to believe any man who's lived

five thousand years could have any humanity left?” Ikara asked, more harshly than she’d intended.

Mira winced.

She lowered her voice. “I’m sorry. My mother spoke of Anum often. Blinded by love she was. They do that.”

And soon they’d be back, all twelve of them, for the succession of Pherus, the incumbent Emperor.

“Kreth believed Anum to be wise and sought his advice frequently,” Mira said.

Kreth, the Emperor. Poor man. He had suspected Anum of treachery, and it seemed he had been right. As for Anum, she tried not to think of him as her father. It didn’t help.

How could he do this to me, to Mira and the unborn child?

She put this aside to recall later. Mira’s life was at stake here.

Ikara straightened. “Officially you died today, and your body is in the chasm. I’ve arranged for you to go to Halifad.”

Tears fell down Mira’s cheeks. “I can’t go home, can I?”

Ikara shook her head. “Come to the robe room. I’ll give you a change of clothes.”

The entrance of the robe room was on her left, hidden by an outer wall. Ikara led Mira inside and handed her a robe, boots, and a cloak.

“Put these on.”

“Won’t anyone notice that they’re missing?”

Ikara tossed her own robe into the chute where healers discarded their used clothes. “For each preparation, we wear a new robe. One will not be missed.”

They dressed quickly and, checking to make sure the tunnel remained clear, returned to the cave entrance.

Relieved to see both her and Maric’s shuttles waiting, she steered Mira to the ladder of her shuttle. “Get in.”

Maric smiled broadly to see Mira restored to health.

After Mira was safely out of view, Ikara said to Maric. “Give me the recorder.”

He handed it to her. “I can’t believe you saved her. It’s a miracle.”

Yes, it was, Ikara thought. She tried not to think of Asiel or what had happened at the lake. Her focus now was to get the tone right for the post-mortem recording.

She turned the recorder on, but left visual off. She imagined Anum as a traitor and a killer. It helped compose her words.

In a tight, emotional voice, she said, “Mira, wife of the Emperor of the fifteen planets, was delivered into the chasm at a half-hour after midnight. Her soul was judged by Asiel to be pure.”

The pilot's lips widened into a smile. "Terrible, this-" His smile fled. "Ikara, are you all right?" She fought back a tear. Saving Mira and seeing Asiel was becoming too much for her to bear. "I'm exhausted," she lied.

He pocketed the recorder. "I have it on good authority that Pherus has already left for Arien." That brought her back. "With the Emperor still alive?"

"Kreth will be dead by morning. I'm sorry to make this sound so horrid, but Pherus will accelerate the mummification treatment en-route to Arien. After all, when Kreth is officially dead, Pherus becomes Emperor. I only hope he'll be too distracted with other things to think too deeply on Mira."

An ambitious son would be more likely to check such things, but she didn't tell the pilot that. She placed her hand between his shoulders to ease his tension. "You must go. I'll take care of her."

Ikara had contacted her sister, Karin, in advance. Karin would be arranging transport for Mira to leave Arien. A safer option than risking Maric's life. He had risked enough as it was, over the years.

"I suspect this will be the last for some time."

She nodded.

He climbed into his shuttle. "Take care, Ikara."

"And you." He closed the hatch.

Ikara climbed in beside Mira and waited until the pilot's shuttle was out of sight.

She contacted Karin. "I'm ready."

"I'm nearly there."

Ikara cut the connection. "Mira?"

"I don't want your life to be at risk because of what you've done for me," Mira said softly.

The decision had been made when she'd left Hedron, but Mira didn't need to know that.

"Mira," Ikara said gently. "Your son will live. Think of a future with him."

A whimper fled from her lips. "I know that. It's not so easy... now."

Ikara couldn't imagine being exiled from her homeworld. The loss of companionship with fellow healers would be bad enough, but severance from Asiel would be devastating.

Another shuttle landed nearby.

Exhaustion swept over Ikara, as the adrenalin worn off.

"What can she do?" Mira asked, worried.

She placed her hand on Mira's arm, a gesture of reassurance. "She'll take you to Halifad," Ikara reminded her, "a world with many places to hide."

Mira fell into a brooding silence.

Karin climbed into Ikara's shuttle. Her long blond hair was tied back. She sat in the rear of the

shuttle and removed her cloak, revealing a green robe. She'd discarded her healers robe years ago after moving to Halifad.

"Thank goodness you saved her," Karin said.

Mira looked wide-eyed.

"My sister, Karin. This is Mira. Are you ready to take her?"

"No. We're going to your place. I have found a faster alternative to a shuttle."

That was odd, but Ikara didn't question it. Karin knew what she was doing.

The shuttle rose above the lights of the tarmac, over the tall trees dusted with snow. They curved upwards between snowcapped peaks, across a valley where lights from the city shone through the thick mist.

Ikara was relieved to reach her home at last. It was one of a hundred dotted along the top of the cliff face, just above the mist. Other houses below the healers' were occupied with assistants, masons and farmers who flew out to their crops, or servants to aid the healers. A whole community lived in the cliff faces, dedicated to the lake of Arien.

Another shuttle occupied the small landing area. It was shaped like a bird. A Mandrake shuttle.

What was it doing here?

"What the-"

"It's Prenth. Don't fear. He'll be taking Mira."

She had known Karin's lover's name, not that he was a Mandrake. Why hadn't Karin told her the truth? "A Mandrake?"

"I know your attitude towards them. Not all of them have lost their humanity."

Ikara bit the retort down. "Anum certainly excelled himself."

"What do you mean?" Karin asked, frowning.

"The virus was lethal," Ikara said.

"What? I don't believe it."

"Neither did I until-" Ikara was about to mention Asiel's appearance. "What I mean is, not until I treated Mira."

"I see," Karin said. "Are-"

"What awaits me on Halifad?" Mira asked, interrupting their conversation.

"A man called Kat has a place reserved for those who receive our aid. You will not be alone, Mira. There are others in a similar situation to you. We've found it helps if you all stay together."

Mira gave the briefest of nods before her gaze returned to the window.

Ikara placed her hand on Mira's shoulder. She was shivering. "We'll go inside for a minute and get

you warm.”

“Thank you,” she whispered.

Ikara landed beside the Mandrake shuttle, not leaving a lot of room on the landing pad. She climbed down the small ladder onto the paved landing area. Mira followed, her face downcast, the cloak wrapped tightly around her.

Karin reached Ikara’s side. “Prenth wants to speak with you before we go.”

Ikara wasn’t sure about meeting a Mandrake face to face. But since he was a man Karin trusted and loved, Ikara was willing to do the same.

The stone door of her home slid shut behind them.

Ikara led Mira to a roaring fire, recessed in the wall. “Here, get yourself warm.”

“Mira,” Karin said. “Forgive us for talking about you in your presence.” Her gaze turned to Ikara. “Are you implying the Emperor had no idea what had been done to his wife and child.”

“No. Anum engineered the virus,” Ikara said.

“What? Why would he do such a thing?”

“He’s our father in name only. Don’t get sentimental.”

Another voice from behind the doorway of one of the bedrooms, said, “*That* is of no surprise to me at all.”

A man appeared.

So this was what a Mandrake looked like. His aura filled the room, rendering her speechless. His blond hair was tied in a plait, the unmistakable trademark of a Mandrake. He wore a dark cloak covering a blue robe that fell to his ankles. His boots, barely visible, were designed for walking in snow.

Just how the carvings in her home depicted these immortal Mandrakes.

Except he was very much alive. Ikara couldn’t take her eyes off him: his blue eyes, square jawline. No wonder her mother had been unable to refuse Anum.

Prenth lowered his gaze. Ikara nearly staggered with the break in contact.

Shocked that he’d captured her so easily in his thrall, Ikara kept her gaze averted from his face.

“Prenth will take us to Halifad,” Karin said.

In two long strides, Prenth reached Karin’s side. He leaned over Mira, nearby, and gently cupped her chin. Blue fire rippled over his fingers. “The virus is gone.”

Ikara looked, open-mouthed. How did he harness it?

Karin smiled. “The Mandrakes can harness the fire away from the lake. Not for healing, unfortunately.”

Prenth caressed Mira's cheek. She closed her eyes and leaned into his hand.

"We'll get you safe to Halifad in a moment," Prenth said.

Mira opened her eyes again, blinked. Ikara didn't miss any of it. He had lulled Mira as she did with her patients before she began to heal them.

He straightened. "First, I must speak to Ikara."

Ikara kept her gaze averted.

"Prenth," Karin said. "Are you sure Ikara shouldn't come with us? When Pherus arrives, he'll seek her out."

"His ship won't arrive for days. Besides, I'll be back before midday tomorrow."

Before noon? How fast was his ship? She knew his gaze rested on her face, but she refused to look at him.

"Have no fear, Ikara. You'll be safe until then."

"Must you return so soon?" Karin said.

"There's much to be done before Pherus arrives."

The air shifted when he reached Ikara's side. Before she could increase the distance again, he gripped her shoulder and steered her into one of the bedrooms.

She backed away towards the window. This was more like the behavior her mother had warned her about.

"Look at me," he commanded.

An invisible force dragged her gaze back to his.

"I'd like to know what the virus was," he said.

With a supreme effort of will, she tore her gaze from him. Her gaze averted, she said, "As long as you stop doing that, I will." And looked back at him, defiantly, she hoped.

He looked surprised, but hid it quickly. His voice lowered. "It doesn't matter. I can retrieve it from your mind."

Prenth closed the gap between them, pinning her into a corner. She flinched as he stroked her cheek, sending a gentle energy throughout her body. She felt part of her separate for a moment, then rejoin. An odd sensation, yet, she'd been willing to give whatever he wanted.

He removed his hand, and the wonderful sensation faded.

Prenth smiled, a bitter smile that made her shiver to the core. "Anum was behind the attempt to kill you, via Mira's illness, and Asiel saved you. How unusual."

Prenth returned to the main room.

Ikara followed. He'd taken those memories without her consent. "How dare you."

He raised his hand. "Not now."

She was about to protest, when it occurred to her there were more important things to worry about, Mira in particular.

"Can I do anything?" Ikara offered.

Karin shook her head, her gaze on Prenth. "We must go. The longer we stay, the-"

Prenth cupped Karin's chin. The tenderness in his eyes took Ikara's breath away. His hand slid to Karin's shoulder, drawing her close to him. "Greater the danger. I know."

He turned to Ikara. "Asiel is not the benefactor you think. What you see in me, and I know you find it distasteful, also exists in Asiel."

He may as well as have struck her instead.

Karin's face paled. "Ikara. Prenth is right. Asiel uses us all, and sometimes we give what he wants willingly. I-" she shook her head. "No matter. It's done now."

She couldn't believe what her sister had said, or Prenth.

"I see you aren't convinced. You'll believe me in time," Prenth said.

Ikara closed the gap between herself and her sister, refusing to listen to his words. "Take care."

They briefly embraced.

"Whatever happens, I love you, don't forget that," Karin said.

Ikara frowned. Karin was bothered by something deeper. Was she in danger? Surely not with Prenth accompanying her to Halifad.

At the door, Mira grasped Ikara's hands. "Thank you."

Ikara smiled briefly. "Take care."

She lingered outside long after they'd gone, pondering Karin's words. She shivered, and not because of the chill outside. Karin's words had implied a deeper message, a confession of some kind. Fear and doubt twisted through her mind like Asiel's blue fire. What had Karin meant?

Chapter Two

Blue fire entered Sekai's consciousness, marring the grandeur of the stars that surrounded his ship, and his mind.

Light pierced the darkness as the lid of the black chamber hissed open. Sekai squinted at the pale light. As he grew accustomed to brightness again, he opened his eyes fully.

Awareness struck, and he hated it, knowing he couldn't do a thing about the re-awakening.

Carefully, he sat up. In the center of the black-walled room, a pulsating column of blue energy brightened.

"Why have you called me back so soon?" he croaked.

"It's time," the ship answered.

He climbed out of the stasis chamber and his bare feet touched the cold floor. The faintest of breezes caressed his skin as the ship's life support system began operation again. He didn't feel the cold, one of the few blessings upon re-awakening. That would change after he visited the lake. He gripped the edge of the stasis chamber for support, as the last vestiges of disorientation left him.

He removed the folded blue robe from a nearby compartment and slipped it on. Tendrils from the column of energy reached out and aided Sekai to the floor. He sat cross-legged, facing the column. The tendrils withdrew, and were replaced by an image of Arien. A world largely consisting of ocean, save for a few pockets of land across the equator.

"How long this time?"

"Thirty years."

That was a surprise, even to his indifferent state. Usually it was sixty or more between successions of an Emperor. It was easier to return to Arien after a longer period had passed. Most of the people he'd come in contact with would be dead. Once, it had devastated him, leaving those he cared about behind, but after five thousand years, he felt only relief.

"Why so soon? Did the son kill the father this time?"

"You've not lost your sarcasm," the ship said. "The Emperor, Kreth, died, by what I can divulge from their records, of old age. His son, Pherus, is on his way to Arien. I'll update you on what else has occurred over the last thirty years."

General information was easy to digest. Facts didn't need his participation. "Only whatever is interesting."

"Of course, Sekai. What else am I here for, but to serve you?"

A hint of mockery there, Sekai thought. He gazed back at the coffin-shaped chamber.

“Since returning to this sector, I’ve collated what may be of use to you.”

He was sure most of it was tedious. “Summarize for me.”

“You’re in an unpleasant mood.”

So would the ship be, if it were torn from oblivion.

Sekai placed his hands into the column of energy in an act of prayer. “Show me what’s changed.”

The haze enveloped him, and events recorded by the ship filled his mind. So much and so little has changed, as words and images merged into his consciousness. People lived, loved, died and killed.

What else was new?

He was about to remove his hands when the message from Prenth appeared as a single line of thought.

Anum is up to something. I need your aid.

Sekai removed his hands.

“Prepare the shuttle,” he said.

“It’s always the same isn’t it?” the ship said. “The games that people play.”

Ironic, he thought. The only anchor in his existence was an aging ship.

It was no more than he deserved. The endless centuries were bad enough, tempered to a large degree by the sleep, a near-death state that enabled the decades between successions to pass in oblivion. It helped, until one needed to wake up again.

Asiel had been an Emperor once, until his brother had forced an uprising on Hedron five thousand years ago. Pursued by his brother, Asiel had crash-landed near a village on Arien, a world occupied by few in those days. Only a handful of men had followed Asiel, those who would have died if they’d remained. Sekai had been among them, young and impressionable, and also Asiel’s cousin. Anum, an adviser to Asiel, had had little choice but to flee as well. What might have transpired instead, Sekai could not imagine, nor what the decision had cost him.

A red desert surrounded the large village sprawled along a great river. The occupants had welcomed them, healed them, and offered a home in exchange for their assistance in the fields. Far from the corrupted politics and deceit within palace walls, the simple act of tending fields had come as an incredible shock to some, Asiel in particular, who’d never performed any physical labor in his life.

Then one day an old woman had arrived, a healer. Blue fire flared from the red earth to her hands. As if the blood of the land gave its essence into her body so another could be saved.

What had happened that night still burned in Sekai’s mind. All thirteen of them had sat in a circle before a flickering fire. The old healer had removed a five-sided star that hung from a chain around her

neck. The blue gem had flared in the firelight, causing the villagers, who'd lingered as onlookers, to fall to their knees in response.

The words still rung in his ears. The old woman's gaze fixed on Asiel. "You've fallen as an Emperor, but will rise as our god."

Asiel had been stunned, but took the gem.

The old woman and Asiel had disappeared into the night. Later, much later, when the fire had died and they'd huddled in their mats, only Asiel had returned.

Rivulets of blue fire had bathed his body. "I am the chosen prophet it seems," he said, amused. "I ask your companionship for ten years, and after that, we will live forever."

Sekai had never imagined Asiel had meant literally. Having nowhere else to go, the remaining twelve had followed Asiel as a prophet, and later as their god.

A sharp, sudden pain seared across Sekai's chest. It happened after every revival, a suffering he had to re-live so he could never forget *her*. The healer who'd died to make him immortal.

Inu, dear Inu.

The choice had been easy then, remain alone on a world so different to the one they'd fled, or become immortal.

The pain receded. He recalled the image of the golden dagger in Inu's trembling hand with painful clarity. Droplets of blood, one by one, fell from her hand in slow motion, onto the still surface of the lake.

How desperate I was to be amongst my brethren, I didn't even care she died for me.

His emotions were always raw after a re-awakening. Once he'd rejuvenated in the lake, the darkness would lift.

He descended past the mountains towards the lake. Dawn cast a yellow hue over the snow as he landed.

At the tarmac, Sekai climbed out of the shuttle.

Prenth, barely visible near the shadows at the entrance of the cave, moved forward to greet him.

The two men embraced. Sekai's knees weakened for a moment. "Forgive me; the sleep has not quite left me."

Mist came from Prenth's lips. "I've just returned from Halifad. I'm meant to be seeing Ikara later on today, but before I do, we need to discuss Anum."

Sekai didn't know the name, Ikara. He'd find out later who she was, once he'd been rejuvenated. "First the lake, then we will discuss it."

Prenth slid his arm under Sekai's. "I'll aid you."

The lake he did remember, his life and his curse. To live an eternal death and be unable to die.
One day he would sink to the bottom.

You have already tried that.

Prenth aided him to the shore.

The sandy shore was as he remembered, as was the cave. To many, this place was where miracles happened. Asiel, who had taken life, also gave it to those that he deemed fit. Sekai had to admit begrudging envy of Asiel's abilities in keeping the healers believing that he was a benevolent god. Little did they know of the darker side of Asiel. That, he saved for the Mandrakes.

The walls of the cave remained an unmoving white. The water rippled in anticipation of his arrival. Asiel waited to welcome his long lost cousin.

Sekai felt the collective pull of the lost souls of the lake, decreed by Asiel not to be worthy to pass beyond. As he waded in, they clamored to extract from his memory any news he could offer them. He brushed them mentally aside and waded to the center of the lake, where the chasm began.

The chasm pulsed with blue light, making him wince. Asiel tended to like the dramatic. Not that bright light could hurt him. It was the lives he'd affected since his last visit, in particular, the healer he'd left behind after the last succession. After thirty years, she'd still be alive.

He sank below the surface and breathed in. The first breath was always the worst, regardless of the lake being laden with oxygen. The sensation was like being in heavy, thick air. The fluid coursed throughout his lungs. When he exhaled, bubbles rose to the surface. He breathed in again, and the water filled his lungs as easily as air. Another gift Asiel had given the Mandrakes.

The density was lower than that of normal water, making the descent easier, but Sekai still had to be careful. Unable to see clearly, he ran his hand along the rock face to keep his body steady. Step by unsteady step, he walked down a narrow ledge into the chasm.

The lost souls swirled around him, encasing his body with light caresses, taking from his mind as they did so. They, with the water, rejuvenated him inside and out in slow loving caresses. Sekai let himself enjoy the pleasure. It awakened in him the need to take a woman as a lover for the succession. While some Mandrakes took several, Sekai tended to take one and usually a healer. Why, he never knew, only that he found a deep connection with a healer each time he returned.

The souls darted in and out, new ones replacing old, so all could get their turn.

This part of the immersion almost brought him to the verge of bliss.

His foot struck what he was looking for. A stone bench. He'd not be allowed to go further.

He paused and breathed out with a sigh. *You must go.*

They did so, reluctantly.

He sat.

Apprehension filled his mind, as he prepared himself for *her*.

Water rocked him in gentle motions.

He formed in his mind the image of the healer he'd loved during the last succession.

Her olive face appeared. Her green eyes, powerful and compelling, were what had attracted him to her in the first place.

You abandoned her to a lonely death, Asiel said.

His body tensed with dread. *What happened?*

Look.

He closed his eyes. The memory replayed in his mind.

The surface of the lake became as smooth as glass. She stood at the shore.

No.

This memory would not be stilled, changed or eradicated.

She lowered her eyes, hesitating briefly before she walked in with purpose. Water swirled around her waist, then slowly up to her neck. She closed her eyes and breathed out, slowly and deliberately. The water changed to blue where her essence bled from her body.

Pain, sudden and old struck him, hard. It was Inu all over again.

No.

Her chin, nose and finally her eyes were hidden from view. Her dark hair floated briefly before she disappeared.

Bubbles, a ripple, then, nothing.

He never lingered on Arien for more than a month, the time required for the succession. She had pleaded with him to stay longer, as they all did. He'd never imagined she'd take her own life. The other healers he'd loved had accepted his departure with sadness. A handful even fell pregnant, preferring to have a child to remind them of him.

He'd warned her he couldn't stay. How could she force him to bear witness to a slow death, while he stayed young?

You abandoned her, unlike Anum, who stayed, Asiel said.

From Prenth's message, Sekai doubted Anum remained for love. As for Asiel's comment, how dare he judge.

What do you know of love? You, an old corrupted god who feeds on the love of your healers when they heal at the lake. That is all you are, now.

He breathed and the pain lessened.

Asiel, it seemed, was lost for words.

The water surged around him.

I sense great danger for all of us, Asiel said.

Ah, that was more like it. Sekai had wondered what Anum had done, staying awake while he had slept. *What does he plot this time?*

What else, but to take over my place.

It's what you live for, Sekai said sarcastically.

Asiel, corrupt as he and all the Mandrakes were, liked sport. The greater the danger, the more thrilling it became for him.

Asiel would not divulge Anum's intent, preferring Sekai to find out the clues for himself. It would not be that difficult. Sekai had a reasonable idea of what Anum was up to. The question was who, or whom, did he plan to use as his pawns?

Sekai stood. Maybe Ikara was involved, whoever she was. She seemed important enough to Prenth if he planned to visit her later that day.

Time to return and find out.

The light from the chasm faded, leaving slivers of light streaming down from above. He used the rock face to guide himself back.

When he broke the surface, he coughed out the water from his lungs. Sweet air took its place. The changes to his body were complete.

Prenth stood at the shore, waiting.

He does look worried. In fact, Sekai couldn't recall seeing his friend so distressed.

Sekai stood up, waist deep in water.

The air became colder, making him shiver— another sensation he'd not experienced for a long time. He would not suffer the physical frailties of mortality, but would experience all the sensations offered, such as remorse.

He could not get the image of the healer who had died out of his mind.

His chest tightened.

Breathe.

He had forgotten.

Prenth walked to the water's edge. "Sekai. I..."

Sekai reached Prenth's side. "Need to discuss what Anum is up to. Go ahead."

He listened to Prenth's story about Ikara, Asiel and the virus.

When done, Prenth concluded, "Mira is safe on Halifad. Karin will be returning later tonight."

Prenth's current lover. It never ceased to amaze Sekai that any Mandrake could endure years on Arien, or any other world, with a woman who'd eventually die. Anum had remained for years at a time before, but never for love. Prenth was another matter entirely. He had never stayed awake for more than a month before.

"Tell me about Karin," Sekai said.

His face took on a dreamlike quality. "Five years ago, I was awakened. How, I don't recall, only it was Asiel's doing. There was no succession, so I thought it odd. Asiel instructed me to go to the lake. I did, and found a woman who took my breath away. I can't describe to you how I felt. This was love, true love, not the brief interludes during a succession. I knew I could never leave her."

Sekai felt a tug in his chest. Why had Asiel done this to Prenth? This was not his style at all. "Go on."

"Karin was crying. I walked up to her and asked why. She didn't even fear me, or hold me in awe. She told me of a gravely ill woman who had been delivered to the lake to be healed. Karin had succeeded in saving her life, but it had nearly cost her own. Once the woman confessed her lover wanted her dead, Karin didn't hesitate in her decision to smuggle the woman to Halifad."

His gaze strayed to the still lake. "Their ship was shot at near Halifad, leaving them for dead."

"Nobility are notorious for such barbaric acts," Sekai said.

"I know. When it touches someone you care deeply for, it becomes personal, which is why I aided her in rescuing other women who were brought to Arien in a similar condition."

Karin must be an extraordinary woman to captivate the corrupted soul of a Mandrake and for him to aid her in her cause.

"She left her healing arts, and we decided to live on Halifad. No one asks questions there."

For Karin to leave Arien would have taken great courage. Few healers could bear to be away from the healing energies of Arien. The connection between healers and Arien was as powerful as the link between the Mandrakes and Asiel.

A nagging doubt lingered. *Asiel*. Why had he awakened Prenth at that time to find Karin? It seemed too much of a coincidence.

"Have you questioned Asiel as to why he offered this chance to you?"

Prenth hesitated a fraction too long for Sekai's liking. "No."

Sekai didn't press. A private offer, no doubt, one he was not privy to.

"I'm concerned about Anum," Prenth said. "He's stayed awake for thirty years, far longer than ever before."

"Where has Anum been?"

“He spent five years in Hedron, and the remainder with Nua, Ikara’s and Karin’s mother. Anum is their father.”

A chill came over him. Anum had never stayed to watch his children grow up before. As for Ikara, what was Asiel’s interest in her?

Prenth smiled wryly, as if taking the question from his mind. “I have no idea why Ikara’s involved. I hope you may be able to find out. She’s quite beautiful.”

Prenth rarely took the time to praise the beauty of women he wasn’t in love with, and Sekai found himself intrigued to see what Ikara looked like.

“I had planned to see Ikara later today,” Prenth said. “Maybe it would be wiser to see her now.”

Sekai intended to do just that. Aside from his desire to see her, another, more worrisome thought lingered. Why had Anum attempted to kill Ikara to force Asiel’s hand, and why did Asiel care?

Chapter Three

Ikara brushed aside the fire from the cocoon, briefly bringing a body into view. Her breath caught in her throat. It wasn't Mira, but Karin. Her sister's eyes were closed and her face appeared serene. It was as if she'd died peacefully.

She can't be dead.

Ikara tried to drag herself from the vision, but an invisible hand held her fast. Blue light pulsed from near Karin's throat, forcing her gaze there. Around Karin's neck was a gold necklace and at the end, a gem in the shape of a five-sided star. Ikara had never seen Karin wear jewelry of any kind. Drawn to it, she reached out and teased her finger beneath the fine chain. The gem pulsed again.

A buzzing sound came from somewhere in the distance. She looked up and saw they were surrounded in darkness.

Where am I?

Suddenly, the cocoon shattered. Ikara awoke with a start, her heart thumping loudly in her chest. It had been a dream after all.

The buzzing persisted. Her mother was due to arrive this morning for breakfast, before she returned home. Was it her? No. She had access to the house.

A blinking light caught her eye. It came from the screen beside her bed.

Someone's trying to contact me.

Ikara switched the screen on, bathing the room in light.

"Yes," she said with an effort.

Liea's face appeared. She was calling from security at flight control.

She looked exhausted. "Ikara. Can you get to the spaceport as soon as possible?"

Ikara checked the time on the nearby clock. It was six in the morning, an hour until dawn.

"What's wrong? Do you need another healer?"

Liea shook her head. "I checked the passenger manifest of a ship due to arrive at Arien tonight. It left Halifad two hours ago. Karin was on it."

A cold dread tore at her stomach. She hadn't anticipated her sister returning to Arien so soon, if at all. Karin must have done so to be with Prenth for the succession.

"What's happened?"

"There's been an accident. We're not sure of the cause, yet, but it doesn't look good."

"When?"

“Less than ten minutes ago.”

She climbed out of the bed. “Is Karin all right?”

“Too soon to tell. A Halifad probe from a nearby sentinel has just entered the ship. We’re receiving a signal from it as we speak. I... would rather you came and saw the footage for yourself. It would save time in case any decisions have to be made. Please hurry.”

Like retrieving her sister’s body and having her in a cocoon so Karin could be returned to Arien for immersion into the lake.

Had that been what her dream meant?

Ikara had encouraged families of patients not to fear the worst, unless it came to pass. She had to apply the same rule to herself.

The screen went dark. Ikara opened the curtains. Soft yellow light on the nearby mountain peaks meant dawn wasn’t far away.

The tightness across her chest refused to dissipate. Attacks on ships near Halifad were uncommon, but never random. Halifad’s policy of giving sanctuary to anyone had always drawn a few enemies.

Uneasiness tore through her. *Was it possible someone discovered what Karin had done and had exacted revenge?*

She dressed quickly and headed towards her shuttle, barely even noticing the cold, pre-dawn air before she climbed inside. She set the coordinates for the spaceport and watched for the yellow five-point star that indicated the perimeter of the shuttleport.

She thought of contacting Liea, but forced herself to wait. It wasn’t far now.

Dawn filtered through the mist as Ikara lowered the shuttle into a spare bay. Liea waited for her to climb down. Close up, her friend’s pale green eyes betrayed Ikara’s worst fears. As head of security, Liea knew exactly what had happened last night regarding Mira.

“Do you think it was an attack on Karin?” Ikara asked.

Liea gripped the cloak tighter around her. “It may be. I checked—no-one traced her departure in Prenth’s ship, but that doesn’t mean someone at Halifad hadn’t turned traitor.”

She motioned Ikara towards the moving escalator. They hopped on.

“If that’s true, why would they try to kill Karin? Surely they’d use her to find out what happened to Mira.”

Liea’s lips tightened into a thin line. She shook her head. “I don’t know, I truly don’t. Let’s wait to see the footage. If we can gauge who attacked the ship, it may aid us in getting answers.”

They left the escalator near the cliff wall and walked down a softly lit tunnel that went through the cliff into the large traffic control room. Inside, Ikara looked over the shoulder of a woman arranging for

the healer on shift to meet a sick girl. Normally, she would have offered her services, but worry for Karin had taken over her mind.

They passed from the main room through a sliding door into a smaller room. As the door closed behind her, Ikara was riveted to the large screen before her. It displayed a sleek, modern ship designed for fast passenger service between Arien and Halifad.

Except there were no lights shining at all. Nor did it look damaged.

Ikara swallowed.

“The capacity of this ship is twenty, including the pilot. From the manifest, there were ten passengers on board, including Karin. The location of the ship is of greater concern to me, however. It was just outside sentinel range of Halifad when the attack happened.”

A blind spot.

Liea nodded as if she'd heard her. “This is the beginning of the probe's recording. I've seen this part already.”

The image of the ship rotated to portside. Ikara looked at the screen, unable to comprehend what she saw. The hull had been ripped apart, leaving a gaping hole. The probe drifted inside, casting an eerie white light over the darkened corridor. Ahead, the images showed a door partially destroyed from the blast. With growing impatience, Ikara watched the probe enter the pilot room.

Light fell onto a vacant chair, facing the wrong way.

“The pilot would have escaped via the corridor on the starboard side to reach the airlock,” Liea said. “If the explosion had happened on that side, no one would have been able to leave the ship at all.”

Ikara kept her focus on the screen. “Are there any...” She couldn't bring herself to say the word.

Bodies.

“Miraculously, they reached the lifepods and managed to escape in time,” Liea said. “Keep watching.”

The beam swung over the console. It was completely dead. To the right was a long narrow black rectangle. Beneath it, protected by shielding would be the ship's recorder.

“Have you accessed it yet?” Ikara asked.

Liea shook her head. “It's not ours to take.”

Ikara cursed.

“My sentiments exactly. Unless you can give this information to Prenth so he can get to it first.”

She recalled Prenth's hard gaze and the way he'd torn the information from her mind. As imposing as he may have been to her last night, his love for Karin seemed genuine. Such a violation could not affect her judgment now.

“Prenth promised to return by midday. Do you know where his ship is now?”

Liea nodded. “His ship’s in orbit and his shuttle is at the lake. He’s been there for an hour.”

He must have had other business to attend to first. “Does he know?”

Liea shook her head. “I haven’t been able to contact him.”

A beep on the console made Liea turn sharply to it. She cupped her hand near her ear. She nodded. “That was Kat, security chief of Halifad. He’s arranging a ship to investigate, but knowing how disorganized they are, they’ll take hours to find a crew.”

Ikara felt hope rise within her. “Does that mean Prenth has time to reach the ship?”

“According to our records, their ship can do a one way trip to Halifad within two hours. Quite impressive.”

Ikara wasn’t all that interested. She just wanted to leave. “Can I go?”

“There is one more part you should see.”

The images went fast forward, before slowing down again. The probe had just reached the airlock near the rear of the ship. Inside, only nine lifepods remained.

Which meant they’d all escaped, but to where? “They could be anywhere out there.”

“Not so,” Liea said. “We estimated the distance a lifepod could have traveled from the time of the attack, and it’s not that far. Prenth will be able to search the area quickly.”

Ikara rose. She’d not waste any more time here. “Can you to transmit the details to my shuttle?”

“I’ll do it now.”

Ikara tried to stay calm. One could last a week, stranded in a lifepod in space. Not a pleasant experience and one she’d no desire to repeat. Back inside her shuttle on the way to the tarmac, she let her thoughts drift back to that fateful day. Five years ago it was, just before Prenth had arrived. Their first smuggling operation had gone terribly wrong. Should Karin have failed, the nobleman had insisted on the body of his mistress being returned to him. Ikara had arranged a private ship to take the woman to Halifad.

Since bodies of the deceased were never returned, Karin had told the nobleman she’d died. He wasn’t so easily fooled. He followed their ship into deep space, and then attacked it. The three of them had ended up in lifepods. He did leave, but only after he’d destroyed the lifepod carrying his mistress. Karin and Ikara had drifted in space for two days before they were rescued. She still recalled the unpleasant feeling of being cooped up in a tiny vessel. With the awesome grander of space surrounding her, she’d never felt so terribly and utterly alone.

Ikara had never ventured off world since.

She felt her shuttle descend. Drawn back to the present, she scanned the tarmac. It was deserted.

Hadn't Liea said Prenth had gone to the lake?

She contacted Liea. "He's not here."

Liea frowned. "Wait a moment." She returned to the screen. "He was at your home. They're on the way now."

At her home. Why? Then the other word sunk in. *They*? "Who is with him?"

"Sekai."

Two of them. Well, so be it. Together they could comb the area in half the time to find her sister.

Ikara waited impatiently for the men to arrive.

Energy surged throughout her body. She looked skyward. That hadn't taken long at all.

Even with the rays of the sun, the hull of the bird-shaped shuttle shimmered with fine lines of blue energy. She'd heard the lines of passage that powered their shuttles were the same type of energy that, according to the records, existed in the lake. All of it was connected somehow. Arien, the Mandrakes and Asiel. She wondered how, but such a conversation would have to wait until another time.

Prenth raised the hatch of his shuttle and jumped to the tarmac. She lifted her hatch and was about to climb out when Prenth raised his hand. "Stay there."

Another man followed, probably Sekai.

A sense of great age seemed to radiate from his profile, even though he looked about thirty. His lustrous dark hair, tied in a plait, fell to his waist.

Sekai faced her, full on. His dark eyes seemed fathomless, a place she wanted to sink into. His face was like a fine work, crafted by a master. A tendril of energy swept over her cheek in a caress. Tiny shudders rippled over her body. She raised a hand to her cheek and felt the aftermath of his touch.

He inclined his head forward and smiled briefly. The energy faded, as did the desire to do anything he wanted.

How dare he. He'd caught her in his thrall in the same way Prenth had done the previous night.

Or had he?

Sekai's touch had been more of a caress than a plundering of her mind. Reluctantly, she removed her hand from her cheek.

"Ikara?"

She looked down. Prenth was beside her shuttle. She hadn't even noticed him walk over.

"We were looking for you," Prenth said, smiling.

Her head cleared. "Karin."

"She's coming..." His smile fled, and he climbed the ladder until his eyes met hers. "What's wrong?"

“The passenger ship Karin was in was attacked. The lifepods are gone.” Prenth’s face blurred briefly. She blinked and his face cleared again.

He gripped her arm, making her cry out. He released her quickly. “I’m sorry. Please tell me everything.”

She steeled herself for an invasion of her mind.

“Where exactly did you say the ship was?”

Relieved he was willing to let her speak, she said, “I have the details in my shuttle.”

He climbed in beside her and she watched him view the probe’s movements. He checked the coordinates of Karin’s last location. His hand clenched into a fist.

“A blind spot. The attack is definitely linked to us taking Mira last night,” he said.

Her heart sank. “You don’t know where she is, do you?”

Prenth looked genuinely distressed. “Have no fear Ikara; we’ll find her.”

These men were used to having what they wanted, according to her mother. To see Prenth so vulnerable touched her deeply. He loved Karin, truly loved her.

He climbed down.

“The ship’s recorder. You must get to it first,” she said looking down at him.

“There’s no danger of that. Even if I have to-” He paused. “I’ll make sure no one else reaches the ship.”

She suspected the words Prenth had omitted were: *destroy anyone that gets in the way*. And she hoped it wouldn’t come to that.

Prenth returned to the shuttle. Sekai nodded briefly before the two men climbed into the bird of shimmering blue fire.

After they left, Ikara touched her cheek again. She’d not forget Sekai’s caress anytime soon. She wondered why he’d done it. Was he scrutinizing her or... No she thought, surely not.

Ikara closed the hatch. She had no interest at all in taking a lover.

* * *

Just as she entered her home, her mother, wearing traveling pants and a loose top, walked into the room. “Ikara. You look terrible. What happened? A difficult shift?”

Memories of the last twelve hours came back like a crashing wave. Where could she start? Ikara briefly embraced her. “I’m glad you waited. I need to talk to you.”

“Prenth and Sekai were looking for you. They didn’t explain why. They then left in quite a hurry. Any reason why they’d be looking for you?”

Ikara nodded. “You better sit down.”

Her mother sat cross-legged on the cushions near the dying fire. Her brown hair, flecked with gray, hung loose over her shoulders.

Ikara started with Karin. After she was finished, her mother looked at her, eyes brimming with hope. “If anyone can find her, it will be Sekai and Prenth.” She placed her hand over Ikara’s. “As a healer you tell your patients not to fear the worst, until it comes to pass. I know you’re worried, but don’t let it consume you.”

Ikara forced a laugh. It broke the tension somewhat.

Her mother smiled. “There, see? Now what else is bothering you?”

Trust her mother to know. Ikara never kept secrets from her. She recalled Asiel’s words. *Now I have revealed myself to you, tell no one.*

Although the euphoria of seeing Asiel had left her, she intended to keep that promise.

That left her with Anum. How *could* she tell her the truth about him?

Perhaps it would be easier if she mentioned what happened between her and Sekai, first. She made the question indirect. “How does a Mandrake choose a lover for the succession?”

Her mother seemed to go into a meditative trance. A smile formed on her lips. “The first time I saw Anum, I would have done anything for him. The Mandrakes hold you in their thrall, and you can do nothing to escape it, nor do you want to. I’d never felt such passion before Anum took me to his bed. No mortal compares after you’ve loved a Mandrake.”

The few lovers Ikara had were never more than casual, and long ago at that. No man compared to the joy she experienced when she healed. Was it possible a Mandrake could? Did she want to find out?

“Anum changed after that,” her mother said. “The initial rush of love for that month was the only time I saw any humanity in him. When I became pregnant with Karin, to Anum it was a completion of a project, rather than a sense of joy at giving new life.”

She inclined her head towards the wall. “Look at the carving.”

How could she miss it? The carving was of two Mandrakes who stood on either side of Asiel while he healed a dying child. Its image had intrigued her from the moment she’d moved in here, after she’d taken over her mother’s position as a healer.

“There is a reason why I carved Anum’s likeness as I did,” her mother said.

Ikara clenched her jaw at the image of Anum on the left. His eyes held the haughtiness of a man used to playing god. It fitted perfectly with what he’d done to her last night as he’d played with her life.

Tears streamed down her mother’s face. She gripped Ikara’s elbow with an unsteady hand. “I was foolish enough to think I’d be able to heal the darkness within him. All the healers believe they can restore the humanity of the Mandrakes, but they can’t. No human can. When you are caught in their

thrall, it's too late to see reason. Love blinds you. You see, I would have done *anything* to save him."

Ikara shuddered at the words, in particular, *anything*. She could not imagine what possessed the healers in Asiel's time to give up their lives so men like Anum could become immortal.

Should she tell her about Anum? "Mother. I-"

"Later child. Let an old woman reminisce."

Her mother's gaze returned to the carving. "Anum was not my first choice."

Her gaze shot to her mother. She had never admitted *that* before.

"Sekai was. He's the complete opposite to Anum, which is why I was drawn to him. It was as if he'd given up all hope." She gave a long, sad sigh. "If any Mandrake will tear your heart in two, it will be Sekai." Her mother's gaze fell to the ground as if she could no longer bear to look at the carving.

Ikara scrambled to her feet. She'd not studied Sekai up close before. He seemed to be in awe of Asiel. She ran her finger over his finely featured face, stopping at his cheek, remembering how he'd caressed hers.

"He regrets it, you see, but time can't be changed, can it."

"Some decisions could not be unmade," she whispered.

A rustle of her clothes and her mother was soon beside her. "I asked Sekai once, why he become a Mandrake."

Ikara had never thought to ask. Then again she'd never imagined seeing any of them in her lifetime. "What did he say?"

"He said Asiel is impossible to refuse."

Asiel. The way he looked at her in the lake with such love, she would have done anything for him, still would do anything for her god.

"Asiel is powerful, Ikara. At the time, Sekai would have followed him anywhere."

Asiel, who had aided her in healing her patients, was a far cry from the Mandrakes if Anum was anything to go by.

"The Mandrakes are full of darkness. No so Asiel," Ikara said softly.

Her mother shook her head. "Preth doesn't see much distinction between himself and Asiel, nor did the other Mandrakes I'd spoken to the last time they were here."

Preth had said something similar. She hadn't wanted to believe Asiel contained any darkness.

"You said you met Sekai at the tarmac, but you didn't mention what happened."

No, no she hadn't.

"I can see it on your face. He's considering you as a lover, hence your question at the beginning."

His touch had been exquisite, but if it were a prelude to taking her as his lover, she'd have no part of

it. Especially if what her mother said was true. A month of incredible passion followed by years of despair. No. She'd not ruin her life in the same way as some of the other, older healers had. A couple had given up healing altogether, unable to endure Asiel's touch as it reminded them of the Mandrakes who'd abandoned them.

"Sekai's only just arrived. There are many other healers he'll have a chance to choose from," Ikara said.

"They do the choosing and the healer never refuses. I have seen many try," her mother said. "I should know. I didn't love Anum in the beginning."

Ikara watched the way her mother played her finger over Anum's lips. The caress was so intimate. "Now I do, his darkness and all."

Ikara was unable to drag her gaze from her mother's roving finger, which had drifted to Sekai's cheek.

"Do you recall the story of one of the healers who drowned after the Mandrakes left last time?" her mother asked.

Ikara nodded.

"Officially, it was a difficult healing. I'll confide to you that it was no such thing." Her mother paused in her movement. "She was so devastated when Sekai left, she died by drowning."

Ikara tore her gaze from the carving. How could any healer take her own life in despair? Could she have been so blinded by love to die, rather than be separated from him? Ikara wiped a tear from her cheek. Something had never seemed right about that incident, but she'd not expected this.

"When do they find out about what happened on their last visit?" Ikara asked.

"Anum told me that Asiel tells them after they awaken."

Which meant, when she'd met Sekai on the tarmac, he already knew. His perusal of her cheek was hardly the action she expected from a man suffering from guilt.

No. She'd have nothing to do with him.

Her mother removed her hand from the carving. "I must return home. Will you contact me if you have any news of Karin?"

"Can't you stay a little longer?"

"Staying here will achieve nothing. You've had a difficult night. Go to the hut and mediate. Don't stay here, wondering." Her mother grasped her hands. "Preth will not stop until he finds her. We'll know before nightfall."

Ikara considered her mother's advice. Maybe the hut was a good idea.

* * *

Sekai's ship drew up against the damaged passenger ship. Even though their long-range scanners had picked up ten lifepods, one was still unaccounted for. He didn't have time to widen the search; he needed to get the recorder first.

Sekai watched blue haze envelope the long slender hull of Prenth's ship as it sped towards the first lifepod, somewhere in the distance.

With a sweep of his hand in the column of energy, the image changed to the damaged hull on the passenger ship.

He frowned. The ragged edges around the gaping hole appeared too perfect when one looked at the whole in symmetry. "Ship. Analyze the damage, then give me your theories on what caused this."

"My theories. Are you sure? It may take some time to go through them all."

And he'd thought the ship had no wit left. "Whatever is the most probable."

"It won't take long," the ship said. "There aren't many weapons that could create a hole like that."

"Exactly," Sekai said.

He began to bathe his body with blue fire. "I'm going to the passenger ship to retrieve the recorder. Can you create a bridge for me between the ships?"

"Do you need air?"

"Not for this trip. The cocoon I'm creating should provide me for the time I need."

The energy encased him so thickly he could barely see the ship. He'd need it, for the energy would begin to lose its protective shell the moment he entered the passenger ship.

He walked down a long, dark corridor, until he reached the airlock at the other end of his ship.

The inner door hissed shut. After the outer door opened, Sekai leapt onto the bridge of swirling light that extended from one ship to the other. Sekai crossed it quickly using the fire to stop himself from floating. He'd not be able to maneuver so easily in the passenger ship.

He placed his feet on the cold, dark floor just inside the damaged hull. He increased the binding to the floor to give just enough grip if he walked slowly. The light from his cocoon shone enough for him to see easily.

The pilot room didn't take long to reach. He spotted the location of the recorder, embedded beneath the console in a protective box.

With cupped hands, he directed the energy around the fascia of the recorder. He arranged the energy into a large rectangle then began to cut. The twisted metal on the console glowed briefly before it evaporated.

He counted to two, making sure the depth would be sufficient. He let the smoke clear.

The cocoon around his body began to fade.

Just a bit more.

He raised his hands, drawing the contents he'd cut away upwards. The black box appeared amongst wires and broken bits of metal. He grabbed the recorder, loose wires and all. As he did so, a flash just inside his peripheral vision made him turn. A man spun in his seat and fled through the opposite corridor.

Sekai was about to give chase when it dawned on him the apparition couldn't be real. It must be an echo from the lines of passage. Which meant he could trace what happened, if the echo along that line went back sufficiently in time.

A rush of what he remembered as anticipation raced through him. Running his hand along the wall, he followed the man to what looked like an airlock near the back of the ship. Several lifepods were there—all of them, in fact.

The scene began to fade.

He forced more energy from his cocoon onto the wall and the image returned. There were people in some of the lifepods.

He could not believe it. All of them had made it to the exit in time.

Sekai counted eleven in all, but which one of these, people, whose faces were barely visible in the heavily coated shielding, was Karin? He had no idea what Karin looked like. He'd not had a good look at Ikara beyond her light shoulder length brown hair, or those sea green eyes as they widened at his touch.

When he'd touched her cheek, he'd not expected her to react at all. That she did had surprised him. Being the daughter of an immortal would explain a greater sensitivity to the lines of passage, but not all. There was more to her, and he wanted to find out what made her so gifted. Would she agree to be his lover for the succession? Just imagining kissing her sent his heart racing. The connection between them would be more potent during -

A change in pressure made him look down. He could feel and hear the air leaking from his body. The cocoon surrounding him was beginning to break up.

Sekai cursed.

When he looked back at the airlock, it was too late. All the lifepods had shot up through the open door into space. Slowly, mist covered the scene.

The echo had petered out.

Sekai retracted his hand, which had begun to swell. He walked as fast as possible back to his ship. Only when the door had slid shut behind him did he collapse.

"Your estimation of how much energy you need wasn't too accurate," the ship said.

Sekai regained his footing, ignoring the swelling on both hands. "I'll live."

A wide beam of light scanned his body. When done, the ship said, "Some swelling, nothing that won't heal itself. Mind you, I've never seen you so motivated."

Sekai returned to the navigation room. "Nothing as intriguing as this has occurred before."

"I have to agree, this is most unusual."

"Sekai, are you there?" It was not the ship's voice this time.

The lines converged to form a circle the size of a man's head. Sekai looked up at Prenth's worried face. "What news?"

"The occupants of the first two lifepods are dead," Prenth said matter of factly

Sekai had never seen such anguish on his friend's face. "Until we have found them all, don't speculate."

"I could do with some help."

"You may have to do the rest on your own. I need to return the ship to Arien." He explained what he'd seen on the passenger ship.

Prenth's face lit up with hope. "So they were all alive when they left." He briefly looked away from Sekai. "I'm afraid that may no longer be the case."

He'd never seen such conflicting emotions of Prenth's face. "Why?"

"Patch into my visual and you'll see."

Sekai did not like what he saw at all. A crack appeared on the outer wall of the lifepods Prenth had just found. If there were air inside, it would have escaped long ago.

"What caused it?"

"My ship suspects the damage was caused just after these lifepods left the passenger ship."

How convenient. "Just at the time the echo petered out. I'll need to get this ship back to Arien and use the energy from there to amplify what's left."

"I'm approaching the third lifepod now. Take care."

Take care. When had anyone used such words? Prenth had immersed himself in this time and place for five long years. Sekai could only wonder at how it had changed him.

"I will," Sekai said.

"Sekai."

"Yes, ship."

"A ship from Halifad has just left orbit. I estimate its arrival within two hours."

No surprises there. Halifad would have sent a ship eventually, once it found a crew to pilot it. "Arrange minimal energy to encase the passenger ship in a cocoon so I can tow it back to Arien."

“Are you aware we used a lot of the energy to build your bridge to the other ship? I don't have that much in reserve to tow a ship to Arien, and it will take hours to draw the lines of passage from space,” the ship said.

At times, he wished the ship was not a sentient mind and just did as instructed. He sighed. The ship could only do so much. “Do what you can. If I have to, I'll think of some way to divert the ship from Halifad.”

A faint vibration grew around the ship.

While the ship worked, Sekai examined the recorder, a box about the size of his palm. It would have to wait until they returned to Arien. The ship could only handle so many tasks.

“Sekai.”

He placed the recorder on a recess beside the column of energy.

“What?”

“The results I have on what attacked the passenger ship are inconclusive.”

That was odd. The ship never had any difficulty in detecting what weapons were used. “Why so?”

“It's not that I don't have a theory. It doesn't make sense.”

“Can you *speculate* on what you suspect the cause was?”

Pause.

“Ship. Your best guess.”

“The damage was caused by one of our ships.”

Very little shocked Sekai. This did. He looked up at the black roof of the ship as if to find someone there and accuse him of lying. Unfortunately, the ship never lied. “What do you mean one of *our* ships?”

“I'd rather I diagnosed the recorder first before proceeding further.”

Sekai rubbed his brow. Which of the Mandrakes would attack a passenger ship? They were here to protect, not destroy.

That had not always been so.

“I'll wait, ship.” Sekai said. “Focus on the cocoon for now.”

Sekai watched the ship from Halifad approach. An hour had passed, and it seemed the ship might just make it, even if the trip to Arien was slower than he liked. As long as they were faster than the Halifad ship, he didn't care.

Sekai decided to check Prenth's progress.

Prenth looked at him in despair. “I've swept a radius equivalent the distance to Halifad. There are no more lifepods,” he said.

“You’re making no sense. Go back to the beginning.”

“I’ve found every lifepod, all damaged in the same way, except one.”

“What about an energy trace?”

“Nothing,” Prenth said, exasperated. “The missing lifepod is Karin’s.”

Never had he seen his friend so distressed. “What about a wider search.”

“Why? The lifepods I found were nowhere near the distance I scanned. It’s gone, Sekai. Gone.”

It made no sense at all. “You’d better return. I’ll need help from your ship to get to Arien.”

A sliver of hope returned to Prenth’s eyes. “The lines of passage. Maybe there is an echo we can follow. What if we use Ikara to aid us?”

Connecting to the mind of a living relative would help, so why not Ikara? Besides, it would be the perfect way to find out more about her.

Chapter Four

Ikara checked the screen in her room for the tenth time, but she had still received no message from Liea. Her mother was right. Waiting achieved nothing. She decided go to the hut after all and slipped on traveling clothes—it would be cold up there. Free of the confines of her home, she directed the shuttle in the opposite direction to that of the lake.

The cliff face came up sharply. Being almost midday, no shadows hid the jagged bare rocks. Gliding up aside it was always a delight. She and Karin had flown this way when they went to the hut to meditate after a failed healing. They'd spoken mainly about their patients, an old woman who'd wanted to live, a man whose body was so shattered that none of the healers could heal him. Those tragedies, and so many others, had caused her and Karin to come to the hut. It was a place to find respite.

After the incident in the lifepods, Karin had drawn into herself and had never returned to the hut.

A lump formed in her throat. *And now she'd disappeared.*

The sudden brightness of light startled her. The cliff face had ended abruptly, and she hadn't even noticed. She descended onto a flat area near the small stone walled hut. Grey clouds drifted upwards, momentarily blotting out the midday sun. The gusty wind buffeted her as she ran to the hut. Shivering, she closed the door behind her. Silence fell.

The main room contained little furniture: a fur lined sofa, a table and empty shelves. Ikara opened the curtain into the adjoining bedroom containing two beds. Few healers used the beds, preferring to rest on the sofa and watch the flames. After retrieving a few logs from the cellar below, she placed the wood in the fireplace, grabbed the small laser from the shelf above, and fired. Ikara lay on the sofa, dragged the fur covering over her body, and stared into the flames.

Patterns formed, first in the fire and then in her head. The swirling images danced around her, closing in. She yielded to their embrace.

Echoes of the past came as whispers, the present with longing and possibilities, and the future silent in its mystery.

The lines of passage.

How was it possible? Only the Mandrakes could read them, not a healer.

Was this Asiel's doing?

Warmth flowed through her body. The light became stronger. Patterns formed and reformed. Ikara saw Karin drift into view amidst old trees, heard a whisper from a man she didn't know, but Karin did, for she smiled as she turned to the source. The lines twisted and Karin faded away.

The trees shifted to blood red desert sand with such dry ancient air it hurt to breathe. It was as if she'd inhaled, across time itself, power that tried to reach into her, make her *see*.

But what?

Light turned to darkness, illuminated by twin moons. Then: a silhouette of a man in the distance. With each purposeful step, he left an arc of blue fire.

Who are you?

He didn't change his pace or even acknowledge her existence.

The blue haze returned, lulling her into a state between sleep and awareness. Time drifted by, and she was barely conscious of it becoming dark. The single moon appeared tepid, a pale comparison to the twin moons of old.

She tried to awaken, bring some order to the two images that stuck in her mind, but a hand pressed against her chest insisting it was not yet her time. More warmth poured into her, allying her fears.

Ikara.

"Karin," she murmured.

Ikara. Yes oh... she said, distant, soft.

"Where are you?"

Where I want to be.

Ikara groaned as the energy tightened around her.

You will understand in time. Believe me. I am safe, Karin said.

She imagined the words in her mind. *What happened to you out there?*

In the passenger ship? I have gone back in time, using the lines of passage.

Ikara felt Karin leave her. *Don't go.*

I must. Tell Prentis I will save him, and soon. Goodbye.

A wave of sadness slammed into her, then as quickly, it was gone. Blue fire returned, embracing her. She didn't want to leave.

Ikara sensed another nearby.

This is not the place to find reason.

The voice was unfamiliar to her. *Who are you?*

Sekai. Now let me bring you back.

Soft lips touched hers, causing a gentle vibration to ripple over her skin, drawing her back from a place she didn't want to leave. Torn from the embrace she protested with a muffled groan.

She felt Sekai's lips part from hers and opened her eyes. He was close, too close. Sweat glistened over his forehead. His masculine scent enveloped her. She tried to back away from his intense gaze and

failed miserably. His coal eyes took her own, held hers for what seemed an eternity.

A fog slowly lifted.

The faintest of smiles formed on his lips. “You’ve come back to us.”

He helped her sit. His hand lingered on her shoulder then drew upwards towards her cheek.

“No,” she whispered, remembering how Prenth took the images from her mind.

“It will be but a moment,” he said gently.

Prenth placed his hand on Sekai’s forehead.

Sekai caressed her cheek. Memories came to the surface, and she wanted him to see it all: Mira, her sister and Prenth, the memories of other, more wonderful times when, as sisters, they had healed at the lake. Karin’s subsequent departure to Halifad, and her love for Prenth. And, finally, what she’d just experienced in the hut.

Sekai removed his hand. Ikara sensed barely suppressed rage beneath his calm demeanor.

“I’ll leave the two of you alone to talk about Karin.”

A gust of cold air came and went as Sekai closed the door behind him.

“Karin did an extraordinary thing,” Prenth said. “And you were forced to go deep to reach her.”

She was still trying to believe it herself. “No one can traverse the lines of passage into another time. Can they?”

He smiled more broadly. “With Asiel’s aid, yes.”

She hadn’t believed it possible. “Why would Asiel aid her?”

His smile fled. “I’ve lied to you and Sekai.”

No wonder he’d left the room so abruptly.

“Karin told me if she could reach into a past life of mine, she could save me.”

“From what?”

“Immortality.”

Reality slipped to one side, casting her into a dreamlike state. Ikara recalled the images of Karin between the trees. Was it possible Karin was already there, and this was an echo along a line of passage?

“I saw Karin in a copse of trees. A man called to her and she turned to see him. She knew who he was, although I never saw him.”

His eyes widened. “Oh, yes. I captured that image from you. Do you want to see what Karin saw next?”

Her sister was in the past but ... Prenth was still here. She put that thought aside for now. “More than anything.”

He cupped her chin. "I'll share this with you."

The images returned in slow motion. Karin entered a nearby clearing. A man stood up, his short blond hair falling about his shoulders. He wore a brown shirt and pants, definitely not the robe of a Mandrake. He spread his arms wide as Karin came to him.

Ikara heard the sound of water nearby.

"Old Arien," Prenth whispered, releasing his hold on Ikara. "I've... just remembered it. It's before I became a Mandrake."

Ikara would not have believed him, had she not experienced it too. "How long ago was that?"

"I am two thousand years old, far less than Sekai's five. I hope Karin talks my former self out of ever taking up this accursed life."

She hadn't known the Mandrakes were different ages. "I thought Asiel created you all at the same time."

"One Mandrake can die if another takes his place. Tier returned to the lake where Asiel took his life essence as well as that of a healer. Some, like Sekai, could not bear to have another healer die, so they endured."

His look took on that of a fevered man. "Have you ever loved someone enough that you'd do anything to save her?"

She would for her god Asiel. If she'd felt such love for a man, would she? Even though she could imagine why a healer would give her life for a man, such sacrifice was wrong. "You didn't love the healer who died for you enough to stop her."

"I know that. This way I can save her life."

He stood. "Asiel gave you a great gift, Ikara, and its conditional, I'm afraid. Karin made a pact with Asiel which included you."

Karin's words echoed in her head. *Asiel uses us all, and sometimes we give what he wants willingly.*

She willed herself to remain calm. If Karin had made a pact, what was her role in this? Was it to do with Anum? A cold chill raced up her spine as she considered scenarios. "Is Karin's plea to Asiel connected with Anum's treachery?"

"Of course not," he said vehemently. "Whatever Anum is plotting is a separate issue. One I don't have the answers to."

It made no sense to her. "How am I included?"

Prenth sat beside her again. "I'm sorry, I don't know. Karin never told me what Asiel planned for you."

“You mean she *knew*.”

“Asiel always explains what he wants in return, eventually.”

She straightened as the words sunk in. When Karin made a decision, nothing got in her way. In a terrible moment of awareness, she realized how love, or desperation, could make one do anything.

Prenth was no longer the distant immortal, but a desperate man in love. Had he used Karin’s love to evade his immortality? No. She had seen the way he looked at Karin in her room the other night. He loved Karin; of that she was sure.

What she didn’t comprehend was how. How powerful was Asiel, truly. Could he alter time? If so, wasn’t it dangerous?

Right now she needed to be alone. “Go away, Prenth.”

“Please come with me to the ship,” Prenth said.

She didn’t want to do anything except return to the trance and—what? Oblivion? It looked so appealing right now.

“It’s been a difficult time for you. Please. Think of Karin.”

He was right. “What can I do?”

“We hope you can enhance what remains of the echo,” Prenth said.

“What do you mean, echo?”

“When a person leaves a place such as the ship they leave a trace, or an echo. If we have a living relative with us, we can connect to the right lines of passage and find out where Karin went.”

She didn’t like what he was alluding to. “Does that mean you have to touch my mind?”

“I’m sorry. There’s no other way.”

She bit her lip. This was for Karin. “I’ll do it, for her.”

Ikara climbed off the sofa, donned her cloak and followed Prenth outside to where Sekai waited with the damaged ship.

The rip in the hull looked worse close up. Two men could enter unhindered. She was amazed the passengers had any time to escape at all. The air would have disappeared from the ship in seconds.

Her gaze fixed on Sekai. Wrapped in a cloak, he stood motionless as the wind buffeted around him. He stared at her with coal eyes that appeared bottomless. Sekai was a presence she would never be able to ignore. He was... there, to her a presence almost as powerful as Asiel.

No wonder some believe them to be gods. *Fallen gods*.

Sekai moved, and the pull between them shattered. The awe she felt faded. Had he been influencing her again? She shook her head. It hadn’t felt the same at all.

Her heart lurched as she considered the possibility of her feelings changing towards him. *It’s the*

healer in me that tries to find empathy with him, nothing more.

Sekai released a tracker beam, a small, floating, portable source of light. Light flooded the interior. Ikara was about to enter, when Sekai extended his hand to her. She shook her head, avoiding his gaze.

He shrugged, then disappeared down the dark corridor.

Prenth whispered to her, "Some of his customs are old; best if you can accommodate them."

"When he stops staring at me like that, I will." *Of all the stupid things to say.*

Prenth chuckled. "He tends to do that with everyone."

His laughter took her by surprise. Of course he would be exuberant. He was so close to becoming free of his immortality, he could hardly care about her problems.

Ikara took a deep breath, straightened her shoulders, and followed Prenth down the damaged corridor, dark save for the flicker of the tracker moving ahead of them. She halted, reluctant to go further. Instead, she doubled back and went the other way.

It gave her some breathing space from them.

She paused near the airlock. Resting her hand on the cold wall to peer through the window, she felt a slight vibration. For an instant, she saw Karin inside. Ikara jumped back, but her action caused Karin to fade away. She touched the wall again and Karin reappeared.

So this is an echo.

Running her fingertips along the wall, she watched as Karin and others climbed into their lifepods. Her gaze returned to her sister. Karin brushed her blond hair from her face, and that was when Ikara saw the gold chain around her sister's neck again. Karin looked up briefly as if she saw Ikara there, her green eyes full of hope.

Others, less solid in appearance than Karin, sealed the lifepods. A brief smile formed on Karin's lips as she lowered her seal. Above, a sliding door opened. The ship lurched but Ikara heard no sound. She nearly stumbled, so real was the suddenness of it. Aware it came from the echo, she quickly replaced her hand on the wall.

The lifepods had all drifted through the open roof above, except one, which hovered just in view. Ikara glimpsed the occupant; it wasn't Karin. Whoever it was whimpered as blue fire seared the side. Someone died, regardless.

The same energy she used in healing had killed the person in that lifepod. She snatched her hand from the wall as if were tainted.

She was not alone.

* * *

Sekai removed his hand from the airlock door.

Prenth went deathly pale. “What have we done?”

“One of *your kind* attacked this ship,” she said in a cold harsh whisper.

Sekai had been called many things, but the division of his kind was always the worst insult. It reminded him of his immortality.

“We aren’t all alike,” Sekai said, more harshly than intended.

“What I’ve seen so far doesn’t bode well.”

“Why are you so hostile towards me? I had done everything possible to aid you.”

The hardness around her eyes began to fade. She nodded. “You have, and I apologize.”

He tried to see things from her perspective. First Anum then ... this. She had every right to be upset.

More softly he said, “You saw it too, didn’t you?”

She placed her hand over her heaving chest. Tears began to stream down her face.

He wanted to brush them aside, but refrained. He didn’t want to force her to do more either, but had to. “Put your hand back.”

“What for—to see more die?” she protested.

He grabbed her hand, aware of how cold it was, and pressed it against the wall. “Hold her there, Prenth.”

Prenth shook his head. “I don’t want to see more.”

“Do it,” Sekai commanded. “Before the echo weakens.”

Prenth’s hand cupped Ikara’s.

Sekai caught the line of passage he’d witnessed before and passed through the airlock door.

Directly above, a constellation became distorted. Sekai wished he had some means of magnifying what he saw. From here it was impossible to see any lifepod, unless he traversed the line upwards.

Was it worth the risk? He chuckled inwardly. When had he been concerned about personal safety? He couldn’t die, unless a healer gave her life essence to him.

The stars shifted in color as he shot upward towards the tear in space. It grew larger and larger until it formed the shape of a five-sided star. It was odd being here, no sense of cold, or even emptiness. The line restricted the experience one would have if they were here in reality.

Probably for the best. Such vastness could send one mad.

He reached the edge of the tear.

The edge became fuzzy.

Damn. The line of passage was beginning to weaken.

A gentle tug threatened to drag him back. He resisted the increasing pull, knowing that the lifepod

had to be close and being unwilling to lose track of it. *There it was.*

From the images he'd extracted from Ikara, he knew the person inside it to be Karin. How different they looked. Ikara's hair was darker, and her face, softer. Her lips were-

He returned his focus on the task at hand. His gaze strayed to the gem around Karin's neck. It was unmistakable. How did she possess the star of Asiel? Sekai had not seen it for two thousand years.

Karin looked up at him, a gesture that chilled him to the core. She couldn't possibly see him.

He watched the lifepod pass through the tear in space, but not before he saw what lay beyond. Arien, and two moons, before one had been destroyed, along with parts of Arien as tides became less intense with a single moon. Nearby was a Mandrake ship, which Sekai knew with certainty was Asiel's.

A plume of energy from Asiel's ship burst across space encircling the lifepod. Within one blink and the next, the lifepod was gone, as was the energy. The ship became smaller and smaller as it raced towards Arien.

The past. It had to be. He'd never imagined Asiel being capable of such power.

He fell, suddenly and rapidly.

Ikara and Prenth reappeared, but from an odd angle above him.

Prenth knelt beside him. "Are you all right?"

He winced. He'd struck the wall of the ship.

Ikara looked at both men in disgust. "Others died so she could perform this elaborate escape."

"It seems that way," Prenth said.

Sekai scrambled to his feet. "Sacrifice is necessary, Ikara. Karin would have known what Asiel was capable of."

She recalled the words Prenth had spoken when they had returned with Mira.

Asiel is not the benefactor you think. What you see in me, and I know you find it distasteful, also exists in Asiel.

And Karin had agreed with him.

Ikara shook her head in disbelief. "Karin would not have condoned the loss of life."

"Whether she knew or not, it is done," Sekai said, not meaning to sound so callous.

Ikara stormed from the ship.

Back outside Sekai saw the door of the hut slam shut.

Prenth and Sekai exchanged glances.

Sekai didn't want to leave her like this. I'm going in."

"I'll come with you," Prenth said. "We need to aid her, and this is best done if we explain--"

“I don’t she think she could stand any more explanations.” Really, he wanted to see more of her, and he dreaded how she would receive him. Poorly, most likely. Sekai slowly opened the door.

Ikara stood beside the fire. If she appeared distressed, she hid it well. Too well.

Prenth closed the door behind them.

Sekai took a seat on the large sofa in front of the fire, the scent of fur and the warmth of the room bringing back memories of the kiss he had given Ikara to bring her back.

“I have not seen a fire for so long. What do you use to feed it?” Sekai asked, trying to brush the memories, recent and old, aside.

“Wood.” She removed her cloak and placed it on a nearby chair. “We could use solar heaters, but nothing compares to a real fire. Don’t you feel the cold?”

Her words sounded so matter-of-fact. She was pretending everything was normal again. Best to just answer her.

“I do but it doesn’t harm me like it does you.”

Prenth leaned against the fireplace. “I’m sorry I’ve done this to you.”

Ikara rubbed her hands near the fire. “No, you’re not. You can barely keep the smile from your face.”

Her calmness was close to breaking. It was incredible she held up well as she did. Probably aided by her father’s stubbornness. He chuckled. Anum had produced something useful for once.

She frowned. “How can you laugh at a time like this. You have no humanity, do you?”

That drew him up short. She was right. He didn’t.

“Ikara,” Prenth said. “I remember Karin in the past. But since I can’t see beyond that, it means my future is by no means certain.”

“And if Karin does succeed, what becomes of you? If you never become immortal, who will exist in your stead?”

Considering her state, the intensity of her questioning confounded Sekai.

“Tell me, Prenth,” she demanded.

“You already know. It’s Tier.” Prenth’s eyes blazed in sudden anger. “What is done has been done and you cannot change it. I only hope that Karin succeeds and I’m sorry it that upsets you. I care about her and *only* her.”

Ikara clenched her fists. “You used her to avoid becoming immortal.”

“I love her, damn you!”

Sekai had never seen his friend so distressed. “Ikara. Stop it.”

“I need to go outside,” Prenth said. “I can’t bear much more of this.”

Sekai watched him go, torn with following him or staying.

Ikara shook her head. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to vent my anger like that."

A surge of energy around him made her look at Sekai with fright.

He raced to the door, flung it open, and ran into the fading light.

Where was Prenth?

Outside, he saw footprints going away from the hut. He followed Prenth's imprints in the snow.

Suddenly, they disappeared.

Sekai stared at the footprints as if willing them to continue.

"Prenth's gone," he whispered.

Had Prenth truly left this time? Did that mean Karin had succeeded? Sekai spun around to Ikara.

She was still there, her face an expression of utter disbelief. The hut looked the same. Looking upwards, he saw a single moon. That hadn't changed either.

Had anything changed? And if it had, would he be aware of the difference? He didn't seem to, so far. In fact, he still remembered Prenth.

"Is Prenth still a Mandrake?" she asked.

Sekai collected his thoughts. "I recall a faint line of passage of Prenth as a Mandrake, and another, clearer line where Prenth changed his mind and decided not to become a Mandrake after all. Tier, his predecessor, is alive."

"Has this happened before, I mean, seeing more than one alternative?"

He frowned. "Not that I can recall. Wait. The one of Prenth is fading; I can barely recall him except as a mortal. It seems Karin succeeded after all."

She looked distressed. "Will I still remember her?"

"Karin will always remain in your memory, for she left from this time."

Ikara looked exhausted. He sensed her mind was on a knife-edge. It was important she didn't leave in such a state.

* **

Ikara decided it was wiser to go while she still could. "I'm leaving."

"Please. Don't," he said, gazing at her with such intensity she couldn't leave even if she wanted to. Was he manipulating her again? No. It was a plea for help, one a healer could not refuse.

"I need to talk this through with someone. Will you please oblige me?"

She paused at the base of the ladder to her shuttle. If she left now, what purpose would it serve? He was her only link to Karin.

Her knees threatened to give way. She was in no state to leave in any case. "All right."

Back inside the hut, she watched as he sat on the sofa. He stared intently into the fire.

“Tier. It’s coming back now.” He blinked as if trying to remove something from his eyes. “It’s getting easier now.”

The concern she felt in returning to the hut faded as she tried to recall Karin’s disappearance into the past.

Her head began to spin. “I feel odd; I’m not sure what to believe. Can you help me?”

“I’ll link to you mind,” he said. “It will be easier.”

She sat beside him, wary. Sekai cupped her cheeks. The now familiar energy flowed over her. Images flashed in her mind as he spoke. “Asiel saved you from Anum. Karin went to Halifad with Mira. The passenger ship was damaged, and Karin went to the past to meet a man called Prenth.”

He released her, puzzled. “How would Karin know him?”

She was still reeling from the shifts in her memory. “I... don’t know.”

He grabbed her cloak and slipped it over her shoulders. His hands lingered.

Time seemed to fade, as did the hut. His gaze burned across the space between them. He reached over and soft lips lowered onto hers. A wave of lethargy rolled over her body. She could no more run from him as she could stop breathing, and didn’t want to.

His scent enveloped her as his tongue slid across her lips.

Somewhere deep in her mind, reason returned. It came to the surface, dragging her back with it.

He’s influencing you. This time she was sure of it.

With a supreme effort of will, she gripped his shoulders and pushed him away. “Sekai. I will not be your lover.”

Her heart thumped loudly as she slid along the sofa to gain some distance between them.

He looked annoyed by her rejection, but covered it quickly. “If I promise to not to touch you, can we continue this discussion?”

He seemed torn. Her healer’s compassion prompted her to stay. “Yes.”

Her thoughts returned to Karin, who would now only be a memory to her. That she was alive in the past was small consolation. She would never see her sister again.

A lump formed in her throat.

“Prenth. I’m having trouble recalling him. I mean as a Mandrake. Are you?”

Anger flashed in her eyes as she looked up at him. “I can’t care about Prenth. He took Karin from me.”

He scrambled to his feet. “It too hot in here.” He walked to the door and opened it. Outside, the single, pale moon shone.

Ikara reached his side, ignoring the cold seeping into her clothes. Sekai had not engineered this.

“Tier is alive, Prenth is mortal,” he said, “I think.” He crossed his arms. “Once there were two moons. One was destroyed as the moon folded into itself.”

Steadying herself, she focused on the stories of the loss of the larger moon. Her memories of that event remained unchanged. Focusing on a version she had read, the giddiness began to recede.

“I heard Asiel ate it in a fury after some of the Mandrakes offended him. I never quite understood why or even if that version is true. Is it?”

The tension eased across his shoulders. “Not quite.”

“Do you want to tell me?”

“No.”

Before she knew what she was doing, she rested her hands on his shoulders and breathed in. He smelt of rain cleansed by the lake. As a healer, it was a gesture she used on some of her patients to determine if in any mental anguish caused their illness.

Her knees weakened as she felt his sadness and other things she could barely comprehend. She breathed out slowly onto his neck, before releasing him.

“Perhaps over time, the conflict you have will fade away, leaving only one history,” she said.

He twisted around to face her, and she took a step backwards. His face, partly lit in the moonlight, made her lose her breath. She wanted to take the sadness from him and there was only one way she could do that. One she would not take.

He walked towards the shuttle.

“Where are you going?” she asked, suddenly not wanting him to leave.

“The City of Legends. I believe the Emperor will be there in a couple of days.”

A memory returned with sudden clarity. The pilot who had brought Mira had been interrogated by one of Pherus’s captains. The pilot had signaled her a warning that Pherus would seek her out for confirmation and that she should take great care.

She sagged against the doorway.

Several strides later he was back at her side. The tenderness in Sekai’s eyes surprised her. “Ikara? What’s wrong?”

“Pherus wants to question me about Mira.”

“Of course he would. I’d not be concerned. Besides, Pherus is not the danger to you, Anum is.”

Oddly enough, she was less afraid of her father than of Pherus. “I’m going to face Anum at the City of Legends. I have to know why he did this to me.”

Sekai shook his head slowly. “I will be seeing him tomorrow. Please, wait until I do. I’ll be able to

find out what he is plotting, then I'll warn you."

She began to shiver uncontrollably. "I'd best go or I'll die of cold out here."

He moved past her, went back into the hut and soon returned with her cloak. He put it around her shoulders. "Go to the City as soon as possible. I'll meet you there sometime tomorrow."

Chapter Five

Back in his ship, the memories still burned in Sekai's mind, as did that kiss. Unlike other healers who'd fallen into his arms with abandonment, Ikara had fought. It presented a challenge in more ways than one. If a woman resisted, and there were very few who did, he sought out another. With Ikara, he could not let her go.

Then there was Anum. Why had he tried such an elaborate charade with the virus and Ikara, and why had Asiel saved her? That Asiel had plans for her was obvious. But what?

Sekai had to protect her from Anum, even if she refused him, a prospect he didn't plan to consider. He strode through the corridor; aware for the first time that he lived in a tomb.

"A normal reaction," the ship said.

"What?"

"This ship is a tomb. Do I guess right?"

Fragments came and fled. "Another memory you found?"

Pause. "No. You go through this each time you awaken."

Sekai placed his hands into the column of energy. He had to know what transpired, and what had not.

"The recorder?" the ship asked.

"I know Asiel damaged the ship. Unless there is anything else of use, discard it."

"Your conclusion is correct about the attack. I also found a coded section that is very interesting. It's not from Halifad either. Very odd indeed."

That piqued Sekai's interest. "What is it?"

"I was about to work on it but wanted to see if you were interested in bothering."

He suppressed a chuckle. "Of course I am. Get on with it."

Sekai sat in front of the column of energy. It was time to contact Anum.

The lines converged to form a circle the size of a man's head.

Anum's face appeared within the circle. Older than Sekai by twenty years, fine lines had appeared around his green eyes. Soft torchlight danced over his face. Behind, Sekai saw moonlight reflected on an ocean.

"Sekai."

"Anum," Sekai said. "Where are you?"

"I've just returned to the City of Legends." Anum gave him a worried look. "Things are not right,

are they? I mean, I feel variations that don't belong within the lines of passage."

"Karin disappeared into the past to be with Prenth. I find it odd she did, don't you?"

Anum's old arrogance began to resurface. "Prenth? He rejected us. And Karin went to be with him? Hmm. Did she just?"

"I suspect Prenth was once immortal and somehow, Karin managed to change his mind in the past. I'll explain further when we meet."

"Tomorrow then."

* * *

Dawn broke across the sea as The City of Legends appeared in the distance. Single story houses descended layer by layer down the cliffs, maintained by the few hundred people who lived there permanently. Soon, the City would be crawling with people from the fifteen planets, all come to flock around the white palace in the center of the City, where the Emperor would stay and entertain.

Once Sekai and the other Mandrakes arrived at the city, women would want to sleep with them, while men tried, and failed, to conceal their envy. Some openly cursed their immortality. Many coveted it in silence. Over the centuries, Anum had relished in the attention while Sekai found it more of the same.

Sekai entered the shuttleport of the City of Legends, a large amphitheater that housed thousands of shuttles parked in rows. People moved along long escalators to reach them. As he slid into an empty space, a passing shuttle slowed down to have a good look, and then sped up again.

Yes. This would be a rare sight.

He lowered his shuttle into the vacant bay. Opening the hatch, he watched a cart full of luggage rumble past him, followed by two women dressed in long golden robes, their hair tied with ribbons. They gave the birdlike craft, and him, an appraising look before they hurried on.

He climbed onto the landing. The hatch closed behind him with a barely audible hiss. He stepped onto the moving escalator, aware of the stares, from men and women alike. He knew it wasn't his robe; others wore similar clothing. His long plait wouldn't be the reason either. It was his presence that attracted women to him.

It had been a wonder, once, to have any woman he wanted. Ikara stirred a deeper emotion to the surface, one he'd not felt for a very long time.

Guilt.

It had begun when he followed Asiel to a small village, deep in the desert. He had met a woman, Inu, who was learning the healing crafts. She had watched Asiel as he walked away in the red sand

where an arc of blue fire flared from his hands. The image was exactly the same as the one he'd extracted from Ikara's mind. In so many ways, they were connected. How, he had to find out.

He had become so totally distracted that he nearly tripped at the end of the escalator.

Anum, waiting for him at the bottom, grinned. "Not like you to be so preoccupied. Found a healer already?"

Sekai wasn't going to confide in him. "Perhaps."

Beyond the exit, they walked down a wide corridor whose walls depicted carvings of the ancients. One carving showed a healer pouring water onto the forehead of a man, who floated in the lake.

Anum wasted no time in getting to the point. "Karin intrigues me. If what you said is true, that Prenth was immortal and Karin somehow saved him, then this is incredible. Now the question is, what frightened Asiel so much that he bothered to deal with Karin."

From what Sekai had extracted from Ikara's mind regarding the virus, Anum had forced Asiel's hand, which meant Anum was hiding things from him again. It didn't surprise him; this was how Anum like to play. He bided his time. If Anum didn't admit his part in the virus, Sekai would force it from him.

Anum motioned him to continue down the long corridor. "I stayed behind. This time, I wanted to see both my children grow up, from a safe distance of course. I didn't want either of them to know me; that would require attachment. It's an extraordinary experience. You should try it."

Sekai had doubted Anum being capable of any paternal instincts and this confirmed it. Still, it intrigued him why he had stayed so long. "When did you last see Ikara's mother. Nua, wasn't it?"

He nodded. "I saw Nua today."

"What did she tell you about Karin?"

"That her daughter disappeared. I didn't dare mention all of our discussion to Nua. I don't think she could handle the consequences."

"Well considered," Sekai said, amazed Anum even cared.

They passed another carving, of Asiel when he healed in the villages. He was always depicted younger, about Sekai's age. Asiel stood in the middle of a village. His robe rippled in the late afternoon breeze; his face tilted to the sky. His slender hands touched the shoulders of a dying child. He wore the five-sided star, the source of his power. The same one Karin wore.

"Asiel," Sekai whispered. *What have you given Karin?*

Anum stood beside him. "Arien's great talisman. It's amazing that he created an item that could be used to destroy him."

"He loves the challenge," Sekai said. "Being all powerful wouldn't be so interesting otherwise."

A group of tourists stopped nearby, whispering in hushed tones, clearly trying to overhear.

Anum cleared his throat before moving on. Sekai followed.

After they were out of earshot, Anum said, "I do have some good news. I have a new student."

Sekai knew Anum had been the adviser to the Emperor until he died, which meant he had ample opportunity to find another acolyte. "Whose life have you meddled with this time?"

The sarcasm wasn't lost on Anum. "I have spent considerable time on Hedron."

Where else?

"There is no law that says I cannot teach those who are interested in our history."

Most likely a son of a noble. "You found someone of interest then."

"You underestimate our past. We are unique. Many believe we are truly messengers of Asiel. What man would refuse to have a messenger of a god speak to him about the mysteries of the past?"

Once those soothing tones may have tempted Sekai, but not now. "I remember the last time you 'taught' a student."

Anum waved his hand as if it were unimportant. "I'll not make that mistake again. Pherus values my teachings. Does that satisfy you?"

The new Emperor. Sekai had every right to be suspicious of Anum's motives. "What do you plan to do with him?"

"Not here. Wait until we reach my rooms."

They stepped out of the amphitheater into a huge garden covered with blooms of purples and reds, fed by underground springs that supplied water to the city. Beyond, Sekai recalled a large courtyard that led to the main reception rooms. Anum went in the other direction, towards the sea. Sekai knew this way too, the private residences of the Mandrakes. Anum wouldn't have been disturbed during his time here; few ventured into this part of the City.

They skirted around workers, who drove minicars laden with food and wine in readiness for the first night. The workers stopped and stared as they passed.

They walked between two pillars into a small courtyard. Beyond lay their residences small terraces nestled side by side, separated by pathways to the waterfront.

Anum led Sekai to the lodge, last in the row, and furthest from prying eyes. The newly cleaned walls still showed little decay, considering the age of the buildings.

Inside Anum's home the floor of the main room was patterned with mosaics of serpents. In the center lay a large, low-set marble table. The walls were painted with rich colors and the frescos were most striking, 'The Judgment,' in particular.

Those who died were judged before entering the chasm. In his right hand Asiel carried scales, in

his left the disc of the sun. None were exempt. Kreth, the Emperor who had just died, like his predecessor, would be judged and delivered through the chasm while the light of the god Asiel shone on Pherus.

Anum stood beside him. “When Pherus participates in the succession, he will be favored with the radiance of the sun, and we, as his emissaries, will accept his succession.”

Fortunately, not his rule. He’d seen it all before. “It’s a pity the destruction of the second moon didn’t enable us to end what Asiel began.”

Anum’s eyes became misty. “I recall that day too. I’d hoped the power of one moon would weaken Asiel’s hold over us, but no. We doomed our existence to the cursed lake instead.”

Asiel knew how to punish those who erred. For the last two thousand years, since the destruction of the second moon, the power of Arien became concentrated at the lake, surprising Sekai and the other Mandrakes, who had expected the opposite to happen.

Weaken the planet and break the curse of immortality. They had failed miserably.

“Tell me of your plans.”

Anum smiled. “Asiel isn’t the only one who uses others to get what he wants. I plan to make Pherus a god.”

More than once he’d been glad that only emperors could replace Asiel. It meant that Anum had only one candidate a century to manipulate. Fortunately, he usually failed in his attempts, except for Khumn. He’d almost succeeded there.

“Like last time, Asiel will know what you what you’re planning.”

“Of course he does. You know the obstacles last time. They weren’t what stopped Khumn, were they?”

Sekai knew what stopped Khumn. He had.

When Khumn had been lured into Anum’s thrall, Sekai had been only left with one option to save him. He had turned to Meri, who was prepared to die to give what Khumn wanted. Sekai had managed to convince her of the danger posed by Anum, and she had believed him.

All he had to do was let Meri convince Khumn that she didn’t want to die for him. Sekai had gambled that where Khumn’s head refused to see reason, his heart would.

And it had worked. Anum had underestimated Khumn’s love for her and the power she had over him. Khumn had wisely fled with Meri to Hedron, the Emperor’s homeworld, and stayed there, never returning to Arien.

Asiel had admitted to Sekai later at the lake that the lines of passage had predicted the most likely outcome to be in Meri’s favor and that no intervention on his part had been necessary

Sekai was convinced the same scenario was being played out again, but had a feeling that Asiel was not so confident of the outcome.

Showing him the star around Karin's neck meant that Asiel was concerned about the outcome, and somehow Ikara was instrumental in stopping it.

But how? Was she going to be a lure or

Could she be a candidate for Anum? Not while he drew breath.

"What healer is going to be foolish enough to offer to die for Pherus?"

Anum smiled wryly. "I haven't found a suitable healer, yet."

And he wouldn't, if Sekai had anything to do with it. "Nor will you. There will be few in the City and those that are will never concede. Besides, such practices are banned on Arien."

"Asiel has allowed them to die before."

That was true. Two Mandrakes had been replaced since Khumn's time, and Asiel had done nothing to stop it.

Anum gave him a smug look.

"You will still have difficulties," Sekai warned.

"The challenge will be too much for him to pass up. Wait and see."

Would Asiel take up the challenge? If he had anything to fear, he might. That he had manifested himself to Ikara in particular worried him a great deal. He was responding to Anum's threat, which meant Anum's challenge was being taken seriously.

Anum rubbed his hands together, a habit that irritated Sekai.

He was on his pedestal, and it would take some time for him to finish. "The star that Asiel wears around his neck. If I possess that at the time of Pherus's initiation, Asiel will become part of the lake as a lost soul, that is, if the initiation is done at the great lake. Pherus would be a god, literally."

"With you as his guide, no doubt," Sekai said sarcastically.

"Asiel will reveal it to me," Anum said. "He loves playing with us. I believe that you are right about Preth, and that Karin's disappearance is Asiel's move in another more elaborate game."

It was time to find what he knew about the virus.

"Which brings me back to Ikara," Sekai said. And he explained what happened to her the night Mira was healed.

Anum swallowed. "I see."

Just as he suspected. "Surely this is what you planned. Attempt to kill her to force Asiel to become aware that you are up to something again. A bit dramatic, isn't it, since Asiel would already have some idea of the outcome from the lines of passage?"

Anum inclined his head. “No one can predict every scenario, not even a god. I plan to make it interesting for him. Besides, I thought the virus was a real work of art, and it certainly grabbed Asiel’s attention.”

He recalled poor Mira from memories he took from Ikara in the lake. She was a pawn as much as Ikara was. At least Mira was safe on Halifad.

Ikara could not imagine what her father was capable of.

The air suddenly became oppressive.

“Go outside, I’ll be there in a moment,” Anum said.

Sekai found some respite on Anum’s front balcony, overlooking the sea. He watched the rising sun over the ocean. Slowly, the walls of the buildings became brighter.

Anum returned with a glass of water. As Sekai took it, the energy surged around them. The goblet fell from his hand and shattered on the paved floor.

Sekai and Anum exchanged glances.

“Karin must be the cause of this growing strength.”

Sekai, for the first time, began to fear that Ikara’s role in all this might be beyond Anum’s machinations.

He hoped she’d be arriving soon.

Chapter Six

It was nearing midday before Ikara opened the curtains of her room. Sleep had taken some time to come, and she was still exhausted.

Outside the mists began to lift. Suppressing a sob, she pressed her head against the cool glass of the window. *Karin is alive, not dead.*

What woman in love would consider others when a god offered a chance to be together? Would she if there was a man she loved enough?

Ikara had no idea, only that she could not judge Karin or be angry with her.

She lifted her head from the glass. *Sekai.*

He was an enigma to her. He wanted to aid her as much as he wanted to seduce her. She wanted the former but not the latter.

Or did she? His kiss was not like any other she'd experienced, not even with men she had become attached to during a particularly difficult healing, some who had become lovers.

Should she continue to resist Sekai or allow herself to be loved as she had never been before? Undecided, she knew one thing. Staying here wasn't going to answer that.

Grabbing a bag, she tossed it on the bed. It was time to leave for the City of Legends and find out.

Clean robes hung from the rack. She was about to slip one on, when she spotted the dresses on another rack, gifts from patients she had healed. She'd never worn them, as there had been no need to do so.

It couldn't hurt to take some cooler clothes. It was far hotter at the city than here and her robe would be stifling to wear. As for her work as a healer, tradition allowed her to go to the succession for the whole month. Many healers would not go, preferring to remain to aid those in need than be seduced by Mandrakes. At the City, she wouldn't have to act in the capacity of a healer. It would be wiser if she didn't dress like one.

She brushed her fingers over the silk-like material of a sleeveless emerald gown, before tossing it onto the bed.

Ikara rummaged through several other dresses, amazed she had hoarded so many. All gifts from patients whom she had healed over the years. She paused at a sleeveless gold dress that would come partway down her thighs. She pulled the hem down, and the material stretched. One of the modular ones, she thought, designed to suit different body shapes.

Ikara bundled all the clothes into one large bag on the bed. When done, she contacted Liea.

“Liea here.”

Behind her was the backdrop of the ocean. She was already at the City.

“You got some sleep,” Ikara said.

“I had to eventually. Pherus is going to arrive in a day with the body of his father and, this is the part that bothers me, five warships.”

“Is that usual?”

“More likely he is out to impress. After all, each new Emperor likes to show what power he has. Did you know our records showed, with the exception of Khumn, every new Emperor has done the same thing? They will intimidate and impress. They know that, without the healers, the lake may as well not exist. Tedious really.”

Ikara had experience with the games nobility liked to play. The ones that weren’t engineers of deadly viruses used other methods. Gold and precious gems were popular amongst the lesser nobility—a bribe if she refused to heal a member of a rival family. Ikara always refused.

Some of those people would be in the City Of Legends, as would those who played with viruses. All of them would ooze charm and grace if she met them. At least she knew their ‘victims’ were alive, while they believed otherwise.

“I’m coming to the City today.”

Liea nodded. “Good. Now tell me. What word do you have on Karin? Did Sekai find her?”

“He believes Karin has gone back in time. I should be grateful but... I’ll never see her again.”

Liea made no attempt to hide her skepticism. “What do you plan to do? Find her?”

Karin had chosen to go there. What right did she have to interfere? “No.”

Liea frowned. “It seems far fetched to me, but if a Mandrake says it true, then they know far more than I about such things. All I suggest is that you be very careful who you confide in. Others might not be so willing to suspend disbelief.”

Ikara was no fool. “I trust your discretion, Liea. Tell me. What story do I give about Karin?”

“She went missing. We have the passenger ship for security reasons. The recording of the lifepod failed at the critical moment. I assume you still have it.”

“Sekai does.”

“When you are done, get him to destroy it.”

Her only link with Karin. She wasn’t sure if she could. “I will, once he’s finished with it. I must go.”

“See you soon,” Liea said. The screen went blank.

After she placed the bag in the shuttle, Ikara set the co-ordinates to the City of Legends. She’d not

traveled this mountain route before and soon lost count of the number of undulating peaks and troughs.

The mountains gave way to forest that ended sharply. Beyond, a brilliantly blue ocean, a contrast to the shoreline of whitewashed buildings that clamored up the cliff. The coordinates directed her to a large entrance inside the cliff.

A flash on her screen indicated a message from her mother.

“Ikara. Go to the courtyard. I will guide you.”

Ikara veered away from the entrance, over the accommodation area, to a large courtyard, covered in white stones and brown paving. She landed a short distance from a Mandrake shuttle.

She guessed it to be Sekai’s or Anum’s.

Anum.

Goosebumps covered her whole body as she fought the nausea in her stomach. The clammy city heat clung to her robe, but she still shivered.

Ikara slung her bag over her shoulder and climbed down.

“Over here.”

She saw her mother at the end of a tunnel. She was more sensibly dressed in a green sleeveless shift that fell to her knees.

The shade came as a welcome relief. It *was* hot here.

Her mother looked her up and down. “What are you wearing that for?”

“Habit,” she said.

“You can’t stay in that.”

“I know. I’ll change as soon as possible.” She looked uneasily back at the shuttle.

“What’s wrong?”

“Is that Anum’s?”

Her mother nodded. “He told me Asiel appeared to save you from a virus that nearly killed you.”

So her mother didn’t know Anum’s involvement with the virus. Only that Asiel had visited her the other night. Sekai had every right to be concerned about what her mother was told.

“I... see.”

“What’s wrong?”

She didn’t dare risk telling her. “Just what happened with the virus, that’s all.”

“Anum is concerned as well. He’s also keeping me informed about Karin.”

Is he now? “What did he say?”

“That Karin had disappeared, and that he and Sekai were trying to determine where she went.” She wiped a tear from her cheek. “I would have thought they’d have found her by now.”

Keeping Anum's participation regarding the virus from her made sense, not so Karin's trip back in time.

Ikara decided to tell her what she saw in the passenger ship, but from Sekai's point of view. She didn't want her mother to know that she could touch echoes along the lines of passage.

The blood drained from her mother's face. "Are you sure that's possible?"

"Would Sekai lie?"

"Never. One of the few I'd trust." In a pained whisper, she added, "Why didn't Anum tell me?"

"Maybe he didn't know," she lied.

Her mother hugged her. "At least she's alive." She released her. "Come on, it's stifling out here."

Ikara followed her mother down a pathway between a large building and smaller homes.

"To the right is one of the several reception areas. On the left is where the Mandrakes will stay," her mother said.

"How do we get to the main reception area?"

"Tunnels, my dear. We are shielded from visitors here."

Ikara glanced at each lodge. Vines covered the walls near the wooden doors. Between the buildings were small lanes that led down to the sea. She breathed in the rich perfume of unknown flowers and peered inside a lush garden. White flowers draped over the walls. Below, stood a wooden seat for two.

"This is a private place for meditation used by the Mandrakes and the healers," her mother said.

Ikara could see why. The garden had a wonderfully peaceful feeling about it.

Her mother walked to a lodge in the middle of several others. "This is your home for the next month."

The same white flowers covered the walls. "Where are you staying?"

"I'm staying with Anum."

Ikara tried to keep her expression neutral. He'd be here, somewhere, and soon she'd have to face him.

"Liea has asked to share with you."

She looked forward to catching up with her friend in more relaxed circumstances. "By the way, does Emperor Pherus take over the whole palace?"

"No. Save a few private rooms, it's open to all." Her mother pointed upwards, through the trees. "See the big white building with balconies, overlooking the sea?"

A fragment of white, that was all. "Not really."

"You'll see it soon enough. Pherus and his entourage will remain there for the duration of the

festival. His father, Kreth, will be placed in the mourning room until the succession, when he will be taken to the lake. You'll know the palace well, within a few days. Now, go and get changed and I'll meet you at the front."

Ikara entered the main room of the lodge. Vines, carved into stone, twisted along the walls. The mosaic floor, cool under her feet, was also patterned with images of vines. The whole room enclosed her like a cocoon. A subtle vibration flowed from the carved leaves, giving her a feeling of reassurance.

She dropped her bag on the floor near a cushion, one of several that surrounded a large table. A large bath was set off to one side. Minimalist in furnishings, Ikara liked the empty feel of the room. She knelt beside the bath, ran her fingers through the water, and a slight tingle ran up her arm. The water came from the same source as the lake. She hadn't known that.

Ikara returned to a large entrance that faced the shore. Two pale curtains, now drawn aside, provided the only screening. The humid air brushed her face, pressing the material of her robe against her legs. It became warm, too warm. Ikara changed into a sleeveless dress that came to just above her knees. Though self-conscious at how skimpy the dress was compared to her usual coverings, she knew others would be wearing similar attire.

She wandered to the patio outside.

Her mother was waiting in one of the reclining chairs. Ikara sat opposite, glad for the shade the roof provided. Her pale body stood in stark contrast to her mother's, which had spent considerable time here with Anum.

Ikara's gaze turned to the ripple of the sea; its shimmering surface reflected the sky above, hiding more than revealing.

The salty air made her skin feel parched. She wiped a bead of sweat from her forehead.

A glass of water trembled in her mother's hand. "I can't stop thinking about Karin." She suppressed a sob. "I'm glad she succeeded, but we'll never see her again."

Ikara took the glass from her mother and sipped the cool liquid. "I know."

They looked out silently for some time, lost in their own thoughts.

Finally her mother said, "Do you find the need to heal Sekai grows stronger?"

The change of subject was not expected, but welcomed. She could not brood over Karin. Her sister had made her own choices. Perhaps her mother saw that too.

Ikara sipped the cooling fluid. "Yes."

"He's chosen you," she said, her face expressionless.

"Yes," Ikara said, "but I'm hesitating."

Her mother's eyes widened. "Why?"

“I don’t want my heart broken,” she said. *What had she said?*

Her mother leaned forward. “I was fortunate Anum remained, but if he hadn’t, I would have risked loving him and still had his child. Perhaps you should consider it as a compromise.”

Did she want him?

Yes, a tiny voice in her head said.

As for a child, that would be too much. Not that she was at risk of falling pregnant. She could shut down her cycle then restart it again if she wanted to conceive; all healers could. “I have no desire to have a child by a man who will abandon me.”

Her mother sighed. “I was fortunate Anum wanted to stay with me for so long.”

It had to be more than love. Power came to mind. What else drove a man who tampered with the minds of Emperors and the bodies of their wives? She fought down rising anger. She’d not vent her animosity onto her mother.

Ikara squinted out to the sea. The gentle lapping of the waves became hypnotic. She felt herself being drawn to it, so much so she almost didn’t hear what her mother said next. “Asiel marked you before you were born.”

“He did what?”

“I’m not sure how to explain-”

Ikara gripped Nua’s hand. “How did he mark me?”

“Asiel revealed himself to you, yes?”

Sweat trickled between her breasts. It became uncomfortably hot. “You know he did.”

“And so he did with me. I was with child, you, at the time. We immersed an old woman. I heard Asiel call me after I turned away from the light. The urge was so powerful, I turned back to the light, and then I saw him.”

Ikara could understand the thrall her mother felt.

“What I recall most is his haunted face. I’d have believed he was seeking absolution. I could hardly believe it when he communicated a lifetime of experiences into my mind in a few moments. In the end I had such love for him. No, it was more than that. Imagine ecstasy at the edge of death.”

Ikara tried to control her breathing. She pulled the clinging material from her chest, as if it were suffocating her. “Did you tell Anum?”

“Never.”

Ikara rose from her chair. “Why me? Why you? What is Asiel doing to us?”

“I thought you’d see his act to save you as a gift, not a thing to fear.”

Her mother reached out to take her hand. Ikara backed away.

“Are you all right?” her mother asked.

The pull from the ocean intensified. “I’m not sure. I feel...” Ikara needed to cool down.

Behind her, her mother called, “Ikara. Come back.”

Ikara stopped waist deep in the shallows. As she waded further out, the burning sensation began to fade, thankfully. The saltwater, more invigorating than fresh, cooled her down.

Something was about to happen; she could feel it. Suddenly, invisible lines gripped her ankles, yanked her over the reef and down.

Before she had the chance to cry out, she found herself in a dry cave, a wall of water shielding the entrance. Her heart felt like it was going to burst.

“Breathe, Ikara.”

Ikara did so in. The dank air filled her nostrils. She looked at the cave walls, at the sponge dangling limply from the roof, the fish flapping on the floor. “How did you do this?”

“The line of passage that dragged you here also holds the wall. The air will not last long.”

Several strides later, she embraced her sister. “I miss you.”

Karin gripped her hand. “Asiel has allowed me to briefly return to this time. He wants you to consider returning to the past to stop Inu from dying for Sekai.”

Was this what Sekai warned that Asiel wanted from her? Before she could ask Karin, an echo from another line of passage touched her, brief, and bitterly sad. A woman from a village in the desert, her beautiful face full of wonder and love. And so young, too young to know what she was doing. It was as if Ikara were there, as that healer. She breathed in the hot dry air of an ancient desert.

Inu. I am Inu.

Suddenly she was yanked back.

“You should feel sadness for her. Inu was you in a past life. You have been reborn to save her,” Karin said.

The memory faded from her consciousness. *Was it true?* “I remember nothing of my past.”

She was having difficulty comprehending this revelation at all.

“It’s true, Ikara. Once you’ve fallen in love with Sekai, you’ll see.”

She shook her head. “I can’t believe this.”

“Asiel gave you gifts for a reason. You must use them to prove you are worthy of his aid.”

This was becoming too much.

“I exist, Ikara. If I can save Preth, you can save Sekai.”

Sekai was an enigma to her, but to go back into the past to save him from being a Mandrake? And Inu. To save the life of a healer as Karin had done? Did the healer in her want to save them both?

She shook her head. "Why would Asiel offer this to me?"

Karin gave a sympathetic gaze. "You will see, in time."

Ikara didn't see how.

"I have effectively died in your time, Ikara, and will not return. I have a new life with Prenth." She faltered. "You cannot do this on your own. Sekai must want this as badly as you do, even if you don't feel that way, yet. But you will, and when you do, you will have problems. Sekai will find the decision difficult, for he is a Mandrake first and a man second."

Regardless of her skepticism, Ikara felt a deep wave of admiration for her sister.

"I do not regret what I've done. Now, go through the veil of water before it disappears."

The cave wavered around her. She didn't have much time. A glimmer of fear crept within her as she walked through the veil. The line of passage pulsed through her, urging her upwards. She extended her hand towards the large fish that followed her, and her hand grazed the reef as the ocean surged her to and fro.

Ikara. It's not your time.

She had heard him speak in her mind before, and knew who it was.

No, it is not, Sekai. Not yet, anyway.

She kicked upwards.

Sekai grabbed her hand and pulled her towards him. Slowly, the sea became warmer. Air bubbles rose when she breathed out.

She broke the surface and spat out the salt water. Sekai slid his arms around her and dragged her towards the sands. He sunk to his knees and she followed. Facing her, he said, "Your mother called for aid."

When Ikara looked up, she got a brief glimpse at the man beside her mother: Anum. He wore a wrap around his waist and had his arm around her mother.

"Why didn't he come to my rescue?" she muttered.

"I was here first. Don't be harsh with your father, Ikara."

"How can I not. You know what he did to me."

"I can't denounce him. He's a Mandrake."

Ikara didn't bother to argue. He'd never see her father the same way she did.

Sekai rose. Ikara gripped his arm to steady herself.

"Do you want me to be with you when you speak to your father?"

Anum waited impatiently at the shore. Ikara took in a deep breath. "I'd rather face him alone."

Sekai whispered in her ear. "If he presses you, tell him 'maybe Asiel meddles'."

She chuckled. "I like that."

He briefly kissed her throat, sending a delightful shudder throughout her body.

"I'll walk you to the shore."

Why was she resisting him? Why not just give into the abandonment that she'd had but a taste of.

At the shore, Sekai gave a reassuring smile as he left her.

"What were you doing out there?" her mother snapped.

Ikara's gaze locked onto Anum. His lined face betrayed the determination in his green eyes, which brimmed with barely controlled anticipation. His blond hair, back in a plait, was bleached from the sun. His tanned torso was taut, although age had softened some edges. His hands were clenched together.

Ikara knew he was nervous. It gave her the strength to endure his assessment of her, as if she were a fine product of his creation. When done, his lips curled into a half smile. She didn't like being considered as a product of his, born to serve as a healer, then to be killed for reasons still unknown to her.

His smile broadened. "Ikara."

His voice triggered another memory; this man she had met before.

"Anum," she said as coolly as possible.

"A life is a precious thing. What drove you to the ocean?"

How this man pretended to care. She'd have no part of it. "I'm flattered you care about my well-being."

And turned to leave.

"Don't go, yet." Anum caught her arm. "Nua, please leave us."

Her mother did so, with great reluctance.

The pressure on her arm increased. He was using his ability on her. Sekai's touch had been like a delicious fire; Anum's was like being pressed by a heavy object.

Did he use a link that was genetic, or was he more powerful?

She redirected it back at him, surprised that she could do so.

His smile fled, but he didn't let her go. "You're stronger than I expected. You touch the lines of passage with ease, as Karin did."

The pressure increased.

She countered him again. "All healers touch the lines of passage to some degree with Asiel's aid. I hardly see it as a gift." Then it occurred to her what he might mean. "Is this some kind of test to see how I defeated that disease you tried to kill me with? Tell me."

The pressure faded.

Where was the energy coming from? For now it didn't matter. "How well am I doing?" she said, unable to resist the euphoria she felt in besting him.

Anum forced a smile. "You were never in danger of dying. Asiel saw to that. I wanted him to reveal himself to you. You had to believe in him, you see, or all would be lost."

Ikara pulled her arm from him, breaking the contact between them. She'd not realized how much he'd controlled her body. She could barely move. With an effort, she stepped back.

"You and Karin are my finest creations, but my appreciation goes deeper. For Karin to do what she did, Asiel must have aided her. Do you have any idea how few are noticed by him?"

She clenched her fists.

"Don't be angry. You are not the first who has discovered how to influence the lines of passage, and will certainly not be the last. All I ask is, if you see Asiel or Karin again, listen to what they say, then tell me."

Why should she? She wasn't going to let him manipulate her in this way.

"My request about Karin isn't without good reason. Prenth is no longer a Mandrake according to Sekai, who said he was, once. I need to know why Karin acted on her own accord."

He'd expected her not to. Such defiance gave Ikara renewed courage.

She was tempted to tell him what happened in the cave, and decided against it. Why give him the satisfaction? Rather than say something she'd regret, she used the words Sekai had given her. "Maybe Asiel meddles."

He laughed. "A typical response from Sekai."

His laughter caught her off guard. She'd thought that after so many centuries, laughter was an ability that would be forgotten. He appeared human to her for a brief instant. She reminded herself that he was a manipulator who'd had thousands of years to perfect his art.

The moment became awkward. Ikara looked behind him to the lodge. The wind picked up and her damp dress became uncomfortable.

She had one last question to ask him. "Why didn't you tell mother the truth about Karin going back in time?"

"Why? What if Karin didn't succeed?"

I know she has. "I told mother what happened."

"You fool. She--"

"It's too late. Go and make amends. It should be a unique experience for you"

Her mother caught up with Ikara inside the lodge. "Tell me what happened?"

"I told him that I told you the truth about Karin."

She frowned. “That’s why he stormed off. Ikara. Are you sure you weren’t premature in what you told me.”

Omitting references to Sekai, she told her mother what had happened in the cave with Karin. “Now, do you believe me?”

She nodded. “Go. Get changed; you’re shivering.”

At last, her mother knew the truth. What she did with it was up to her.

Ikara opened the bag she left in the main room, grabbed the first dress she could find and slipped it on. The chill immediately fled.

She sat in front of the entrance overlooking the sea and began to meditate. She needed to finally accept that her sister was truly dead in this time.

The sun sank towards the ocean casting a pink hue across the walls of her room. She sensed Sekai from deep inside her trance, resurfaced, and opened her eyes. He appeared as a silhouette at the entrance.

He entered the room, wearing a sleeveless robe that fell to below his knees. “You look... refreshed.”

A faint flush of warmth rose on her cheeks as she contemplated kissing him again. “I am, and you.”

Sekai nodded and sat nearby, his face serious again. “Tell me what happened out there.”

“I saw Karin,” she said. “She succeeded in saving Prenth from becoming a Mandrake. She’ll never return to this time.” Ikara suppressed a sob. “She’s happy. Prenth already forgets he was a Mandrake.”

“He forgets his life as a Mandrake in days,” he said as if it were an insult.

She fought back tears that threatened to overwhelm her.

“Is that so wrong? He wanted this, too. Don’t forget that.”

His face went hard. “It will not stop him from trying again. Part of what we are cannot be changed.”

Was he condemning Prenth, or himself? “You assume all Mandrakes are incapable of change.”

“To serve Asiel is no easy thing. A thing that is worth having requires great sacrifice. The healers who gave their lives to us knew this. Their life is brief compared to ours. Their souls return to the lake to be reborn, unlike your patients whose souls remain for eternity. We are spared the imprisonment of the lake, but it takes a thousand years to realize we live in another prison – immortality. After two thousand, you try to find ways to end it all. When you fail, you begin to forget.”

“What would you do if you were given a chance not to become a Mandrake in the first place?”

He shot her a look of surprise. “How can that be? And what purpose would it serve? Can you imagine if we weren’t here? The lords of the fifteen planets would fight over Arien, then each other.

You see, Ikara, our very existence is enough to stop that. Even Pherus with his warships is no match for us, and he knows it.”

Unsure, but glad she had asked the initial question, she truly wanted to know why. “What about *you*? What would you do?”

“The healers and the lake are inextricably entwined, as are the Mandrakes to Arien. One cannot survive without the other. I cannot imagine being anything else,” he said.

She tried to hide her disappointment, surprised at the emotion. “Have you considered that Asiel regretted taking away the life you should have had? That’s what Karin told me.”

“I doubt it. Asiel is incapable of regret. Besides, if he had plans to pick off the Mandrakes one by one, other dangers arise with your idea. If Anum ceases to be a Mandrake, as he is your father, you will never exist in the first place.”

She froze as understanding dawned. She hadn’t thought of that. Ikara drew into herself instead. Did she want this man, and his pain? Maybe it was best to let him go. “I do understand sacrifice, but I don’t understand what you’ve gone through. I can’t.”

“Karin was blessed with a chance to save Prenth. Asiel does not give so easily. Asiel will return and demand something from you, and trust me, you will not be able to refuse.”

A great weight descended on her shoulders. He was right. No one could refuse Asiel, now that she believed in him utterly. She leaned back, to think about it further. A gasp from Sekai’s lips made her aware that she’d moved in a way he had misinterpreted.

Her pulse quickened as he approached.

* * *

Sekai couldn’t help comparing her to Inu. Her hair was lighter and her eyes were green, compared to Inu’s brown. His gaze roved over the curve of her shoulder down to her hip, savoring every curve. Her legs were long and slender. He imagined his hand stroking her thigh up to her waist, to the curve of her breast, barely visible beneath the material of her dress.

Her chest rose and fell more rapidly as he approached. He lowered his body beside hers.

“Are you sure?” he murmured.

“No. But-”

His lips descending on hers interrupted her answer. His tongue parted her lips and gently teased into her mouth, probing each part, slowly and fully.

A soft moan escaped her lips.

Her scent mixed with his, a combination he breathed in, savoring it. She ran her finger through his hair in rhythm with his kiss. Her breathing became more rapid, and her kiss more demanding. He

needed to wipe any doubt from her mind about having him. Motivated by the thought, he gently rolled her over until her back touched cushions.

His hand slipped under the hem of her dress, pausing when he reached the curls between her legs. As tempting as it was to delve deeper there, he wanted to prolong the moment.

He raised his head to look at her face. Her eyes were full of longing.

“Sekai, I-,” she whispered.

“I’ll not hurt you. I promise.”

Sekai ran his hand up her body, teasing the hem higher, giving feather light caresses as he went. She writhed under his touch.

His heart crashed against his ribs as he brushed the curve of her breast. He released blue fire from his solar plexus, felt its energy flow over his groin and felt it dive into her moist center. She went rigid. A heartbeat later, a whimper escaped her lips.

Hands grasped frantically behind him and he felt the material of his robe being lifted higher. A cool breeze touched his legs.

Sekai moved between her legs, parting them. He rubbed his shaft against her nether lips.

“Do you want to?”

“Yes,” she murmured.

He connected with her mind, as he had done in the hut to draw her from her trance. It would enhance the experience for both of them.

Sekai was about to lose himself inside her when, suddenly, another woman appeared, one he’d loved so very long ago. Her dark, beautiful eyes were unforgettable as she looked up at him with love.

Inu.

Rapture faded from Ikara’s face. “Who is she?”

“Did you see her?”

“I *was* her.”

He rolled off her. “I... don’t know what happened.”

She gripped his waist. “Look into my mind. Take this image. I feel it belongs somehow.”

The image of the man in the desert filled his mind. “The man you saw in the desert. Do you know who it was?”

She frowned. “Of what I saw, that one touched me the most. It was as if a great chasm of time had passed.”

It was what he wanted to hear.

“Sekai? What is that memory from?”

“Inu. The memory is hers.”

Her face seemed to reel in shock.

“What’s wrong?”

“Karin said I was Inu in a past life, but I don’t remember.”

He’d heard her but simply couldn’t believe it. “She said what?”

“Karin showed me Inu; I was her. That was the woman you were about to make love to.”

He removed her grip. *Time to think.*

“Don’t go.”

There was nothing more he wanted to do than to finish off what they had started, and it would be the only way to find out for sure, share their memories. He was about to explain to her, when the ship called him in his mind.

Sekai. Are you going to look at the remainder of this recording or not?

He cursed. He’d forgotten all about it. *I’ll tend to it later.*

“Sekai. I don’t know how but I heard the ship in your mind. Let’s both go and see. It won’t take long.”

He’d not broken the connection between them. He did so. “We’ll take Anum’s shuttle.”

The shuttle was dark inside, save for a blue column of energy.

He saw her gasp in amazement. After she had settled in her seat, she said, “I expected dials and displays, not a column of blue energy.”

Sekai placed her hand into the blue column. “Feel that?”

A soft vibration rippled throughout the craft as it ascended.

She nodded. “What powers this?”

“The lines of passage. It’s the same energy you use to heal your patients.”

Another pattern began to emerge. A ship surrounded by circular lines, crossed by pulses of blue energy.

“Is that your ship,” she asked, wide-eyed.

He nodded, pleased with her observation. “That’s how we navigate. Where we don’t know an area of space, we use navigation similar to yours.”

She looked around like a delighted child. He watched her face. Once, he had looked upon things with such wonder.

Focus on the recording. “Ship. Warm the cabins for a visitor.”

The airlock of Sekai’s ship opened, and the shuttle drifted inside. The external door to the airlock closed.

Sekai heard Ikara gasp as she walked along the dimly lit corridor.

“Are you cold?”

“No. This ship reminds me of a place where someone is interred after they have died.”

“You see, Sekai,” the ship said. “She’s right.”

“Who’s that?”

“The mind of my ship. He has a sense of humor.”

Ikara shook her head in amazement. “A ship that thinks. Isn’t that dangerous.”

Don’t you even think of answering her.

A soft chuckle filled the air.

Ikara smiled.

They reached the front of the ship. He watched her jaw drop.

“Is that a coffin?”

He felt as if all his inner secrets were being exposed to her, layer by layer. It made him uncomfortable. “It’s a stasis chamber.”

She ran her hand over the lid. “And you lie in there between successions.”

“Yes.”

“It’s not very big, is it?”

“It’s not a bed,” he said curtly. “Now sit down.” He indicated the floor.

She looked up at him. “I’m sorry.”

He sat beside her. “I should be the one to be sorry. I’ve rarely shown this to anyone.”

“Ship. Begin.”

An image appeared within the column of energy.

Sekai watched Ikara’s eyes widen as an image of a man solidified. His long dark brown hair was tied in a plait, his brown eyes full of ambition. His face flushed with the anticipation of a great event about to take place.

It was Asiel.

How had *this* ended up on the passenger ship’s recorder?

Around his neck, Asiel wore the five-sided star. Ikara looked twice. “Is that the star of Asiel?”

“Yes.”

“Karin was wearing it,” she said, wide-eyed.

“I know.”

“How?” she asked, totally perplexed.

“I truly have no idea. Now, watch.”

Asiel began. "All things are interconnected by the lines of passage. Reaching the source of the lines will transport you to the beginning."

Sekai saw how transfixed she was. He had heard the words before, so long ago that he'd almost forgotten. He recalled Asiel briefly, in the desert, when the lines of passage were a mystery to a young man who would have followed Asiel anywhere.

"You ask which gift is the greatest: life of course. By taking hers, she gives life you eternal life. Do you accept this gift?" Asiel asked.

He heard those words in a dreamlike state between sleep and death, and accompanied by his response. "Yes."

The lines of passage enclosed him like a vine and dragged him across space and time to the day of his death.

Sekai and Asiel walked from the village surrounded by the red desert to a nearby oasis shaded by palms. A place used before the City of Legends was built, and well before the great lake became the focal point for all healing. He'd been to this place many times, but had never entered the water before. He'd not been ready then.

Inu, waist deep in water, waited for them, her face darkened by years in the desert sun, a sharp contrast to her pale brown robe. She held the gold dagger in her hand, a small blade the size of her palm. He saw the slight movement in her hand. He knew she was terrified, and wondered if he should stop her.

She gave him a sideways glance. "You have never loved me as I wanted you to. Allow this to be my parting gift to you, for I cannot live any longer like this."

His vision blurred.

"Do it!" she said.

He squeezed his eyes shut, and his vision cleared when he reopened them.

He looked down at her hand. A rivulet of blood began to stain the golden blade, falling as droplets into the water.

Sekai followed Asiel into the lake. Beneath the ripples of water in the afternoon sun, blue light began to radiate.

Inu took in a deep breath before she spoke again. "So, this is it."

"Yes." He knew the teachings, and that made the difference. Asiel was careful whom he chose to be the first.

Asiel waded in front of them. "Do you believe in me?"

He recalled every word with painful clarity. "Yes."

“Do you willingly give your life to serve me?”

“Yes,” Sekai said.

“And you?”

“Yes,” Inu said.

Sekai winced, but couldn’t turn back now.

“Both of you desire to transform yourself towards greatness. This can be as simple as understanding the unfolding of petals within a flower, to ruling worlds with a hand guided by love. What do you choose?”

To be guided by love? He’d fled a world he believed ruled by anything but love to follow Asiel, once an Emperor, driven out of his world only to find Arien, his only sanctuary.

“The ultimate sacrifice is one’s self. To take you beyond the limited vessel of your body,” Asiel said.

How easy it had seemed.

Inu scooped water and poured it over his head.

“In the west is Rei, your darkness.”

She poured water over his head a second time.

“In the East is Sa, you light.”

She poured water a third time.

“May the darkness be shed from you.”

His lips touched hers, and her essence bled into his soul. The depth of her love crashed over him like a flood.

“I give my life to you,” she whispered, and plunged the dagger into his heart.

“Asiel, give me peace,” he whispered. The pain in his chest became unbearable, as did the realization of the depth of her love for him. Water filled his lungs. Light burned his dead eyes.

Asiel supported him as Inu died. “Stay with me, my first initiate.”

The cold of death left him.

“You are here to protect Arien from the darkness, which lives in us all. You are now a Mandrake as the name implies. The Mandrake root contains the magic of words and deeds. The leaves can purge the poisons, cure the ills, but they can also kill. Do not forget this,” Asiel said.

He placed his hand on Sekai’s forehead. Peace rippled through his body and into his soul.

Sekai walked out of the water while Inu descended.

Back in the ship, Sekai saw tears fall down Ikara’s cheeks.

“How could he do such a thing? How could Asiel have allowed such an injustice to happen in the

first place? How could *you* make her die for you?"

Sekai felt as if she'd torn his heart from him very being. He wanted her love, not *this*.

She shook her head. "This is too much. Asiel had no right. You had no right."

"I know," he whispered, ashamed at what he'd done, and what he'd become since.

"There is more," the ship said.

"Later," Sekai snapped.

Ikara rose. "I must see it all, but I need to--"

"Be away from me for a while?"

"You. This."

He understood that. "I'll take you back."

She nodded.

The trip back to the City was excruciating. She refused to acknowledge him at all. After they'd landed she left, her back to him until she disappeared into the tunnel.

* * *

Sekai needed to talk to someone.

Anum opened the door of his lodge, and smiled. "I expected your return. Come in." He poured wine and offered a goblet to Sekai.

Sekai drank its sweetness, trying to drown the bitterness that lingered in his throat. After draining the goblet he walked to the entrance and watched the rolling waves of the ocean.

Anum stood beside Sekai. "When I first became a Mandrake, I couldn't see why I was dragged into this pitiful state to feel raw emotions; the tug of my heart, knowing that love will not last; the need to control anger, or to fight pain." He sighed. "Now I'd welcome it."

Sekai too, recalled the raw feelings of the first few centuries. He related it to the blooms in the garden behind the lodge. First the awareness, the abundance of flowers year after year, until one year the abundance waned, leaving a husk of a plant that refused to die.

"These last few decades I've never been more alive," Anum said, choked with emotion.

Sekai had thought him mad to avoid the sleep. Now he wasn't so sure.

Anum refilled his goblet. "Tell me what you found."

Sekai broke from his melancholy. "The initiation of a Mandrake."

Anum raised an eyebrow. "An odd thing to find on a flight recorder that belonged to Karin, don't you think?"

"There is more, although for now I've seen enough."

Chapter Seven

Ikara squinted at the late afternoon sun. The heat had lulled the turmoil in her mind, allowing her to listen while Liea told her the story of Pherus's arrival.

"He landed in the courtyard in front of the palace, accompanied by his guards. His ship arrived first. Pherus is younger than I thought, about thirty and quite pleasant looking. He wore his blond hair loose, making him seem even younger. His gold robe hid anything else that may be of interest."

Intrigued Liea could consider Pherus in such a way, Ikara nodded for her to continue.

Liea frowned. "His captain had a weapon, a laser cannon. I suggested they were not necessary on Arien. Pherus then ruined it all by looking me over like a prospective bedmate."

Ikara suppressed a grin. "What did he say?"

Liea's face reddened. "They are not primed."

Ikara laughed.

Liea's blush deepened. "The way Pherus looked at me... How could I not be intimidated in that way?"

It obviously irritated Liea all the same. "I'm sure by tonight he'll have so many distractions, he'll not give you another glance."

"Maybe you're right," Liea muttered. "I've already begun a list of women who hope to be married to him. Should be amusing to watch who wins, if nothing else."

"Oh, Liea. You'll be busy enough, I'm sure."

"Pherus has his own guard, more ceremonial than to protect him in case of danger. I mean, what are the odds of anyone being hurt? It's possible, although unlikely if the records are anything to go by."

No attack had been recorded in the City. Ikara knew Liea hoped for that trend to continue.

Liea leaned back into the chair. "Sekai didn't go well?"

"Yes and no. I needed to get away from him. He..." How could she explain what happened? "Nothing you can help me with, I'm afraid."

Liea rose. "In that case, I'm getting out of this heat. Coming?"

Ikara helped Liea place towels near the large bath. She ran her hand through the water. "It's warm."

Liea wasted no time in getting in, clothes and all.

Ikara followed her. The warm water relaxed her more than she could have imagined, and her thoughts returned to Sekai. Did she want his darkness? Could she bear it? The words of warning from

her mother returned. *The healer in you will not be able to walk away from him.*

Her mother was right. Whatever sadness that would prevail after that, she would deal with then. As a healer and as a woman, she could not walk away from him, even after what he'd done to Inu so long ago.

Twilight drifted through the room.

Liea slipped out of the bath. "It gets dark quickly here; I forget about that."

Ikara changed out of her wet clothes, removed an emerald gown from her rack and tried it on. She adjusted the neckline to reach the edge of her shoulders, and the center to cover all, save for the top of the curve of her breasts.

Liea looked her up and down. "I didn't know you had such a gown."

"A gift from a noble," she said softly. Ikara have never worn such finery and for the first time planned to forget she was a healer.

Liea returned from her room, wearing a sleeveless red gown that fell to her feet.

Just as they closed the door of their lodge, her mother arrived, wearing a pale yellow gown that covered her slim frame. "Green suits you, Ikara. Are we ready?"

Ikara and Liea exchanged glances. It seemed her mother was going to play chaperone tonight.

They climbed the steps to the palace, meeting others that headed the same way. Ikara stared at the people in the torchlight, including a couple of lords who passed them, their bearing rather than appearance giving them away. Ikara had no idea who they were, but guessed within in a week, she'd know them all.

Liea whispered to Ikara, "Rumor has it that Pherus definitely plans to take a wife during his stay."

"Glad we're not nobles then," Ikara said, trying not to forget Mira. She was in exile due to him.

* * *

Sekai wore a blue robe, functional and cool in this heat. Any other style of clothing was unnecessary at the festivals. One needed to remind others of whom they were.

The corridors in the palace hadn't changed. He remembered them well, too well. He had stood in one, not far from here, and convinced the healer, Meri, to change her mind.

He heard whispers inside the mourning room.

The smell of the chamber greeted him, a combination of mustiness and incense. The room was lit by solar lanterns, fueled by prisms from light stored during the day.

The priest, his head shaven, bowed to Pherus. "He will remain here until the lords have given their respects."

Sekai watched the Emperor. Pherus's face was a combination of conflicting emotions as he gripped

the edge of the wooden coffin.

Kreth, Pherus's father, not a big man, looked even smaller in the coffin.

"Sekai." It was Anum.

Pherus looked up, his blue eyes widened for an instant as the expression on his face changed. Sekai had seen that look many times: awe.

"May your father find peace," Sekai said.

"May the lines of passage carry him beyond," Pherus replied.

An ancient gesture of parting, and Pherus knew it. What had Anum taught him?

Anum closed the gap between the two men. "Sekai. You've not met Pherus."

Sekai smiled at the formality. He bowed his head. "It's not been that long since I stood in these rooms."

Sekai leaned over the coffin and touched the dead Emperor's bandaged forehead. Memories flickered: weeping, denial, and acceptance. The old man knew he was dying and that he needed to save his young bride, Mira. Sekai wished he could tell him that she was safe, but dared not in present company.

Anum motioned to Sekai to follow him. Aware Pherus watched them intently, Sekai followed Anum down the corridor, towards the music.

Pherus did not follow.

"Discreet as always," Anum said.

"For what?"

"For not informing Kreth of Mira in Pherus's presence."

Which meant Anum planned to keep it a secret. That would come as a relief to Ikara once he told her.

The music drew closer. Harps and drums mixed with laughter as they entered the large hall. Frescoes of old battle scenes, larger than life, covered whole walls, each one a scene of an Emperor leading a battle against some enemy.

In the end, these successions were all the same. The undercurrent of tension simmered beneath the smiling faces, the drinking, and the rubbing of shoulders of different cultures joined together for a brief period of time. An occasion where none could be turned away. He knew this hall to be one of many where the feasts were held.

People changed little, regardless of the passing of time. Lords would negotiate. Alliances were sought through marriage, and spies hid everywhere.

"Emperors have power that they are eager to use," Anum said.

“Fortunately, in most cases, wisely,” Sekai replied. Gauging a reaction from Anum, he added, “The pupil learns his wisdom from his teacher.”

“He will rule well,” Anum said stiffly.

“As long as you leave him to become the Emperor he is meant to be, perhaps Pherus may have what it takes.”

Anum reacted as if slapped. “You cannot stop me.”

Sekai was confident Asiel knew what Anum plotted. “I have no need to stop you. It’ll be Asiel who plays this game, remember, and he never loses.”

Anum muttered under his breath. “We’ll see.”

Sekai’s gaze swept the hall. Servants carried trays of food to the mingling crowd. He didn’t want to join such pointless chatter and the games the nobility liked to play. He’d made every effort to escape such dullness.

Fragments of memory drifted unbidden into his mind. *You even left a kingdom.*

Sekai shivered.

You left many things.

Anum swept his hand across the hall. “What do you see? Men and women united, or a group of people who would kill and steal if given the chance?”

“The former,” Sekai said, ignoring the random thoughts in his head. “A succession tends to bring a truce. The latter will occur after they leave Arien.”

Anum appeared undeterred. “What would change these people? What would make them think beyond their own short lives to imagine their children as assets rather than pawns?”

“When you consider Ikara in such a way” Sekai said harshly, tiring of his pontificating.

Anum stood there, speechless.

It was a rare achievement to render Anum speechless.

Anum inclined his head towards Ikara. “And Ikara? Do you feel an urge to protect her, or do you want her to die for you one day, so you can finally end all this?”

Sekai followed his gaze. Ikara stood with people whose faces were ghosts and she the only reality. He fought the need to go to her. He would have left the hall, and Arien, except for her.

She turned his way.

Sekai lowered his gaze lest Anum suspected. “No. I’ll not be tempted again. As for Pherus, leave him to become what he is capable of.”

“And why should I? What else do I have to look forward to, besides these endless successions?”

He had a point but it didn’t excuse him for meddling with the lives of others. “Endure them as I do

or find someone to take your place so you can die.”

Anum suppressed a laugh. “To die, I need a healer at the lake, in case you haven’t forgotten, and she must be willing.”

“And Pherus?” Sekai asked sarcastically.

“Make him a god so I can die? Not likely. I have prepared for this moment for two thousand years and have no plans of dying just yet. Besides, who would offer their life for me? Ikara? Hardly.”

To Sekai it was obvious. “Nua.”

He looked horrified at the suggestion. “Are you mad? She’s been my companion for thirty years. One tends to become attached to another after a long period of time.”

“Your attachment is what an owner would give to a pet. You don’t fool me with your sentiment.”

Pure rage radiated from Anum. It faded as suddenly.

Anum slapped him on the shoulder. “You jest, surely.”

He was deadly serious but there was no point in continuing this conversation.

“I was getting worried about you. I was going to suggest you coax your ship into the sun. Maybe you should try it again.”

He joined the crowd.

Sekai chuckled. The sun. Anum would never miss an opportunity to remind him of that failure.

Chapter Eight

Inside the reception room, a woman played the harp and a man the drums. It was an odd, yet pleasant combination. Ikara craned her neck towards the ceiling in order to examine the large fresco spanning the roof. In the center of the roof was a golden disk representing Asiel. Green vines spread from the disk, thinning out towards the walls.

She followed a vine down the wall to a scene. A man's dark face showed no triumph as he stood over the men lying on the bloodied field. He held his sword high, but his face showed bitterness.

"Who is he?" Ikara asked.

"Emperor Khumn," her mother said. "He originally came from Hedron. Although peaceful now, it wasn't always. His brother wanted to rule. Of course, Khumn refused. The Mandrakes arrived just before the second wave of attacks. They should have been there before the war began."

"Why weren't they?" Ikara asked.

"I asked Anum the same question. He told me the destruction of the second moon required their more immediate attention."

How arrogant of him. Ikara swallowed the bile that formed in her throat.

Aware of several people who'd paused too long nearby, her mother said, "Let's not discuss this now."

Liea nudged Ikara. "We should move on."

Ikara recognized an old man who'd been to the lake, a young woman cured of an illness, a boy who'd been injured in a fall. The old man gave a casual look before he continued to talk to his companions. The boy ducked behind his parents. The young woman gave an embarrassed look as she touched her smooth face, aware her skin was no longer scarred.

"Our presence reminds them of what they were. Some prefer not to remember," her mother said. "Ah. Now, that is an interesting sight."

Ikara recognized Kat, Captain of the Halifad fleet, with some of his pilots. He was a tall man with fierce eyes and a temper that was legendary. Kat gave Ikara a quick nod in recognition before returning to his companions.

"I convinced Kat that it was just another random attack. I even offered to return the ship, but he refused," Liea said.

"Tainted by the Mandrakes," Ikara whispered back.

Liea nodded.

Not all believed the immortals to be emissaries of gods. Some believed them to be abominations who had cheated death by abhorrent means.

And they were right.

They wove into the crowd. A warrior, wearing a green tunic, possibly from any of a half a dozen worlds, spoke with a young lord. Another, similarly dressed, spoke to an older lord, whose smile appeared forced.

They walked towards the woman playing the harp, her shift almost transparent, cheeks rouged, eyes almost closed, lost in the serenity of music.

A servant handed Ikara wine.

She sipped the sweet liquid from her goblet. “Do you know any of the lords?”

Liea pointed out a middle-aged lord next to Sekai. “Kephna. He runs Paradise.”

Eyes barely visible beneath chubby cheeks and haphazard hair streaked with gray, his deep red silk robe drenched in sweat, he looked like the type who visited Paradise, not owned it. She knew about Paradise, a world where any form of reality was available, for a price.

“He will not last the year,” Ikara said.

“How do you know that?” Liea asked.

“Don’t question a healer,” her mother said with mock severity.

Liea gave a sly grin. “It’s a good place for recreation. You should try it some time.”

Silence descended near one of the entrances to the garden. The cause made her pause for breath. Sekai and another Mandrake entered.

The chatter resumed after they passed.

The blond-haired man with Sekai looked so young. His bearing told another story. He didn’t seem to quite fit in and Ikara couldn’t pinpoint the reason why. Ikara looked around. Many women gave both men more than a passing glance.

A middle-aged couple strode towards Ikara and Liea. The woman looked well. She recalled the patient from three years ago. The name escaped her.

The man gave her an appraising look. “Ikara. It’s good to see you again. I must say the dress looks stunning on you. Those drab robes really do hide your assets.”

Ikara blushed, unused to the attention.

His wife spoke. “What do you think of all this intrigue? I bet a few will need the aid of a healer soon enough. I mean, think of all those hangovers for one thing.”

Some things didn’t change; this woman she recalled, had nearly died. She prattled on and Ikara began to tire of her.

A shift in the air quieted the woman.

Pherus entered. Liea hissed, but Ikara shushed her. Pherus wasn't as tall as Sekai, and his build appeared lighter. He wore a gold tunic and a gold earring from his left ear, and his blue eyes were set hard as he gazed over the faces in the room.

He raised his hand, and silence fell across the room.

"Welcome to Arien. I would like to thank you all for coming to the ceremony. In addition to celebrating my succession, I'm sure you'll all enjoy the month long festivities that have been prepared for you. While many activities have been planned for your pleasure, I know some of you would like to use this opportunity to conduct business. If you need a room for negotiation, one of my guards will arrange a meeting room."

Pherus grabbed a goblet of wine from a nearby servant and took a sip before continuing.

"I will also be selecting a suitable bride. Those who are fortunate to be considered within the next week will be invited to a special ceremony where I will choose three candidates."

Ikara could not believe how he planned to find a lifelong companion. To her, marriage was about love, not political convenience.

As if Liea had read her mind she whispered, "It's not our concern."

"I know that," she said. "It's barbaric. That's all."

"Ssssh," her mother said.

"The most important day of the succession ceremony is the last. On the full moon exactly one month from now, I will be immersed in the great lake in Arien and will formally become your Emperor. As you can appreciate the lake is not a large area, so it will be invitation only."

He raised his hand again. Ten men dressed in plain gold robes came forward. "My assistants will answer any other question you may have for the duration of the festivities."

He waved his hand in a dismissive gesture.

The music started again.

Ikara had imagined a man who was ambitious and ruthless. Seeing him, she saw an entirely different person, one who cast a veneer over another, more fragile layer, one that was on the verge of breaking.

"See the woman who approaches him? It's Neti. She's favored to be his bride," Liea whispered.

Ikara gave Neti a sideways glance. Her dark hair draped down her back, a contrast to the gold flecked gown she wore. The gown was far too ornate and her grace lacked elegance because of it.

Neti surveyed the crowd with barely concealed disdain.

Ikara instantly disliked her. "How do you know that?"

“Lord Umat owns a large mining colony. Besides unprocessed fuel for the ships, his planet also produces gold.”

Suddenly, Ikara sensed pain in another. She swung behind to find a woman leaning against one of the pillars.

Liea restrained her. “Wait.”

Ikara shoved Liea aside. A bloom of redness seeped across the woman’s abdomen. Ikara placed her hand over the bloodied stain and began to chant softly. “Asiel, give her life.” The lines of passage pulsed through her hand. She continued. “Save this vessel with your power between the light and the darkness.”

The seeping slowed until it stopped. Ikara slid her hand around the woman’s waist, holding her up. Ikara looked down at the wound, stunned at what she had done.

How did I heal her outside from the lake?

The woman gasped between words. “... in the garden.”

“Who?”

“A soldier from Halifad. I listened too much...” She gasped for air, her breath ragged.

Ikara lifted her torn tunic. “Look.”

The woman caught her breath, looked down. Her eyes widened. “I had no idea you could heal beyond the lake.”

The urge to heal had made Ikara forget what she could and couldn’t do. How was this possible? Asiel had bestowed yet another gift upon her.

Ikara looked behind her. Several people watched her with curiosity. *How much had they seen?*

“I’ll take her to her rooms,” Liea said briskly.

Ikara didn’t want to be studied by the onlookers. Some had no idea she was a healer, and Ikara wanted it to remain that way. She was about to leave when a hand gently gripped her shoulder. Sekai’s stern eyes gazed at hers. “No.”

He slid his fingers around hers and led her back into the room. Ikara knew many watched them. She hoped they focused on him, but their stares convinced her she was wrong. Their chatter fell to whispers.

Sekai led her to the center of a mosaic floor, patterned with vines. He slid his arm around her waist. “If you leave, they’ll believe you didn’t heal her. You are Arien and Arien is you. Make them believe, make Pherus believe you are to be revered.”

He was making no sense to her.

“There are shadows within shadows,” he continued. “Kat will find the attacker.”

He made her move with him to the music. She had no concept of dancing, so she followed Sekai's steps without conscious thought. She couldn't forget the attack. Why would a soldier from Halifad do such a thing?

"Concentrate," he whispered into her ear and drew her body closer to his.

The subtle hint of sweat and another tantalizing scent caused her body to respond to his. She brushed her lips across his throat, and his grip on her tightened. Sekai led her towards other couples, who, by their lead, decided to dance to the harp, their only accompaniment; a slow moving dance.

She never wanted this to end. She looked at Sekai, who looked beyond her. She followed his gaze to the young Mandrake she'd seen before.

The young Mandrake took the hand of a woman with golden beads threaded through her hair and led her into the dancing couples. "Who is he?"

"Forin. The flawed man," he said with an edge of sadness.

"Why... flawed?"

"That is what his name means."

Ikara sensed he wasn't going to tell her more. She gazed into those dark eyes at last. "And yours?"

"The sea of life."

Ikara couldn't resist a light smile. "I like that."

Sekai paused a moment. "I'm sorry about before."

"I must accept you as you are, but it's difficult," she whispered.

Ikara watched the conflict of emotions pass his face as he considered her words, the easing in his heart as the revelation came to him. The healer in her knew instinctively Sekai fought to break through a barrier as difficult, but as fine, as the transparent silk dress of the woman playing the harp.

The man with the drums played again. Forin left his partner and wove through the crowd, pausing nearby. Yet another Mandrake entered the hall, this one of an age with Anum. Grey flecks ran through his long brown hair, and his face looked haggard. Time hadn't been kind to him.

"Who is he?" Ikara asked.

Sekai turned around. "Tier."

The one who-" She said no more. Tier was alive.

Sekai released Ikara. "I must leave you."

She watched him follow the two Mandrakes into the garden.

Ikara felt she was being watched and sought out the source. Pherus. He could be pleasing to the eye had Mira not-. No. She could not think of her now. While part of her secretly delighted in his attention, the hunger in his eyes, almost predatory, made her uneasy. Ikara fitfully scanned the hall for

the closest door. Pherus began to head in her direction. She sighed with relief when Neti veered him towards the garden.

A servant offered Ikara another goblet. She refused—she had drunk enough as it was. She walked briskly from the hall and when she reached the corridor, fled from the palace back to her rooms. At the entrance facing the sea, alone with the accompanying lightning in the distance, she felt like a caged animal being closed in on by her predator.

Pherus must have seen her heal the woman.

Ikara tapped into the energy around her; it was far stronger than at the lake. Her whole life had been within a short shuttle ride from the lake, where the lines of passage had been her constant companion. Perhaps this was normal for these parts.

She lay down, closed her eyes. Patterns formed behind her eyelids that lulled her into sleep.

* * *

Ikara awoke to a soft, cool breeze on her face. She flung the dress she'd slept in off and donned a silk tunic. More appropriate to what looked like a hotter day.

Liea entered Ikara's room.

"I have arranged to meet Kat. He wants to speak with you. They admit one of the soldiers from Halifad was drunk when the dispute happened."

The people of Halifad handled matters in a simpler fashion than Arien, finding a dagger to be a more efficient means of administering justice. To be so stupid at a succession and in a reception hall was another matter.

"Can I come with you?" Ikara asked. She wanted to speak to Kat about Mira.

Liea nodded.

"Where?"

"The small hall, we're having breakfast there."

Ikara followed Liea to the other side of the palace.

On the way, she overheard two women talk about the Mandrakes. "They look like gods," one woman said.

Ikara recalled the one who had been with Forin, earlier in the evening, her face now flush. The woman also looked tired. "I've never been loved by a man like that before. I'm moving over to his lodge tonight."

The older woman, her companion, chuckled. "I suspect I won't see much of you."

They disappeared around the corner.

Liea looked behind her, grinning. "I'd like to taste a Mandrake for a night, but with so many women

who have more idle time than me, I don't think I'll have the opportunity."

Ikara smiled. "There are other men besides Mandrakes. I saw one of the lords look at you more than once."

"Really?"

"Of course. I'll point him out to you next time."

They entered a small hall. Inside, the walls were carved with vines that converged to the center of the roof. In the middle was a wooden table.

Kat, his dark hair tied back, rose from behind it.

"Regardless of what happened last night, I hope you find Karin," Kat said.

Ikara hadn't expected this and it touched her.

He sat. Ikara sat opposite. "How are things?"

Kat smiled. "You mean Mira. We'll protect her; don't you be concerned about that."

"She may be the last for some time."

"I suspected that. I don't trust Pherus and I trust that adviser of his even less."

Anum. "We can agree on that," she said.

Liea cleared her throat.

"Back to the matter at hand," Kat said. "We dealt with the soldier who attacked the woman. It appears it was a misunderstanding about the Mandrakes."

"That's of no surprise," Liea said. "But why her?"

"She overheard a conversation and began to argue in the Mandrakes' defense. Not a smart thing to do when half the people who've arrived on Arien despise them."

"I'll make sure she stays out of the way," Liea said.

Kat nodded. "I suggest you arrange transport for her to leave as soon as possible."

"I'll do that, anything else?"

Kat's gaze fixed on Ikara. "You may be interested to know we had a spy who told us Pherus was very interested in the particular type of aid you gave last night."

Ikara recalled the look Pherus had given her. The feeling of being cornered returned.

"You have drawn attention to him. That wasn't wise. He'll seek out details about you, which will draw Karin into the picture." Kat pursed his lips. "Take great care around him, Ikara."

Ikara cursed herself for being so public about saving Kien.

Kat ran his finger over his smooth chin. "Did you know that Karin had reservations regarding your involvement with Mira?"

That was a surprise. "No."

“She worried it may be too great a danger to her. It seemed she was right. Liea suspects it was Pherus who caused the attack.”

Though Ikara had confided to her friend about many things, she could never tell Liea that the real culprit was Asiel. She nodded instead.

Kat rose. “I must go. I have things to attend to.” He nodded to Liea. “We’ll watch over you,” he said, with a sincerity Ikara knew to be genuine.

Liea rose as well. “I don’t like this business with Pherus. Not at all.”

Nor did Ikara, but for totally different reasons. It meant that Karin had known the danger she faced and had planned it to happen anyway.

* * *

The next day, when Ikara heard the knock on the door, she didn’t expect one of Pherus’s guards to be standing there. “Pherus wishes to invite you on a hunt.”

He stalks me already. “No,” Ikara said. “I have other things to do.” And shut the door.

Liea whistled low. “He was the captain of the guard, too. The best advice I can give you is to use the hunter to your advantage. Go to Pherus and find out for yourself.”

“I doubt he’ll visit. He has many others, more than willing to accompany him.”

“Perhaps,” Liea said.

Later, Ikara heard another knock at the door.

“Go,” Liea said.

Ikara opened it.

Pherus, dressed in a light blue traveling tunic and pants that matched his brilliant eyes, said, “I would consider it an honor if you would accompany me.”

She couldn’t believe he’d come in person, and looking at Liea’s surprised expression, neither did she.

“Captain,” Pherus said.

Liea bowed to him. “Emperor.”

Ikara realized she should have addressed him as well. She bowed slightly. “Emperor.”

He extended his hand to her. “Please, come.”

“Only if you tell me why you watched me last night.”

He smiled warmly. “I’m interested in your ability to heal away from the lake. I want to discuss it further.”

Ikara didn’t budge, although she took a great risk in refusing him.

“I saw Sekai for the first time last night,” Pherus said, unperturbed. “He has a presence even I

admire. I'd like to know what you think of the Mandrakes."

She knew his intent lay elsewhere and took care with her answer. "What do you really want to know?"

Liea nudged her arm.

Ikara had pushed her luck as it was. She couldn't insult Pherus by refusing him. "Give me a moment to change."

She changed into summer traveling clothes: a pale brown long sleeved tunic that covered her thighs, loose pants and sandals.

Pherus led her past several corridors, to a smaller landing bay near the ocean shore. She didn't like the proprietary way he directed her past the other guests, seated in single-person aircars that hovered knee high above the plain tiled floor. He helped her into one and waited until she was settled before climbing into his own.

The leader of the group blew his horn, and Ikara followed the rest of the hunt out over the surface of the water. They all headed towards a nearby island, home of their intended prey. Ikara watched one of the aircars dive between two palm trees, driving a pig out of the thick vegetation into clear view. The horn sounded again, and hunters sped in their aircars after the pig, chasing it towards the clearing.

Aircars converged, crowding each other to jostle for a view of the pig. Ikara backed away in disgust. There would be crowds back at the palace who'd be watching this on televids, placing money and desire on the outcome. She was tempted to return to the City—the positioning unit in the aircar could guide her back on automatic. She backed out towards the ocean and another took the space. She could have called this island paradise save for the terrified pig that had to die for sport.

The soft hum of another aircar broke her thoughts. Pherus reached her side, their aircars almost touching. "I don't find any pleasure in the hunts. Some do. It's strange that with all of our modern improvements, our ability to travel through space and between worlds, some still prefer the simplicity of the chase and the kill."

His words were meant to sound sincere, but the calculating gaze in his eyes betrayed him.

"I did have a reason to take you away from the palace."

Was it to do with Mira?

She played a bold maneuver. "You didn't need to make your interest so obvious," she said coolly.

He laughed. The calculated look fled.

It if wasn't Mira, what was he after?

"Had I?" He smiled. "I'm fascinated with what you did last night. How did you heal her away from the lake?"

Relief flooded through her. This she could handle. “I don’t know.” Her answer must appear weak to him, but at least it was the truth.

Pherus considered her. “I believe you, but tell me one thing. What type of man is a Mandrake?”

A question she had asked herself as well. “There appears to be no particular requirement, from what I’ve seen. If I can use Sekai and Anum as examples, I would say they believed they could change the world. After a few thousand years they found out they’d changed nothing at all.”

“Hmm. Does the healer in you want to ease their suffering?”

She nodded.

“I never thought of it like that. Sekai radiates such a presence. Anum pales compared to him.”

Ikara looked around. They had drifted quite a distance from the other aircars.

“How much do you know of Mandrake history?” he asked.

“In what context?”

“I-”

Before he could continue, she heard a cheer in the distance. When the noise of the hunt subsided, he continued. “There is a fresco of a woman who appears to be reaching for the sun, but her feet remain steadfast beneath the water. Do you know what that means?”

Ikara hadn’t seen it. “Where is it exactly?”

“A large corridor between the library and the mourning room. You’ll find it next to a woman in a red dress. Her eyes appear to follow you.”

He paused as if wanting to tell her something else. The healer in her took over. “Tell me.”

Pherus gave her a surprised look as if she were in a place she shouldn’t have been. “Have you ever been asked to extend life?”

“An old man wanted to reverse his illness, which was really his age. He was one of many. We cannot reverse what already exists. The lake is a place of healing, not of miracles.”

He shook his head sharply, but not at her answer. He fought with a decision he had to make, and didn’t know which way to turn.

The pilot had warned her of Anum’s influence over him. She took a gamble. “Do you think Anum is corrupt?”

He drew a quick intake of breath but regained his composure quickly. “I need to know what drives him to be the way he is.”

The question worried her. Did Pherus want to be rid of Anum’s influence or did the man fascinate him?

The horn blared again, further away. Pherus’s old smile returned. “I think the hunt has been a

success.” He spun around in the direction of the horn, leaving her behind.

Chapter Nine

Ikara spent the afternoon wandering the corridors in the palace. The large entrance wasn't an easy place to miss. She paused at a carving of a man who knelt in the lake while a woman poured water over his head.

A woman wearing a red tunic passed Ikara with a young girl. She paused. "Do you know what it means?"

Ikara didn't want to appear too knowledgeable—she might end up as an unofficial guide. "I think its part of the succession where the Emperor is anointed by the lake."

The woman stood back, intrigued. "I see. Like an initiation."

"Yes. A ritual that represents the return of the god in mortal form, or so I am told."

"Really? I have heard the god, Asiel, is a representation. Once, it must have meant more. Do you know if he truly existed once?"

"He must have," Ikara said, careful not to admit that he did.

"Fallen gods," the woman said.

Ikara had thought of them as fallen gods. It was intriguing that another did so as well.

The little girl with the woman looked up at Ikara. "Do you believe the Mandrakes are happy?"

What a question. "Why do you ask?"

"Come child. I'm sure the lady has other things on her mind."

Lady. Ikara liked this anonymity. "I'd like to know her answer."

"They seem so sad," the girl said.

The woman shooed her along. Ikara took some time to move. Was their sadness so obvious to others?

Inside, the palace air was cooler. She wasn't alone in coming here to get out of the heat. Many drifted past her to look at the frescoes and carvings that lined the various corridors. A few tried to interpret what they meant; most were happy just to be out of the sun.

She walked over the mosaic floor towards the library, or what she hoped to be the library, according to the directions she'd been given, and passed a couple standing in front of a large fresco of Khumn in the heat of battle. Another woman, further on, sighed at a seascape. A man commented on the style of a Mandrake ship to another. Others spoke in hushed whispers about the Mandrakes' return. Sekai was mentioned most of all.

An undercurrent of energy rippled over her, and Ikara felt drawn to a room near the center of the

palace. The few soldiers she encountered let her pass. Everything in the palace, save Pherus's private rooms, was open to all, as her mother had said. She wandered down another corridor, urged on by the sensation.

She stepped into a large passage.

The fresco of the woman standing in the lake was directly opposite her. She seemed to reach for an invisible sun, while her feet were held fast, beneath the lake.

Ikara ran her finger along the surface of the water. It seemed to ripple before her, and she jerked her hand away and took a step backwards. The face of the standing woman looked unfamiliar, but her occupation was unmistakable: a healer.

Ikara looked closer at the image. Beneath the water was a kneeling man. He could have been an Emperor about to be initiated, or a patient about to be healed.

Pherus hadn't mentioned a man. Maybe he couldn't see him.

She stood forward and noticed it was the angle of the light. Now she couldn't see him at all. Then she understood why this fresco might have intrigued Pherus. It would be a ceremony he'd undertake at the succession.

Ikara shifted her gaze to a woman wearing a red dress whose face was painted gold. Dark eyes followed Ikara as she passed. The temptation to reach out to touch it was overwhelming.

Ikara fought the pull and stepped back. The desire lessened. Was this woman trying to reach her? Ikara thought the idea ridiculous, so she touched the golden face with her finger to confirm how silly she was being. The walls shimmered with a milky hue, briefly surrounding her. Before Ikara could determine what had happened, the haze dissipated. Another odd sensation passed over her that she couldn't initially fathom. Thoughts raged inside her head, thoughts Ikara knew weren't her own.

Ikara tried to turn. Nothing happened. Her head tilted down as if controlled by another. With a start, she saw gold pants overlaid with an overtunic, adorned with patterns of five-sided stars.

Whose body am I in?

Her host wrapped the red shawl tighter around her, looked up again and caught her breath. Hearing footsteps, a feeling of tenderness rose in her host. He came into view. Her host knew this man, loved this man.

Khumn.

Tenderness changed to hostility when the other man came into view. Anum, shorter than Khumn, wore the burgundy robe of an adviser. They were in deep discussion and hadn't yet seen her.

Khumn's dark hair fell past his broad shoulders. Ikara watched him turn to face her, saw the way he looked over her host's face, savoring every detail. He shook his head at Anum. "Meri and I are not

ready to do this. Yet,” he said harshly.

Meri? She was inside Meri’s mind. *How was that possible?*

Meri held no such confusion; she wanted Anum to leave.

“I thought we’d agreed,” Anum insisted.

Khumn’s response took Ikara by surprise. Meri, it seemed, had been more than eager to give Khumn what he wanted, once. Ikara tried to shield herself from Meri’s emotions, but to no avail. She felt as if she were toppling into an abyss. Meri’s emotions were so pure, so unselfish; the decision to change her mind and not die for Khumn had been painfully difficult for her.

Meri gripped Khumn’s arm. Ikara tried to surface. When she did, barely controlled rage simmered within Khumn.

“I’ll become a Mandrake when I am ready, not you Anum. Now leave us.”

Anum bowed stiffly. “Emperor,” he said. “You can bring Meri back when you are a god.”

Ikara noticed Meri wasn’t one who’d allow Anum to have the last word. “I will choose the day of my death Anum, not you.”

Anum spun around and walked off.

Khumn cupped Meri’s chin tenderly with his fingers, and his rage fled in an instant. His love for her was unquestionable. Meri shivered as his fingers drifted down her throat. A wave of desire swept over her body.

“Sekai does not want me to do this. I... know he is right,” she whispered.

His fingers returned to her chin and his eyes softened. “If you truly don’t want to do this, say it and we will leave.”

“Anum believes I have betrayed him. He isn’t a forgiving man.”

For an instant, Khumn’s expression was one Ikara never wanted to see again. He was torn between his desire to become a Mandrake and the cost to Meri.

“We do not bow to the whims of the Mandrakes. We will leave Arien tomorrow,” he said.

He drew her lips to him. Ikara tried to hide from the emotions, but there was nowhere she could go. She was swept into the rising tide of Meri’s desire.

Khumn withdrew from Meri; his eyes held a hint of regret and later, relief.

Dizziness overwhelmed her. She heard a thud as her back touched the wall. Ikara took in ragged breaths; the desire hadn’t fled so easily.

Her breathing steadied as she recalled what happened. How had she entered Meri’s body, or left it for that matter? Ikara recalled when she’d met Karin in the ocean. Somehow she’d touched the lines of passage, again.

Ikara scrambled to her feet. She dared not touch the fresco again and distanced herself as far as possible from Meri's image. Further down the corridor, Ikara looked at the windows above her; the shadows had lengthened greatly; it was almost dark.

She heard a voice carry ahead of her.

"...Let him be prepared for the lake. Let him be received in the presence of Asiel...."

The chanting grew louder as she drew closer. Pherus's father must be undergoing one of the rituals before being sent to the lake.

Her concern over intruding on an important ceremony overrode her curiosity. She ducked past the mourning room, down another narrow corridor until she finally found her way back to her rooms. She lay down upon her bed and allowed the afternoon's events to sink in. Possibilities seemed to open up before her. What if she could control, could manipulate the lines of passage?

She fell asleep, dreaming of lines twisting around the nexus, a five-sided star.

* * *

Hands shook her awake. She opened her eyes to see Liea dressed in a pale green gown that matched her eyes, with a neckline exposing the top of her breasts. It contrasted well with her brown hair, hung loose rather than a plait down her back.

"You slept almost a night and a day," she said.

Had she slept that long? "It must be the heat. Thank you for not waking me sooner." She suspected it was due to an accumulation of recent events.

Liea placed the lantern on a table beside Ikara's bed.

"How is the woman I healed?" Ikara asked.

"Better. Her name is Kien, by the way and she'd like to see you when you are free. I suggested later tonight or tomorrow. By the way, the feasting starts soon, and I'd like you to point out the man who showed an interest in me the other night."

No wonder Liea wore such a dress.

Ikara pondered what to wear. She could not believe she'd care about such things, and she blushed to realize just how much she wanted to impress Sekai.

Liea left Ikara's room and returned with a pale gold dress similar in style to hers. "Try it on."

Ikara did so. The material reduced to fit her waist.

"Now we're ready," Liea said.

* * *

More visitors drifted into the main hall, causing others to spill into the minor halls. Ikara searched the sea of faces and couldn't find the lord in question.

Nor could she find Sekai.

Hoping to find either in one of the other rooms, Ikara said, "Let's try one of the smaller halls."

People drifted into couples, small groups of similar minds formed. Men argued about philosophy. A woman argued with a girl about her dress.

Ikara spotted another, older lord. "Who is he?"

"Doran. He rules a small outworld planet. No one of strategic significance." Liea cupped Ikara's arm.

"Over there I see Kephna, Umat, Pemheb, plus three or four others from minor worlds."

"It's him," Ikara said. "The one with long dark hair."

"Pemheb?" Liea asked.

Ikara nodded.

"Oh my," Liea said, "are you sure?"

Before Ikara could answer, the music stopped. Pherus walked in, followed by four men carrying a large tray with a large pig on it.

Several in the crowd cheered. Ikara could smell the scent of roasted pork as it drifted towards her.

"It took a full day to roast it," Liea said.

The man placed the pig on a long table, running along the center of the hall. She wondered how many more pigs would be brought in.

Two more trays came, followed by fruit and brimming jugs of wine. Servants wove through the crowds, filling goblets and offering food on small trays. The overabundance of food shocked her. The smell of the different meats, the sweat of flesh in the increasing humidity, all combined to make her want to bolt to the gardens. She nearly did.

"Ah. I've wanted to meet you," said a voice from behind.

Ikara turned. Neti's green eyes looked redshot. Up close, she stank of perfume.

Neti radiated hostility, surprising Ikara.

"I'm surprised Pherus would consider a healer."

Did Neti consider her as competition? "He doesn't, and I can assure you that I have no interest."

Pherus closed the gap between her and Neti. He smiled to all three women, Ikara last. "You look wonderful."

She fought the rising blush on her cheeks. The second man who'd complimented her on her appearance.

He whispered in her ear. "That fresco I want to show you? Meet me near the mourning room in an hour. We'll go from there."

She could hardly refuse. "I know where it is. I'll meet you there instead."

“You’ve seen it?” he asked, wide-eyed.

She nodded. “It’s an interesting work.”

“Good,” he said.

Neti made to follow.

“Not this time, I have a few lords I want to see,” he said firmly.

After he’d disappeared into the crowd, Liea said, “You are not planning to spend the night with him are you?”

Neti inclined her head as if amused.

Ikara could not believe Liea would ask such a question. “It is a fresco, nothing more. I have no interest in him, Neti.”

Neti left with an uneasy smile on her lips.

“She’s determined,” Liea said, “and you had better watch yourself. Last night, no one saw Pherus either. Rumors have started.”

“What? I was asleep, and alone.”

“I know. If facts are not available to the contrary, mis-truths will do.”

“He found a fresco in one of the corridors and does not understand the meaning. That is all.”

Liea grinned. “Hmm. Not an original line.”

“Don’t be foolish Liea; let’s find Pemheb.”

She found him eventually. “Look, he’s watching you again.”

The lord approached both women. “I am Pemheb of Burusis.”

“Ship building,” Liea said.

He stared directly at Ikara. “Yes, and you are?”

“Ikara.”

He was quite good looking. Dark skinned, with black hair that fell behind his ears and contrasted with his pale gray eyes, which occasionally darted around the room. He wasn’t comfortable being here.

“You’re watchful aren’t you,” Ikara said.

Liea nudged her in the side.

Pemheb smiled, showing a hint of perfect teeth.

“Sorry. Healers aren’t used to subtlety or the masks of politics.”

His smile broadened. “A healer, I would never have guessed. Now I know, I’ll have to be more careful.”

He returned to his companion who was busy talking to an older woman nearby. Disappointment rose in Liea. This woman was his current lover.

Not for long.

Pemheb returned to Liea's side.

His companion frowned at Liea. Ikara pretended not to notice.

Ikara watched Pemheb's gaze stray back to Liea's neckline. It was time to leave. "Liesa. I have to go."

She had plenty of time and took it to find Sekai. Ikara scanned the remaining rooms, to no avail. On the way she noticed the mourning room. She had time to visit the body of Pherus's father, Kreth and tell him about Mira.

No one else was there, save a guard who didn't stop her. Inside, lanterns cast shadows over the open coffin. She placed her hand on the bandaged head. A flash came. Kreth had returned to the lake twice, but not when she was there. The illness was preventable, although the old man wouldn't have lasted beyond another healing. She swept her hand over the bandages one last time, and whispered. "Mira is safe."

I knew you would save her.

She jerked her hand away. His soul was still in his body, unable to be freed until he was immersed into the lake. She'd never been able to 'listen' to a soul before, until Asiel's intervention. For once, she was grateful for Asiel's gift.

"What did you say?" Pherus said from the doorway.

Ikara jumped at his sudden presence. Had he heard her?

"I said that Mira's soul had been blessed by Asiel," she lied.

Pherus reached the coffin and kissed the mummified head. "My father never expected me to succeed, but Anum believed in me." The last was said with such affection, it took all Ikara's effort not to tell him the truth about her father.

"You mentioned Mira," he said more coolly. "I had no hand in what was done to her."

But he knew, he had to. "She was so young, and the virus-" Ikara couldn't go on.

He placed his hand over hers, a gesture that stunned her. His eyes were now full of compassion. Ikara was too surprised to react. How could one change so suddenly? It was as if two people existed in his body.

"Was her condition life-threatening to you?"

What sort of question was this? "Yes it was; I nearly died." *Oh, why did I say that?*

"I had no idea the risk was so great to you."

Why did he care? There was something so wrong about all of this.

He hand grasped hers. "Did your god aid you?"

She stiffened, and his grip tightened. *How do I get out of this?* She tried to imagine Asiel's confronting gaze and wonderful embrace. Her hand relaxed beneath his, easing the pressure. She could get through this. "He always aids me with his presence."

Pherus abruptly removed his hand, his face deathly white. She cupped his elbow to diagnose what was wrong.

Darkness, then light, swirled in a battle that seemed to tear into his very soul. She had been right; this man was torn with a decision that wasn't of his own choosing. If only she knew what disturbed him.

He backed away, cleared his throat. Color returned to his skin. "Do you think father would have lived much longer if I'd brought him back to the lake?"

"You didn't cheat his life by much," she said softly.

It appeared he hadn't expected that answer, and seemed glad. "Come," he insisted.

They arrived at the fresco; it looked different under the lanterns at night. A faint ripple ran along the walls and the surface of the water turned to a vivid blue. She blinked. The color paled against the stone wall.

Pherus's fingers lightly caressed her shoulder. It appeared he hadn't seen it or his fingers would have tensed.

His lips glided down her neck. "Come back to my rooms tonight."

Oddly she didn't find the touch unpleasant, much to her surprise. As for his offer... "No."

His arms circled her waist. His swelling desire pressed against her lower back. She didn't feel any desire at all. "I belong to another."

He abruptly released her. "Sekai? He'll be gone in a few weeks and you will be alone. Is that what you want?"

She didn't want to think about the truth. "Is what you're offering any different?"

He chuckled. "Perhaps not. Now where were we?" His hand returned to her shoulder, caressing to and fro. "Ah. The fresco. What do you see?"

"Do you mean the woman in the red dress? That's Meri. I believe Khumn offered to marry her in this room," a voice said from the shadows.

Ikara, startled by the answer, spun around.

Sekai stood there.

Pherus's hand fell slowly from her shoulder. "I believe the Mandrakes disapproved of the union."

Ikara, aware how this must appear to Sekai, pretended it was of no consequence. As for Pherus's comment, marriages amongst healers were rare; between an Emperor and a healer it was non-existent,

except for Khumn. She didn't know the Mandrakes had disapproved, and even if they had, what could they have done? From what she saw briefly of Khumn through Meri's eyes, he refused to be influenced by Anum, the most arrogant, by far, of the Mandrakes she'd met.

"I believe Meri had quite a few conversations with Khumn along these corridors, marriage not being the least of them," Sekai said.

"How long was Anum Khumn's adviser?" Ikara asked.

Sekai gave her a look of astonishment. "How do you know that?"

"I..." She looked sideways at Pherus who gave her an equally startled look. She didn't want to tell either man what had happened to her.

"Teachings," she muttered.

"I don't think so," Sekai said.

Pherus straightened. "Leave her be."

Sekai appeared to tower over him.

"I'll be outside," Ikara said, hoping her departure would diffuse their tension.

Ikara walked quickly down the corridor and out of sight. She took a deep breath after reaching the exit. Checking her bearings, she determined she was in the main palace gardens. Alone save for an occasional couple, far more interested in each other than her, Ikara wandered over to the balcony rail to watch the rhythm of the waves below.

Had he come to find her? It was a little used part of the palace. His intrusion could be hardly a coincidence.

* * *

Sekai watched her go. How did she *know*? That knowledge was buried, even from the records.

"You mentioned conversations in this corridor? You were there in Khumn's time, weren't you?" Pherus asked.

His rapt expression bothered Sekai. "He asked her to marry him, in this very spot."

Pherus took a step backwards. "Are you sure?"

He nodded. "Why are you interested?"

Pherus's blue eyes betrayed a concern he'd not seen before. Did Pherus care for Ikara beyond her healing abilities?

Pherus misunderstood his silence. "I have offended you."

"No you haven't. What do you really want to ask?"

"What sort of healer dies to allow a Mandrake to be born?" Pherus said.

Sekai found the question unexpected. Pherus might be young, but he was perceptive. "Died for me,

or in general?” Sekai glanced at the fresco again. Was there a... He looked closer at the lake. Beneath was a kneeling man. Was that what Ikara saw? How could he have missed it? “Before I answer, what do you see below the waterline?”

Pherus stepped back and gasped. “Oh.”

Sekai needed to know how whether Pherus truly wanted immortality, or if it was Anum’s influence. “The cost is high, and you never forget the gift of her life, even after a millennia.”

Pherus gave him a look of renewed admiration. “Look at you. The lake revives you. In this light I wouldn’t know you...” He lowered his voice. “... were immortal.”

He dreaded where this was heading. “What do you really want?”

“To live forever. To be like you.”

“You will never be like me.”

Pherus didn’t seem to understand. Sekai hadn’t expected him to. Again, a fool wanted to be like him. How many had asked, wondered, tried and failed. Sekai made his way back to the banquet, leaving Pherus behind. He had to find Ikara.

A Mandrake intercepted Sekai in the corridor. He was a head shorter than Sekai, his stocky build caused his robe to be a snug fit. His dark red hair contrasted sharply with his very pale skin.

Sekai gripped his hands in greeting. “Gwain.”

“When did you arrive?” Gwain asked.

“A week ago,” Sekai said, studying his pale young face. One of the newer ones.

“And Anum?” he asked, not perturbed by Sekai’s gaze.

“He’s not left Arien for thirty years.”

Gwain raised an eyebrow. “Why?”

“He tires of the sleep.”

“I see,” Gwain said.

Sekai knew he’d not understand.

Gwain swung around. “To the banquet?”

Sekai nodded. It was on the way to the gardens, where he hoped Ikara had gone.

In the main hall, Gwain looked around. “Do you find each awakening brings such wonder? I have slept thirty years and it seems only yesterday I was here.”

Of course, for Forin and Gwain the awakening was a wonder. It took until the end of the second millennia before the need to die began to set in.

Tier would know, though. Where was he? Probably hiding in the garden too.

Gwain walked towards a group of women. Sekai smiled at Gwain’s warm welcome.

He departed the company of people and went outside. The large gardens never ceased to amaze him. The blooms of red and purple appeared black in this light, separated in places by pockets of small fruit-bearing trees. Their scent made the air heady. These gardens existed solely for the pleasure of the Emperor and his guests at succession. The workers had taken great care in tending it in the intervening years.

He found Ikara at the balcony, leaning against a pillar. Below, the near full moon reflected in the ocean.

She straightened and looked up at him, her face pale in the moonlight.

He removed a strand of hair from her face. "Tell me what you saw in the corridor."

"I saw Khumn, for real."

"Or a ghost of his past."

She frowned. "I was *there*. He was as real to me as you are to me now."

He wanted to believe her. Was this another gift from Asiel?

"Tell me what you saw in the fresco," he said softly.

She told him about the immersion.

He nodded. "I also saw the man in the lake. You are right, it is the immersion ceremony. What do you feel for Pherus?"

She flinched. "What I... feel. I don't know. Pherus faces a decision that threatens to tear him apart. I feel a need to ease him. That is all."

He hid his relief. Her healing was clouding her judgment. Now, a trickier request. "Can you recap the entire conversation that Meri had with Khumn in the corridor?"

In the moonlight, he saw a flicker of anguish pass through her as if she didn't want to talk about it.

She did, and he listened intently.

When she was done, he placed his hand between her breasts to forestall her reaching out to him. Her heart pounded.

Her hand caressed his. "Sekai. Can we finish what we started last night?"

"Yes," he said huskily.

Back in her rooms, Sekai drew the curtains open. He watched the shimmering reflection of the moon within the sea. "Arien had twin moons, once."

She turned to face him. "I know. You said that the other night."

He lost his concentration for a moment. "We destroyed the second moon two thousand years ago. A mistake."

Her eyes widened in amazement. "You did? How?"

He pressed his fingers to his temples. “The second moon interfered with the energy of Arien, so we destroyed it.” No, that wasn’t quite true either.

She seemed torn between being awed and appalled. “Did you really destroy it?”

“Yes, and Asiel punished us for it.”

She placed her hand on his shoulder. “How did he punish you?”

“By forcing us to return to the lake as his emissaries at each succession, so we could be reminded.”

“I see.”

The gentle lapping of waves soothed his nerves. “The Mandrake brings miracles or death.” He smiled wryly. “You, too, could be in danger.”

“By falling in love with Pherus? I don’t think so.”

The corners of his mouth drew into a smile. “Pherus is simply misguided. He could be easily steered back to sense by you. He desires you.”

“What do you take me for?” Ikara asked.

He placed his finger on her lips. “You will be better than I am in stopping him.”

She snatched his finger from his lips. “He has no chance.”

The air seemed to become charged. He had to have her or leave now.

Taking her hands, he slid her arms around him drawing her lips to his. The lines of passage surged from his body into her, with an intensity that left him breathless.

She smelt of rain, and a hint of sweat, and another indefinable odor that drove any remnants of doubt he’d had about her feelings for him. He kissed her throat and felt her tremble. Her skin seemed to be on fire where he touched her with his hands.

“Reach into my mind,” she whispered.

He did so, and for a brief instant touched her soul, a sea of colors so pure. The connection with her had grown stronger. “It’s you inside Inu.”

“We must go further,” she said.

He wanted to, badly, and not just to chase a memory. Ikara was real and living before him.

He lifted her dress over her head and let it fall to the ground. Moonlight bathed her skin. He froze at the vision before him. Fine, so fine. Her breasts were ample although not large, her stomach flat. The thatch between her legs was obscured by shadows.

His heart hammered hard in his chest. Never had any woman sent his senses reeling. It was as if his body had lain dormant for millennia, waiting for her to come and rekindle not only the heat in his loins but possibly his soul. He steered her outside.

The cool breeze sent goosebumps over his body, and hers.

He removed his robe and cast it aside.

Her eyes widened at his manhood; then her lips drew into a smile.

She leaned against the railing, facing him. He pressed small kisses from her throat to the curve of her breast, causing little shudders to race over her body. He brushed a nipple with his lips and felt it harden in his mouth.

A low groan escaped Ikara's lips.

Exquisite, he thought.

He descended in a cascade of caresses and kisses down to her flat stomach. After parting her legs with one hand, he stroked the inside of her thigh.

A breeze picked up, cooling his sweaty skin.

He pressed his lips to the inner folds of her nether lips and began to kiss.

Hands grasped his hair and Ikara thrust her hips towards him to give him greater access. He tasted her essence pouring from deep inside her. A whimper from above urged him on.

Suddenly the air shifted to arid and dry, save for a hint of moisture from a nearby oasis. He could not see it, only knew it existed from memory.

Ikara's scent sent him reeling, as did Inu who writhed beneath him in the desert. He was re-living the first time he had lain with Inu. His body arched, just on the onset of orgasm, with Inu's. Ikara cried out his name. It was like having two women at once.

He groaned into Ikara's nether lips as he came.

The vision faded and the humid air returned, coupled with Ikara's scent. Hearing a faint whimper, he rose to find tears on her face.

Chapter Ten

“Ikara. What’s wrong?”

She dragged herself away from their passion, letting her own fade into despair.

Inu had already faded from her mind, not so the sadness she felt in leaving Sekai. Their time together had been brief, just like hers and Sekai’s.

“She abandoned him,” she said.

He cradled her in his arms. “I lived with Inu for ten years.”

No. Inu, or whoever she was, abandoned him that night. Inu may have remained, but the woman he’d loved was someone else. Who, she had no idea. She did know the love from that other woman lingered in her own heart.

“Just as you will soon abandon me,” she whispered. The words were out before she realized what she’d said.

“I can’t stay with you, just like she couldn’t stay with me. It can never be more,” he said with a strained voice.

She leaned against his shoulder, breathing in his scent, mixed with the taste of the salty air. Her sated body refused to listen to the crying heart within her. *Do I love him, or is it her?*

Ikara had to find a way back to that time in the desert. “I must meet Inu.”

He looked at her startled. “You what?”

“Asiel gave me gifts for a reason. Karin said I would want to save her. Will you aid me?”

“I can’t.”

“Why?”

“I cannot imagine being anything more than I am.”

Space was what she needed. As if he sensed it, he backed away from her. Her mother was right. It was going to hurt when he left, more that she dared to imagine.

He searched for his robe and slipped it on.

“I can’t offer you more, forgive me,” he said, and left.

She loved him. A word that had meant nothing to her before, she now understood with painful clarity. She wanted to have a life with him.

Grabbing the first dress she could find, she slipped it on. It was time to visit Kien, the woman she had healed. Better to find some distraction than suffer like this.

Just up from her lodge, Ikara entered Kien’s via the front entrance. It was dark, save for a sliver of

twilight through the curtains.

Kien sat on the edge of the bed, her head hung low. As Ikara approached, Kien raised her head, her face full of awe. “I can’t believe you healed me.”

Ikara sat beside her. “Forgive me for not coming sooner.”

“Why should you?”

“Tell me what happened?” Ikara said gently.

“I went towards the gardens for a walk and I overheard two soldiers talking about Karin. They...”

Ikara urged her on. “They what?”

“They said Karin disappeared on purpose. They also said she found and took the star of Asiel.”

Ikara stilled the motion on Kien’s arm. Kat had spoken of Mandrakes but no mention of the star. Why had he omitted it? Recalling the star around Karin’s neck, had she stolen it from Halifad?

She needed to think about the repercussion of this... or... was it a sign from Asiel?

“I’m not used to such violence,” Kien said. “I’ll be returning home on the next passenger ship out of here.”

At least she had the sense to leave. “Come, lie down.”

Kien did so. Ikara hummed softly, her hands hovering over Kien’s body. Slowly, the woman’s eyes closed and she fell into the easy breathing of sleep.

Ikara looked at her relaxed face, wishing she could find such a moment. She didn’t want to be alone and the one person she wanted had left her.

She rose from Kien’s bed, slipped though the curtains and gazed at the sea as it rolled back and forth. She jumped over the balcony onto the sands and walked towards the water’s edge to look at the twilight beyond. Clouds thickened and the moisture in the air clung to her crumpled dress. Thunder rumbled over the steady lapping of waves. The charged air made her heady.

Help me Karin. I don’t know what to do.

A droplet of rain fell onto her face, then another. Ikara faced skyward, closing her eyes. More droplets fell. She sagged to the ground letting the rain cascade over her body. Thunder shuddered around her and the rain stung. Droplets pelted her. She felt the energy around her increase and drew it in. Awareness struck as to what she was doing. It was the same as if she were taking in Asiel’s blue fire. All this time she had the ability and didn’t know. Invigorated by the revelation, she increased the energy.

Warmth poured into her body, causing steam to rise. Thunder crashed again. Ikara became pleasantly distant from her surroundings, and the thunder faded into silence. She closed her eyes and drifted away.

Darkness.

A voice?

Karin is that you?

She opened her eyes. The moon glowed through the thick clouds. Rain continued to fall over a silent sea. Ikara tried to sit up, causing her head to spin. She fell back onto the sand.

Karin didn't come to her aid.

With a lingering sadness in her heart, she returned to her rooms.

* * *

Dawn light filtered through the window, while rain continued to fall. She slowly sat up, but the dizziness didn't return. She swung her legs out of the bed and cautiously stood, causing sand to fall from her dress. She wandered to the patio and leaned against the rail. Damp air hugged her, infusing her with warmth.

"You don't look too well," a voice said.

"Just tired."

Liea leaned beside her. "Did you know Pherus didn't turn up last night?" She chuckled. "Nor did you, again. You should have seen Neti. She was furious."

Her chest tightened. "No. They don't think-"

"Why not? Let them speculate. I'm sure Pherus has an equally valid reason."

Ikara gently cuffed Liea's shoulder.

Liea grinned. "Are you well enough to get acquainted with one of the lords?"

Ikara wiped the remnants of sleep from her eyes. Why not? The chance of meeting any after the succession was unlikely. "Who is he?"

"Pemheb."

"Your lover?"

She gave a sly grin. "Perhaps."

Liea stood up and turned to the table. She picked up the comm, the size of her palm and flipped open the screen. "Pemheb. Lord at nineteen. Planet Burusis. His father died in a shipping accident. Details restricted. His mother is still alive, although she does not attend official functions. He is unmarried."

"Any *useful* information?" Ikara asked.

Liea gave her a hrrmph. "Burusis has built ships for many centuries, and I don't think that includes Mandrake ships. Mind you, I'd be curious to find out who did build them. Do you know?"

She headed to her room to change. Asiel had, but decided to keep that information to herself.

“I never gave it a thought,” she called out to Liea. “Would Burusis have such technology?”

Liea lingered at the doorway. “I don’t know. In any case I’ll ask the question.”

Ikara draped a gold shawl over her shoulders. “Maybe they did in the past.”

* * *

They walked along another corridor unfamiliar to her. Ikara wondered how large the palace was. After another twist and turn, they climbed steps until they stopped in front of large stone doors carved with birds twisted amongst vines.

A guard motioned them to wait.

The carvings of birds appeared so fine they almost looked alive. She ran her hand along the wings of a strange long legged bird. “Such fine work.”

Liea raised a cylinder to the door then quickly lowered it again. “No listening devices here.”

The guard reopened the door, leaving Ikara’s hand suspended in mid air. “You may enter.”

Pemheb stood, looking out of the large window, his back to them. The room contained a table, laden with food. Liea gave Ikara a hard look. “Promise me you’ll eat some?”

Ikara nodded sharply.

The guard closed the door behind them. Ikara gazed at the carved walls, as ornate as the doors. A tingle shot up her arms. She rubbed her hands, and the familiar feeling grew. The lines of passage vibrated through the walls of twisted carved vines.

Pemheb turned around. “Ikara. I’m glad we meet again.”

Ikara scanned the seafood, fruit, and lastly the wine on the blood-wood table. Her stomach growled.

Pemheb was older than she initially thought. His eyes held genuine curiosity. *You, Pemheb, delight in everything you see and touch. You yearn to know more than your mind and your body can handle.*

She reveled in the power that surrounded her, stronger than elsewhere in the city. “Whose room was this?”

Pemheb ran his finger along one of the carved green vines near the window. “This room, I believe, was a favorite of Meri’s. There’s a sense of peace about it, don’t you find?”

Was it so strong that even he noticed? “Yes. A sense of peace.”

Out of the corner of her eye, a vine rippled. Pure joy washed over her. She gripped the edge of the table to steady herself, before looking again. The wall had solidified.

“Are you all right?” he asked, concerned.

“Yes. I’ve not eaten much since last night.”

He gave Liea a look of disapproval. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Liea crossed her arms in mock indignation. “We’ve only just got here.” She motioned towards the

table. "Ikara sit."

She did so, and placed strips of cooked fish on bread, topped with thick spicy coconut. The smell of rich chili wafted through the air about her. Liea sat beside her, poured a lemon drink and handed it to Ikara. Pemheb took a few nuts, then sat opposite them.

"What do you know of Meri?" Ikara asked.

Pemheb ran his dark finger along the table. "We know little of her or Khumn. Stories of their lives are tied up in carvings, and only the Mandrakes fully understand those."

"A student learns only what a teacher will teach," Ikara said.

Liea shook her head at Ikara.

Pemheb gazed at her intently. "What does that mean?"

"Anum is a teacher, who is selective in what he passes on and what he does not," Ikara said.

"I'm glad someone else has concerns about Anum and Pherus," he said.

Dangerous words. Ikara scanned the room quickly. "Who else has concerns?"

"There are no listeners here," he reassured her. "As for your question, I'm not sure. The lords are careful of their opinions in public."

Ikara should have considered that Pherus could possibly use such devices. She was glad Liea has checked beforehand.

"Do you take spying for granted on Burusis?"

Pemheb shook his head. "We have no need for such devices."

Ikara decided to take his word. So far he'd been very direct with her. She wondered, though, why she was here. Did he want her confidence about Anum?

"Were Mandrake ships built on Burusis?" Liea said.

He smiled, a smile that went to his eyes. "A good question." He leaned back in the chair. "First, I think we will eat." Pemheb filled his plate with several varieties of fish, fruit and breads. He methodically tasted his selection. "Arien does not provide a bad feast."

Ikara took another bite from her roll.

He fixed on Liea. "Your question about the Mandrake ships. Why do you ask?"

"Burusis has always been the center for ship building."

"True, but more so in recent times."

"Were the Mandrake ships built on Burusis?" Ikara asked.

"Yes. They certainly were. But the essence, for want of a better word, to fly them, was created on Arien."

Ikara and Liea gave each a look of astonishment.

“Arien,” Ikara asked. “When?”

“Five thousand years ago, I think. Depending on if you believe Asiel exists or not.”

As much as she wanted to tell him of Asiel’s existence, he’d demand proof. Instead she said, “The energy we use in our healing is the essence of Asiel. You are talking about the lines of passage or the blue fire.”

He smiled warmly. “I like you, Ikara. You give direct answers and you confirm what I’ve read. Have you seen it?”

“Yes. Sekai showed me.”

He took care with his next words, unsure, she suspected, how she would react.

“You, I’m curious about. Take Sekai, for example. The way he danced with you. Mandrakes are here to defend Arien, his... protection of you seems more... personal.”

What was Pemheb after? “What we do is not your business.”

She wished she hadn’t said that. Uncomfortable, Ikara rose and walked towards the window. The humidity seeped into her skin. The rain continued to fall.

Pemheb followed her. “One has to be fortunate to be allowed inside a Mandrake ship. Sekai has allowed you on his.”

The real reason at last. “You want to know what I saw.”

“Please.”

“The power source in Sekai’s ship can only be harnessed by a Mandrake. I’ve no idea how, only it’s similar to what exists in the lake when we harness the fire for its healing properties.”

“I’m sorry about slighting you regarding Sekai. It wasn’t what I meant,” Pemheb said.

“Why do you want to see inside a ship?”

He didn’t hesitate in answering. “Curiosity.”

Ikara knew instinctively that she could trust him. “I’ll ask him.”

Liea gave her a sarcastic, *oh, was that a good idea?* look.

He returned to the table. “I don’t know why, but I trust you. You have no need to play one of us over the other.”

Ikara could think of nothing worse than the protocols Pemheb must go through. “I think I am fortunate. The life of a noblewoman isn’t for me.”

“You prefer being a healer?”

“I do,” she said warmly. “Arien has some of the technology of other worlds, yet we fundamentally live in a way no different to when Asiel appeared. We heal the sick and the dying, and extend life.”

He took another bite of the fish. “And the lake? I believe the succession wasn’t always held there.”

She had seen Sekai at an oasis with Inu. That, she could not mention to anyone. “I don’t know. The healing certainly has been.”

“Amazing. So, you really are content here.”

Liea frowned and ate another piece of fish.

Ikara felt very relaxed. Maybe it was the room, or Pemheb, or both.

Liea feigned a cough. “Ikara has a few things to do before tonight.”

Pemheb gave her a sly look. “And you.”

“Not for a...” She grinned. “No, I must go.”

Ikara pretended she’d not heard and looked around the room.

Liea rose, as did Pemheb. Ikara did so, reluctantly.

In the corridor, out of earshot, Liea whispered, “He does not waste time, does he?”

“It seems my association with Sekai has taken some strange turns,” Ikara said.

She stopped Liea in the corridor. “Go back to him. I can handle the few *things* I need to do, whatever they are.”

“I don’t get a lot of free time, and, well, he is diverting.”

Ikara pushed her towards the closed door. “Go.”

So Liea did.

Chapter Eleven

The next evening, the main reception room was thick with people. The energies seemed to be stronger, similar to what she had experienced in Meri's room. Was this another level of awareness she was beginning to experience? Or was it a simpler solution, such as her usual reaction to an approaching storm? Servants wove through the crowd, carrying trays of food and wine. Ikara observed Pherus move from one person to the next, with Neti accompanying him.

Where was Sekai?

Ikara spotted Tier and approached him. He looked worse than the previous night. His bloodshot eyes complimented the goblet of red wine he gripped in an unsteady hand. His smile was forced, as was his presence; he didn't want to be here. Before Ikara thought about what she was doing, she briefly touched his cheek. His emptiness was a void so deep, it appeared bottomless.

Tier snatched her hand, saving her from drowning into his despair. A glimpse had been bad enough.

"I don't think even you could save me, healer."

Ikara fought back the darkness from her mind. "I don't think I could."

He raised the goblet in salute, spilling wine down his hand. "At least you are honest about it. By the way, what is your name?"

"Ikara."

He smiled wryly. "Sekai speaks of you."

She tensed at his name. "Do you know where he is?"

"Most likely at his ship or the garden."

"Prenth," she said without thinking.

"Who? Oh. Yes. Prenth. He was so determined, but this woman from the southern province convinced him not to go through with it. I was furious. Do you know how long it takes to cultivate a man to replace you?"

Ikara couldn't hide that she saw a shattered man in Tier, one who still wanted to die. It was terrible he could not. "No."

"It took a year to convince Prenth, and she managed to change his mind in less than a day."

No. Karin took much longer than a day.

"I've lost the inclination to try again." He drained the goblet then looked at it, as if it had suddenly appeared in his hand. "I can't even find relief in this wine."

Ikara's heart thudded with anticipation. "What happened after they met?"

"They married within the week. Can see why. No man with sense would let her out of his sight. Why the interest?"

She wanted to treasure this moment. Karin had succeeded in stopping Prenth from becoming a Mandrake. "It's a long story. I think I'll find Sekai now."

He cupped her elbow, brought his lips close to her ear. He smelt of the ancient dust of the past, like the mummy in the morning room. "You'll fail to convince Sekai to stay, as others have before you."

He grabbed another goblet from a serving girl and drank it in one go, bowed to her, then left.

She trembled with joy for Karin, but her own future with Sekai grew increasingly uncertain.

Save him.

She looked around the room. No one was looking her way.

Save my son.

Was it Kreth?

She left the reception hall, ran down the corridor, stopping just inside the mourning room. Breathless from the run, she reached out and touched Kreth's bandaged head.

Free my son so I can be free.

"What can I do?" she whispered.

Reach into my mind.

She placed both hands on his forehead and probed into the husk of his mind, finding a labyrinth where a mind had once existed, loved, made decisions, changed lives.

Stop him. Save my son.

"From what?"

He does not have what it takes.

"Your son will not succeed. No healer will give him what he wants," she whispered.

A jolt of energy jerked her hands from the bandaged head. Kreth had not finished; someone had interfered.

Anum?

She didn't want to stay and find out. Ikara backed out of the room. Pherus's father believed she had the strength to save his son, and she would, if it was at all within her means.

So it was immortality Pherus coveted. Or did he? Kreth seemed to imply that Anum had a hand in this, and from the torn feelings she had seen in Pherus, she believed him. Either way, there was no chance Pherus would achieve that goal. The healers she'd seen in the city of Legends were few. She'd not seen any other healers in his company. Even if Pherus dared, he'd fail. A healer could not be

forced; she had to offer her life willingly.

She returned to the reception room, and ran headlong into Neti.

Neti inclined her head towards Pherus in the distance, speaking to one of the lords. “I see you two have not stopped the rumors.”

What rumors? Was Pherus all this woman could think of? Ikara had no time for it. “He’s yours. Leave me be.”

Neti’s face darkened. “I am here for one purpose only: to marry the Emperor. Tell me, has he asked you?”

“What?”

“To be his bride, you fool.”

This was too much. “I’m a healer. Emperors do not marry healers. I have also made it clear I have no interest in him.”

“So, he’s tried,” Neti said softly.

“To do what? There is a large gap between seduction and marriage. You are tiring me, now go.”

Neti spun on her heel and left.

Ikara had never spoken to anyone so rudely. No one had infuriated her so much, either. She spotted Sekai outside with a group of Mandrakes in the courtyard discussing, what, she didn’t know. No. She wouldn’t go there either, certainly not in her current state of mind.

“Ikara?” a subdued voice said.

She spun around to face Pherus. He looked exhausted. Here was one person she could not vent her anger on. Whatever game Anum played was tearing Pherus apart. That Pherus knew about Mira and had done nothing to prevent it, showed the depth of Anum’s influence over him.

Was there anything she could do for him at all? Her instincts screamed at her that he was a lost cause, and whatever she tried would be to no avail.

She smiled weakly. “You don’t look too well.”

He waved the concern aside. “It’s the festivities.”

Yet she couldn’t give up, not while a tiny remnant within his soul pleaded for her aid. “Let me help you.”

He looked behind Ikara, then shook his head. “I would like to apologize for my behavior. I should not have taken advantage of you the other night. It seems I have caused tension between you and Sekai.”

No Emperor needed to apologize to anyone. That he did touched her. “There is no harm done.”

His eyes brightened, looked beyond her again. “Neti.”

No wonder he'd changed the topic. Hope soared in her heart. Maybe she could aid him, if only he'd not allow Neti to hover around him at every turn.

"About what." Neti slipped between them, her hand slid possessively over his arm.

"Nothing of your concern," Pherus said.

Neti seemed immune to his less than civil tone. "I have heard healers are amazing at the lake. There is a god, or so they believe."

Ikara clenched her fists. "Asiel exists."

Neti's face paled.

Pherus eyes narrowed. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely."

"Oh, come on, Pherus. Let--"

"Neti!"

She gave him a start.

More gently he said. "At times it is better not to delve into things you do not understand." He disengaged her arm from his. "And I suggest you do *not* interrupt us again."

Neti left them, looking once back at Ikara, barely hiding a grimace.

"Come outside with me," Pherus said.

Ikara followed him, past the open window to the balcony. The still, balmy air brought some relief to her jaded nerves. The ocean turned to a shimmering dark mass as thick, dark clouds began to swallow the moon. Lightning flickered in the distance.

"Have you *seen* Asiel?"

Pherus desperately needed reassurance or validation. She couldn't determine which. "Yes."

He sagged into the railing as if he'd seen a miracle.

"What does Anum want from you?" she asked gently.

He gripped the railing for support. "I met Anum five years ago. He convinced my father to be his adviser, admitting he had advised to Emperors in the past. I didn't know he'd advised Khumn as well."

Since he skirted the question, she decided to try another, one that may be closer to the truth.

"Anum tried to make Khumn a Mandrake. Khumn refused to let Meri die for him. Pherus. Is that what you want?"

His gaze became unreadable, but the subtle twitch in his cheek left her in no doubt that was exactly his intention.

Ikara wanted to shake him. "Haven't you seen what they are? Anum is the foulest of them all. Walk away from him. Don't become like him."

“Tier said you were looking for me?” a voice said.

She spun around, as did Pherus. The timing couldn’t have been worse.

“Yes,” she said.

Ikara followed Pherus’s gaze, full of admiration for Sekai.

“Not all of them are the same,” he said to Ikara.

She bowed to Pherus. “May I take your leave?”

He nodded and left.

The walls were back. She could barely read Sekai. Her heart nearly broke in half from his indifferent gaze. It almost became impossible to speak.

She cleared her throat.

“Pemheb asked me if he could look at your ship. Also, I would like to see the rest of the recording,” she said.

He shrugged. “I can’t see why not. Where is he?”

She inclined her head in Pemheb’s direction. Sekai motioned her to follow him. “I’ll bring my ship to the courtyard.”

* * *

Sekai watched Pemheb touch the walls of the ship every few paces. When he reached the pilot room, he asked, “Where is the energy?”

Sekai activated a blue haze, revealing a pattern made up of lines.

“Are these schematics?” Pemheb asked.

“Yes.”

While Pemheb studied the schematics, Sekai’s gaze drifted to Ikara, who was looking back at him. She briefly looked up at him; hurt lingered in her eyes.

Sekai wished he’d never ever met her, nor loved her, but he did. He tore his gaze from her. Why had he invited her to his ship?

He wanted to make love to her, desperately, and since last night it was all he thought about.

“These designs are extraordinary. The concept looks simple,” Pemheb said.

Sekai steered his concentration back to Pemheb’s words.

“What I can’t understand is how it’s powered. This ship cannot possibly be powered by fusion.”

Sekai chose his words carefully. “It’s not powered by fusion. I don’t understand the mechanics myself. I don’t much care. The ship makes the calculations, draws the energy from the lines of passage and then... moves.”

“The lines of what?”

“The lines in space, around the planets.”

Pemheb gave Sekai a look of disbelief. “That’s impossible!”

“Why?”

“My favorite word flung back at me.” He became serious. “Tell me, how do these lines of passage work?”

“These lines exist across space, between, and within every body in space. This ship is able to ride the lines and move between worlds.”

“Why can’t we use these lines in our ships?”

“The ships were built specifically for each Mandrake. Do you think that would be possible, if there were hundreds of these available?”

“You’re worried about one world threatening another. I mean, there doesn’t appear to be any weapons on this ship.”

“These ships destroyed a moon.”

“Impossi... there I go again. I mean, how?”

“Another time,” Sekai said. *If at all*. Some truths were best kept buried.

Sekai checked the path he wanted to travel. Seeing no ships nearby, he visualized a location between Arien and Hedron. “Ship. Take us to these co-ordinates.”

“I don’t feel us moving,” Pemheb said, doubt in his voice.

“Ship. Visual to outside.”

An image of Arien appeared. They were out of orbit already.

Pemheb shook his head in amazement. “So fast. I mean, I had no idea.”

“Few do.”

“Tell me the principles. I can learn from them.”

Sekai could see Ikara was worried. He gave her a reassuring nod.

Pemheb didn’t miss their exchange. “You don’t trust me. I can understand such reluctance, but what do you gain by not sharing it with me?”

“If I did share such knowledge, the other lords, not to mention Pherus, would want to use the technology. Some things are best kept secret.”

Pemheb was adamant. “Have you considered what may happen if Pherus succeeds in becoming a Mandrake? And don’t pretend you don’t know. I miss little. I’ve seen the way Anum hangs close to him. I also recall what happened with Khumn. I spent a long time in the library finding that information. Khumn fled, wisely, back to Hedron. What’s to stop Pherus from succeeding where

Khumn failed? Imagine if Pherus did succeed. He would become a god, in the literal sense. He would dominate Arien and the remaining planets. I don't think we can allow that to happen."

Sekai had underestimated this young man. "Our god is Asiel, and will always be so. No other will ever take his place. Pherus will not succeed."

"You hope to stop him?"

"He needs a healer," Ikara said quietly. "He will not succeed."

"How can you be sure a healer will not try? I have heard the temptation can be strong."

"It's true, some healers have died to save a patient, but it's very rare. When it does happen, it's due to the bond becoming so strong that one cannot live without the other." She faltered for a moment. "I think that with an Emperor, the chances are remote. Healers do not form relationships with nobility."

"Rumors are another story, Ikara," Pemheb said.

Sekai had to agree. "I suggest we dispel such rumors. Ikara. Will you have difficulty with staying in my lodgings? You'd be safer there."

He wasn't prepared for her laughter.

Sekai gazed over her pale face, high cheekbones, slim throat and her lithe body hidden beneath the dress. His body burned with wanting her.

She stopped laughing. "I prefer our existing arrangement."

Pemheb appeared to be at loss to try to determine what happened. "Can you show me these lines of passage?"

Sekai regained his composure. "Lie down and place your feet here," and pointed to the energy.

"Inside there?"

"You need to join with the conjunction. If you...."

Pemheb lay down, and slid his feet into the energy.

Sekai sat beside him, and placed his hand on Pemheb's forehead. "Now, close your eyes. Good. You'll feel a sensation as if you're being torn from your body. You will want to fight with all your might to stay. Don't."

Pemheb nodded.

Sekai dragged the lines of passage around the two of them. He felt Pemheb shudder in awe. A moment later the two men were outside of the ship.

See it?

Sekai couldn't see Pemheb's face, only sensed the other's excitement as Pemheb replied. *Yes.*

The lines of passage tugged him into one direction more strongly than another. *Not yet.*

What?

Can you see the lines?

Yes.

Pull the ship towards you.

If I knew how to laugh out loud I would.

Watch. Sekai imagined the ship coming towards him. The lines weakened until they split apart. The ship moved forward. *Now try it.*

Pemheb tried to duplicate what he'd done. The ship didn't move.

Imagine reality, not a concept.

This time, the ship moved a little.

Good. Try again.

The ship moved again.

Sekai knew Pemheb was approaching breaking point. Time to bring him back while he still could. He felt a snap as Pemheb joined his body.

Pemheb opened his eyes and groaned. "I had no idea--"

"It was so tiring?"

"The feeling of leaving your body. I felt like I was about to die." Pemheb sounded surprised.

Yes, you nearly did. "You must not say a word about what happened here."

"I understand."

Sekai helped Pemheb to his feet after the ship had landed.

Ikara's face was a conflict of emotions. "I felt what you did. I think I--" she said.

"I'd not recommend it. I can assure you, traversing the lines is entirely different from drawing energy from them."

She gave him a defiant look.

How much clearer could he make it? "Don't do anything rash. Only a Mandrake is capable of traversing the lines."

Her look of defiance didn't waver.

He had to help Pemheb back to his lodge. Meanwhile, he would have to leave Ikara with the ship. He didn't want to leave her at all.

"I'll find my way back. I want to view the remainder of the recording," she said.

"Ship," he said. "Do not allow Ikara to interact with the lines while she is here." At least she couldn't do anything rash.

Ikara shook her head. "There is no need. I'm not completely stupid. I'll wait for you to show me. I promise."

Sekai noted Pemheb's fascination with what Ikara could do. He had seen too much as it was.

"I didn't know Ikara could traverse the lines," Pemheb said.

"It was an anomaly." How she managed to slip into Meri's time he had no idea. It shouldn't have happened.

"But she can," Pemheb said, with renewed admiration.

Sekai's patience was at an end. "We're leaving."

Pemheb climbed from the ship. "Nothing happened here."

* * *

After they'd left, she searched for the flight recorder from Karin's ship and found it inside his open coffin. She placed the recorder into the energy.

Nothing happened.

"Ship. Play recorder."

It didn't answer her.

Had Sekai instructed it to totally ignore her?

She was about to leave when the ship said. "You may see the reminder of the recorder. Shall I continue where I finished before?"

"Yes."

Asiel appeared inside, wearing the star around his neck. "It's time to end the beginning, but to do so I need a legacy. You are that legacy. Find my star and you will possess the means to travel through time."

He vanished.

The means to traverse across time? She recalled Karin wearing the star. Was it possible she had used it to return to the past?

It had to be. "Ship. Is that all?"

"Yes."

"How can I find this star?"

"Asiel will give it to you if that is what he chooses to do."

She shuddered with anticipation at seeing him again. "How?"

"When he reappears at the succession."

Ikara fought back panic. "Literally?"

"No. His presence is manifested in the blue fire."

That made sense. If Asiel had appeared literally, the records would have spoken of Asiel in volumes.

She left. There was no more to be found here.

The ship spoke in metaphors, meaning she may not see Asiel again, nor would the star reappear, meaning her chances of going to the past were non-existent.

Why, Karin, have you shown me this? And she wondered what her objective had been, beyond a history lesson.

* * *

Ikara just made it in time to the great hall to witness the formal introductions of the lords. Pherus had just sat on the golden throne, positioned in the center of the room.

Harps played and a woman sung. Each lord moved forward with his daughter. A guard spoke. “Umat from Minstra and Neti.”

The solid man bowed to Pherus, then moved to one side. Neti curtsied, gave Pherus a smile and she too, moved on.

Ikara watched the others progress through, all hoping their daughters would be chosen.

Once the lords were done, it was the Mandrakes’ turn.

Sekai went first. He nodded briefly to Pherus. “May the new Emperor have the wisdom of the old.”

Ikara looked back at Pherus, who looked too long at Sekai. If Pherus wanted to be rid of Anum, she had to help him further. His father had pleaded with her from beyond the dead.

Liea nudged her.

Ikara cursed, and missed what happened next.

One of the Halifad soldiers walked towards Sekai. *A woman.* She withdrew her dagger and without a word, plunged it into Sekai’s abdomen. He could have staggered, or fallen to his knees.

He did neither.

She said aloud. “You are no emissary of a god. You are an abomination. You-”

She got no further.

Sekai removed the dagger from his abdomen and plunged it into her heart. He embraced her as she slumped into his arms.

Ikara wanted to run to him.

Liea gripped her arm. “Leave him be.”

Ikara shoved Liea to one side, and in several long strides reached Sekai.

His eyes were hard. “I will survive. Go back,” he ordered.

She did so, unable to hide the hurt within her. She couldn’t endure this much longer.

The music stopped. No one spoke.

“I take a life for a life,” Sekai said.

He nodded to Pherus, who took a few moments to react.

When he did, Pherus motioned two guards forward. Ikara fought back tears. The woman was dead.

The guards carried her body from the hall.

Pherus cleared his throat. “Let the music continue.”

The woman began to play the harp. Several Mandrakes closed ranks around Sekai and assisted him from the hall.

The mood of the room changed immediately. Many spoke to each other in hushed whispers in a bid to ease their confusion at what they witnessed.

“Why did she attack him?” a woman whispered to her companion.

An old man spat the ground. “Should have never allowed them in.”

Ikara swallowed hard. Not only had Sekai killed when he admitted he abhorred death, he didn’t want her around either.

Anum placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. She didn’t even flinch. He led her outside. Distraught, she let him.

The lightning flickered, followed by a distant rumble. Ikara touched the charged air as if the sky itself were alive.

“I’ve never encountered such energy with such strength before,” Anum said.

She fixed her mind upon her father. She needed facts. Focusing on that helped to ease the pain. “I thought Arien was growing stronger. Do you know why?”

Anum looked at her oddly. “Karin, of course. Do you think Arien can be the same? The increase has occurred since she left. She must be causing it.”

If that was true, she should have been able to contact her sister the other night on the beach. “I don’t think so; Karin’s not contacted me since.”

He led her to a bench in a private part of the gardens. “Maybe you’re right. I have a more pressing matter. Please. Sit.”

She sat beside him.

He placed her palm to his forehead. “Look.”

She wasn’t prepared for the suddenness of his gesture, nor the darkness that threatened to engulf her. She wanted to scream, but Anum held her fast. She was sucked into a swirling mass of uncontrolled rage. The next instant she fell into a sea of colors. Anum, the man before he became a Mandrake, a follower of Asiel, a man.

Anum removed her hand from his forehead. She slowed her racing heart. “Why have you shown

me this?"

"We Mandrakes possess a darkness and do things that are unforgivable. What Sekai did tonight was foolish. He has tarnished our reputation as a result."

"When have you cared about reputation? You tried to kill me."

"That was never the intent. I used you to force Asiel to reveal himself to you. He fears me, Ikara and I can assure you he will want you to save him."

Save a god. Was Anum mad?

He gripped her hands. "Make sure Pherus doesn't do anything foolish as a result of this. He'll listen to you."

Save him, his father had begged. "Do you want me to make sure Pherus behaves in an orderly manner until you initiate him as a Mandrake?"

He suddenly released his hands from hers. "How did you know?"

"He told me. Why not leave him be?"

"He wants to do this more than you know," he said coldly.

"You mean like Khumn did with Meri?"

He hid the shock well, but not well enough. "What about Khumn and Meri?"

"She changed her mind, didn't she? Khumn never tried again."

His fingers twisted like serpents out of control, betraying his composure. "I coveted Khumn. Sekai," he laughed bitterly, "couldn't go ahead with losing Meri. I had no such reservations."

"You wanted to die and have Khumn take your place?"

She saw the fury in his eyes and his hands stilled. He smiled briefly, a smile that made Ikara shiver.

"One of us has to die so another Mandrake can be created. Tier wanted to, so there wasn't a problem there. Meri would die in this slice of time, and Khumn, had he chosen to become a god, would retrieve her from another."

His words shocked her, more so his conviction that it was even possible. Snatching the charged energies from the air, she drew them in until she reached a place where rational thought returned.

"A normal man can become a Mandrake, but an Emperor can become a god, in other words, replace Asiel."

He nodded.

"How is that possible?"

"Pherus is a direct descendant of Asiel."

"Surely not after five thousand years."

"The genetic sequence is tested in each child born into the royal line. Pherus was not the oldest, but

that has never been a consideration in selecting an heir. I was quite pleased with being able to influence Kreth to choose Pherus thirty years ago.”

“You began your plan while he was a baby. How *could* you?”

“Those years have been the most rewarding. With Kreth's illness being incurable and the only other brother well and truly exiled, the choice was easy to make.”

“Why are you telling me? Is it to gloat?”

“No. It's because Asiel is in danger and soon he will come to you for aid. You will be unable to refuse his request.”

“And what would that be?”

“Pherus needs a healer and Asiel will ask you.”

Was it possible that Asiel knew? He must. “Why would he use me as a sacrifice?”

“He is clever when it comes to continuing his existence.”

Anum's words seemed contradictory. “You're speaking in riddles. Does Asiel want to be replaced by Pherus or not?”

“It appears that way, yes, but I know from previous experience Asiel enjoys the danger.”

“Do you mean he deliberately provokes you into attempting to take over his life then makes sure it doesn't happen.”

“Exactly. Asiel will appear to give me what I want, but then he will fool me at the last moment. It happened with Khumn and Meri. Sekai talked her out of it.” He chuckled. “That I never expected. It's a game, see. He will ask you to be the sacrifice and I'll think I've won, but there will be a trick, one that you, I or Sekai will not be aware of.”

Was this her god he was speaking about?

“You think he heals patients because he is benevolent? If so you are a fool. Asiel needs you healers so as to make his pathetic existence seem important.”

Despite his insults, a niggling doubt lingered. There was more to this. Surely Asiel wouldn't offer her such gifts only to become a sacrifice for Pherus. No, there had to be another reason. *Think*. What about this slice of time scenario, did a clue linger there?

Ikara's thoughts reeled, but she had to play this out. “Let's test how complex this really is, shall we? For Pherus to become a god, I have to willingly become his healer. If I do so and die, I can be brought back from another slice of time, where I still live, and resume my life, here, as if nothing had happened?”

He looked at her with admiration. “Your memories would be different, but if the right line of passage was selected, the variations would be minimal.”

Was this her father? She'd not take any more. "I will never agree to be anyone's sacrifice and I will do whatever I can to stop Pherus from becoming a Mandrake."

A small smile formed on his lips. "You'll fail. No one can refuse Asiel, which is why it's best that you know in advance what is in store for you. Call me a caring parent if you want."

Ikara stormed from the seat, leaving him there. She wanted to scream. Sekai was gone, and Anum had revealed his true intentions. He was so confident that she would be as weak willed as Pherus.

Well. She'd show Asiel she'd be no one's puppet.

The words stated, she didn't feel any more confident. Doubt returned as she returned to the hall. She drew more of the charged air to keep herself from breaking. Pherus was there and she was going to confront him once at for all. She took in a deep breath and approached the small group.

"Did you see the simplicity in the way he killed her?" a woman asked Pherus.

Many heads nodded. A man inclined his head to Ikara, who joined the group.

"It was self defense," Ikara said. "Please, may I see you for a moment?"

He nodded.

Ikara led Pherus from the group, ignoring the gasp from the woman.

"They are fools," she hissed.

"I need to talk to you."

Ikara's throat tightened. The hunter had returned.

He led her behind a stone pillar, away from eavesdroppers. "I can save them."

What?

He placed his lips close to hers keeping his voice low. "I thought Sekai was different, but he proved me wrong tonight. He performed an act so abhorrent that I could never bring myself so low as to repeat it."

He was making no sense to her.

"Don't you see? I was looking into their likeness. As a god, I will become far more than a Mandrake. A god could save them from what they have become."

She backed away from him. She had believed him to be torn, but had been wrong, very wrong.

"Anum will not control me," he warned.

Ikara wasn't convinced. "Anum has had thousand of years to perfect the art of manipulation."

He smiled wryly. "I have also seen him frustrated by you. You have great strength, Ikara. If only you'd be by my side, he'd never be able to touch us."

"If you took such a path, you would need someone to aid you. Would you ask me to die for you? Could you?"

He nodded. "And drag you from another slice of time to bring you back, oh yes."

She couldn't breathe.

He stroked her cheek. "Sekai did me a favor tonight. I can see a way to have it all."

* * *

Sekai was glad to be out of the hall where the death scent of the woman lingered. He held his hand over his abdomen. The wound had almost closed, leaving a slight tingling sensation along a newly formed scar.

Tier was the first to speak. "You did what was right."

The three Mandrakes walked with Sekai through the garden towards the balcony.

Forin and Gwain spoke in whispers. New and young, seeing the world with the mystery and wonder of the living. Tonight, they had seen another, darker side.

Thunder rumbled. The energy seemed strong, very strong tonight. The lights along the balcony railing glowed softly in the thick humidity.

"Can you smell it?" Gwain asked.

Forin shivered. "Yes, a little."

Sekai breathed in the thick scent of honeysuckle that resonated through the charged air. He shouldn't have rejected Ikara the other night, or tonight when she came to his aid. He had to find her, end this once and for all. Worry later about leaving her.

Tier gave Sekai an amused glance, misreading his grimace.

Sekai's thoughts returned to the woman who had tried to kill him. There was no pleasure to be had there.

Why had he killed her?

To dissuade Pherus from becoming a Mandrake, a secret he'd not share with the remaining Mandrakes, nor planned to.

Tier leaned against the railing. "If I wept for every deed I committed, I wouldn't be a Mandrake. We are chosen for our... selected abilities."

The two younger Mandrakes hadn't answered. They would have killed others; no Mandrake had a life free of sin.

Forin shifted uneasily.

Sekai asked him. "Do you recall the healer who died for you?"

Forin trembled. "Always."

Gwain looked to the ground; his sharp face momentarily lit up by lightning.

Sekai recalled Pherus's terrified face. "A healer died so you could be a Mandrake. Do you think

the woman who died tonight was any less important to me? I took her life in the hope of saving another.”

Forin shook his head. “My healer chose to die for me. The woman you killed tonight didn’t. You could have let her go.”

Sekai decided to risk telling them after all. “What if you were contemplating to become a Mandrake? Would my action tonight have changed your mind?”

“I don’t know,” Forin stammered.

Gwain’s green eyes challenged Sekai’s. “You can’t stop a man who desires nothing more than to be a Mandrake.”

Yes, that was true.

Gwain hadn’t finished. “She believed her actions were the only way of showing Pherus that the Mandrakes are an aberration that shouldn’t exist. She knew she’d die. You could have let her live. The people tonight would have had a different view of us if you had.”

“A different view of what? Compassion?” Sekai asked sharply.

Tier placed his hands on the shoulders of both Forin and Gwain. “We are not known for our compassion.”

Sekai suppressed a bitter laugh. The energy embraced him. He drew it closer, into him, infusing him with renewed energy.

“If you need to know how it feels to live another three thousand years, traverse the lines of passage, if you can. Go into my past, see what I’ve seen and let the darkness take over your mind until you lose your humanity. *We are not here to care.*” And regretted the words. It was a lie and he knew it. If he didn’t care, he’d never had killed her.

Forin backed away from him. Gwain tugged at his arm. “The death of that woman has upset us all, especially Pherus.”

The sensation built inside him. He recalled the last time he’d felt like this, Khumn’s time. “And so he should be afraid of us.”

Gwain tugged at Forin’s arm again. “Let’s go for a walk.” And they left.

“You forgot who *you* were tonight,” Tier said.

So he’d waited until Forin and Gwain had left. Tactful of him. “I wonder what Khumn would have thought.”

Tier winced. “He was lucky to leave alive.” He inclined his head in the direction Forin and Gwain had gone. “I’m glad those two young men are spared from reliving that particular nightmare.”

Sekai forgot Asiel cleansed a ship’s mind of its predecessor. Forin and Gwain hadn’t experienced

the tragedy of the moon. Ironic. Asiel hadn't planned on two of his followers dying after *that* disaster. He'd thought they'd serve him for eternity.

"We should talk to Anum about this," Tier said. "I'm worried what Pherus may do."

They reached Anum's lodge soon after. Sekai heard voices from the laneway. "... as my vessel rises from the sleep, so does my mind return from the depths of the vine."

Tier gave Sekai an odd look. "Why does he speak of the vine?"

They reached the beach. Anum knelt on the sands. "Let the lake join--"

He paused in mid sentence and looked up. "Ah, Tier. Sekai." Anum stood up. He brushed the sand from his knees. "Don't you feel a change happening? Tell me, does it not feel wonderful?"

Chapter Twelve

Ikara wandered from the hall, her feelings torn. The death of the woman hung as heavily about her as the damp air. And Pherus? He had shocked her with his revelation.

Pherus was in great danger from Anum. With Sekai, the danger was different. If the darkness in Anum was any indication, Sekai's must be equally devastating. If she had any sense at all, she'd turn from both men and flee from the city.

And couldn't. Not if another healer could be seduced into giving what Pherus wanted. This was her problem, and she had to find a way to resolve it. What didn't make sense was Asiel. She could not believe he would demand her sacrifice, unless he had a grander plan in mind, one that neither Anum nor she could foresee.

Why don't you speak to me Asiel?

Or was she meant to determine what he was planning on her own.

Then it occurred to her.

Karin.

She had mentioned Asiel wanting to save Sekai, but how? She was no god who could traverse time.

A clap of thunder made her jump. She looked around. Facing the entrance of a little used building at the far end of the garden she heard voices. She entered the building. The voices came from behind a large lion carved in black marble, twice her height, resting on its haunches. Its stone eyes bored into the semi gloom of the room. Next to the lion was a lioness, similarly carved and of the same height.

Under the cover of darkness, she crept along the far wall, hiding behind columns as she went, until the source of the voices came into view. Ikara recognized the blond haired man. Forin. The other? Yes, Gwain.

Forin stood between both animals, his back to Ikara. "You've been here before."

Gwain, a head shorter, stood beside him. "Yes. The gardens appear to hold a far greater interest than the remnants of old gods. As you can see before you, the lion and lioness when they join represent the crossing from one world to another," Gwain said.

"What do you mean by join? Obviously not literally."

Gwain chuckled.

Ikara smiled from the shadows.

"Apparently during certain storms, a veil appears between the pair. The ancients speak of the joining as a link to the past rather than, as you aptly put it, literally," Gwain said.

Forin sat on a stone next to the lion. “I’ve never asked you this before. Why did Anum choose you?”

Had he said Anum? Ikara crept to another column to see, and hear, Forin more easily.

Gwain gazed up at the cat. “I was one of the advisers of the Emperor of the time. He had a brother who desired to take the throne. The other advisers were torn in their loyalty. Maybe it was a coincidence Anum arrived, for he soon gained an audience with the Emperor. He sided with the Emperor soon after, and the brother disappeared. All of a sudden, the other advisers disappeared, except me. I knew why Anum selected me, and it wasn’t for political reasons. Anum believed if I was a Mandrake, I’d be held in awe as he was. After ten years my Emperor became jealous of my youth, and wanted to be like me. I refused, so he exiled me.”

Forin, from the subtle uneasiness in his body, was born as a Mandrake from tragedy.

“I cannot imagine such differing circumstances. My wife died in an accident on the cargo liner bound for Burusis. One of the containers spilt, a chemical I can’t recall, only that it reacted with the contents of the container she was doing an inventory check on. The container exploded. She didn’t have a chance. The woman brought back memories I’d rather have stayed buried.”

“Do you know what I’ve discovered all this time?” Gwain asked.

Forin shook his head.

“Only a large emptiness. Sekai thinks I’m too young. What he does not understand is that he tries to discover the deeper layers of the lines of passage and has gained no further insight than I.”

“He has great knowledge, as does Anum.”

Gwain shook his head. “There is a difference between knowledge and insight.”

Ikara understood Sekai’s reference to the flawed man. Forin didn’t easily handle the obligations of being a Mandrake.

A flicker of blue appeared between the lions. Ikara gasped. Both men turned in her direction.

Thunder rumbled outside, followed by a flash of light. The charged air clung to her, suffocating her. Sweat poured from her forehead. Ikara staggered into the narrow arc on the beam. “Don’t you feel it?”

Forin nodded.

Ikara wanted to go outside, so rain would fall on her face as if in some way she could get rid of the fire inside her. Instead, she pointed to the shimmer growing between the lions. “What is that?” Ikara asked, between short breaths.

Forin seemed similarly effected. “I’ve heard the lines of passage manifest in physical planes, but this is the first time I have seen a veil.”

Ikara watched it grow in intensity. She saw realization strike Gwain's face. "This storm must be the cause. This energy is much stronger than any previous time I've returned to Arien."

"I've heard that passing through the veil can take you to another time. The problem is you have no idea where you may end up," Forin said.

Ikara grabbed his arm, felt his heart stop for a moment. "Don't go."

Gwain stood in front of him. "Do you dare to cross the veil? You'll go mad if you return to the past. That is, if you are able to return."

Forin flicked Ikara's hand from his arm, shoved Gwain aside and stepped into the shimmering light. A tear opened briefly then closed again.

"No," Gwain called.

Forin hit the veil like a solid wall. His body slumped to the stone floor.

"I'll get help; stay here," Gwain said.

Ikara watched the patterns in the fire, mesmerized. If a person could choose how they spent their last moments of existence, this would be it. She opened her palms outward and allowed the lines of passage to run through her fingers.

Asiel, no more than a presence urged her forward.

Go and see who you were.

The words faded from her consciousness, leaving a sensation more wonderful than at any healing. Pherus didn't matter, Arien didn't matter, and Sekai ceased to exist. She touched the flimsy curtains of fire. The tear opened, and she stepped through.

* * *

Green leaves hung thickly from tall trees. The scent of earth in the forest was a sharp contrast to the storm she'd left behind. The heat was nowhere as oppressive.

With experience in her transition to Meri behind her, Ikara immediately felt herself in the body of another. Her own body, like Forin's, would be on the stone floor beside Forin, empty of conscious thought.

Material brushed her legs and she looked down at the thin healer's robe her host wore. Its familiarity gave her comfort, yet the sensation felt oddly strange. No. It was more than the material. Arien pulsed with energy.

Where was it coming from?

She tried to move her host's body. Nothing happened, just as it hadn't with Meri. Ikara hovered over an ocean of memories, but whose? Was it Meri? She dipped into a wave and found a memory of the place she stood. Her host often came here to find solitude. Ikara focused on the surroundings,

absorbing her host's sensations as she did so.

As her host approached the edge of the forest, she heard swords clash with swords. Her host wove through the trees in no hurry. A shout, come, then laughter. She saw the group of men in the noonday sun wearing leggings only, their chests bare. Women sat on mats, watching. Children ran amongst the trees, playing hide and seek. Ikara had never seen a community of families before. She saw a woman with dark hair and eyes, wearing a red dress that emphasized her full figure.

Meri.

"Tien. Come," Meri beckoned to Ikara.

Ikara nearly slipped out of her host's mind. Tien.

Who was Tien?

The trees wavered for a moment. *No, I don't want to leave yet.*

Tien raised her hand to her forehead to shield the sun.

Suddenly, one of the men who fought with his sword swore and fell, gripping his arm. "Damn."

She looked at him twice before his name registered. *Prenth.*

Limited by Tien's wandering gaze, she studied other faces she barely knew, but their profiles give their history away. She'd known some of these people before. It had to be more than a coincidence. Was it possible her host was familiar to her and Tien was one of her past lives? It was such an incredible leap to make, yet it made sense.

Ikara saw Karin in the circle of women. She wanted so desperately for Tien to stop.

"Tien. Come here," Meri said, as if she'd heard Ikara.

Tien joined the circle of woman and sat beside Meri. She searched Tien's mind for clues about when she'd arrived.

The succession hasn't happened yet.

Prenth sat next to Karin, his face flushed with exertion. His blond hair hung loose about his bare shoulders. He looked no different to when she saw him in her time.

Karin did. She looked radiant in the green dress that fitted loosely over her body.

Tien's eyes roved to her swollen belly.

Ikara's sister was pregnant, and Ikara sensed Tien's longing.

You have courage, she thought, knowing Karin couldn't hear. It also explained why Karin hadn't appeared while she was on the beach the other night. Her sister had totally immersed herself in this time.

Karin grabbed Prenth's hand. "Can we go back?"

"Of course."

He helped her to her feet.

Ikara watched them go. The sadness ran deep in Tien, who was younger than Ikara. Tien wanted a child, but more importantly, a man who wouldn't abandon her. She searched for a name. Sekai. Ikara wanted to soothe her, but what could she do? Mandrakes do not stay and Tien should have known better than to believe Sekai would be any different. A pity the cut of love ran deep in her. Unfortunately, Ikara knew exactly how she felt.

Tien rose as well. "I'm heading back. This heat has made me tired."

"I'll meet you later then." Meri returned to the group of women.

In the distance she saw buildings, a large town. She reached into Tien's mind.

Arien.

The town looked nothing like the Arien Ikara knew.

Walking towards the buildings, she saw smoke rise from the thatched roofs. A serving woman carrying laundry curtsied to her. Tien nodded in response. The woman scurried towards the river to do the washing.

Laughter drifted towards her. Tien continued through the center of the village. People ran past her. A girl gave a secretive gaze before she ran inside the hut. Ikara tried to remain calm, but with every step Tien took, it grew harder.

Old Arien had been transformed totally from this time and the wonder of being here was the only thing that kept Ikara going.

The chatter subsided after she passed. Tien looked above. A wide path led up a cliff to buildings carved into the cliff face. She recalled some of the buildings from the old city of Arien, used by traffic controllers after the spaceport was built.

She reached the beginning of the path, when a voice called her from above, a voice she knew across time. Ikara searched inside Tien's memories. Sekai was about to leave.

He reached her, slid his arms around her waist. Tien forced her hammering heart to slow down. Her host looked up at Sekai, tears running down her face. Words failed her as she stroked his cheek, but it was too late, far, far too late.

Ikara wanted to laugh at the irony, the failure.

Tien placed her hand over his heart and Ikara felt a strong beat.

"Prentz failed Tier," Sekai said, with a hint of a smile upon his lips.

"You're not sorry are you?"

"Not if a healer can be prevented from dying."

Ikara tried to push through her host, Tien, but nothing happened. She wanted to shout. *What about*

in the future, when Forin flees to forget, and Gwain, who despairs of his existence. Will you stop the healers who will die for them?

She felt her lips move. The words were Tien's. "And Khumn. What has he decided?"

"He plans to use Meri as his sacrifice when he becomes Emperor, and attempt to replace Asiel as a god."

What?

Sekai's face wavered. Ikara nearly slipped out of her host's mind.

"Of course he'll fail." He looked at her kindly. "Have you wondered why no Emperor has tried before Khumn?"

"No."

"None have had the means. Khumn does."

"What means?" Tien asked.

Good question, Ikara thought.

"You don't believe me. I mean Khumn can become a god, literally. Once he possesses the star, not even Asiel will be able to stop him. But I will." He was deadly serious.

"I believe you," Tien whispered. "You don't want another healer to die, do you?"

"I cannot, will not, allow Meri to die for him." He kissed her cheeks, her wet eyes, her lips. Ikara savored his soft lips and the longing that flowed throughout Tien's body. She loved him as Tien did in this time, but not enough to stay, Ikara thought sadly. He could have, but like Anum, he would be subjected to a slow death if he did. Instead, he'd taken the less painful way, while Tien grew old and died.

The path rippled and Sekai wavered out of focus. *No!*

Tien was gone. The veil flung her away. Ikara's body lay on its side. Unable to move, she sensed someone lying nearby.

Chapter Thirteen

The energy shifted as if he'd been swamped by a great wave. Sekai looked over the ocean. Thunder rolled overhead and the energy increased.

Gwain called to him from the beach. "Forin and Ikara have gone beyond the veil."

No.

Sekai ran after Gwain to the room of lions. Inside, he walked up to the shimmering wall, stopping in front of Ikara's limp body. Above was a small tear in the veil. Had she gone in there? He turned her over and saw her face, serene as death. She breathed, just.

Where was she? As tempting as it was to follow her, he could end up anywhere. That would be of no help to her.

At times, it was possible to determine a faint echo from such a tear. He briefly touched it and a deep anguish jolted his memory, of a summer's day and a woman walking towards him. He pressed deeper into the tear, heedless of the danger involved.

Voices.

She stirred.

He released the veil.

Sekai knelt beside her. "Are you all right?"

She stared at him, confused.

"You can't stay here," he said gently.

Gwain gave Sekai a stricken look as he tried, unsuccessfully, to shake Forin awake. "He's not returned."

"He's gone beyond the veil," Ikara finished.

Sekai helped her to her feet. "He could have ended up anywhere. The best thing we can do is take him back to the lodge."

"I found my past, and I didn't want to return," Ikara confessed.

"Forin will return," Sekai said, remembering how in Khumn's time he'd lost the minds of three Mandrakes to the same veil, while their bodies wasted away. They eventually returned to the present, to be confined to the lake for days afterwards.

"Ikara. Can you walk?" Sekai asked.

She nodded.

Sekai and Gwain half dragged, half-carried Forin to the lodge.

* * *

Ikara hadn't realized how cold she was. She forced one foot in front of the other. When she reached the lodge, Liea and her mother ran towards her, both soaked from the rain.

"I can manage on my own," she said.

Inside, her mother ran a hand through the water in the bath. "The energy from the lake runs in that bath. If we redirect it we will be able to warm you. Get in. No. Not you, Liea."

After her mother's healing energy triggered hers, Ikara drew a line of passage from the water and in doing so tapped into a deeper well of power. The water began to warm up.

Her mother broke free of her, panting. "I can't sustain it."

She felt another. Asiel was with her. Ikara no longer needed her mother. "Let it go. I have enough."

"Don't go too far," her mother warned as she climbed out.

Ikara tried to temper the flow the way she did with her patients. The passage across the veil had taken more than she imagined.

Her mother knelt beside the bath. "That's enough. Ikara, it will kill you."

Asiel would never harm her. "No."

Her mother grabbed her under the arm, but Liea restrained her. "I feel something... powerful."

"Asiel guides me."

Rapture filled Liea's face. "Is that him?"

Her mother placed her hand over her chest and closed her eyes, smiling. "I sense him too. He wants us to leave." She rose. "Come on Liea."

With his presence, Ikara drew from the energies of the lake at a much greater rate. A blue haze shimmered throughout the water, illuminating the room.

The chill began to ease, and a wonderful feeling of peace drifted over her. The haze became brighter as the lines spilled out of the room, past the window towards the ocean and the other lodges until the fire reached Sekai's lodge.

* * *

Sekai didn't sleep. He preferred to avoid the sensation when possible. Often, his body won in the end. Tonight, it didn't.

Forin's state hadn't changed, and Sekai could do nothing but wait.

A sudden bolt broke his thoughts. He'd not sensed such strength since Asiel.

Was he here?

He bolted from the lodge and ran along the beach, lit up by the haze. Odd. Where was *that* coming

from?

Sekai continued along the wet sand until he reached the source of the energy, the second lodge of the healers.

Ikara.

He ran inside.

Her outstretched palms rose upward, her feet pointed down. Tendrils of blue fire rippled over her body, illuminating the water.

What is she doing?

Sekai dragged her out of the bath. The fire lessened, but still trickled over her dripping body.

She coughed and opened her eyes. "Sekai. Why are you here?"

He carried her to the bed, removed his robe and slid in beside her. He had to remove the energy from her, channel it elsewhere, or she would be consumed.

There was only one way, one he'd thought about since last touching her. He'd not quite expected to take her like this. Not like the brief contact of hands and snatching of fragments, this would be a complete merge, physically and mentally. Using Ikara's excess energy, he linked.

She slid one arm slowly around his waist. Her cheek brushed against his lips until hers met his. Her essence flowed into the very pores of his being. This time they might die. If not, he would not leave. Couldn't leave. If he had to spend his life with her only to watch her die, then so be it.

He began to take the energy from her, slowly and with reverence.

She whispered with difficulty. "Don't abandon me again."

"Hush."

She kissed his face, his neck. She didn't loosen her grip on him. He played the lines of passage and sensing her readiness, parted her legs and dove in.

A woman came into view, Inu, then another he'd loved within Inu for a brief night in the desert. He had just met her that night, and all too briefly, she had to leave again. The familiarity of *her* was all consuming. He'd loved Ikara in another time and she had abandoned him. He probed into Ikara's mind to find out why.

Nothing.

His body ached from being denied release. Nothing at all. She still didn't remember it. A revelation shook him.

Because it still hasn't happened.

She burned as she gave to him. He took it all, savoring her passion. He felt her try to reach into a recess of his mind he wasn't sure existed and allowed her to go there. He had to, and it terrified him.

She held him tighter as they drifted along the vines towards a bright light. *Sekai?*

I'm here. I'll always be here.

Light washed over both of them.

The lines of passage formed a star with five sides that converged to a singular point in the center. Briefly, he saw a young man, himself, before he became a Mandrake, a follower of a great prophet, Asiel, after he became a god.

Other faces raced past him at a speed that defied him. Familiar faces of women he had loved in the past. Another jolt of realization came to him. They were all Ikara, past lives of her.

The lines began to fade and the energy inside burned out like a candle in a gust of wind.

She began to weep. Sekai held her, awed.

"I saw it all, but I don't remember," she said.

"Are you sure?"

She nodded. "I've never been in her mind."

He stroked her damp hair. A glimpse of light shone from a place that had been dark for a long time. "Apparently, you will be. And I plan to aid you in getting there." He fell onto his back. "But not tonight."

"How?"

"We'll go back to where Karin disappeared and see if we can find an echo from the lines of passage."

"Truly?"

"I'm not sure what we'll find but-"

She snuggled closer to him. "Asiel meant for us to happen. Surely we'll find some reason as to why."

Sekai lay beside Ikara for a long time, watching her steady breathing, allowing the memory to return, of the night they'd spent in the desert. How it was possible, he didn't know, and right now he didn't care.

As for Asiel, things were becoming clearer. It appeared he genuinely wanted Ikara to aid him in returning back to the past, but why the sudden change of heart after so many thousands of years. Was it remorse? He bit back a bitter laugh. His purpose was most likely a deal of some kind, something so compelling that Ikara could not refuse, and he suspected, nor could he.

Sleep eluded him as scenarios tore through his mind. Much later, and having come no closer to an answer, he opened the curtains and walked to the shore as red dawn touched the sea.

* * *

Ikara stirred and reached over the bed. He wasn't there. Had he left her again? She breathed a sigh of relief when she spied him beside the shore, wearing a wrap. She ran her eyes over his back and recalled that, in another other place in the past, she had kissed him as Tien.

But not Inu. She remembered a young man who discovered love for the first time, and a woman who gave that love to him, her in the body of another. Inu.

Such exquisite passion. She wiped away a tear. She had to find this youthful, uncorrupted Sekai, and use his love to stop him from becoming a Mandrake. She recalled Karin's words about loving him enough to want to try. And she did. Even if it was to glimpse at an echo from where Karin disappeared and that was all she saw, echoes, then hopefully Asiel would guide her further.

When red dawn changed to yellow, he slowly walked back towards her.

Sekai kissed her slowly. The lines fed through her as a light tingle. She savored every moment. He released her, much to her reluctance, and stepped inside.

Ikara followed him into the main room and saw a table, laden with fruit, bread and water. She was ravenous.

He sat cross-legged opposite her and picked up a piece of fruit. Ikara didn't take her eyes off him as she ate several pieces of melon.

When her stomach had settled, she reached out to him and found a link that had always been there. She'd not been aware of it before.

"All Mandrakes and those they take as lovers are forever linked," he said.

Forever linked. She smiled. It made sense. "When I went beyond the veil, I was in the mind of a woman called Tien."

He smiled wryly. "I take a lover each time I'm awake. I think, each time I return, I seek out a healer who is a past life of you. I've never remembered before."

The words struck her, uninvited. "Go and see what you were."

"What?"

Her hear raced as she recalled the experience. "That's what Asiel said to me before I entered the veil."

"He's beginning to reveal his intentions to you."

"To aid me in stopping you from becoming a Mandrake. I don't know how yet but there must be a way or Asiel would not have made the suggestion through Karin." Doubt cross her mind. "Would he?"

"Asiel is always vague. He likes to make you ponder each twist and turn. All we can do is wait and see."

She hoped so. "I don't recall my past lives, except for Tien. She seemed so fragile."

“She was. None possessed your strength and determination. Perhaps that was the contrast you were meant to see.”

“But why Tien? Why not Inu?”

He shook his head. “I wish I knew.”

She didn’t want to think of what Asiel wanted in return. She wanted to be loved again. If the vision of Inu returned then she would accept it, but had this odd feeling it wouldn’t.

“Sekai,” she said huskily.

He scooped her up in his arms. This time, Inu didn’t return.

Later, when the sun hung overhead, she awoke from a deep sleep.

He leaned on one elbow and stroked her stomach with his fingers. “As much as I’d like to ignore what happens outside these walls, I’m afraid we cannot.”

She slid her hand over his, stopping its motion. “Pherus.”

He winced. “Pherus will select several brides, but he’ll choose you.”

Ikara flushed under his intense gaze. “Are you sure?”

“He believes you can save him and will marry you if need be. Lead him into believing you’ll consider any proposal he’ll make to you.”

“I spoke to him last night.” She told him what Pherus had said to her.

Sekai turned abruptly away from her. “It’s as I feared. Pherus does not love you enough to stop becoming a Mandrake.”

“He never loved me.”

Sekai gripped her hand. She winced. He let her go. “If he asks you to marry him, it means there is still a part of him that could be persuaded to change.”

“Are you sure? He seemed decided last night.”

“He is on the edge. Give me a few days. That is all I ask.”

“To do what? Find a way to the past and escape all this?”

He nodded. “We’ll return to near the tear in space. I’m sure it’s what Asiel wants you to do. Remember. Karin said you had to be worthy of your gifts.”

Hope rose within her. “You think if I return to the tear and try to go through, it may bring Asiel to my aid?”

“I’m sure of it.”

She sat up. “When can we go?”

“You have been invited to the bride selection tomorrow.”

“No.”

He continued as if she hadn't spoken. "After Pherus has done so, come back here and we'll go."

She didn't want to hear this. "How can I change Pherus's mind if he is so easily swayed?"

"Ikara. He can still change, regardless of what he told you about being able to save us. What I did was a desperate act on my part to convince him not to become a Mandrake, and it proved to be a mistake."

The thought of him killing that woman made her shudder. "You went too far."

Sekai shook his head as if it were no longer of consequence. "We have weeks to change Pherus's mind. Anum's had five years. He'll not give up."

Ikara wasn't convinced. "If Pherus asks me, I'll refuse."

He stroked her cheek. "I know you will. I worry another healer may not be so strong."

She cupped his hand over hers. "If I refuse, and no healer is allowed near him, Pherus can't succeed, can he?"

Sekai wasn't going to be convinced. "In any case, I have taken measures. Pemheb will retaliate, if the worst does happen."

So that was why Sekai had been so quick to show Pemheb the secrets of Mandrake technology. "Why Pemheb?"

"He has what it takes to defy an Emperor. It doesn't hurt to cover all possibilities."

Ikara wasn't sure what he was talking about. "Like what?"

"If Pherus does become a god, and he cannot bear the responsibility, we need to consider an alternative. Pemheb is liked by many of the lords. His ships will temper those who are unsure."

"You plan to make him a protector of Arien, until Mira's child is of sufficient age to take over. That is years away."

"Pemheb is not old, and I believe he will be a good interim ruler."

Mira would be able to return to her home after all. Ikara was getting ahead of herself. This was all academic. She'd be gone from here. Better to live a life on a remote planet than ever feel Pherus's touch in the lake.

"I want you to think beyond this time," Sekai said. "Imagine several possible alternatives that could happen. You found a way to my past once. If you are able to do so again and change my future, Pherus will exist, as will Pemheb, as will you. I will not. What Pemheb gains as knowledge in this time will filter into the other lines of passage."

Ikara hadn't thought such a thing was possible, but she had loved him in the desert, in the past. "How do you know this?"

"The minds of the ships are aware of one line of passage over another. Asiel controls what is

permitted across each.”

It was too much to take in. “What does he want from me, you, or any of us?”

“He will reveal his intentions soon enough. In the interim we must do what we can to stop Pherus.”

She couldn’t give up hoping for Pherus, not yet. “I could stop Pherus if Anum was stopped from poisoning him. Is there anything you could do?”

“He is one of my kind. I can’t.”

She knew it to be too much to ask. Anum was one of the few constants in his long life.

“Khumn was strong. Even now, I hear his protests, and sometimes laughter, at how history repeats itself. He told me once that a Mandrake made more mistakes because he didn’t die. His mind grew corrupt, forgetting all the sensible things he had done in a past life.” Sekai looked up at the ceiling. “He was right.”

She recalled Khumn in the corridor and the love he had for Meri. He’d turned down immortality for her. “What did you do to change Meri’s mind?”

He lowered his gaze. “I convinced her to see the flaws in us and made Khumn believe that his future as a god was pointless. Don’t forget, he loved her enough to change his mind.”

She recalled Meri’s determination in the corridor. “How exactly did you change her mind?”

His eyes returned to hers. “We told her what we planned to do with the second moon.”

“What happened?”

“The moon. You already know.”

“And you. If you knew the repercussions of destroying a moon, would you do it again?”

He rose from the bed. “I don’t know.”

Ikara sat open mouthed. She couldn’t believe what she heard. “You don’t know?”

Sekai cupped her hands in his. “Give me time to remember who I was.”

His words reassured her somewhat.

He released her. “One more thing. I left a gold dress in your room. Wear it when Pherus selects his candidates for a bride.”

What was he up to now? “What will Pherus do?”

“This dress would have been what Meri had worn had she sacrificed herself for Khumn. Anum needs to be reminded that you know of his intent.”

He never ceased to surprise her. “You mean to annoy Anum?”

“Anum needs to be reminded of the past,” he said harshly.

Would such a stunt work? Sekai didn’t think it would, but they couldn’t just sit by and do nothing. They had to continue their assault on Pherus at every turn, just as Anum did.

Chapter Fourteen

Ikara rose well after dawn. She'd never felt as focused as she was now. Today, she would find a way to Sekai's past. She sent a silent prayer to Asiel to aid her.

"Ikara?"

"In here, Liea."

Ikara shoved warm clothes into a bag. What would she need to take? Sekai heated the ship last time for her, so perhaps there was no need. She put the bag aside.

Liea entered her room and glared at the bag. "Are you going to leave with him?"

Ikara took a moment to register what Liea meant. "Yes, but not in the way you think."

"What do you both plan?"

She told her.

Liea shook her head. "Sounds crazy to me, but after I saw what happened to you last night, I believe Asiel is there, guiding the both of you."

She rose. "You best get ready."

It was not lost on Ikara that Liea was struggling with what she witnessed last night. Best to let her accept the revelation of Asiel in her own time.

"The bride selection. I know."

"Sekai told me he believes Pherus will consider you as one of three prospects, so you must come. You will receive a lot of attention as healers are not considered candidates. Simply be aloof and say as little as possible. If it helps, I have arranged to attend as well for security reasons."

"How long will it take?" Ikara asked, unable to hide her nervousness.

"If you are selected, you will then have three weeks to delay any decision. I'm sure he'll reach suitable negotiations with one of the other lords in that time."

Sekai said to appear to accommodate Pherus and had obviously spoken to Liea to reinforce the point. "I'll go, but after the choice is made, we must go."

Liea shook her head in disbelief. "This is when your isolated existence doesn't really prepare you. If you are selected, do you think you'll be able to leave? Pherus's warships will stop you. If his need is as desperate as Sekai fears, Pherus will think you are trying to run away. Does he realize this could happen?"

"I'll not let Pherus stop me. Besides, I'm sure Sekai's considered it," she said.

Liea crossed her arms. "They've had enough experience in warfare and enough sense to make sure

not to make a mistake. It's Pherus that worries me."

"How so?"

"He's unstable. Even some of the other lords have noticed it. Some believe he's too young to rule competently."

"Lia. He is under great pressure of another kind. I can assure you he is perfectly sane."

"Oh?"

She wished she could share the truth with Lia. "I can't tell you."

Lia gave a short, sharp, sigh. "That's exactly what Sekai said to me. He said that whatever Pherus suffers from will be resolved after the succession."

Thank you, Sekai.

Ikara removed the gold dress and matching pants from the rack of clothes. "We best get ready."

It looked familiar, in particular the stars on the hemline. Ikara had seen only part of this dress when in Meri's body. She held it up in front of her. The fine material fell below her knees. The hem was covered in silver patterns of the five-pointed star.

Ikara put it on. Underneath, she slipped on thin pants, which she tied in place with a drawstring. She slipped on golden sandals that adjusted to her feet.

Hardly a suitable item to flee to a ship in.

Lia looked her up and down. "It's lovely. Where did he get this?"

Had he recreated it for her, or was it Meri's? She'd never thought to ask. "I have no idea. Sekai said it would create quite a stir with Anum."

"I don't see how."

She forgot Lia had no idea about Anum's corruption.

"Let's go," she said, not wanting to discuss it further.

* * *

Expectation filled the throne room. Few were invited for this occasion, lords, and their daughters and those who were candidates for his bride. A few glanced her way in surprise. To these people she would be considered an outsider. Since Pherus had invited her meant this had to be a desperate act on his part.

It also meant there was still hope.

Pherus entered, wearing a gold robe to his feet. His confident air was hard to miss. Anum stood to one side, his body at ease. Her father inclined his head towards Ikara and gave a triumphant smile. He froze when his gaze fell to her body.

Pherus glanced at her, frowned, then glanced at Anum. Had Anum told him of the significance of

the dress?

Pherus sat on the throne, his guards posted along the walls. He obviously didn't want a repeat of the previous night.

Neti, who wore a green dress with gold flecks that were far too brilliant, looked her way. Ikara watched Neti look her up and down before abruptly turning away. Ikara suppressed a smile. Neti, obviously, hadn't considered wearing gold in its most subtle form.

Umat stood beside a woman, who gave Ikara a lingering gaze.

Pherus rose. "I have chosen three suitable candidates. I shall begin initial negotiations with the families of Neti, Kirani and Loi tomorrow."

The clinical way he made a decision about his future made her blood run cold, marring her elation at not being chosen. Ikara heard Liea sigh with relief.

Several of the lords gave audible sighs of relief. Some grunted. Several women drew in sharp intakes of breath. Ikara didn't look to see who they were, too intent on leaving the room.

Ikara took another sideways step to the closest exit and ended up behind Umat. A few more steps and she'd be at the door.

A guard blocked their way.

"The Emperor wants to see the both of you. Wait here."

Ikara looked at him, confused.

As people filed out, some were muttering. One man said, "I wonder why she's been asked to remain."

Another shrugged. "Who cares? My daughter was one of those chosen."

Another man slapped his back. "I'll not envy you the negotiations."

Pherus gazed at her, imploring her to remain. The floor threatened to give. Liea steadied her.

Anum slammed the door after the last guest had left. "What is this?" gesturing to what Ikara wore.

"How *could* she know," Pherus demanded.

Ikara took in a deep breath then released it. *Stay calm.*

Anum shook his head. "How *did* you know?"

Ikara felt strangely light. She wasn't afraid of Anum at all. "I told you to leave Pherus alone, and until you desist, I'll not stop."

"Anum. Go," Pherus hissed.

With a smug smile, he did so.

He knew this would happen.

After her father had left, Pherus took Ikara's hands in his. Desperation, not love, filled his voice.

“Sekai’s demonstration had hardened my resolve, but this. You have reminded me of the cost. I need... you to help me. If you do, I may have a chance. I have no interest in the others. Will you return to Hedron as my wife?”

Did he know the risk he took is being so rash? Did he not care who he could offend? Careful with her reply she said. “It’s very sudden.”

He released her hands, looking away from her as if ashamed of his outburst.

Slowly he straightened, and turned to face her. She caught a glimpse into the mirror of his soul. Pherus was right on the edge. If she had accepted his offer, there may have been a chance to save him, but she would have to become his lover.

And that she couldn’t do.

His gaze hardened and the chance passed her by. “Do not leave the planet.”

“May I go and consider your offer?” she asked, trying to sound as obliging as possible.

Moving aside to let her pass, he nodded.

After the guard closed the door behind them, Ikara muttered under her breath. “How *dare* he threaten me like that?”

Liea led her down the corridor, away from a few stragglers who’d lingered in the corridor.

Around the corner Liea said, “If you are to go, we must hurry. Now, where was Sekai going to meet you?”

“In the courtyard.”

Outside, the afternoon heat grew more oppressive. Liea squeezed Ikara’s shoulder. “I’ll check to make sure the way is clear.”

Ikara didn’t think it was necessary. “Sekai will be there.”

“No one is alone, Ikara. You must not shield yourself from those who care.”

Healers touched many patients’ lives for a moment. A shared act which affected both deeply, but when they recovered, it was forgotten. Few dared touch a healer in return, and those that did made up for those times in between. Liea deserved her trust. “All right.”

The airlock of Sekai’s ship hissed open.

“Hurry,” Sekai said. To Liea, he said, “I have arranged for a shuttle to leave the shuttleport as a diversion.”

“There’s no one in it, is there?”

“Gwain.”

“Oh,” Liea said.

“If you are asked, you saw Ikara leave with him.”

Liea nodded and was gone.

The external door to the airlock closed. The internal airlock opened. Ikara followed Sekai along the dimly lit corridor. When they entered the navigation room, the energy burst into life. An image of Arien appeared mid air. Ships hovered over the planet.

“Show me Kat’s shuttles,” Sekai said.

“What?”

“I lied to Liea about Gwain. Forin is coming to and Gwain has refused to leave his side. Kat had promised to aid us instead. See.”

Two shuttles were just entering Kat’s cruiser. “He was planning to leave anyway.”

She didn’t like others being used as bait like this. “You shouldn’t have done this, Sekai.”

“It was his decision. There,” he said. “Kat’s cruiser moved out of orbit.”

On the periphery of the image, an imperial warship began to change position.

“What is Pherus doing?” she asked.

The ship answered. “The imperial warship has moved into an attack position.”

“Surely it won’t fire on Kat’s cruiser,” Ikara said.

“I don’t plan to leave them unprotected,” Sekai said. “Ship. What communication is happening between the ships?”

The ship intercepted the signal from the captain of the warship. “Kat, we demand you return to Arien.”

“Kat here. We are returning home. Why are you stopping us?”

“You are suspected of carrying the healer, Ikara on board.”

“It worked,” Sekai said. “Hold on. We’re leaving.”

Ikara continued to listen to their communication. “She’s not here. Scan our cruiser; you’ll find we speak the truth,” Kat said.

“I repeat, unless you return to Arien, we will fire.”

“I don’t think so. What if Ikara is on board? Pherus wouldn’t be pleased, would he?” Kat said.

Silence.

Would the ship fire on Kat?

“Shouldn’t we tell them where I am,” Ikara said.

“We will *not*. He’s playing with us. Pherus isn’t so stupid.”

She flinched. He was the expert on such tactics, not her. “What do we do?”

“If the warship attempts to open fire, I’ll ask my ship to damage it. That should stop this nonsense.”

Kat’s cruiser left orbit, followed by the imperial warship.

“Ship. Is the cruiser from Halifad in danger?” Sekai asked.

“The power levels of the imperial warship have increased. Probability of attack is seventy five percent.”

“Sekai. Don’t.”

“Ship. Fire on the imperial warship if the percentage rises beyond ninety,” Sekai said. “I want you to witness something, should it transpire.”

“Why?”

“To see what I truly am. Now sit before me.” She did so, and he embraced her from behind. His legs hugged hers. He gripped her hands and placed them into the pulsating column of energy.

“Pherus’s warship is following us instead,” the ship said.

What was Pherus doing?

The warship’s power rose.

“It’s going to fire on us,” Ikara cried.

“I know,” Sekai said, and held her tight.

The lines of passage engulfed them. The energy drew her out of the ship. Somewhere behind her was Sekai. The lines of passage surrounded the ship, took form and grew. The ball of fire hurtled towards the warship. She and Sekai embraced the warship, swallowing it whole, consuming the life that lay within it for raw energy. Brief memories of the crew as they leapt from life to death flashed though her. Faces of a father, a mother, a lover slammed into her mind. She fought the grief slowly overtaking her. The lines of passage gave, but they also took.

The light faded away, leaving her drained.

What have we done?

Sekai released her and she removed her hands from the plasma; looked at them as if they weren’t her own. The energy still pulsed though her. She understood for a terrifying instant what Sekai went through when he killed.

She sagged into his arms. “What have we done?”

“They were going to kill us,” Sekai said. “And I defend my own and those I love.”

Ikara heard him through a thick fog. Love. He had said love. The word faded as did the last vestiges of her consciousness.

* * *

Ikara lay on the floor, her face as pale as death.

Sekai had to get her back.

He gently placed Ikara on the floor, moved her feet into the column of energy. He sat, cradling her

head his lap. Cupping her forehead, he closed his eyes and began to track where she'd gone.

It was no easy task.

Images flew past him in jagged madness; emotions tore through his mind, unrelated to the images. He felt himself sinking. The veil fluttered its tendrils in an invisible wind. Images and words assaulted him. A similar madness had possessed Anum. He could see how easily it could happen. He struggled to go deeper.

Asiel prevented him from entering the chasm.

If you want whatever game you have in mind to succeed, let me pass, Sekai demanded.

Suddenly, blue fire embraced him.

Words floated into his mind, a jumble of meaningless sentences. He focused until they took shape, formed into lines he could read.

In the beginning, there was Arien, where the moon of falsehood was removed. The bough of the tree carried the birds to the West, taking the life essence from Arien. But take care. Whatever you learn can transform you to greatness. This can be as simple as the wonder of the unfolding of petals in the morning sun to ruling worlds with a hand guided by love.

Sekai knew the words. Asiel had reached him at last.

Tears continued to fall down his cheeks, forming as droplets on Ikara's forehead. There was more, so much more, and he couldn't bear it.

The words made terrible sense: Asiel the bough, the strength of Arien. The birds, Mandrake ships. The West meant destruction. As for wonder and love? He had lost those he loved long ago and the wonder had died as well.

Until recently.

Shed the wastewater of your tears as the ultimate sacrifice of self takes you beyond the limited vessel of your body.

He wouldn't be able to do it alone. He left his body and hurtled down the lines of passage. The lines converged into a blur of nothingness. The void was deep and terrifying.

Sekai saw Ikara caught within Asiel's essence, beyond the chasm. He dove through, the lines of passage swirled around him, each a fragment of time a possible alternative. Ikara lived in one, but he didn't, another had her with Pemheb, a third showed her alone. Others came and went; the possibilities were endless.

He wanted no alternatives.

Sekai searched the link he'd forged with Ikara. It wove through the lines, a fine thread caught in a tangled mess. He touched another line: Tien, after he'd deserted her. He went deeper into Ikara's past,

using the thread as a guide. He drew closer; the lines of passage buffeted him like a howling wind, but in the center, in the stillness, the thread ended.

Ikara.

He embraced Asiel's defenses, obliterating them instantly. It was too easy. Asiel needed her alive, and he was going to have to do whatever Asiel demanded.

An all too familiar story.

The wind fled, leaving Ikara behind.

Asiel's hollow eyes locked in on Sekai in sympathy. *You can have her back, but first she must redeem her crime.*

How dare he. *I caused this, not her.*

This is not all about the warship. It's also about showing her what makes you a Mandrake.

He couldn't deny that. *In what way?*

She needs to understand you.

Not what he expected Asiel to say; yet it seemed fitting, somehow. *And what will you demand of her in return?*

As inconsistent as this may seem, she must not stop Pherus from becoming a Mandrake.

No.

The lines of passage show possibilities of my future. Mine is at risk.

He was about to protest when it occurred to him this was exactly what Anum had hoped for. *Go on.*

Imagine if Pherus takes my place. He may become a god, but he is still a man, a weak man who will be Anum's puppet. Is that what you want?

He began to see what Asiel was up to. *Are you saying Ikara should persuade Pherus to become a god but he will not be able to go through with it?*

That is the plan.

Which meant Asiel wasn't completely sure of the outcome. *I don't want to take such a risk.*

If you do as I say, and do not get in her way, regardless of what happens, I promise to return her to a time before you become a Mandrake.

He hated this, this inability to control his destiny. Of course, it had to happen. He had no choice. He never did. He knew that Asiel would not free her unless he agreed. Asiel, fortunately, always kept his promises.

I'll do it.

Chapter Fifteen

Energy rippled around her. Ikara knew she was back at the lake on Arien, so why couldn't she move, or breathe?

"She deserves the blessing of Asiel, like any other," a woman said.

Her mother.

Gentle hands carried her to the shore.

Am I dead?

"She witnessed the death of those people," her mother said. "You were mad to force her into your darkness."

"She had to understand what I am."

Silence. A breath, then another. Ikara suspected her mother was deliberating.

"Those who return must go with a clear conscience. A clouded mind could become lost. Are you sure you want to risk her life in this way?" she asked at last.

"She's already lost if we don't let her go," Sekai said.

A sigh, then: "Lift her up," her mother ordered.

Ikara heard the sloshing sound of ankles in water as she was carried on a stretcher into the lake.

What are they doing to me? I'm not dead.

The lake tugged at her. The lost souls clamored around her.

Vines, long, and invisible floated towards her body, twisted around her ankles. They tightened, dragging her body under, and out.

Ikara felt utter freedom. The reality of the crime she'd witnessed faded as she sank deeper. She couldn't go back to that dark memory of a being an accessory to a killer. The lost souls embraced her, caressed her, and spoke in whispers of endearment.

Sinking further towards the chasm, Asiel appeared as pure energy. He embraced her, more intimately than a lover.

She could not breathe, did not need to, and the revelation astounded her.

Am I dead?

No. And yes. Asiel said.

The light of the chasm blinded her. She sank deeper, until lost in darkness. Asiel held her with great reverence as he guided her into the chasm.

Apprehension seeped in at last. Reason filtered through the bonds of guilt. *Sekai said he defended*

his own.

You participated in the destruction of people to defend your own life. Has Sekai corrupted you, too? Asiel asked.

Ikara spun in circles in the water. It was cold here, very cold.

Your crime, as it is, is small to what I have witnessed.

It was too much for Ikara. She wept; tears were washed away with the gentle sway of the lake.

She wanted oblivion. Leave me.

You have not been brought here to seek solace in your guilt. I gave you gifts for a reason, and you have proven your worth.

To witness those deaths? You call that... worth?

Now you understand the Mandrakes are not servants of peace. They protect their own at any cost, as you have witnessed.

You are not the benevolent god who saved my life, she said, sadly.

He laughed. I lost my humanity a long time ago, so don't preach to me about morality. What do you want, Ikara?

That this had never happened, and to be with Sekai when he was mortal.

I will grant you both.

Water surged around her. A distant light drew closer. Ikara was sucked into a tunnel of light. A moment later, she was spat out into a waterfall. She curled into a ball and fell into a pool of water, squeezing her eyes shut against the bright light. Bobbing to the surface, she coughed. Breathing in the cool, fresh air, she swam to the closest rock, grabbed it and crawled, hand over hand, until she reached the shore.

Dragging herself onto the bank, she coughed out the remaining water.

Am I back in my body?

A soft breeze was her only answer. She turned to her side and managed to sit. The noonday sun dappled through the thick leaves. Birds joined in with the harmony of the waterfall. The pool below twisted in circles before cascading further to another, smaller waterfall. She looked above to find water pouring from an open cave.

The mountains reared above. Was this another time?

She leaned against the rocks; she wanted to die, not be rescued.

A twig cracked nearby. She was too tired to contemplate hiding. The cold seeped into her body, the chilly breeze faded. Feeling oddly relaxed and warm, she slid down the rock and passed out.

* * *

Ikara awoke to the crackle of a fire nearby. She felt something over her, a blanket. Tilting her head sideways, she opened her eyes slowly. The hut was small. Thatched roofing, tightly woven, kept out the chill.

Where am I?

An old woman leaned towards the fire, her back towards Ikara. Elsewhere in the hut were a table, a chair where her clothes lay, stools and cutlery hung along part of the wall. In the middle of the fire was a cooking pot. She smelt stew.

“Where am I,” she croaked.

The old woman turned towards Ikara, her voice soft. “Asiel has plans for you,” she said softly.

Ikara turned towards the woman, not daring to sit up, not yet anyway. “Am I on Arien?”

The woman frowned, her gray hair contrasted with sharp brown eyes. “Arien? Yes, I suppose we are.”

Ikara sank back onto the soft pillow. “Why?”

The woman collected two wooden bowls. “Let me see.” She removed a ladle from a hook on the wall, and shuffled towards the fire. Leaning down, she woman scooped stew into two bowls. When done, she handed one to Ikara. “Eat, then I will answer.”

Ikara gazed into the stew in the semi darkness, not feeling hungry at all.

“You were asleep for two days. I will not answer you until-”

“Two days?”

“You were as cold as death. It takes time to warm properly.”

“Who...?”

“Who am I? What illusion suits you the best? This one?”

Asiel. Tears welled up.

“Was your decision fitting, regarding the warship?”

Ikara nearly dropped the bowl; her hands wouldn’t stop shaking. “No. It wasn’t.”

“And if Sekai had done nothing, what then?”

Would they have died? Somehow, she doubted it. “I had no choice.”

She patted Ikara’s hand. “There are degrees of right and wrong, depending on how you are affected by the outcome. Now eat.”

Ikara took a spoonful of the stew and, with difficulty, ate the rich meat and herbs.

After Ikara finished, Asiel said. “The lake is the giver and taker of life, is it not?”

“Asiel. You control the lines. Could you have stopped me?”

“And if I had intervened, would you have blamed me instead?”

“I... don’t know.”

“You must accept the decision you made, and redeem yourself.”

It was too much. “How can I bring those people back to life?”

The woman sighed as if Ikara were an errant child who refused to listen. “I can bring you back to Arien from another slice of time, innocent of your crime; reflect on that if nothing else will satisfy you.”

Ikara tried to comprehend other slices of time where she’d not killed. “Can you?”

The woman shook her head. “I will not. Memory is to be cherished, and deeds learned. The Mandrakes have thousands of years of regret. Be grateful you do not suffer their fate.”

“What if I can’t accept the deaths we have caused?”

“Then you will never leave here.”

Ikara’s shoulders sagged. “Where do I start?”

The woman handed her a green gown, a cloak and short boots. “Take these and go to the end of the river. You will meet someone who will lead you to the path of restoration.”

Ikara donned the clothes. The door to the hut creaked open. Ikara stood in the morning light, under a brilliant blue sky. She couldn’t remember such brightness before.

“See this path. Take it and observe the way. Listen to your surroundings. Look at the wonder. Feel the warmth from all things. Smell the earth beneath. Touch the trees. Use all your senses to allow the light to reach into your darkness.”

The path was easy on her feet, but didn’t lighten her mood. The weight of the deaths flooded over and over again. Birds flew overhead in a group into the valley beyond.

Ikara stopped occasionally to drink from the stream. Descending deeper into a valley, the mists rose from the river. Pines grew on either side, their scent strong in the still air. Smoke drifted from below and her step faltered.

Who would she meet?

She turned the way she’d come, a path that narrowed and petered into the trees above. Above, the mists had crept in. The waterfalls and the mountain were no longer visible.

Ikara plodded down the path until she reached the hut.

A young woman opened the door. Ikara’s heart missed a beat. It was Karin. “Oh.”

The flood of pain drained from her when they embraced.

Karin released her, and her cloak slid to the floor. Ikara stared riveted to her abdomen; she was no longer pregnant.

Karin looked down. “I have to explain to you that my body isn’t real, nor is yours, in the layers between the veil.”

So that was where she was: the place between sleep and death.

Karin motioned her to enter the hut.

Inside, the furnishings were similar to the hut she'd left in the hills.

Karin brushed back a stray strand of hair. "Asiel gave Prenth and me a life we always wanted. He can be kind."

Ikara had experienced only kindness from him. "What did Asiel demand of you in return? Me?"

She removed a jug and two goblets from a table near the wall. "As I said to you in the cave. When you want someone badly enough, you will do anything. Asiel needs our passion to heal his lack of humanity. If you do as he asks, he'll give you what you most desire."

Ikara forced her hammering heart to slow down.

"Why didn't he ask you to be Pherus's healer?"

"The lines of passage showed many scenarios. You were deemed to have the likeliest chance stopping Pherus."

"By giving what Pherus wants?"

"By giving the *illusion* of what he wants. That may include going as far as the immersion ceremony and being prepared to die for him."

Now she understood why Karin had used her.

"I risked all to be with Prenth and I can assure you it has been worth it."

Ikara sat down, defeated. If Asiel, failed then she'd be dead.

"In return, Asiel will send you to a time before Sekai becomes a Mandrake."

Which meant he had no plans of allowing her to die. "Why didn't Asiel suggest this sooner?"

"He wanted to see if you could stop Pherus, but to do so you would have to marry him. Not a sensible option if he wanted to remain as Emperor. If you stay away, Anum will win him over again."

There appeared to be no way out of this, unless she left Arien and that left the way for another healer to be lured into possibly her death. No. She had to see this through. "Does he keep his promises?"

"As long as you give him what he wants, yes he does. He will not let you die."

She began to consider the real possibility of living in the past with Sekai. So much would be different there, and not only the physical. She would have consolation that the people in the warship wouldn't exist yet, for it wouldn't have happened.

And Sekai would be mortal. "I can't deny I'm tempted."

Karin sipped wine, barely concealing a smile. "You'll not regret it." She placed the goblet on the table with a light thud. "For now, your body exists in the lake, ready for when you return. You can

choose not to.”

“What do I become, a lost soul? What sort of choice is that?”

“I didn’t think you’d want to, but Asiel insisted I gave you the choice. You can live in a body of your past life, Tien, or Inu if you prefer.”

Ikara recalled the last time she was in Tien. She wasn’t sure she wanted to go through that again, and as for Inu, it would be no different to being inside Tien’s body. “I’d have no control over either of them. What good is this if I can’t change the past? Look at you. Asiel allowed you to have your body, why can’t I have mine, here?”

“As I said, you must show to Asiel that you will do anything to try to stop Sekai from becoming a Mandrake. You will fail but that’s not the point here. He needs to see how badly you desire this.

So she was to be tested.

“I was challenged, too. I had to return to the past to convince Prentth that he could love him more than becoming a Mandrake. It took five years as I went back into other places in time. On each occasion I managed to alter his memories, little by little. You are not so fortunate. You have less than three weeks.”

That Karin survived the testing made her admire her sister greatly. “Was it difficult?

She nodded. “I was tempted as you were and there were times that the option of a lost soul appealed.”

Her face glowed as she spoke. Karin risked everything for love. In Ikara’s case she had to stop Pherus before Asiel gave her what she wanted.

“If you succeed, you will return in your body. But think carefully. Once you have returned to a particular time, you can never leave. It’s important that you find a time where you can convince Sekai not to become a Mandrake or you will be better off staying in your own time.”

So that was not even certain. Playing the last of the scenarios that ran through her head, she said. “And if I choose not to give what Asiel wants can I return to my own time or will I be lost in Tien’s, or Inu’s body or that of another of my past lives?”

“You can choose any time you like, even live in your own and have Sekai remain, but do you want to? Pherus will seek you out again.

“The other option is to become a lost soul who spends their lives in the bodies of others as carriers of their dreams and passions. Some even forget their past and become wholly immersed in the mind of their host. You will find it difficult to leave.”

Could I forget what I did to these people? Become lost in a memory of another? Even though that temptation was overwhelming, she knew such an option was impossible. “Pherus would seek out

another healer and could become a god.”

Karin smiled. “Asiel was not a fool when he chose you.”

Ikara sipped the wine, savoring the rich sweet body to steady her nerves. “Where do I start?”

“You must witness the destruction of the larger moon, first. Do you want to know what really happened?”

Ikara placed the goblet on the table. Perhaps that was a place she could start in convincing Sekai to change his mind.

You will fail, Asiel had warned.

Perhaps, but he did expect her to try. “Yes.”

“I expected nothing less.”

She wiped a tear from her eye and laughed softly. She had a real chance to save Sekai.

Karin placed her pale hand over Ikara’s. “You are Inu and Tien is you. You have existed countless other times, even though you don’t remember.”

“I’m... afraid.”

“And so you should be.”

Karin rose. “To seek me out, leave Tien’s body at night. Ask me any questions you have.”

Ikara left the goblet on the table. “Will Tien know I am there?”

“Like last time, you will be an observer, feel what the host feels. She’ll not notice you.”

With trepidation, she followed Karin outside.

The light faded to twilight. Ahead the path narrowed and abruptly ended in a shimmering wall. Karin paused at the veil. “When you reach the other side, I’ll have returned to my own body. You’ll find Meri will be waiting for Tien.” Karin slipped through the veil and disappeared.

Ikara followed, trying not to think of the veil she crossed so recently in the City of Legends.

She felt the change immediately. Energy radiated around Tien’s body and her mind swirled as an ocean, absorbing Tien’s thoughts on the trees.

Ikara couldn’t see Karin anywhere, even though she’d just followed her through the veil. Her body must be elsewhere.

The leaves were still green. Ikara sunk lower into Tien’s ocean. The feeling grew more pleasant and the memory of the deaths she so recently committed began to fade. The damp air and soft breeze from the clearing was refreshing.

Tien entered the clearing.

“There you are,” Meri said. “I wish you wouldn’t hide here. I get an uneasy feeling about this place.”

The clearing was empty save for the two of them.

Meri led her beyond the clearing, towards the familiar path. This time Ikara would climb into Tien's past, live in her rooms.

The path to the fortress was steep. Tien climbed with ease, arriving at the gates of the town by late afternoon. From the top, Tien looked down, the river a narrow strip amongst the forest. When she entered the tunnel, the layout drew closer to the old city of Arien in her time. Beyond would be the tarmac, shielded by cliffs. In Ikara's time, she flew by shuttle. In this time, one had to walk.

Tien couldn't hide the longing on her face. Meri gave her a smile. "He comes soon, perhaps tomorrow. Tell him then."

Tien placed her hand on her abdomen and smiled. Was she with child? Ikara sunk deeper. Tien had conceived only recently.

"It won't make any difference in the end, but this will be enough," Tien said.

Ikara knew Tien lied.

Meri turned towards a corridor. "I'm sorry, Tien."

"And you?" Tien asked, her voice tight. "What will Khumn do when you tell him you won't do it?"

Meri tensed. "I worry he will choose someone else. He wants to be a Mandrake so much."

"When will he tell Anum?"

"Khumn and I will decide at the City of Legends."

Ikara recalled the brief time she was in the corridor. The succession must be some time soon.

They continued down the tunnel in silence. At the end, both women stepped outside into the late afternoon sun.

Meri stood in a doorway of her home. "Goodnight, Tien." She closed the timber door.

Ikara thought about what to do next. So far she hadn't tried to suggest anything to Tien. She wondered if she could be more than a passenger. Karin said she couldn't.

Tien's stomach growled. Ikara forgot her purpose for a moment as she observed where her host headed.

Tien entered a large hall, the ceiling covered in vines. Ikara knew this place well. Voices came from several rooms that fed off the main hall: meeting rooms in her time. Here, the rooms filled a more casual purpose.

Tien looked in two rooms; both were full. She entered a third.

Please stay here, she implored Tien.

Karin looked up at Tien, and smiled. Ikara would have smiled back, but Tien nodded.

The table was laden with fruit, breads and water.

Karin removed a piece of white bread from a plate in the middle of the table. “You’ve been touched by a new life.”

Tien blushed. Ikara tried with all her strength to step aside from Tien’s emotions. Her desire to have this child was so strong.

Karin sipped water. “I’m staying on Arien until my child is born.” She paused. “You have another question. Ask it.”

Tien picked at her fruit. “I saw you with a man, Prenth. How did he escape becoming a Mandrake?”

Bit late now, Ikara thought.

Karin gave her a look of sadness. “I told him his future would be one of sadness and loneliness and-”

“That wouldn’t be enough, would it?”

Karin, Ikara knew, tried to find a kind way of telling Tien. Instead, Karin told her the truth. “He loved me more than his desire to be a Mandrake.”

Tien began to shake uncontrollably.

“You’re not strong enough, Tien. Let him go. Let the future save you. You’ll have a child to love one day and to remember him by,” Karin said gently.

Ikara fought to hold her. Tien was weak and far too young. Ikara had no intention of remaining as Tien. She’d either succeed in the past with Sekai or die in the attempt.

Tien left the table and ran from the room.

Back in her room, lights dotted the plains beyond. Tien gazed upwards to the stars, barely visible from the brightness of the twin moons.

Blue fire skipped between Tien’s open palms. Ikara found the sensation almost overwhelming, but to Tien it was normal. Tien released the energy, turned away from her window and surveyed her room. Familiar things flooded Ikara’s senses over and above the conflict in Tien’s mind. The room, a fire, cushions; so many things were similar. A bed rested against a wall, tables and chairs—these didn’t surprise her. What did surprise her were the tapestries that hung from the walls.

From the twin moons above Arien, a milky light encircled the planet. Faces appeared from the surface of the planet as if they were trying to escape. The moon held them back. Ikara wanted to look further at the tapestry, but Tien turned away from it.

The cool breeze wasn’t uncomfortable as it brushed against her face. Tien yawned, removed her dress, slid between the warm down blankets of her bed and dozed off.

Ikara tried to leave Tien’s mind. Nothing happened. Frustration began to set in. She tried to lift

herself out of Tien again, and crashed into a web of energy. She fought through the sticky threads and finally broke free. Looking back to her host, fine lines shimmered around her body.

Milky light shimmered about her, giving the room a glow much stronger than natural moonlight. Ikara slid out of the window into the ethereal mingling of light.

She wasn't alone.

Ikara sensed others around her, sweeping her in a gentle caress before moving on. The touch felt odd, yet in that brief instant she felt a sense of belonging. As they drifted past, others took their place, a constant stream of minds seeking contact in the only way they could in their ethereal state.

Ikara drifted out of the window, down a maze of corridors until she reached another window, several levels below.

Karin was reading a book. Prenth slept on the bed, his blond hair spilled over the pillow.

Karin.

Karin touched Prenth's forehead. "He'll not awaken until we're done."

Ikara was too shocked by her words to respond. Could Karin see her?

"Think the words Ikara. I will hear you," she said softly.

What gifts you have to see the ethereal.

"An easy question. Focus your mind--"

I didn't ask that as a question.

"All you have are questions."

Are they the lost souls that you spoke of?

"Yes. They drift above the surface at night and hope they can ride a host till morning. They crave for the touch of another. After all, that is what you are: a lost soul."

And the second moon controls them.

"Yes."

I see how the Mandrakes believed by destroying the second moon the souls would be freed, weakening Asiel's power. It wasn't sufficient for them to die, was it?

"No. It wasn't. With the healing was restricted to the lake, Asiel decreed future successions be performed there to remind the Mandrakes who was in charge."

So that was how the successions started at the lake.

"As you can see, that's not happened yet. Khumn's succession will be the first."

How can I stop this... destruction?

"You cannot stop it this time, but you can witness it."

Ikara had wanted to see. *When?*

“Soon. First, I have a gift for you.”

Karin walked towards the wall and removed a stone near the floor. She slid her hand into the small darkness and removed the star of Asiel.

Ikara hovered above the star, its power drawing her to it.

“Asiel let me use this, and now I’m done with it, you should have it.”

The star glowed in her cupped hands, encasing both women in light. “Don’t you feel its strength?”

Yes.

“Come. I’ll show you the moon.” A soul rose from Karin’s body. She slid her hand into Ikara’s, or what Ikara felt as a hand, and the two shot skyward.

* * *

Space. Ikara had seen space from a place she didn’t want to remember. She forced away her memories of the men she killed, allowing wonder to take away the pain.

Amidst the void between stars pulsed an energy she had begun to know well. She followed Karin along the lines of passage, past the approaching Mandrake ships, the imperial ship and the small escort ships heading away from Arien. Stars blurred into lines. They drifted along the converging lines of passage towards the source.

This is the place between other places, the source.

So that was what the source was.

Time no longer mattered. The men she killed on the ship no longer mattered. A life is born, lives, then dies. All matter created is dissolved into the blue fire.

The lines surged.

They were spat out into the direction they’d come. Ikara lost all sensations pertaining to the concept of existence as she knew it. This utter feeling of nothingness nearly drove her mad.

Can you imagine what the Mandrakes suffer? Karin asked.

Ikara recalled the time she was stranded in a lifepod awaiting rescue. To experience this over a prolonged period would send her mad. Ikara fought to gain any bearings at all.

Think in terms of living for centuries. Life becomes like this, a desolate existence as unending as the stars around you. They take stasis as a way to overcome the worst of it.

Do they understand this... nothingness?

More than any of us ever will. Each new Mandrake takes this path. Their past dissolves to create their future. The ships are the vessels of their memories.

Ikara could grasp at nothing to steady her in this void, so she let go. Sekai had been so indifferent; he had to be, otherwise he would go mad. He took memories from his ship after each sleep so he could

slowly return from a fog of confusion. When he finally understood what he committed, he'd drift back into oblivion. Sekai knew what had been done to him, what was still being done to him. *Why doesn't he end-?*

He has tried many times, many ways. The moon was the most dramatic attempt of all, and their greatest failure.

The lines disappeared into a ball of haze, revealing Arien: a few islands surrounded by ocean, scattered clouds hovered protectively overhead. Beyond, she saw the moons, one familiar, the other an intruder.

One opposes the other. *How did the moon just... disappear?*

Wait and see.

Stars disappeared one by one as each Mandrake ship appeared. Ikara had been inside the Mandrake ship, seen what they could do with the lines of passage, how they could kill others. She couldn't dispute the power they exuded as they prepared to destroy the moon.

The loss of the second moon made the lake more potent and Asiel more powerful. The increase in energy in your time is due to the two of us being together. We form a link that upsets the balance between our two times.

Had Ikara been in a body, back in Karin's room, she would have grabbed the window for support. *How?*

You are not meant to be here, I am. Look.

The lines of passage radiated from the seven Mandrake ships and converged onto the moon. They strangled the moon, tore it into fragments; the remnants captured with great care by the lines that flickered with blue fire. After the remnants had disappeared, an outburst of energy poured from where the moon was, fading slowly to the familiar levels of healing energy she knew in her time.

Now she saw a familiar sky, the mountains of Arien, the sentinel stations.

The next moment, Ikara was flung from Arien and back along the lines of passage.

Karin's essence drifted back into the woman beside the window.

"The Mandrakes changed Arien by reducing the tides, nothing more fortunately. Not so the Mandrakes. The loss of the moon forced the lost souls to the lake, enabling its power to grow and Asiel to become more powerful."

Ikara hovered above her sister. *Does Sekai know this?*

"Yes."

Karin returned to her bed and lay down beside Prent. "Asiel wants you to know the truth, not only so you'll do what he wants, but also so you can manage with what you will become."

What did *that* mean?

“You must take this knowledge and return to whence you came.”

How will I do that?

Karin kissed Prenth’s forehead. “You’ll see. Now go.”

Ikara returned to Tien’s sleeping body. A gentle vibration came from near her throat. Ikara reached up to Tien’s neck. A moment later, awareness struck; she could control her host.

Ikara slid Tien’s hand around the star and raised it to eye level. She had to hide it, for now since she’d not be able to control Tien’s body when her host awoke. Ikara removed the star from Tien and placed it under a tile near the wall. She wasn’t sure if she could control Tien while awake, but she certainly didn’t want anyone else to find it.

Chapter Sixteen

From a viewing platform, Ikara watched the ship descend towards the spaceport, a silhouette against the rising sun. From Tien's memory, she knew that the ship belonged to the Emperor Khumn. Occasional bursts of flame slowed the imperial ship as it descended. Two Mandrake ships followed in formation, and Ikara felt her host's excitement at Sekai's imminent arrival.

Ikara couldn't hide her surprise at the changes in technology between this time and her own. Pemheb would be intrigued, she thought. She marveled at the time the bulky ship of the Emperor took to eventually land and wondered how long it took to travel from Hedron to Arien.

Tien waited for one of the shuttles to land nearby, its bird-like shape unmistakable. Tien ran towards a large courtyard, her heart beating faster. "Sekai." Ikara heard his name escape as a whisper.

Tien backed away as Sekai's shuttle landed in the courtyard.

Khumn exited first.

Meri bowed to Khumn, who strode towards her, his dark eyes showing tenderness. He took her hands in his.

Tien stepped aside to allow two Mandrakes to leave first. Ikara recognized Anum.

Tien stood where she was, while her body yearned to rush towards Sekai.

Ikara was more interested in Meri's reaction to the Mandrakes' arrival, particularly Anum.

Meri glared at Anum. "Why are you back? We have a week to decide."

Sekai and Anum gave each a sideways glance.

"We want to know what you've decided," Anum said.

Khumn said with barely controlled anger. "You heard Meri, now go." He took her hand, ignoring the Mandrakes, and walked with Meri from the courtyard.

Tien returned her gaze to Sekai's eyes, but not before Ikara caught Anum's mocking gaze towards Tien when she took Sekai's hand.

Tien didn't care and neither did Sekai. They abandoned Anum to mutter curses on his own.

Tien didn't waste time with wine or pleasantries after she led Sekai to her room. She flung her clothes to the floor and so did Sekai with equal abandonment. She dragged him to the bed.

That a woman so young could force a man to yield to her touch shocked Ikara. Her hands ran over his bare chest. Drawn back into Tien, her own consciousness began to fade. For now, she didn't care.

Ikara became acutely aware of his fingers as they ran over Tien's nipples, down the path between her breasts. Ikara became Tien, who lowered her body to him, sank into her desire, allowed the depth of

her love for him go deep. His hands roamed over her back, his lips swept over her neck and face.

Ikara knew Tien had loved him many times, and with the familiar nature of the movement of their bodies came refinement.

Being inside Tien, gripped in passion was one thing, experiencing her emotions were another thing entirely. The sheer delight each found in the other, knowing that soon this would pass, made the moment even more precious. Tien laughed softly as she nibbled his ear. Sekai whispered words to her that Ikara never wanted to hear said to her. They were words of parting and his anguish in doing so.

Then the urgency, the bliss, and Ikara was within the lines of passage enfolding her in a blue light with Sekai, beyond the physical. Her mind touched his and she couldn't let him go, not yet. She knew about the moons and Meri. It mattered to her what Sekai thought. She reached in, seeing a sea so rich in colors she sunk in.

Sekai sensed her immediately. *Whoever you are, ask then leave. I tire...* and abruptly broke off. He dragged her down into the colors of his mind. That place where darkness had not reached. Wanting to become lost in it, yet knowing this was not her reason for being here. She fought to break free, but he was stronger.

Let me go.

He released her suddenly.

Why did you destroy the moon?

His rage and desperation washed over her. *We do what we must to be freed of Asiel.*

Ikara could barely contain the link. *You end up making Asiel stronger. You do not die.*

His mind encircled hers, hungering to know. *How do you know we fail?*

It will become obvious.

The pressure abruptly stopped. Ikara pulled beyond the lines, back into Tien's body.

Sekai gripped his forehead.

"What is wrong?" Tien asked.

He sat up. "Someone else was here. I think..."

She moved beside him. "It's happened before, the voices."

"This one was someone else."

Tien slammed the bed with her fist after Sekai had left. Ikara wanted more than anything to be out of her host's mind.

After her host fell asleep, Ikara retrieved the star, placed it over her host's head and fled beyond the veil, back to the place between sleep and death.

The old woman waited for her. "And?"

Ikara was back in her body again. She reached for the gold chain. A small vibration radiated from the star.

The old woman looked down at her throat. “What do you want to ask?”

She placed her hand on the star. “What do I need this for? To return to Sekai’s time?”

Asiel patted the star. “Eventually. You need it for a more immediate purpose. My star enabled an Emperor who became a prophet to become a god. No man can challenge me with anything less. As Pherus’s healer-”

Was he going mad? “You want Pherus to succeed, with this?”

Asiel wavered and Ikara caught a glimpse of a tall man with brown hair and eyes. “Hear me through.”

She nodded weakly.

“The lines of passage are many. In this one, Pherus can cause great damage if he succeeds.”

She couldn’t believe what she’d heard. “You aren’t sure, are you?”

The face of the old woman changed, and she grew taller. Slowly, she transformed. Ikara focused on the words as his voice lowered. “What happens in other slices of time isn’t your concern, for the possibilities are endless. In this line and those close to it, he is a danger to me. If you can stop Pherus, I will never be at risk from him again, in this or any other slice of time.”

He appeared as a young man, as he had appeared to her in the lake. As tempted, as she was to touch the energy that rippled throughout him, she backed away.

“That doesn’t mean you’ll be safe against future attempts from Anum, does it.”

His eyes radiated love. “Not while he continues to live, but reading the lines of passage into the future I see no threat.” A light caress on her cheek made her feel light headed. “Karin has told you what I require. Wear my star at the lake during Pherus’s succession. Do not remove it.”

Asiel placed his hands together in prayer, reached out to touch Ikara’s forehead. Blue light poured from his hands into Ikara. “You are redeemed of your crime. Go and save me.”

Ikara reeled as the memory of the men she’d killed in the warship returned with painful clarity.

How can I save a god?

With a flick of his hand, Asiel flung Ikara back into the deep blackness of the lake.

Ikara drifted upwards. The waters swirled around her. The light above became brighter. She could see a gentle ripple above.

A heartbeat later, she broke the surface.

Breathing out then in, air seared her throat, her chest. She swam to the closest rocks. The star pulsed through her body, warming a bitter chill before she began to shake. She reached the shore,

looked behind her. The blue fire died, tepid light flickered as before.

Sekai waited at the shore, looking exhausted. How long had he been here waiting for her?

In two strides he reached her side. "Thank Asiel you're back."

She fell into his arms and he wrapped her cloak around her. *What do I say? Where do I start?*

What do you remember?

"Pherus is... angry." Sekai said. "We've kept him from the lake until you returned."

She looked up at him. "And Kat?"

"All of them are safe."

"How long?"

"Were you away? Ten days." Sekai stroked her hair. "I remember someone who warned me about the second moon. Was it you?"

She nodded.

"I doubted you and I was wrong. Perhaps I needed to be convinced much earlier."

Asiel was right. In Inu's time, she had a chance.

"You must promise me one thing before you return."

"What?" By the look of pleading in his eyes, she knew what he would ask.

"If you return to the beginning and become Inu, the healer who died for me, don't let her."

"No. I won't."

He faltered. "When... the need to save someone you ... love requires the need to travel a dark path, then..."

She didn't hear beyond the word, *love*. The remaining words slid through her mind. He'd said that word in the ship as well. "Did you say what I thought you said?"

"Yes." He ran a finger down her cheek then to her lips. Releasing her, he said. "I do love you and I have loved others. I can't deny that."

She kissed him briefly on the lips, unable to forget him in Tien's arms.

He released her. "How," he forced the remaining words with difficulty, "... did you warn me about Meri?"

"I shared her mind and body and reached you for a moment." She recalled her experience as Tien. "She loved you as I do, and you left her to die in grief."

He released her. Her words pierced him to his soul.

She found the resolve to continue. "Asiel demands I be Pherus's healer and that I will not die as a result. I'm not comforted by that-" The utter anguish in his eyes stilled her. "Tell me."

"Asiel demands I do not stop you. I don't know if I can."

She placed a finger to his lips. "Asiel promised he'd return me to a time before you were a Mandrake in my own body. I'm sure he will not let me die."

She watched for a reaction. His lip trembled. "Are you sure?"

"Are you?"

His trembling fingers ran down her neck, briefly touching the star. He released it suddenly and looked up at her in disbelief. "Where did you get this?"

"Asiel."

He rose, helping her stand. "Do you believe Asiel will allow Pherus to take the star and become a god? Asiel never takes risks unless he is certain of the outcome."

"I hope you're right."

He slid his arm around her waist, supporting her. "We can't do anything until the succession, which is a week away. I suggest we focus on restoring as much of the past as we can, starting with Inu." That is where I am mortal."

He helped her to her feet. "I will take you to my ship and, this time, be with you."

By her side? "Yes."

A smile spread across his lips. "My shuttle is outside."

On the way towards the exit he said, "While you were... away, Liea informed me Kat made it to Halifad. You have an ally there. Kat sends ships to aid us should... Pherus succeed."

She was relieved they'd made it, but did not relish the idea of their return, or at least not the reason for it.

"There is one more thing you need to know." Sekai's expression changed to distaste. "Anum told me that Pherus greeted him like a lost father. He's in awe of Anum after seeing all his wounds healed. Fool."

What else had she expected?

"Pherus was never strong enough to fight Anum," Sekai said. "Ironically, he believes you can still save him."

Ikara had hoped he'd the strength, but ten days was a long time. "And the marriage offer?"

"Umat and Neti appear to have negotiated a successful arrangement. I'd not let that encourage you. Pherus has not accepted Umat's final offer."

She gripped the star and prayed that Asiel knew what he was doing.

* * *

Her mother entered the cave and ran towards her. Ikara embraced her.

"I thought I'd never see you again," her mother said.

Ikara released her. "I'm leaving again."

Concern flashed across her face. "Why?"

Sekai spoke for Ikara. "I'm taking her to my ship. You best not take too long in your farewells."

He tried to pass her mother. She stepped in his way. "You mean to take her away?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"When," Ikara corrected.

Her mother placed her hand on Ikara's arm. "Did you see Karin?"

She nodded. "Karin isn't returning, but she is well and is with child."

Her mother placed her hands over her mouth. "Oh, my. I'm so happy for her."

Sekai made his move.

Her mother barred his way, again. "You can't abandon us."

Sekai paused for a moment. "Asiel demands Ikara give Pherus what he wants. Will you ask Anum how he plans to stop his daughter from dying?"

Her mother backed away, hurt.

Brutal, not how Ikara would have said it.

"You see..." She paused, wondering if her mother should hear this, and decided it no longer mattered. "When an Emperor becomes a Mandrake, he literally becomes a god."

"I don't believe you," her mother said, horrified.

"It's true," Sekai said with finality. "The initiation ceremony for a man makes him a Mandrake, one for an Emperor makes him a god. The star around Ikara's neck is the conduit. I'm surprised you didn't know. Anum certainly does."

Her mother couldn't take her eyes off the star. "I knew Anum wanted a healer. But *you*? He could have asked me; I'd have given him what he wanted."

Ikara was speechless. "How could *you* allow a healer to die for another?"

Sekai had no difficulty answering. "Anum has no plans of dying. He'll use Pherus as his pawn. As for Ikara, it's what Asiel demands."

Her mother wiped a tear from her eye. "I didn't know."

Ikara closed her eyes and found strength in the darkness. "Anum never cared for me or Karin, except for his own ends. You were too blinded by love to see it."

Her mother shook her head. "I'm so sorry."

"It's too late," Ikara said softly.

* * *

Sekai walked into a brisk wind. He squinted as he gazed into the midday light. Gray clouds thickened overhead. If snow fell, an area beneath the hut might be a good place to hide his ship. Pherus's ships were cruising across the whole path between Hedron and Arien.

He climbed into his shuttle and checked the location of the storm. From the north, and it was going to be a bad one. *Good*. His ship would almost be impossible to find.

Ikara appeared soon after. She climbed in, her clothes wet from the lake. The fire at the hut would dry her quickly.

His shuttle rocked unsteadily on the tarmac. The front of the storm hit as they ascended. He rose, keeping close to the leeward side of the cliff until he reached the opening of the first valley. He nearly lost control as a tunnel of wind buffeted the craft. He kept below the tree line of this valley and the next. When the image of the hut appeared in the column of fire, he rose straight up the leeward side of a cliff. Flakes of snow swept past him.

The shuttle rocked violently near the hut. He took the leeward side and landed.

He tracked the descent of his ship until he saw it through the blizzard. Snow melted in rivulets of water down the pulsating hull. It turned side on and burrowed partly into the snow. If he were lucky, more snow would cover the remainder of his ship by nightfall.

Ikara relit the fire inside the hut, flung her cloak over the sofa, then removed her clothes. Sekai grabbed her cloak and wrapped it around her. After hanging the wet clothes over a spare chair, he patted the sofa. "Lie here for a while."

She looked exhausted. As was he. He hadn't rested, but sleep eluded him. After Ikara's breathing steadied, he sat on the floor, his back against the sofa. The star had been the trigger to Asiel's immortality. To give it to Ikara was a bold and dangerous move.

Chapter Seventeen

Ikara stirred reluctantly when Sekai woke her. The fire had gone out, and she had to feel about in the dark for her clothing, now dry and waiting on the back of the chair. She dressed in silence while Sekai waited. When she was ready, he opened the door, letting the cold wind blast into the room.

“The snow has covered most of the ship. We must go, or I’ll have to move it. I’d rather not draw Pherus’s attention to us.”

There were no stars, only the cold howling wind.

“I’ve heated the ship. I’ll carry you.”

She clung to him through drifting snow to the airlock. He had already dug away the snow so that they could reach the ship, a task that must have taken him half the night.

Ikara, surprised at the warmth inside the ship, followed him to the navigation room.

Sekai pointed to the coffin. “The life core works best in here.”

She climbed in. “There’s no room for two in here. Where will you be?”

“I’ll be on the floor. The life core provides the strength we wouldn’t have otherwise. The star will need its power.” He helped her lie down. “All you have to do is focus on the star.”

She placed both hands over the gem.

“Not necessary, but it will do. Do you have any questions?”

Not a question, more a prayer. That Asiel would show her a time where she had a chance to save Sekai.

“No.”

“I will track you from the ship.”

Ikara gazed at him steadily. “How?”

“A link I used to find you once before.”

“I’m ready,” she said.

“Remember, the star is the link to the past.” He squeezed her hand. “Never doubt the words you hear. Do you understand?”

Closing her eyes, she nodded. The star hummed. Light shimmered from the life core to the pulsating star, which responded with its own blue light. Fire rushed through her. She disappeared from the ship, and plunged into space.

Ikara drifted back towards the ship. *What had gone wrong?*

She stood next to the coffin. It was sealed. She tried to move the lid; it wouldn’t budge. She

checked the rest of the ship, but Sekai wasn't there. "Ship?"

Blue light began to radiate from beneath the lid. "Who are you?"

Her confidence began to waver. "Ship, who is your Mandrake?"

"Asiel."

She was in Asiel's ship. The lid hissed open. Her heart raced. "Asiel?"

A breeze touched her face. "I feel no evil within you."

Relief flooded through her. She was in the past.

The light faded. Asiel shimmered as a sea of blue.

"Am I in the past?" Ikara whispered.

"Yes."

Ikara began to feel light-headed.

Asiel touched her, and clarity returned. His dark hair, tied in a plait, shimmered with the lines of passage as did the robe he wore. His dark eyes were black orbs, a center of darkness in a face of light. She fought the urge to run, but there was nowhere to go.

He touched her forehead. Cold energy tore along her body, dragging thoughts from her mind. He released her. "You place a condition on my offer."

"Once I end up in the past, how can I be sure I won't fail with Sekai?"

"You saw his determination. I warn you, others have tried and he abandoned them all."

"Tried to return to the past?" she said, disbelieving. She didn't want to be another who tried and failed.

"Inu, Tien; other healers who are past lives of yourself. They didn't have the chance you have to change Sekai's past."

Disgust rose within her. Why had he waited so long for her? "Why me?"

"You have what it takes to defy a god and the sense to know when to yield."

If she was supposed to be impressed with his words, she wasn't. "What sort of creature are you?"

Asiel sat on the coffin. "A manipulator who uses others to achieve his own ends. I touched you before you were born, fed my strength into you so you would succeed where no one else will."

Did he expect her to be flattered?

He chuckled. "Don't despair. The end isn't the terror. Do you want to start with Inu?"

She had no choice. How does one defy a god? She didn't believe she had, or could. Sekai was all that mattered now. "When he was at his greatest."

"You could go in your own body, but I'd suggest you go as Inu. You'll attract less attention that way."

She nodded. It made sense.

He raised his hands in front of her as if in blessing. Light shimmered around her as a cocoon formed. A line of passage caught her, flung her along the line until another caught her. Stars shifted, worlds moved, suns became brighter.

* * *

She dropped gently into the body of a sleeping woman. The lines of passage flowed from Inu to drain into the parched ground. Clouds drifted across a cloudless sky tinged with red. Inu rose. The late afternoon heat had already fled. She ran her hand through the parched red sand, along the scorched lines that ran on either side of her like miniature streams, unsure how they appeared. Rising to her feet, Inu brushed the sand from a brown woolen robe. A basket lay before her, laden with tubers. Inu picked the basket up, inhaled the dry desert air, immediately forgetting the lines.

So this is Sekai's beginning.

At the top of the red dune were squat buildings of stone, running along parallel lines.

A village?

Inu carried her basket and walked towards the first building, a small hut with a thatched roof. Sensing this wasn't her home, she moved on. A woman nodded as she passed and Inu nodded in return. Farther down the street, shade from the thatched buildings covered the stone pathway, providing relief from the heat. Several women huddled in conversation. Inu passed them and reached a courtyard. Children squealed as they ran under a fountain of water. A young girl ran towards her. "Inu. He's coming soon."

Ikara looked into the child's wide brown eyes.

Inu spoke. "Who?"

"The prophet."

She sunk into Inu's mind. "Asiel?"

"Of course, who else?"

Inu's stomach knotted with anticipation. Ikara touched her mind. Followers were accompanying him and one in particular had caught Inu's attention last time he was here. Inu hid her increasing nervousness from the girl. "Let me know when they arrive."

The girl nodded, and ran back to her play.

Ikara found Inu's home, a hut she shared with her parents and sister. The transition had been much easier this time. She was Inu, impulsive Inu who would die to save a man who didn't love her.

Her younger sister had light brown hair like Inu's. Her green eyes couldn't hide her excitement at the door of the hut. "I can't wait."

Ikara felt Inu's excitement grow. Sekai. Inu had met him a year before and already the stirring of love grew in her heart, but not in his, for he'd not noticed her at all.

Inu said to her sister. "Nor can I."

"You want to see that young man again?"

"And you. Who do *you* want to see again?"

Her sister blushed and fled the room.

* * *

Asiel arrived at dusk, wearing a tattered blue robe coated in dust from weeks of walking. Twelve men, wearing similar robes, followed. Families queued up along the street. The weak, the dying, and the ill all lay on mats.

Asiel's dark hair was tied in a plait. She stared at him, awed. This was the first time she had seen him, for real. His dark eyes shone with passion, while his body fought exhaustion.

He knelt beside a boy and touched his forehead. A trickle of blue fire ran from the ground through his hand towards the boy's forehead. The boy stirred and looked up at Asiel. His mother hugged him. "He lives." The boy protested and wriggled out of her arms. Finally, he succeeded, and ran towards the fountain.

Inu couldn't keep her eyes off Asiel. His healing matched Ikara's own. What energy did Arien possess? Before Ikara knew what she was doing, tendrils of blue fire shot from the ground into her outstretched hands. Inu stared in disbelief. Ikara suddenly released the energy.

What had she done?

Asiel walked over to her. "Do it again."

Inu placed her hands together. The energy crackled briefly before it faded. Her eyes widened. "It must be your presence," Inu said, amazed.

Ikara had unwittingly opened a conduit.

Asiel nodded. "I meet few healers with such ability. I would welcome the need to reduce my travels. Go to the city of Arien and be trained."

Inu, nodded, awed that Asiel had considered her. There were few healers in this time with any ability to heal such difficult patients.

The men who followed Asiel lingered, their faces impassive, but not all. Sekai, who looked younger here than in her time, eyed Inu with more than passing interest. Ikara briefly touched his mind and would have wept in her own body. Such passion lingered there. Passion she wanted to experience at least once before she had to face Pherus at the succession.

Asiel returned to his task. He knelt beside the sick girl. Ikara couldn't catch the words he

whispered to her. The villagers became suddenly quiet, watching. A flicker of light raced over her chest. She rolled over to her side and coughed. Her mother held her, weeping uncontrollably.

Asiel healed the old and the sick. The dying were another matter. He touched a young woman, her skin as pale as white marble. Ikara had seen that look too many times. The woman didn't want to live. Fighting the urge to help was the hardest thing she'd ever done. She couldn't afford to attract attention to Inu again.

The woman began to shiver.

Asiel gazed at her. "Don't you want to return to us?"

She shook her head.

Asiel turned to her mother. "I cannot stop her dying. Please, tell her why she should stay?"

Her mother cradled the young woman. "I need your companionship. My husband needs to tend the fields." She began to sob.

Asiel placed his slender hand on hers. "Do you love her?"

She was stunned by the question. "Of course I do."

"Tell her."

Ikara had seen it all before. The forgotten daughter who had lost her first love, and parents who needed her. "I'll stay," the young woman said, still sobbing.

"Good," Asiel said.

Ikara had seen enough of the healing. Inu was enthralled. Ikara waited, knowing Inu's family wanted to meet Asiel.

Asiel, his work complete, took wine from a grateful mother. Inu's sister offered him a bed in their home. He accepted. The men pitched tents just outside the village. They didn't expect, nor receive a bed.

Inu sat in a circle with her sister and parents. They shared a meal of stew, tubers and bread. When they finished, her sister said. "The blue light. What is it?"

Asiel gazed at her sister with a faraway look. "The land we walk upon gives energy. Any of you can reach into the fire of Arien and heal yourself, and others. It's a pity few have the ability to do so."

Her sister gave her a smile. "Like Inu did?"

Asiel's gaze rested on Inu. She breathed in a little more quickly. Asiel didn't smile, nor did he respond to her sister's remark. He turned towards her father. "I thank you for your meal. May I retire?"

Her father rose. "Of course."

Ikara waited for her mother to usher Asiel to the spare room at the back of the kitchen.

Inu went to her room, her mind filled with expectation. Sekai had noticed her. Ikara's host fell

asleep, a smile on her lips.

Ikara took over Inu's mind and rose to find moonlight on her face. Again, the twin moons. She slipped a cloak over Inu's thin shift, slipped on sandals and went down the stairs out into the chilly night. She didn't check if Asiel was in the hut; she knew he wasn't. This man wasn't dreaming of miracles.

He lay in the center of the lines of passage drained in the sand, the very place Inu had briefly lain. Residual energy remained visible in the moonlight.

Sekai sat cross-legged beside him, his eyes also closed. Ikara felt Inu's heart hammer almost out of control, caused by her own feelings, not Inu's. She nudged the headiness aside. She needed to think clearly.

"Where are you from?" Asiel whispered.

Sekai opened his eyes and looked at her with curiosity.

Ikara looked skyward. Twin moons. The second moon was the stronger of the two, by far. She ran her finger over a drained line. The line flared for an instant. Ikara saw Asiel's face in the light as bright as day.

Sekai uncrossed his legs, unable to take his eyes off her.

The light faded. "What is the second moon called?"

Asiel leaned on his elbow. "Rei."

"And the other?"

"Sa." he replied.

"Rei-sa," she whispered. "Darkness and light."

"You travel by the lines. How?"

"You, Asiel, allowed me to travel here."

Asiel reached out to touch her face. Slender fingers ran down her cheek, to her arm, followed by a line of passage. He withdrew with a sigh. "Your mind and body are not the same."

"No."

"Your name. I must know."

Should she tell him?

He sat up, his face barely a palm's width from hers. His breath smelt of cinnamon. "Tell me."

How much would he know? Sekai was right beside him, already chosen, favored, ready to do anything this man wanted. This was the beginning as promised. Shivering in anticipation, she said, "You believe and hope for a miracle. Maybe I am that miracle. You called me to save Sekai."

Sekai's eyes widened, narrowed. "Save me from what?"

She drank him in, years younger than in her time. She didn't care. "Immortality."

Sekai glanced quickly away. So he had been tempted.

"Your real name?" Asiel insisted.

Should she tell him who she was? If he truly knew of a time via the lines of passage, he'd find out eventually. "Ikara."

Asiel drew a sharp intake of breath. "So, the vision I had is true." He looked skyward. The light of the moons flooded them.

"What an unusual name," Sekai said.

One he had not remembered at all, until recently.

Ikara gazed at the star around his neck. "You are already a god, but you will not be a kind one."

He broke into laughter. "That I believe."

Sekai's gaze fixed on Ikara. "How *could* you know I desire immortality?"

Asiel placed his hand on Sekai's. "You have a choice, it seems. Follow me."

Sekai gave Ikara a look of awe. "How do you know all this?"

Asiel clutched the star around his neck. "Come."

They walked through the sand as twin moons traversed across the sky. Asiel led, leaving a trail of blue fire as he walked. Just as her vision had foreshadowed. Ikara guessed it to be about midnight when they reached an oasis. It was the one she had seen on the recording. The palms swayed in the cooling breeze laden with moisture from the oasis. Energy radiated from the lake, the power overwhelming.

Asiel slipped the star over Sekai's neck.

Sekai placed his hands over the star, disbelief on his face. "Why are you giving me this? I'm no healer."

"You are to look after it until I return."

Sekai backed away from the lake, reaching Ikara's side. Asiel's head disappeared beneath the water.

Sekai's doubts spilled over as he spoke. "He planned for me to be the first. He'll come back, won't he, and it will start."

Was she already too late? Ikara placed her hands over her face. "Please, no."

He slid his arms around her. Inu's cheek touched his.

"He is difficult to refuse," Sekai said.

Her lips brushed his smooth skin; his touch brought her to tears. He kissed her wet cheeks. His lips met hers. He slid his arms around her and drew her to the sand.

Her cloak fell to the ground. Her body shivered at the sudden cold. Would Inu want this? Did she have the right to use Inu's body in this way?

Sekai traced his finger down her thin cloth, gripped the hem and raised it, exposing her long legs. He stopped. Uncertainty flashed across his face. "Inu doesn't know you possess her, does she?"

Ikara couldn't believe what she said next. "Unless I awaken and ask her?"

He removed his top. "No. I will love her afterwards, on the way back if need be, after she awakens. Tonight, it must be you."

She couldn't believe she was going to do this, and wanted to, badly.

His hand slid beneath her robe, lifting it over her head.

Ikara watched him remove what remained, the star last. His body was on the edge of youth; taut and leaving no doubt he wanted her. He lay beside her, propped on one elbow. His eyes hid nothing, not knowing she would be gone by dawn. She leaned towards him, one leg over the other, her knee touching his. He cradled her hand and gently pushed her onto her back.

Inu's body was more eager than Ikara had thought. Ikara dipped into her host's mind. Inu was dreaming of him loving her.

Her host's passion nearly blinded her own. She drew Sekai into her and felt a brief pain that fled as suddenly. Inu had never had a man before.

Sekai looked at her sharply. "She..."

"Will remember this, so love her well," Ikara finished. She grasped his hair and drew his lips to her. Blue fire encircled them both, and Ikara carried him along the lines. The Sekai who loved her now had no darkness at all, the colors so vivid, raw and untouched. She flooded him with fire, her love and part of herself tore away as she did so.

Sekai fell to her side, exhausted. "How did you love like that?"

She was about to answer him, only to be met by the steady breathing of sleep.

How much had she taken?

She dressed quickly. Dawn was still hours away, and he needed to love Inu as well.

Ikara drew the energy onto Inu's body, so she'd last the remainder of the night.

She then knelt beside Sekai, unable to take her eyes off his profile, his loose hair draping over his slender shoulders. She placed her hands over his torso. Energy fed into him, reviving him.

He opened his eyes, and looked up with longing, and regret. "We don't have much time, do we?"

Ikara gathered the cloak around her. "No," she said, not taking her eyes off him.

He dressed quickly, save the star, which he pocketed.

She rose. "Ask me."

“If I do become Asiel’s first, how long do I live for?”

He considers it, still. “Longer than you believe imaginable.”

“Do I do a lot of good deeds?”

“You do a... lot of deeds,” Ikara said with difficulty.

“Not all good?”

Ikara shivered uncontrollably. Had she unwittingly caused him to become a Mandrake?

“What is wrong?”

“I ... shouldn’t have come here.”

His fingers slid into hers. “Why not?”

Did she think she could truly stop Asiel from convincing Sekai? What was she compared to a god. She would fail as Asiel would have predicted. Inu would die.

“Tell me,” he insisted.

“Inu sacrifices herself so you can be a Mandrake. You’ll regret it for thousands of years.”

He almost lost his breath. “That long?”

“Asiel will use you and you will become...” She faltered. Was he even listening to her?

“Thousands of years,” he muttered again.

She shook him. He took a moment to work out where he was.

Ikara rose to hide her tears and walked away from him.

Sekai caught up with her. “Will you stay?”

“To stop you?”

“I don’t think I’ll have the strength otherwise. Asiel will return for,” he clutched the star, “this and I don’t know if I can refuse him.”

If she were in her own body she would have stayed. Probably the reason why Asiel made sure she wasn’t. “I cannot.”

“No. I suppose not.”

“Each woman you love in the future is a past life of me.”

He cupped her face. “Always you for all time?”

She lay down on the depression. “Always.”

He knelt beside her. “I will never forget you.”

You soon will, except in moments of passion where you’ll briefly remember and wonder. “Inu loves you. Treat her well; don’t let her die for you.”

Ikara slipped out of her host, unable to watch Sekai he as knelt over Inu and kissed her. She departed towards the camp where the remaining men who followed Asiel slept. A brief scan brought her

worst fears to reality. Anum. She checked the other sleeping men and recognized some of them. Others, like Forin and Gwain, came later.

Ikara spun down a line of passage for a short distance, until she landed beside a creek. Fresh grass filled her nostrils. The sound of running water filled her ears. Leaves rustled above her. Sunlight flickered in her eyes. She opened them.

Where am I?

“Oh, there you are.”

An old man, with long white hair, leaned over her.

“Sleeping again?” He extended his hand to her.

She scrambled to her feet, immediately aware of the brown healer’s robe brushing against her legs. Her host picked up the shawl from the ground and shook out fragments of dead grass. Water cascaded down a nearby river. She swept into her host’s mind, and could barely suppress her excitement.

Inu reached a still pool near the river to brush the remnants of the grass from her hair. She then helped the old man lift a bucket from the river. He slung the bucket using the rope over his shoulder. Inu followed him up the gentle grassy hill towards a cave. Memories flashed before her. The old man lived nearby, and Inu, now a fully trained healer, visited here often.

The cave overlooked the river. A tree, full of yellow blossoms, with a heady sweet scent, bloomed outside the entrance. Petals drifted from the branches into her hair as she entered the cave.

Inu followed the old man into a tunnel. Prisms fed light into a tunnel. She looked around; no dampness here. This man she knew and loved, preferred to remain here, rather than the city of old Arien.

She heard tapping ahead. The large cave was lit the same way as the tunnel. In the center stood Sekai, his back to her, his dark hair falling loose to his shoulders. He raised a small dagger above his head, turned the blade one way then another. Satisfied, he placed the dagger back on the bench.

Ikara had thought hermits lived in quiet contemplation in places of neglect. Sekai did neither. He turned around to help the old man lift the bucket onto a bench. A fire roared in a recess.

Sekai turned to look at her at last, the lines of youth just gone. Had he given up the magic of Asiel’s words to the mystery of... what? She tried to reach into Inu’s mind and when she succeeded, a wild hope ran through her. Years had passed.

“Inu?” he said kindly.

She loved him. He gave his body to her, but didn’t love her.

She reached deep into Inu, her despair reduced to acceptance.

Doubt crept in. Was it possible Sekai chose to live in the future? Panic set in. Was there a ship in

her time with Sekai waiting for her?

Ikara chastised herself for being so naive. She had to deal with Pherus.

But not yet.

He turned his back on her. To one side of the cave was a large table. Inu scanned stones, knives, shields and swords on the wooden shelves. At one end lay the five-sided star, encircled by a gold chain.

She forced her way into Inu's mind and took over. Surprised she could, she dared not waste the opportunity. Ikara walked over to the bench and picked up the star.

"Inu. Please," Sekai said.

"Did you know a man called Asiel?"

"I'm sorry?" the old man asked.

"No. Asiel. Yes, I know of him. He entered the lake ten years ago and... never returned." Sekai spun around. "Leave us."

The old man grabbed the bucket. "I'll get some more water?"

Sekai gave him coin. "Just. Go."

The old man frowned as if Sekai had lost his mind.

He slipped the old man another coin. He walked quickly from the cave.

Hope lit up in his dark eyes. "It's you."

She wanted to hold him, love him, and would have, had she possessed her own body. "You remember me from the desert?"

His eyes softened. "Always."

"You chose not to follow Asiel's path?"

He smiled. "Asiel didn't return to tempt me."

But he would, she thought sadly. "And Inu?"

He winced. "I couldn't love her. I was cruel. I made her stay with me in the hope you would return." He leaned against the table. "I missed you since that night. Will you leave again?"

Sekai didn't love Inu, and he was going to let her die. Her heart hammered out of control. "Yes, but I don't want to."

He shook his head not believing she was here. "I decided to live near the old city. Visitors are always after work to be done with precious metals and artifacts."

This was the time and place she'd return to, to save Inu. "If I can, I will return for you, here. I promise."

Ikara found his gaze disturbing, but the longer she stayed the harder it would be to go. "I... love..."

He nodded and whispered. "I know." He closed the gap between them. "Tell me one thing before

you leave.”

“What?”

“Do I fail you?”

Asiel’s tendrils reached out to embrace her. The room blurred. Unable to tell him the truth, she said to his fading image. “I don’t know.”

Chapter Eighteen

Blue light encased Ikara. The cave rippled, then disappeared.

I am not ready.

Sucked back into her body, she nearly passed out. Ikara's mind swam, focused, swam again until hands gently rubbed her feet. Energy flowed into her body again, warming her. Sekai cradled her in his arms. "I remembered, but I failed you."

She choked on her words. "Concentrate... my love."

He cupped his hands into the column of energy in the ship and cradled the haze for what seemed like to Ikara moments. He retracted his hands. "The memories in my ship showed Asiel rose from the lake soon after you left. Inu, I'm afraid..."

"Still dies," Ikara said flatly.

"Yes. Asiel was persuasive. He said if I became a Mandrake, I would meet you again and again, in a new life. It made sense at the time. You see. If I went back to sleep, whenever I was awakened, you would be there. I didn't understand that at the time, or how I even found you, but I always did, didn't I?"

She had no recollection of her past lives. Still had no recollection, save for the brief visits to the past. She'd do Asiel's bidding if that was what it took to end this. "Pherus must believe he will be initiated as a god. All I can hope is that Asiel is right in that Pherus will not go through with it."

"Unless you refuse to do what Asiel wants."

"Would you stay if I chose that option?"

He nodded. "As long as you lived."

Could she do this to him? Make him suffer the death of another loved one? If she refused Asiel would never give her another chance. This was all she had. If she refused then how long would Arien be safe for? A century, or a thousand years until Anum found another Emperor to manipulate.

And if she did enter the lake and go through with the initiation, there was a chance to save Sekai from becoming immortal.

She gazed into eyes that were in turmoil. "I must risk this one chance. It will never come again."

He clenched his fists. "Don't."

"Karin said that Asiel always keeps his promises. I must take this chance and believe that he will not let me die"

"Anum will continue to exist regardless of the outcome. He will try to find another Emperor to

manipulate. You gain nothing.”

“You think in terms of centuries. I have decades at best. I will be dead regardless.”

He appeared stunned. “I didn’t consider that.”

“A few decades where I grow old and die, or a chance in the past where we both can grow old and die.”

Clearly torn, he said. “Do it, but if there is any risk to your life, I will stop him.”

“That’s all I ask. Give us a chance my love.”

He leaned back, reluctant.

“What has happened since I’ve been... away?”

The change in topic seemed to help him refocus on recent events.

“Kat has ships orbiting Arien. Liea has been trying to contact you. I told her you’d speak to her as soon as you returned.”

Sekai opened a channel in his ship. Liea appeared, unable to hide her relief. Kat appeared beside her.

“Kat will soon be returning to his ship. We need to finalize our plans? Sekai?” Liea asked.

“Yes.”

“Will your ships join us?”

He bowed slightly. “They are at your service.”

Sekai extracted his ship from the snow. The sky was clear. Brilliant white snow dappled the trees as the ship passed overhead. Soon, they landed at the snow-covered spaceport.

Ikara left the airlock first. The sun had sunk past the clifftops, and the cold hit her with a start.

She trudged through the snow to the Arien warship. The massive ship soared above her. Ships were never allowed on the spaceport in normal times, but these times were not normal.

The airlock of the warship slid open. Ikara walked up the steps, remembering the last time she’d entered an Arien warship. As a child, and out of curiosity.

This time was to say farewell.

Liea waited at the entrance. Kat stood beside her.

Ikara didn’t want to linger. “Sekai will be here soon. I wanted to show you this.” She removed the necklace and handed it to him.

Kat handled the star with reverence. His dark eyes moistened. “I never believed it existed.”

“Kien overheard you say it was stolen long ago. Was that true?” Ikara asked gently.

Kat cradled the gem and nodded. “I’m sorry I lied to you, but I didn’t really believe it myself.”

“How did it get there?” she asked.

“Meri wore it on Halifad, and we believed she hid it there.” Kat handed the star back to Ikara, his emotions mixed. “Who gave this to you?”

There would be no easy way to explain how she obtained the star, so she didn’t. “Asiel.”

Kat wasn’t a man who could handle variations of the obvious. “I see.”

Ikara trod on sacred ground. “Kat. Asiel is real. He has marked me, and those who have been marked cannot turn their back on him.”

“Asiel is the healing energy, not a god who marks healers-” Kat halted, looked again at the star around Ikara’s neck. He touched it. Ikara felt a faint vibration. It appeared so had he.

“I’m sorry. This...”

Ikara knew Kat struggled with the need to believe. “Can you feel the energy around you?” Ikara asked.

“Yes,” he said, as a faint smile formed on his lips.

Ikara knew the sensation when one saw the wonder for the first time. “Kat?”

He broke from his reverie. “What?”

There was no easy way to tell him. “You must allow Pherus to become a Mandrake.”

“A what!”

Liea placed a hand on Kat’s shoulder. “She wouldn’t do this lightly.” Doubt crossed her face. “Would you Ikara?”

Her friend was taking this better than she hoped. “Pherus desires this. Please do not allow your ships to attack another ship. Or Arien.”

Liea and Kat shared a look of bewilderment.

“Arien. Why would I want to do that for?” Kat asked.

“I know this appears to makes no sense. Liea. Do you trust me?”

Lien was equally uncomfortable. She nodded. “I will not attack, unless they fire first.”

“Thank you,” Ikara said.

“Not so fast,” Kat said. “Are you going to die for this... man?”

“She has her reasons,” Liea interrupted, saving Ikara the need to answer her.

“Make sure all the Lords are present,” Ikara said as calmly as possible.

Kat grabbed part of Ikara’s top from near her throat, his dark eyes ablaze with fury. “So they can witness this atrocity?” He suddenly released her, as if ashamed. “I don’t know what has driven you to do such a thing. Liea. Talk to her.”

This was going to be hard. For Liea’s sake, she said, “Asiel asks this of me. Liea. I must end Pherus’s line of time before I can start again.”

Kat shook his head. "She's raving."

"No," Liea said solemnly. "She's not. You've found a way?"

Ikara clasped the star for reassurance. "I hope so."

"All right. I will make sure the lords arrive at the cave on the full moon tomorrow night," Liea said, her voice wavering for a moment. "Anything else?"

The hardest request of all. "I have to see Pemheb at the lake, tonight. Can you arrange it?" Liea's shoulders sagged. She swallowed. "He'll be devastated."

* * *

The cave was deserted. She knew this would be difficult. She had asked Liea to tell him nothing of the intent of her visit.

Pemheb arrived soon after.

She sat on the sand cross-legged. Her cloak lay in a bundle behind her. He draped his cloak on the ground and sat beside her. "What happened to you out there?"

"Please don't ask me."

He took in a deep breath. "So. What can you tell me?"

"Asiel is going to return to witness the succession. He--"

"I have heard Asiel will appear before the lords tomorrow night to witness the succession. We shall see." His eyes betrayed a glimmer of hope. "Why have you asked me here?"

Relieved he would at least hear her out, but not for the reasons she hoped, she said, "You are the only one I can trust amongst the lords."

He smiled wryly. "I'm flattered. What is it you truly want?"

"You must not fire your ships on Arien, regardless of what happens."

The glimmer of hope faded, then died. "I believe Sekai is the one you should be talking to."

Sekai had told her of their joint commitment. "I wanted to tell you to take great care." And in my own way, say goodbye.

His body began to tense. "Not do anything foolish you mean. I threatened Pherus if he used any healer to become a Mandrake."

His commitment shook her. He would do it too, she could tell by the surety in his eyes. "You said you admired my directness."

"Tell me what you want."

"Asiel will be here, literally, to witness Pherus become a god."

Pemheb could have disputed her, had he not touched the lines of passage. "You mean it, don't you?"

This was getting harder. She was genuinely fond of the man. “Pherus must be allowed to become a Mandrake. If he chooses to do so, you must not stop him.”

He bolted from the sand. “No. I have heard of this practice. I cannot believe you would consider dying for him. No man is worth dying for. I will not... allow it.”

She grabbed his hand and lowered him to her side. She heard his quick intake of breath, and said, “The lines of passage enable one to travel through time. Each line carries a variation of our lives. To stop Pherus, this line of his existence must be eliminated.”

His hand shook in hers. He looked up at her abruptly. “You plan to make Pherus a Mandrake so he can never succeed in another line?”

He was as quick as Sekai said he would be.

“And you? You will die in this line.”

“Maybe,” she whispered.

Pemheb stood up and walked to the shore of the lake. He knelt, scooped a handful of water. It ran through his fingers. “We are like the water, aren’t we? We exist for a moment in Asiel’s eyes.”

He was right, so right. “I hope you will understand why I did this some day. He has promised me a life in the past with Sekai.”

“Before he becomes a Mandrake.” He turned to her, his face unreadable. “Are you sure this is what you want to do?”

She asked a lot of him. “I must. Please don’t do anything. For my sake.”

He returned to her side. “For your sake I will do nothing,” he said in a barely controlled whisper.

She let go. Tiredness threatened to engulf her. “I’m going to stay here for a while.”

Pemheb draped the remainder of her clock over her shoulder, grabbed his cloak and left.

* * *

Sekai studied the screen in the navigation room. “The sentinels map every ship within Arien territory. As you can see, there are ten Mandrake ships, as well as your ships from Halifad.”

He counted five warships, small and deadly, from Burusis. Pherus believed they couldn’t destroy Arien. He was wrong. The adjustment to Pemheb’s ships had been minor. If there were a man he wanted to leave the fate of Arien to, it was Pemheb. The lines of passage were fed from each other. The technology he had given to Pemheb would exist in other lines. Who knew what fate would be thrust upon him?

“Our ships are already in orbit,” Liea said.

He returned to the Mandrake ships. They moved into formation. A five sided star with two ships at each point. Two ships remained on the tarmac. Anum’s was one, and, as far as he was concerned, there

it would stay.

* * *

Ikara awoke near the shores of the lake. Apart from a healer with a young girl in the lake, she was alone.

The healer didn't acknowledge her, she was so intent on the girl.

Inside the tunnel, Ikara, for the first time, felt the weight of what she was about to do. Being ready to depart from all she knew and loved was totally different to the imminent reality.

A blood red dawn greeted her outside, the ground spattered with the remnants of snow. Trees, devoid of leaves, held a silence so deep she heard her breathing as if a loud rasp.

She climbed inside her shuttle. The warmth and hum of the vessel broke the stillness. A sense of normality returned and she captured the moment as if her life depended on it.

She landed next to Sekai's ship at the spaceport. Answers to questions waited until she was inside the open airlock of his ship.

"I'm glad I saw Pemheb. You chose well." She gave him a reassuring smile. "He'll recover in time."

Sekai looked outside. She followed his gaze. Anum approached the ship. "Go. I'll deal with him."

She would not.

Anum stopped a few paces from her. She held his mocking gaze with hers. "Are you planning to give Pherus what he wants?"

Word didn't take long to reach him. "Isn't it what you desire? Those years of training will be useful after all."

Anum glanced at Sekai before he returned his gaze to her. "Why?"

"Asiel demands this of me. One cannot defy the wishes of a god."

Anum shook his head. "Why do you give up so easily or," he gave a wry smile, "did Asiel promise you more?" He took a step closer. "I will control Pherus. Don't you want to at least try to save him?"

He plays the game to the end. "Since when did you care about what happened to your daughters? Karin is living in the past. So will I, hopefully. We will become memories in you mind. Sad in a way. Your games tire me as does your existence."

Anum smiled briefly, a smile she began to loathe. "So be it."

She'd had enough. She said one last thing to him, before he had a chance to respond.

"You are my darkness, Anum, but that does not mean I have to be within sight of you."

She didn't see his face register absolute shock.

Sekai shrugged as he closed the airlock, leaving her alone in the ship.

She sat in front of the haze and imagined her position in space. The star radiated blue and the ship rose.

Seconds later, she was in orbit. She guided his ship next to the other Mandrake ships and opened a channel to Liea.

Liea appeared a vision of clarity amidst the haze. "Ikara. What are you doing? Is Sekai with you?"

She shook her head. "Open a line to Pherus."

Liea didn't betray her concern, or challenge her.

"Connect. Ship," Ikara said. *Before I lose the courage of what I am about to do.*

Pherus's face replaced Liea's.

"I have a proposition for you," she said.

He seemed relieved at seeing her again. "Where's Sekai?"

I can't do this. "He's not here."

His face went pale as the revelation set in. "How?"

Do I control the ship? She'd never tell him. "You wanted a healer."

"What?" he stammered. "No."

She tried to remain outwardly calm and continued. "So you can become a god."

He gained his bearings quickly. "Are you ... sure."

That he considered it still saddened her. She was nothing to him.

He turned away from her, nodded then turned back. "Very well. I will see you. Where?"

"On this ship."

Before he could protest, the ship transported him across the lines. An instant later, he was inside with her.

He gasped and regained his bearings a moment later. "How..." He took another breath. "Did you do that?"

"Ship. Connect to Anum. He should be in his ship by now."

Anum appeared in a circle within the column of energy. "You're truly going to go through with it," he said smugly.

She raised the star to eye level, in full view of Anum. "You need this, I believe?"

"How did you get that?" Pherus asked hoarsely.

Ikara swept back a lock of blond hair that had fallen over Pherus's forehead. "Without it, you become a mere Mandrake. Did you know you need it to be a god?"

Pherus nodded; his eyes riveted to the star. "Anum said it would re-appear when needed again. It means Anum was right. *I am* destined to become a god."

She tried to hide her disappointment. If this was some kind of test to thwart Pherus, it wasn't working,

"I never imagined it would be given to you."

"Now you can go ahead, if that is what you want. She placed her finger to his chin forcing him to look at her. "Do you want to?"

A flash of eagerness crossed his eyes. "I can't say I'm not tempted."

"If you decide to go ahead, have you considered the power you will wield?"

He placed his hand over hers and gently removed her finger from his chin. "Oh, yes. And I will bring you back, I promise."

Had Asiel sent her away for ten days so Anum could convince Pherus again of alternatives? What a fool she had been to be so ensnared by her god.

"Asiel," she whispered in barely controlled anger. "Come."

Asiel appeared. His dark hair was tied in the plait of a Mandrake, his robe illuminated by rivulets of blue haze that flowed like water.

Pherus sunk to his knees. Ikara's knees threatened to buckle beneath her. Who was she that thought she could defy a god.

"Rise before your god."

Pherus did so.

"Come to me Anum," Asiel said.

Anum stood inside the ship. He staggered and backed into the wall to steady himself.

For the first time, she sensed real fear in her father's eyes.

Asiel said to Pherus. "To be a Mandrake requires one to take the path through the lake and beyond. Once there, nothing can bring you back. Do you dare to look at the chasm as it takes a life? Do you want to know?"

Pherus nodded sharply.

"Good. I like a man who is committed."

Anum's face went white with shock.

"You are my servant, Anum. Now go." The image of Anum disappeared.

"Ship. Land at the lake." Asiel faded into a blue haze and disappeared.

Pherus regained his bearings. "You would do this for me?"

"For Arien, Inu, Sekai. Never you," she said.

He reeled. "Not at all?"

"I'm sorry."

She opened a link to Liea. "Lia. We're at the lake. Asiel will speak to us all."

Lia gave her a look of incomprehension.

"If I hadn't seen him, I'd not believe her either," Pherus said to Lia. "She speaks the truth."

The ship landed on the tarmac. The sun began to set behind the trees.

Pherus climbed the steps to the tarmac. He ran his hand over part of the hull. "Incredible."

She too, had said those words, once.

The water was still, the wall of the cave white. Lost souls brushed past her, wanting.

Pherus's guards entered the cave, carrying handheld laser cannons.

"Weapons are not allowed on Arien," Ikara said, annoyed by their intrusion.

The first soldier turned to Pherus.

"Holster the weapon captain," Pherus said.

He did so reluctantly. The remaining guards did the same.

She heard murmurs from the tunnel. The lords were arriving.

"I must go and prepare," she said to Pherus.

In the small room Ikara took her time to don the gold dress with the five-sided stars along the hem. She reached up to a shelf and removed a dagger, the gold blade the length of her hand.

The edge of the blade cut her palm and a rivulet of blood ran down her little finger. It would be sufficient to perform the deadly task she was about to do.

Ikara returned to the tunnel. The healers she had known all her life made a line from the small cave to the lake, a thin barrier against the small crowd that huddled nearby.

Many of the lords were alone, save Neti. Kat also came. He clasped Ikara's hand briefly, his face unreadable. Ikara sought solace in the star around her neck to hide her growing nerves.

The lords rose from makeshift chairs when she reached the edge of the lake.

Pherus wore a gold tunic, no crown. She was glad he defied Asiel in a small way. Not so with the gown she wore. Pherus balked at the sight of her, at the dress Meri had worn.

Asiel. You don't know what you ask of me.

I do. If you want to live again with Sekai, this last act must be completed. Trust me.

A few minutes later, Sekai arrived with five Mandrakes. Images of another time flashed before Ikara. *I do this for you. For Arien. For Inu.*

Sekai reached Pherus. "Our ships are safely in orbit alongside yours. I assume our ships will not need to do anything rash?"

Pherus's upper lip twitched.

Ikara couldn't suppress a slight smile. The minds of their ships, broken from time, and Sekai had

left the safety of Arien to them.

“Our ships will not cause harm,” Sekai reassured him, “if yours do not.”

Pherus said with a hint of arrogance. “One of my warships has already fallen victim to your ships. I hope you are right.”

Anum’s eyes were downcast. Asiel’s appearance had humbled him to some degree. He looked up at Ikara, unable to hide his pleasure at the beginnings of a tantalizing taste of what he had desired for so long.

“I underestimated you,” Anum said.

Ikara gave Anum a look of pity. “You are the weaker one.”

Anum visibly shook.

Pherus gently cupped her elbow. “You don’t do this for me, not at all.” It was a reaffirmation, not a question.

Ikara took his hand from her elbow and rested his hand on the star. Her mouth covered his. He parted her lips, his tongue savoring hers. She felt nothing at all. Suddenly she let him go. “See.”

As she turned away from him, Asiel appeared in a shimmering light over the lake.

Chapter Nineteen

Blue haze took form above the lake, the change slow and effective. Asiel took shape at last. He hovered in the middle of the lake. The small group broke from their rapture, and knelt.

The Mandrakes did likewise.

“Rise.”

They did so.

“Bring him in,” Asiel said.

Six Mandrakes carried the body of the dead Emperor through the tunnel, on a stretcher. Kreth, wrapped in a gold cloth, his mummified face exposed, his eyes closed.

Ikara gave Kreth the last rites at the edge of the lapping water. “Release your self beyond the limited vessel of your body.” She bowed her head. “May Asiel grant you peace.” She backed away. The lords did likewise, as if on cue.

All twelve Mandrakes waded into the water until they reached the edge of the chasm. As they began their descent, the ripples in the water grew larger until the Mandrakes disappeared from view. The white walls of the cave went blue. Energy eddied around her, then, a voice.

And how long does this worship last? How long does anything last? Tell my son, if he wants to become a god.

Kreth was speaking to her in her mind.

I can do no more for him. It is Asiel who demands this of me.

The chasm opened before her.

Pherus said to Ikara with barely concealed awe, “I had no idea you were truly Asiel's servant.”

She placed her shaking hand on Pherus's shoulder. “You understand why you can't refuse a god.”

“No,” he whispered.

“Come with me,” Ikara said. “We'll wait in the center of the lake for the Mandrakes to return.”

Better than enduring the glances of uncertainly from the lords.

Asiel raised his arms. “Come to witness a new beginning.”

Pherus's lips trembled as he spoke. “The Mandrake root yields magic, but it also leaves poison. I have seen the poison today.”

The remaining Mandrakes returned one by one from the chasm. They formed a circle around Ikara and Pherus. The lake swirled. A lord shouted from the crowd. “Look there.”

In the center, the cave went violet, a color she had not seen before.

Ikara sensed mixed emotions from the lords. Some didn't understand. Others were too enraptured with Asiel to notice. A few fell to their knees. A hushed silence filled the cave, the only sound the lapping of the waves.

The violet light grew stronger as the chasm opened. The cave vibrated with energy.

"We are ready," Asiel said.

She couldn't believe she was going through with this.

Sekai looked on, his face impassive.

"Why is Sekai allowing this to happen to you?" Pherus said.

Tears ran down her cheeks.

He brushed a tear from her left cheek. "Tell me. I need to know why?"

"He cannot intervene. Asiel promises I can return to a past life of mine and live with Sekai before he becomes a Mandrake."

Pherus gently brushed the tear from her right cheek. "You meant it when you said, not for me."

"Yes."

He smiled wryly. "All right, I'll do this if it means so much to you."

Would he? For her? "Do you truly want to be a god?"

His hunger returned for a brief moment. "Yes, I do."

"Kneel," she said.

Ikara scooped water and poured it over his head. Pherus inclined his head to the right, a slight smile on his face.

"In the west is Rei, your darkness."

She looked to where Pherus glanced. Anum had resurfaced and was smiling back, victory on his face. He knew he was going to succeed after all.

Sekai stood beside him, his gaze unreadable.

Ikara quickly returned to the task at hand. She scooped up more water and poured it over Pherus's head a second time.

"In the East is Sa, you light."

Asiel closed in. "Do you believe in me?" he asked Pherus.

He looked up at Asiel, awe in his eyes. "Yes."

Water spilled from Ikara's hand as she poured for the third time.

"Do you willingly give your life to become my likeness?" Asiel asked.

Pherus's voice firmed. "Yes."

Asiel turned to Ikara. "And you will die for him?"

She looked up at Asiel, defiant. “You betrayed me.”

Asiel continued, undeterred. “The ultimate sacrifice is one’s self, to take you beyond the limited vessel of your body.”

Ripples in the water nearby made her glance to one side. Suddenly Sekai was stopped by an invisible force. His expression of total helplessness tore at her heart.

The realization she was going to die took hold. She trembled as only a few heartbeats remained.

Ikara removed the blade from her palm; droplets of blood fell into the lake. She knelt and Pherus did likewise. His body trembled then went rigid when the blade pierced his heart. He jerked with pain and she held him, tight. Ikara placed her lips on his, releasing her life essence to him. The pain began to fade. She slid her arm around him, drawing him close again.

Her lips parted from his. “In the lines of passage, I give you mine,” she whispered.

Several of the healers screamed. Some of the lords surged forward until Pherus’s guards held them back.

Her gaze drifted to Sekai’s own, blazing in fury and terror. He wanted to scream, and she sensed it, acutely. She had hoped that she’d not die and be allowed to return to the past with Sekai. Right now, as life ebbed from her, she couldn’t possibly imagine how it could happen.

Water reddened the violet light over an uneasy silence.

“Asiel, give me peace,” Pherus whispered through the blanket of violet.

Connected to Pherus, she experienced what he did. Water rippled over his shoulders; violet light burned into his dying eyes. Blood surged from his heart as waves over the lake, darkening the chasm.

Ikara began to loosen her hold.

The lake began to churn as Ikara slid into that point between life and death.

A light caress brushed her neck. Was it Sekai? No.

Pherus’s hand touched the star briefly. He released it and pushed her way from him. His thoughts entered hers. *I don’t deserve your death. You are not the only one who has courage to defy a god.*

She reeled, unable to hide her elation at being saved. Like the first time Asiel had saved her, the euphoria could not be contained. Somehow, the star had saved her.

Life returned and life bled away. Blood mingled with fire. A soft wind rippled around her. The essence of blood and breath forced their way into her soul.

Asiel gave Ikara a wry smile as he faded. He had known this would happen.

Sekai reached Ikara several strides later. She sputtered. “The star saved me. How did... he know?”

Sekai embraced her. “Asiel took an incredible gamble. It seems Pherus couldn’t bear to become a god after all.”

The awareness she felt so vividly lingered, became a part of her. *How easily I grow accustomed to this or...* Fear gripped her and she asked Sekai, “Am I a Mandrake, as you are?”

Sekai shook his head. “The star prevented you from becoming one of us and also from becoming a god. Remember, you are not an Emperor.”

She couldn’t hide her relief. To go to the past, she’d have to be mortal.

Pherus backed away. His hand touched his healing wound. Ikara saw him gaze up at Sekai with a combination of fear and amazement.

Whispers whirled around her. The light blinded her. She closed her eyes again and relived that moment in the lake, beyond the edge of death then back to life. She waded to the shore step by step. The star had saved her. Asiel had taken a great risk with her, and both had won.

Pherus waded towards the shore, his gown wet, save for a tear where the knife had entered. The lords backed away as he reached the sand.

Ikara reached the shore, ignoring their frozen silence. The Mandrakes parted for her. Gwain and Forin gave the briefest of nods.

Pherus stood, shaking from the new sensations he must be experiencing. Ikara embraced him, his hair damp against her chest. She felt the turmoil he was going through, his decision to become a Mandrake and not a god. He walked the path Asiel set for him.

“I wonder who is more insane—you, me or Asiel,” Anum said.

She forced a smile, hating her how father saw all this as a game. “I believe we all are,” she said.

Admiration flowed from her father who continued to stare at her. She tried not to hide her shock.

He chuckled. “Asiel is a better manipulator than I ever will be.”

“Like last time,” Sekai said. “You will never learn.”

Anum placed his hand on Sekai's shoulder. “The fate of Pherus lies within your hands.”

Sekai appeared to tolerate the gesture as he faced the lords. “Pherus refused to become a god. Let him suffer with the knowledge of becoming one of us, if he chooses to join us, that is.”

The Mandrakes formed a protective circle around Pherus. The lords all protested at once. Ikara knew they had no idea that Sekai meant literally.

“We will not be servants to a Mandrake,” Umat spat.

Ikara studied the other lords. Names didn’t matter; the concern on their faces did.

“I betrayed you,” Pherus said between chattering teeth.

She touched his forehead to soothe the pain and understood why Asiel had made her do this. Pherus would ultimately fail through love. She stroked his hair. “How did you know the star would save me?”

“If it was so powerful to allow me to replace Asiel, it must have been equally powerful to save

you,” he said, with a hint of regret.

She had underestimated him after all.

“It gets easier after a couple of centuries,” Anum said.

Pherus looked at him in horror. He backed away from Ikara. “Let me... contemplate.”

“We will look after you,” Sekai said.

Anum said to Pherus with deadly calm. “Did you know if you had become a god, I would have used you to change many things, including my past. I think...” He looked at Ikara with amusement. “I might have made the gravest mistake of all.” He inclined his head to Sekai. “Take care of the decisions you make in the past. Ikara’s future depends on me.”

Ikara understood the implication. If Anum ceased to exist in the past, she would never be born.

Sekai said warily. “I know.”

He lowered his voice. “When a Mandrake is created, another can die. Anum. There is a chance for you to end your existence.”

Ikara hadn’t registered what Sekai meant. Then she did

“At last,” Tier shouted.

With a speed Ikara didn’t believe he possessed, Tier turned, ran and plunged into the lake.

“He’s finally been granted his wish,” Sekai said.

The chasm widened and Tier disappeared. A moment later, the white light returned.

Sekai raised his voice. “Pherus, what do you want to do?”

“I will not serve a Mandrake,” Umat said, tearing his eyes from the lake.

“I must agree. Pherus will not be accepted by us,” Kephna said, showing no difficulty turning back to the matter at hand.

Ikara turned towards the two lords, the dagger in her hand. Both took a step backwards.

She said with barely controlled fury, “Pherus chose his destiny. Have you no compassion for him? He had to struggle with this decision for a long long time and all you do is bicker.”

Several of the lords gave each other uneasy glances. Pemheb smiled.

Neti shoved her way through the crowd until she reached Ikara. “She is right, but we cannot let this deter out future. This choice had to be made eventually. An immortal Emperor would be ... politically dangerous. I’m sorry for being so cruel.”

Ikara nodded. Neti was right, but this existence was no longer her problem. “Whatever you decide, I don’t have to witness it.”

The crowd parted as she left the cave. They continued to argue although she knew what the outcome would be. Pemheb would be chosen, if not for his popularity, then certainly the capability of

his ships. One day, Mira's son would take his rightful place. Maybe it was for the best, this. The euphoria she felt would soon pass. Better she be in her bed than in front of these people when it did.

As for Pherus, she had no idea what would happen to him. That the Mandrakes would embrace him as their own, she had no doubt. And she hoped he'd be strong enough to live with his decision.

* * *

Later, much later, back in her room, Asiel appeared. "I have let you live as I promised. My work is nearly done and yours is about to begin. To stop me in my past will be no easy thing."

Ikara felt for the star around her neck. It was gone.

Asiel stroked Ikara's cheek. "Do you want to see anyone before I take you away?"

"Yes," Ikara said cupping her hand in his.

Asiel released her and nodded solemnly. "You will leave this time tomorrow." He faded away.

Ikara rose from the bed. It was time to say goodbye to Liea.

* * *

Liea stood by the shore of the lake, the stillness an eerie contrast to the night before. Her tearstained face hid nothing. "I don't want you to go," Liea said, hugging her.

Ikara didn't want to let her friend go either.

"Pherus had left with the Mandrakes." Liea drew away from her. "Pemheb--"

"Did he ask you to go with him?"

"Yes, but he doesn't love me. It matters that they do."

Ikara hugged her again. Liea wiped a tear from her cheek as they released each other. "I would have given you my life in the lake."

"You're not a healer." Ikara said, betraying a chuckle.

"Nor will you, soon," Liea said, with barely a smile.

And that moment could not come soon enough.

* * *

The following night, Ikara stood at the shore of with Asiel and Sekai.

They waded to the center of the lake.

"Join with me," Asiel said.

Asiel faded into a haze of blue fire, which fell to the water as rain.

Sekai drew Ikara underwater. Her gold dress floated over her body as reflections of the moon on the ocean at night. She must have looked like a vision to him.

Lips touched. Blue fire rose from the chasm. Sekai's mind opened to her, revealing a sea of colors

tinged by blackness.

Look into my darkness.

She did so.

The healer in her fueled light, as Inu's had for a man long ago. She knew this in an instant. Inu and Ikara connected across time to perform this one last act of transformation.

They tore through the blinding light into the chasm. At the edge of death, immersed in his mind of colors, she saw who Sekai was, and could be.

The past unfolded like layers, the barriers gone. Memories returned clouded with truths once cloaked with lies.

Ikara was glad she was with him, the only barrier to a void he'd feared he could fall into at any moment. The lies he had been fed by Asiel had been blurred with truth until finally there had been indifference.

They arrived at the cave where she'd met him as Inu. His essence reached out to his old self for an instant.

Ikara touched both minds; Sekai's old self, full of hope, merged with the indifference suffered in his future.

Ikara released the lines of passage into both minds, aiding their collaboration, enabling them to live with their differences. The Sekai of the future took great care in the questions asked and the answers he gave. When done, Ikara released them. The Sekai of the future faded.

She sank onto cushions, exhausted. "Do you remember me?"

Sekai opened his eyes and looked up at her. "Maybe I'll let him stay for a while, after all."

She laughed.

Strong hands gripped hers.

"I feel..." he whispered.

"Human?"

"Yes. It's... going to take some time to get used to."

Ikara looked around the familiar cave. She inclined her head towards the entrance. "What do you see?" she asked.

They stood at the entrance. Inu was nowhere to be seen. She'd have to find out what happened to her.

But not yet.

Outside the blossoms continued to fall.

He took her hand, drew her towards him and kissed her. She slid her arm around his waist and

together they stared towards the river, the scent of the petals on the tree familiar and intoxicating.

They walked outside and towards the river. Sekai lay on the grass. Ikara sat beside him. Her fingers tingled when she touched his closed eyelids. For now, Anum could wait, Asiel could wait. She savored the moment at hand. She watched Sekai drift into slumber, for the first time in millennia, as a mortal.