

Elanclose

Krystyna Faroe

*Out of the Apocalyptic dust grew new life
but was life free of the evil that caused it?*

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by

Krystyna Faroe

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Dedicated to:

All those that struggle to bring about awareness of:

Endangered animals

Climate changes

Destruction of nature

Maltreatment of people and animals

And most of all;

Thanks, to those that do something to change it.

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Biography

The invasive dust whirled and twirled amongst the rubble of stones.
With its movement it ejected grumbles and groans.
This was the angry residue of the Devastation.
A child wandered shading her eyes from the biting grains,
Thankful for her tears to dispense them upon her cheeks.
Her soul shattered, heartbroken into pieces, body shaken.
A small lone figure emerged with a dusty smile and an open hand,
Drawing her away from the death, despair and destruction,
He was her saviour in this bitter land.

Fern 2026

Chapter 1

Earth 2032

Watching from behind the large rock, Fern felt safe. She was small and felt invisible from their view. She recalled their eyesight was not very good or at least that was what she'd been told. She reflected that she shouldn't believe everything that the others said, it was easy to speculate when you didn't know, and how could they know anymore than she about these people? Still, she felt safe as she looked down at her clothes, shirt and pants that were a blotch of greens and blended well. Her clothes were form fitting so they did not catch on branches or bushes as she ran. They followed her lithe body and small curves like the bark around the trunk of a tree. Her shirt was long sleeved to protect her from the biting bugs. Bites that left more than marks that would fester to puss filled infections. The colours could fool the bugs most of the time as they were made from strong stretchy leaves, she could easily be mistaken for a long sinewy plant when she stood still.

With interested green eyes she watched them stumbling over tree roots and through bushes. They didn't normally come out this far. Why were they out here now? Although she knew she was safe and could escape silently and quickly, leaving them with no clue as to her ever having been there, she was uneasy about their presence. She could see they were uncomfortable and a few of them kicked in anger at the roots, and spat in disgust at the forest floor. They didn't want to be here, so why were they? She shifted to the other side of the rock and peeked around, following their movements as they trekked on.

Their leader was a large boy, she guessed around eighteen the same age as their leader Oak. His hair was dark and wild; he had a look of distrust and anger. His black eyebrows hooked together in a frown and his dark blue eyes were filled with concern as he led his troop along. He had the broadest shoulders she'd ever seen, covered with a black coat that touched the floor and dragged upon the undergrowth and twigs. It hung open and he pulled the collar back from his neck as if it were too hot to wear. Why did he wear it in this heat? She stealthily moved to a tree to get a closer look.

Now she saw why he wore the coat, she saw the glint off of something silver, shiny. He wore a rifle; it was strapped to his side, and hidden beneath the billowing coat. She leaned closer to get a better look. It had been a long time since anyone had had a rifle; this one must be very old. It shone as it reflected the sunshine that sprang through the trees. The wood had sheen to it, as did the metal receiver. He'd carefully restored this one.

Guns, rifles, revolvers had been confiscated by the Regime many years ago. No one had been allowed to have them, only the military, and to have one in your possession had meant immediate arrest to the interrogation camps. Some had hidden away antique relic rifles and guns because they thought as a part of history they shouldn't be destroyed. If they were discovered the guns were taken and the families removed to the camps and never seen again.

Gazing upon the boy she knew he must be carrying ammunition. She saw it now the bullets were pocketed into his belt, lots of them encircling his waist. She looked up again at his face; it looked grim by the set of his jaw and the tightness of his lips. He looked cautious. He was dangerous.

She left, nothing more than a whisper on the wind. Hastily she ran through the forest along the ground she loved so much, seeking out her own to warn them and prepare. Prepare for what? She didn't know. Her light feet touched the floor briefly as she ran. Her breathing remained regular, unchanged from her exertion. Most Woodlanders were athletic and could outrun almost anything. Branches lightly touched her as she went by and she breathed in the scent from the different trees.

As she sped past a large silver birch she erupted into a copse filled with a puissant of colour, small bell like flowers grew everywhere, their various scents strong and aromatic. The violence of the smell hit her nostrils in an almost blinding shock wave. Her senses reeled momentarily (she still had problems not succumbing to the nastramus poppies). The nastramus poppies were their first line of defence along the west of the camp and kept just about everything, if not away, asleep for a very long time. "Soften your eyes Fern, see all as a blur, listen but hear little, feel the air as nothing more than a caress, slow down your breathing." She softly chanted in her head. Only by reducing the rate of your breath could you pass through the fields, once you opened your mouth to the spores it would only be a matter of seconds before you lost consciousness, and probably never wake again.

Fern ran out from the poppies and through the tall grass. She was coming to the second line of defence. Taking a deep breath, she leaped into the air, reaching as high as any deer or gazelle. She didn't look down at what she was jumping over but concentrated on the safe landing she was aiming for. Had she looked down she would have seen what looked like giant mushrooms (these were the tariniums, a mutated fungus). Their smooth flat surfaces gave the impression of nothing more than a beige mushroom head but below, the stalks were seven feet long and contained a sticky substance that clung to whatever touched it. They had been placed into a seven foot ditch that was deceiving since only the head of the tariniums could be seen. The stems released a powerful chemical that caused paralysis within 10 seconds. Unless you were pulled out by another who hadn't touched the stalks, you wouldn't be able to move to escape and would slowly die. The decaying bodies were absorbed into the ground where they fed the monstrous fungus.

At the six foot mark the tariniums ended and Fern's feet lightly landed at six and a half feet. She paused momentarily and then ran on. She let the huge breath she had taken escape her and focused on her next obstacle.

The third line of defence was the most dangerous and her heart beat rapidly as she concentrated on what she had to do to get through it. Regulating her breathing into calm smooth breaths she softened her eyes so that her peripheral vision was enhanced and she could practically see behind her as well as in front. She let go of all her thoughts, filling herself with peace and tranquillity. You couldn't jump the burneam bushes. They rose up to seven feet high and were a mass of gnarling, twisted black branches, the thorns a shining dark navy blue, stretching to an inch in length. Their height was not the problem, if you tried to jump the bushes the thorns would release, shooting up into the air to impale you with poison. Your skin would turn deep purple as your blood rushed to the surface in enormous swollen bruises, the lack of blood to your organs would slow down the body system and you would go into cardiac arrest and die. Only if all the thorns could be taken out quickly enough could you survive. However, once hit by a thorn you were no longer able to do anything but succumb to your fate, which like the tariniums was to decay and feed the mutated bushes.

The branches grew outwards only three feet in their width and the separation to the next bush's branches was four and a half feet, giving only one and a half foot clearance between. Fern, like a fluttering feather weaved through the bushes careful not to touch the lethal thorns. She couldn't focus on the thorns because of her widened peripheral vision but even so she could sense them with her body. By keeping her body relaxed, she was less likely to cause a body reaction, a slight cough or hiccup would be deadly as the thorns would release. Fern had performed meditation many times to be able to release her mind and body, so as not to stimulate these bushes that responded to sudden vibrations and the movement of air above them, to release their thorns. Weaving in a dance with danger, Fern very slowly and gracefully passed through the bushes.

The defences hadn't been created by the Woodlanders. The nastramus poppies, tariniums and burneam bushes had been there long before they arrived. They'd decided to use them to protect the west side of their camp. The plants had been made by scientists many years before, employed by the government to produce biological protection or at least that is what they called it. Scientists, who had played with the genetics of seeds, adding from one plant to another, playing with more dangerous entities such as bacteria, tumours from plants and a product they had created from their studies of snake and spider venom, using these substances they had created these deadly, poisonous plants and fungi.

The whole ten kilometres had been surrounded by twenty foot high metal fences at one time but those had been destroyed in the explosion. The terrible products from their research should have been destroyed but they weren't, they had survived. They ran side by side from the south to the north. They separated the Woodlanders from what was left of the city and the Citans. The Woodlanders had turned evil into something that would provide them safety but at a cost; the defences destroyed not only the dangerous but the innocent.

Sequoia, their leader, the founder of the Woodlander clan had been the only one who dared to venture near the paradoxical, peculiar plants. He had sat at night, safe, high up within the realms of the branches of a tree and watched what happened to the creatures of the night that ventured into their depths. The cries from them had made him cringe and he had shut his eyes at first. Since he was twelve at the time, he had wondered at his bravery to seek out more knowledge on the plants and their lethality. He had forced himself to open his eyes to see what occurred and how the creatures died. Then he had become fascinated by how the plants managed to stop the creatures in their tracks and kill them.

To the consternation of the clan, he spent many nights in one of the trees nearby, studying the plants, figuring out how they killed and what set off their weapons of destruction. The burneam bush had been the most difficult to understand, he'd seen creatures travel through and not touch the branches or stems and still be impaled with thorns. It was many nights of surveillance until he discerned the plants felt their vibrations; a grunt was enough to cause the changes that triggered the thorns to eject. Armed with this knowledge, he set out to find a way to be able to get through the terrible plants unharmed. He had succeeded and trained some of the clan members, thinking it would be useful for them to go through the plants if they required a quick route to the camp or to escape danger. Fern had been trained by one of those members.

The forest and grasses that had grown soon after the Devastation had been a surprise, especially because of their rate of growth and abnormally large size. Everything was different now. Everything had morphed into something else, mutated...no, not everything. They had brought with them the old seeds and they had grown normally and provided them with food. The mutated vegetation was only used for clothing or to make objects of use but they dared not eat it. The Woodlanders were normal, they had not mutated after the Devastation.

Only children had survived the Devastation. Older brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, grandparents, aunts and uncles had died before their eyes. They had survived because they were inoculated as babies with the SM2. No one knew for certain but the surviving children proved the reason to be right. The inoculations had started eighteen years ago. No one over the age of twelve had survived the Devastation, none of those older than the SM2 inoculation. They had lived their new life for six years, a very different life from what they had known.

It wasn't understood why but only babies could be inoculated with the SM2 and no one was really sure why it was enforced that babies have the shots. The scientists had tried to produce a safe strain for children and adults but no one survived them. They must have known what was coming to have developed the SM2. It was the only reason that humanity survived.

Still even those inoculated died under the falling buildings and destruction, including Fern's own brothers and sisters. Adults, who had escaped the collapsing concrete and stone or managed to scramble out after the shock waves, had dropped dead within seconds of walking into the open air, to the horror of the children.

She gathered her thoughts once more and went over the sight of the boys in the forest. She had no doubt they were Citans. Although, she'd never seen Citans, she'd heard many stories about them. They were survivors too but they were very different from the Woodlanders. Why were they so much larger? Were they evil? Mutated? They were all young so they must have all had the inoculation just as she had herself. That is why they'd survived but she wondered; did they use the chemicals left behind in the city? Did they follow in their forefathers footsteps? If they had, they were not to be trusted—ever.

The Citans never left the city, so, why would they now? She was passing through more of the long grasses, the tops with seeds and long strands of awns tickled under her chin like fingers. She considered the size of the Woodlanders as opposed to the Citans who were bigger and heavier and it crossed her mind that should the defenders from her clan need to fight them they would be dwarfed and out-weighted. Weight could make a difference but as long as you were quicker and more agile, your chances would increase. She hoped it wouldn't come to a battle between them.

Fern had no friends other than Abacus, her mutant snake. He would protect her from the Citans but who would protect Oak. He must be kept safe, he was their leader, her saviour, her...she pursed her lips and swept any further thought of him away.

The aroma from the camp was wafting toward her. It gently nudged her nostrils. She breathed in the smell of mint, parsley and cilantro, they swam through her senses. Herbs helped them, not just for food but for health, healing and aiding vitality. Although, they were all young, they still needed help with their bodies when they did something foolish and became injured, strains, cuts, sores or becoming ill from too much work required assistance. The Almist would make up a poultice of bread, oil and water for strains. He'd dress cuts or sores with devil's claw or turmeric and administer drops from oregano and other herbs to help the lungs clear from the clutches of sickness.

Herbs were a main part of their diet, not only did they protect them but they flavoured their food in special ways that even now made her mouth salivate at the thought. She hadn't tasted meat since she was eleven and now she couldn't even remember the taste. The creatures were not safe to eat. She wondered what the other survivors were eating from this new world.

"Why do you run Fern?" she heard from a voice above. "I saw you when you entered the fields. What's your hurry?" asked the sentinel at his post. He was high up in one of the gigantic pines. His voice resonated off the massive branches to the ground so easily that he barely had to raise his voice.

"I must seek an audience with Oak." She replied. "I've seen Citans in the forest; everyone must be warned of the danger." She was slowing her pace as she approached the base of the tree.

"How would you know they are Citans?" He was staring down at her. "You've never seen a Citan!" Throwing his head back he gave a short laugh.

Fern pursed her lips and kept herself calm. "I've heard enough about them to know. Excuse me, I must leave, we have little time."

"Little time for what?" he questioned but she was already running at a sprint.

Chapter 2

When she approached the outer edge of the camp she slowed a little. Her sprint became a languid lope as she travelled through the narrow roads, passed the short one storey dwellings that were their homes. They were made from the giant papyrus grasses that grew to a height of twelve feet. They were thick in their stems but flexible enough to weave into walls and roofs that were resistant to sun and rain. The tan from the shell-like stem was shiny and glinted from the sunlight giving it the appearance of a huge baked, woven pie.

She noticed the doors in one home were open from one side through to the other side to let the breeze blow straight through. The rush windows were tied up and she could see woven bilobous rushes that were the colour of bright green emeralds upon the floor. She knew they were the colour of emeralds because she'd seen an emerald once. She thought it to be the most beautiful thing to exist, it was encased in gold metal, a ring, and it had belonged to Oak's family for generations. He said it had belonged to his grandfather who gave it to his father.

One day as they sat cross legged in the village he had told her the story, she'd listened with eager ears. Oak explained that not only guns but precious metals and gems had been confiscated by the military. They were taken to be used for the government surplus, to be sold or traded for goods from other countries. Trade between countries was only performed under military control, since little trust existed between them and all transactions were negotiated under heavy guard, armed with artillery.

Anyone caught with gold, platinum, silver or jewels in their possession were taken by the military. No one knew what happened to them. They were enemies of the Regime and punished as such. Some were brave enough to keep a piece of jewelry of sentimental value but they told no one. They dared not, for the military had eyes and ears everywhere. Rewards were given to their spies.

Oak's grandmother died when Oak was six years old, his grandfather had loved her greatly. He found her diamond engagement ring the day after she died and told Oak's father that he'd smiled at the knowledge of her bravery to disobey the law and keep it. He knew how much the ring had meant to her. Just as much as the emerald ring she'd given to him meant to him and so he'd kept her diamond ring and passed his emerald ring on to his son.

Unfortunately, three years later he was found out. Oak's father thought it was the neighbour who'd told because she saw the diamond ring fall out of Oak's grandfather's shirt. It hung around his neck on a piece of shoelace he had it tied to. He'd been tending the front yard at the time, weeding and bending over. She'd said nothing to him as he hastily pushed it back inside but she'd slunk into her house like a cat that had stolen a piece of chicken from a dinner plate.

The soldiers arrived within five minutes as Oak's grandfather had warned his son and grandchild they would. He'd pulled the shoelace from his neck, pulling the ring off just as they came through the door. The soldiers didn't get a chance to take the ring. As soon as they were upon him Oak's grandfather threw it out of the window. With two soldiers pushing his face into the floor on his old bent knees the other two had run outside where they'd searched but never found it. No one ever found it.

Oak's father said a crow had probably taken it since they liked shiny objects. It must have swooped down soon after it had been thrown through the window and flown away with it to drop it into its nest. His father was glad it ended up with the bird rather than a corrupt, cruel, controlling Regime. Neither his grandfather, nor himself would not have liked the fact that it would have helped them to continue to enforce their unlimited restrictions.

The soldiers had been angry with his grandfather and struck the weak old man. His cries had reverberated out through the open door and down the street as they dragged him away on his arthritic knees, not caring at the pain it caused him. Oak's father had rushed to his aid but his grandfather had yelled "No!" to stop him. So he'd watched instead with tear filled eyes as Oak clung to him, his small body shaking barely understanding what was happening. With arms clamped around his father tightly they watched as the soldiers hauled away the man who'd raised and loved them both, throwing him into the mouth of the cold metal armoured vehicle. Their eyes had followed it as it slowly moved away, its stomach filled only to spew its contents into the bounds of hell at the interrogation camp. Neither Oak nor his father ever heard of or saw him again.

When Oak saw the emerald ring hanging from his father's wrist one day, he'd looked at him with curiosity as his father had smiled down at him. "Your grandfather gave this to me and whenever I look at it I think of him and his dislike of the Regime that rules us. They will not have it; it is ours and will always be ours. It will be yours when I am gone and you will pass it to your son, who will pass it down to his son. That way the memory to fight for freedom, faith and a future of honesty and truth will always be with us." He laid his hand on Oak's shoulder. "It belongs to our family and will stay with us forever. It's our bond to one another, even after we are gone."

After the Devastation, Oak had taken the ring from his father's dead body. Weeping he kissed his cheek and said goodbye to the last member of his family. He placed the same leather strap and dangling emerald ring upon his left wrist and tied it, where it had never been removed.

She was approaching the central meeting area. The houses had now become the long buildings and meal gathering areas. The Culineers were already preparing the meal for the evening and the big gathering. She gave a sigh at the thought that they would miss the delicious dishes that they were now creating. No time could be lost; they would have to leave immediately to track the Citans.

She fingered a soft woven bag that was draped across her hip and felt inside to see if she had any melini tablets left. No, she had eaten the last of them earlier before she saw the Citans; she would have to get more. The melini tablets were of great importance for travelling; they were high in nutrition and also provided liquid refreshment in the moist jelly like substance. Eating one tablet was equal to a small meal and a glass of water. Sequoia had made the discovery in one of the laboratories when one of his group had eaten it without thinking. They'd watched him for days nervously wondering what he would turn into but when no change occurred and he'd told them of how it gave him energy and stopped his thirst, Sequoia had succumbed and gone back to the laboratory returning with the plants. The special plants were grown along-side the fruit and vegetables, its origin purposefully overlooked.

As she slipped past the last long building she came into the open meeting area. It was surrounded by buildings which formed a circle around it. The ground was covered with bilubous rushes for them to sit upon when they attended meetings at the central speaking area. Quickly, she made for the raised centre. Upon it, in the middle was a huge round drum made out of burneam bush trunks tightly woven together and covered on the top with a tight white renicus leaf. It was very old, no one knew who had managed to cut the bush down and make it or even who brought it into the camp. It had appeared one day like a gift placed on the podium in its centre. It soon became their symbol of hope. Looking upon its twisted form of evil they hoped they would remember to never make the same mistakes as their forefathers.

She picked up the gnarly burneam bush branch beside it and with the end wrapped in white renicus leaf, she hit the drum with all the force she had three times and listened to its echo through the camp.

Woodlanders approached from all angles running as quickly and safely as they could. A few of the girls that had babies ran with their children perched upon their hips, the younger children holding hands with their appointed foster parents. The defenders ran faster and the others divided to let them through, Oak was amongst them his angular face was rigid with anticipation.

All faces were tight with fear of the unknown as they gathered around the podium. To use the burneam drum could only mean one thing—danger. She could see Oak's blond head amongst his defenders, he stood slightly taller and the sun sparked off the lighter streaks in his hair. Most Woodlanders had blond or light brown hair from the sun bleaching it. She was the only red haired person in the clan. She could see Oak better now for the defenders gave him a respectful distance. His pectoral muscles were pushing through the leather shirt that he wore (made from the terakian beast he had killed years before). He'd been thinner then but the leather had stretched to accommodate his developing muscles. She gave an external sigh at the sight of him.

He was everything to her and yet she was nothing more than a friend (a sister he'd once called her) to him. It made her angry, she was not his sister, he'd been her saviour not her brother.

Her whole family had died in the Devastation. She'd stood alone, afraid and crying amongst the swirling debris. Oak had appeared out of the dust and taken her hand in his. A little taller than her she'd felt as though he towered above her. His face dirty with blood stains upon it, his teeth pure white when he smiled down at her. Holding her hand in a gentle squeeze he'd told her he would take her somewhere safe. Told her that she needn't be afraid anymore that he'd find food to fill her hungry stomach. She'd believed him and he'd fulfilled his promises.

She could see the square shape of his jaw line, it was tight with concern. Why was that jaw always so stern when he looked at her? Why did she feel she was a thorn from the burneam bush, a poison to him? She knew he loved and cared about her but she wanted more from their relationship. It seemed that he was always serious when he was with her now, although his voice would be soft and soothing, but it was soothing like when she was eleven and had cried at night for her parents. Although, only twelve himself he'd hugged her tightly telling her that they were not gone, that they were always with her. She hadn't understood what he meant so he'd explained to her that even though she couldn't see them, if she believed they were there she would feel them. He said she had to learn to feel to be something more than just a body to be her senses, all of them.

She'd learnt to heighten all her senses beyond almost anyone else in the camp, except Willow she was strong with her sight. Willow could see auras clearly especially around the members of the clan. She advised Oak on whom he should pick as defenders. It was Willow who'd said that Oak should be their leader after Spruce had died. Spruce was killed by a terakian beast whilst out on patrol, saving one of his own but losing his own life. Spruce had only been seventeen years old, young, strong with so many years left to live, his loss caused great sadness. They'd been lucky to retrieve his body from the large vicious animal. He was buried in the sacred ground.

Fern was jealous of Willow. She was pretty, small with almost white blond hair and seventeen the same age as Fern. Her eyes were such a clear sky blue that Fern wanted to spit in them to leave clouds and make them imperfect. She often had less than endearing thoughts toward Willow. Willow's hair infuriated Fern; it was straight and long almost to her waist and never became unruly waves or stuck up like Fern's did. Willow's hair was never out of place, it glistened in a glow of light, like the moonlight. When light fell upon it it glowed like an aura. Fern couldn't see auras but she would sometimes pretend when she saw Willow's hair reflected like an aura, that it was Willow's head

exploding. Of course, it wouldn't be a pretty sight, as after the explosion it would be a very sticky red. Then Fern would regret thinking such a bad thing because Willow was so sweet and kind.

She was kind especially to Fern because the other girls shunned her. That just made Fern even more angry with Willow (she didn't need her sympathy) she really wanted to dislike her (which became more difficult when she was so nice). But then how could she *not* dislike her? Oak relied on Willow's aura skills and worse he admired her! He spent *too* much time being with her. He would converse with her whilst wearing a smoldering sexy smile that would melt any girl's heart and when Fern told him he saw Willow too often; he would just laugh and ruffle her hair as if she were a toddler. On those days she just wanted to plough her fist into the bridge of his nose and watch him keel over.

Fern hated how he looked at Willow these days; his eyes would soften when they rested upon her. His face melted and set into a sickly smile which made her want to vomit or beat him to get rid of his expression. Was he in love with Willow? When had she become so obsessed with Oak? She didn't remember when it started, she just knew that it bothered her and she wished with all her heart that it would stop.

She could see him approaching her now as the clan parted to let him through. His arms were glistening with sweat, the leather he wore attached to his body like a second skin. He made her feel hot; perspiration was already pricking its way to the surface at the sight of him. The sun spiked down its rays in silent competition.

He approached her looking at her with questioning eyes as the defenders stopped to let him onto the podium first. His eyebrows were raised, his light blue eyes fastened upon her widened green eyes, watching him, welcoming him. Lightly, but with a leaping stride he covered the ground toward her. He pushed back a flat hand palm behind him toward the defenders following, indicating for them to stay back a little.

His face was quizzical making her realize he was thinking she was just causing another ruckus to get his attention. For once, she had the upper hand; she knew something of great importance that he had no knowledge of. She smiled at the thought and saw his head give a little movement downwards and sideways in question. She smiled even more.

Chapter 3

Oak stared at the smug face before him. What was Fern up to now? She was always thinking of something to get his attention. What new ploy did she have today? Why the satisfied smile? His lips curled up at one end in a brief smile to himself and then vanished just as quickly as he realized she was yet again disarming him of his senses. She was way too much of a distraction to have around him all the time. She'd always been like his sister but the way she had changed lately. Well, it didn't leave him with brotherly thoughts anymore and the fact that she wasn't his sister made her presence more unnerving.

She was so different from the others with her long copper hair that was always sticking out in the oddest of shapes. Sometimes, she looked like she had dragged her head through a bush backwards. On one occasion he'd asked her if she'd had a difficult entanglement with a beast for her hair and almost lost. Her face had flashed with anger and she'd sneered at him, turning from pretty to a nasty wrinkled up creature. Somehow, it just made her all the more endearing to him.

Fern had learnt to rope in her emotions but the fire still burned, even if the flame burned subdued. He'd seen that fire often, usually when she didn't know he was around. It embarrassed her if she knew he saw her lose control. A thrill ran through him at the thought, she affected him that way. There were times when he almost lost direction of what he was doing because of her and the feelings she stirred in him. That was not good in a leader, distractions led to mistakes and mistakes could lead to injury and death. He'd seen mistakes and the biggest mistake of all the Devastation would never be forgotten, no one would ever forget. It had been burned into his young mind just as it had burned the cities it took.

He took in the expression on her face, the straight nose perhaps a little too large but it added to that air of insubordination she held and wore now. She never listened to orders she was a law unto herself. He looked away to hide a small smirk that stretched his mouth. Composing himself he looked down at her and stopped less than a foot away. He hoped to intimidate her by getting into her space but she didn't back up or so much as lean back an inch as he almost dropped his head level with hers.

"What goes on here?" he asked, his eyes slowly slipping away her defences as she tried to keep control. He watched her wet her lips (he really wished she wouldn't do that his resolve was fading). Her chest rose as she took in a breath and as precisely and quickly as possible told of everything she'd seen in the forest. Oak watched her intently, watching the way her eyes widened when she talked of the large Citan leader. How they glittered at her description of him and his long black coat. How a small smile curved her lips when she talked of his rifle and bullet lined belt. She described everything in such detail that he could well have been there with her. He could even feel her own emotions that the Citans had caused within her.

How could he be so in tune with her when they could not be any further apart in character? The *sublime to the ridiculous* his father used to say about the Regime. That was the two of them when they were together. He understood her less than he did anyone else within the camp and it scared him. How could he control her if he did not know what went on in her mind? He used to know what went on inside her head but that seemed long ago. The walls had risen and now he only knew that he was loved by her and that fact made her angry.

He knew she wanted to have more responsibility and sometimes he really did think she should. He had no doubt she would be useful but how could you use someone that would argue against whatever orders you gave them? That was Fern always questioning why this had to be done or why it had to be done that way, or even why it had to be done at all. Sometimes he just wanted to grab her by the

shoulders and shake her saying “because that is what I’ve asked of you now do it!” Eventually she would do what she was asked snarling as she left but that was all it ever was, Fern just being obliging curling up in disapproval inside. With Fern it was always more of a request and a hope that she would carry out what you asked. Giving her an order was more likely to be ignored.

The way she loved him was a concern too. He knew how passionate she was about everything and her feelings toward him would put them both at risk. If she thought he was in the slightest bit of danger she would most likely do something foolish and he’d have to save her probably placing himself in jeopardy of death.

Something else he found disconcerting was when she was close beside him his skin tingled. Would he feel the electrical currents run through him every time she brushed past him? The chemical reaction between the two of them was overwhelming and it took all his discipline to remain aloof and a leader in her presence. Those pouting lips of hers dominated his mind too much when he talked to her; they looked soft like a beacon guiding his own perilously close. All thoughts he shouldn’t have.

When Spruce died and Oak was made leader of the clan everything had changed between them. He was soon busy choosing and training his defenders and proving himself worthy. He worked on expanding the camp, making improvements. So his days were always busy with plans. He was constantly drawing up new ones until late into the night and finally flopping into his bed in exhaustion. Fern had faded from his thoughts and it was then that he had become more aware of Willow.

He'd needed to converse with Willow many times about his choice of defenders and about the harmony within the camp. She was very helpful to him. Soon she began to occupy his thoughts a great deal. He admired her softness and the gentle kindness that enveloped her. Willow was everything perfect. He looked upon her as a delightful flower. She was the magnolia within the clan, a beautiful bloom that was resilient and strong despite its loveliness. Willow and Fern fought in his mind. Fern was everything imperfect, the encroaching weed, a scotch thistle pretty to look at but prickly and irritating. Two very different beings and he realized he loved them both.

He was staring into Fern's glorious glowing green eyes, the excitement shooting from them into his heart and tearing at him. A terakian beast would rip him apart less than Fern could. She could pull out each organ in his body with her eyes and leave him an inert mass of nothing. He wouldn’t succumb to her though, he wouldn’t let her dominate and manipulate him. Even though he knew she did it unintentionally it was in her make-up, what she was. Fern was out of bounds, she had to stay out of bounds and he had to accept that and move on.

Oak didn’t so much as flinch at Fern's story. He kept his eyes shadowed hiding under cliff brows as he stared blankly back into hers, chewing over what she’d said.

“Aren't you concerned?” she asked incredulously.

Still he gave no reply only watched her scan his face frantically.

“You know already don't you?” she whispered, stepping back slightly in surprise. Their voices had been low and he could now hear the crowd growing restless. They were shuffling their feet some giving grunts of impatience. It was time to tell them what was happening.

“Yes, I know and so will the whole camp now because of you.” He retorted through clamped teeth. He watched her shoulders droop.

“I'd hoped to keep peace within the camp until I could learn more. They're not within range of us and as yet show no change of course. I wanted to find out where they were going and what they were looking for with as little disruption to the clan as possible. However, you have changed that now.” He gave her an annoyed glance and saw her visibly slump even more. Her lower lip trembled a little, until

she grabbed down on it with her top teeth. A pout came to her lips and she gave him a sidelong rebellious glance.

Oak stopped a laugh from erupting from him as he looked at her elfish face scowl at him. How could he be angry with her when all she ever wanted to do was protect and care for the camp members. As hard hearted as she made herself out to be, her heart was softer than the melini tablets they carried with them on their patrols of the forest. Her warmth was more than any bonfire they built. He knew he'd been wrapped in it many times in the past when she'd thrown her arms around him and hugged him affectionately; planting a soft kiss upon his cheek whilst telling him how much she loved him. That no longer happened.

As time passed the distance between them had grown and he regretted his loss of the Fern he'd loved so much. He was to blame he knew, he held her at bay. He'd visibly cooled his affections toward her (to hide his real feelings) she'd withdrawn her own from the cold iron wall that he had erected. He'd hated the hurt he caused in her eyes but he reasoned that it had to be, he was leader of the clan and he had to show resolute authority.

He kept being her friend and often talked with her, sometimes well into the night. They would sit in her sparse home and converse. Then realizing just how late it was he would abruptly push back his chair and watch her pretty face turn from a smile to disappointment. It was then, with the onset of sleepiness and unguarded thoughts that he would want to pull her to him. Staring into the welcoming eyes, he would rock back on his feet in regret at his feelings, and quickly stagger away from the emotions to rush out the door with a hasty goodnight.

How many times had he done that to her now and how many times had she looked at him the next day with anger and derision? He could see the damage he'd done, how their friendship had changed, it left a pain within him.

Swiftly turning on his heel, he faced the other members of the clan. He scanned all their frightened faces and smiled benevolently at them.

"What is this?" he cried viewing everyone around him with a slow turn of his head. "There is nothing to fear! We are in no danger at present. All is under control."

The sigh of relief from the crowd was heard by Oak, Fern and the defenders as it vibrated through the podium. "We're watching a group that are passing through the forest. They're not heading toward the camp. They travel parallel to it. We have our defenders keeping track of where they are and what they do. If their course should change we will know very quickly." Again he repeated, "There is nothing to fear!" He swept his hand out in front of his chest from one side to the other; toward everyone as if by doing so he would immediately dispel any worries they carried.

He gave them a slow encouraging smile and saw the crowd relax. His defenders stood beside him resolute and valiant, giving the clan strength to believe what had been said, belief that there truly was nothing to fear. Oak looked at everyone, he was so proud of them all. His heart filled as he stared, he saw the trust and love in their faces. Everything his father had taught him of importance; faith, hope, honesty and belief he saw in them. His clan believed in him, they placed their faith in him and he would be true to them, proving himself the person they deemed him to be.

Surprisingly to Fern, the crowd visibly relaxed, she looked at them and wondered what magic Oak possessed to have so many believe in him so fully. She looked at the back of his head as he stood tall and upright, she knew his face would be kind but determined as he spoke. He held so much

presence on that podium; it was as if no one else was there, for all eyes were upon him, feeling his energy, his strength and his power. Did he know he had power? It wasn't something he ever tried to wield, he never had to and his charismatic words were enough. She could hear them now; they were deep and floated through the air, hypnotic. Oak had a natural presence and honesty that everyone loved, that was why he was their leader. She should know because she loved him the most.

It made her want to spit when those thoughts came into her head and if she'd had something to hit her head with other than the heavy burneam stick next to the drum she would have. Then again she would have just proved to everyone how crazy she really was. Which, she was sure was the general consensus of the whole camp. Darn! She really had to get a better handle on her emotions. It was no wonder that Oak wouldn't let her have more responsibility; she carried way too much mental baggage around with her to be able to concentrate. One day though, one day she would prove herself.

They had a good life in the camp, they ate well, the defenders protected them from the beasts, no one fought other than the odd bit of bickering from boys having rushes of testosterone and becoming aggressive. She smiled at that thought; they soon learnt to control themselves. If there were any fights between boys, the two were sent with a group of experienced hunters to take down a terakian beast and bring back the hide. The leader always made sure it was well organized and safely done but the sight of the ferocious beast was enough to leave the boys shaken. On their return to camp they would vow never to lose control again. Their life had been happy since the Devastation, only the death of Spruce had marred it. They were all young and healthy, no one even thought of death.

The arrival of the Citans in their forest could mean death. She'd heard they could be brutal and cruel. Oak said it was all just hear-say that no one really knew. It was just the unknown that was fearful to everyone that was all. She wondered if Oak was right, she hoped he was. He said the Citans were no-where near the camp; they were headed in a different direction. What if they were trying to make them think that, what if the group she'd seen were a distraction and another group of Citans were right now heading toward their camp? The Woodlander defenders would leave going after the group they'd seen. The second group of Citans could just be waiting for the opportunity to invade and take over.

She was getting ahead of herself and none of it made sense. Firstly, they had sentinels posted everywhere on watch. She had no doubt that they were patrolling right now; Oak would have already arranged that. Secondly, why would the Citans invade their camp anyway? They had nothing that the Citans could want. The Citans still had the use of energy and machines in the city. The defenders had seen them pull up the huge wind turbines they'd repaired and now used the electricity they produced. The few small antiquities that the Woodlanders had were nothing compared to what the Citans possessed.

She looked at the crowd again. They adored him; they listened to every word as if he were singing a song. His defenders stood beside him, faithful and respectful. They were proud to have been chosen by him, their leader who was only a boy. She stopped her thoughts, no; he had never been a boy. He'd grown up faster than all of them. He'd never allowed himself the simple pleasures of idle thought and play. Oak had always worked hard, helping others, making their lives easier in some way or another and they'd all grown to rely on him as they all relied on him now. Here he was re-assuring everyone that they were safe and that he would not allow their safety to be jeopardized and she knew he wouldn't. No matter what, even if it cost him his life he would save them, all of them.

She stared at him, as he stood so solemn and calm. The boy who had brought her here and given her new life, given her hopes out of nothing and comfort instead of pain. To her distress her eyes started to fill with tears, they were hot, unbearably hot and they were flowing down her cheeks. She wiped them off her face quickly and pulled in a breath to regain control. He meant so much to her, he'd always

been so much to her. He'd been her life, was her life. If he were to offer his life to save the Woodlanders could she let him do it? Would she do nothing? Or would she herself try to stop him?

Just how far would she go to stop him from sacrificing himself? She did after all owe him her life. It would break her heart and soul if anything should happen to him. Laying his cold body beside Spruce in the sacred ground was too unbearable to think of. Her thoughts ripped through her; who was she most faithful to, Oak or the clan? She knew it was Oak. She would save Oak before the clan, even if it was wrong.

Chapter 4

“Go to your homes,” Oak scanned the crowd all looking upon him for guidance. “Continue with your lives. We are here to take care of you and care for you we will!” Again he swept his arm wide past his chest in a dramatic gesture and everyone cheered. He stood smiling at them for a while and then he waved for them to go before turning back to Fern. He could hear the crowd dispersing behind him and felt his defenders crowding toward him. Turning his head, he directed his defenders to gather in the main building and wait for him there. He listened to their retreating feet before he rested his eyes fully upon Fern.

He watched her fidget uncomfortably as she waited for the tirade to follow. He didn’t rant; he’d learned how useless that was with Fern long ago. He carefully chose his words and looked kindly into her eyes. “Fern,” he said to get her complete attention for she already seemed to be somewhere else. “I want you to listen to me carefully this is important.”

Her eyes flickered as she stared back at him and he held them as he continued. “We know very little about the Citans. We don’t know if we can communicate with them or whether they will strike first before we even get a chance to talk. We have to consider them dangerous, do you understand?” She nodded her head at him and looked down.

In a fatherly manner he lifted her chin and smiled at her. Her eyes were unusually bright and liquid, she was even trembling a little but he ignored it. “I know you want to help protect our clan but you have to protect yourself first. You cannot help anyone if you are injured or worse still, killed.” He gave her a long look before continuing. “That is why I am asking you to keep away from the forest. I want to know that you are safe and to be safe you must be as far away from the Citans as possible is that clear? You’re not to go into the forest!”

He saw the fire light immediately and almost drew back from it. Her face reddened and he knew he’d lost. The flames came out in her words as she glared up at him like her spitting viper, Abacus. “Why do you always want to cage me up? Am I no more than an animal to you? I am as skilled as many of the defenders that you have at your side, yet you cast my skills aside like I’m nothing more than an annoyance.” Her chest heaved as she released her emotions and continued. “Don’t talk to me as if you’re my father! You’re not my father! You don’t even resemble my father—he had a beard!”

Oak almost laughed at that but pulled himself together to tackle the next blast of anger from her. “I’m old enough,” she spat out as she continued. “I can use a sword, I can climb trees, and I can run as fast as your defenders! I’m an adult...and I know of love!”

She glared at him her cheeks sucked in as she pushed her lips out in her struggle for self-control. He drew in a breath. He could feel his face become severe, feel the rage build at the thought that someone had played with her innocence. His chest and throat were so tight he felt he was going to choke, his heart vibrated in huge thrums like a gong. He faltered fighting fervently to get himself back together.

He hated it when she controlled him like this. How could she cause such passion to burst forth within him, more than anyone or anything else could? He thought he’d left his emotions behind with the dust from the Devastation long ago.

His lips were compressed, he could feel the blood trying to push its way back into them, as he watched her pull in a huge breath to steady herself and listened to her continue.

“I love everyone in this camp. I want to protect them. I don’t need you to protect me, I can protect myself and I’m capable of protecting them too but you refuse to see that. When I find someone

to love, I'll be able to protect him too!" She stopped, taking in another breath and steadying herself as she visually vibrated from her earnest outburst.

Oak's chest lowered, his body becoming more relaxed as he realized his misunderstanding—she was untouched. His breathing steadied as he took in her brilliant green eyes almost the colour of the emerald he carried to remind him of what everyone had lost. There were times when he would sit fingering the jewelled ring reflecting on the grief from the past and Fern would come to his mind. Her presence beside him all these years had bonded him to her, their friendship once so important, was now disintegrating like the trees after the blast of the Devastation.

She was glaring at him, her face almost matching the colour of her hair, her lips trembling. He could see the distress in her eyes as she stared into his. She looked as though she wanted to climb in and tear him apart. "You used to love me, care about me!" She was trembling, her body shuddering as if it were in shock. He took hold of her shoulders to try and help her regain control but she shrugged violently out of his hold. "Get your hands off of me!" she yelled. "I hate you! I hate you!" Her face was contorted so much it was hardly even Fern anymore. His thoughts stopped for a moment. *She just told him she hated him.*

"What?" He dropped his hovering hands. Her head had dropped too; it was bobbing up and down from her shaking body as if it were floating on turbulent water. To his horror he realized she was crying, Fern crying. Fern didn't cry. Fern became angry and stomped off into the forest but she didn't show weakness, not ever. She was sobbing, loud broken hearted sobs of distress and pain. He stiffened not knowing what to do. She'd pulled away when he touched her; she'd told him she hated him. So in effect she'd just told him that she didn't want him there.

"Fern, what is wrong with you?" He looked down on the mass of red hair that today looked like the gnarl of the limbs on the burneam bushes. Her head shook and then stopped as her face jerked up toward him. "I'm tired of you! You treat me differently to everyone else and it's not fair. You pass me over to give opportunities to others. Knowing full well they're what I desired. You know I am different from the other girls. My skills are different to theirs, yet you will not let me use them. Why?"

Oak was taken aback by this; he stepped away from her as the question ran through his mind. He knew why he overlooked her but he couldn't tell her that. She was right, she did deserve more and he knew she needed a job to do. It wasn't for her to prepare the meals and mend clothing. He couldn't see her carrying a baby unless she was swinging it under one arm as she ran dashing through the forest and yet, he'd seen her gently caress Pine's baby boy and softly coo to him. She was everything opposing together in one. What creature was she really because she was nothing like any of them and not knowing how to treat or handle her was driving him crazy!

"Fern, I'm sorry that you feel I've wronged you and I will do my best to make that up to you. You're right you are capable and skilled and..." he stopped for a moment searching for words and then continued. "I'm allowing our past relationship to get in the way of our growth as adults. My nurturing feelings toward you should have dissolved when I became leader."

He felt his stomach clench tightly as he said the words and it made him angrier with himself and her. "Those concerns should be passed on to someone else. I will assign a defender to watch out for you. My duties lie elsewhere."

He knew that the remarks were cutting as soon as he saw the look of horror on her face, he felt remorse but he had to go on. "I can promise you that from now on I will treat you like any other member of the clan and I will review your skills to find you a more suitable position within the clan. However, for now my concerns are with the Citans and until they're gone, I can make no

recommendations for you.” His eyes were hard as he looked down at her pitiful face and tremulous lips. His mouth clamped shut showing their conversation was finished.

His face set in rock and determined that she wouldn't change his plans at this time he bored his eyes into hers. She looked like she would weep again. He could see the remorse in her face and could hear her shriek inside her head *what have I done?* It was too late, neither she nor he could take back what had just happened between them. He'd made his statement, he was bound to it now and their friendship was severed. The bond they had had for so many years was broken; he was lost to her now, just as she was lost to him.

She stumbled backwards but he didn't grab her as he would have once done. It was hard for him to watch, so instead he turned around and walked away as quickly as he could, leaving her alone, bereaved.

Oak aggressively strode toward the main building trying to dispel the event with Fern from his mind. Now he'd made her resent him and with that resentment would follow disobedience. Why would she not do as she was told?

His emotions were getting out of hand. He was angry, hurt, confused and most of all he just wanted to vomit it all up and have done with it forever. He was breathing fast, him, breathing fast. The one person who was the fittest in the whole camp, the most controlled the most disciplined. He thought he'd made himself done with emotions but she—that little viper had brought it all back to him. He would make it so that she would never, ever, be near him again. She would be sent as far away from him as possible, she'd never hurt him again. He'd been hurt enough during the time of the Regime and the Devastation, he refused to be hurt anymore.

How could she say such things? He'd done so much for her, saved her life, kept her from being alone, brought her here to a place where she could be part of a large family. He'd taken care of her, been around to watch her grow up, was her best friend, her confidant. He'd advised her, supported her, encouraged her; he'd done so much for her and what had she just done? She'd spit at him in anger and disdain.

He had to be done with his seething; right now he had other concerns. He threw his shoulders back as he approached the door of the main building and his awaiting defenders.

He could hear their mumbles as he walked into the building, a silence fell when they saw him. All were looking at him including Elm who smirked a knowing smile. How he hated having Elm around him, he made his life uncomfortable. Like Fern he questioned why they were to do things and it irritated him. Elm was always looking for a way to take his place. He knew why he'd allowed Elm to be one of his defenders, *keep your friends close and your enemies closer* had been another of his father's sayings and he believed in it. He had no doubt that Elm was his biggest enemy.

The only thing Elm ever thought of was ruling over everyone, having control. He'd sneak around overhearing conversations, looking for a way he could destroy the respect everyone had for Oak. He knew Elm purposefully didn't pass messages on to him and he knew why. Making it seem Oak was unaware of what was going on with his defenders would make him look weak. But Oak's back was covered by Pine, who watched and made sure Elm never got the upper hand. Elm knew Fern was Oak's only real weakness and Oak knew he was just biding his time to use her against him. Yes, Fern had to be out of his life and soon, but then that had already been done.

Pine stood up to move the boys and make a place for him at the long table to sit with crossed legs. He looked at the faces of his fifty best defenders all seated around the long woven bilubous table. With agility he went down onto his haunches and crossed his legs in turn. He turned his head taking them all in. They were some of the tallest, strongest and bravest of the boys in the camp. Each and

every one of them had proved themselves to be worthy of being defenders. They had all done a deed to protect and even save another member of the clan. Yes, even Elm had proved himself. Though, that was before Oak had been made leader. Now, he knew Elm had no thoughts of heroism; he was just biding his time, watching and waiting for his opportunity to oust Oak from the clan and take over as leader.

“We must wary,” he searched all their faces to make sure none other than Elm were in doubt of him. They all eagerly looked at him waiting to hear his plan. “We will split into five groups. That way we’ll cover more ground and also be able to conceal ourselves better. We’ll leave the camp defenders in charge here on high alert. They’ll be armed and ready having sentinels continually at all posts day and night. We shall split into north, south, east and west of the forest to see what is happening in all areas. My own group will follow behind the Citans.

His eyes swept his defenders again as he mentally picked out his groups and their appointed leaders. “Pine, Blackthorn and Elm you shall be with me.” Out of the corner of his eye he saw Elm give a small sneer.

“Yes Oak,” Pine and Blackthorn immediately replied.

“Yes,” Elm responded through tight lips.

Calling six other names for his group, their responses came back loud and firm.

Oak went through the names of all, naming the appointed leaders of each group. Once he’d covered everything that was to be done he arose and everyone followed suit. “I wish you all the best. May all that is good be with you and may this interruption in our lives be brief and of no danger to anyone. Now pack what you need and let’s be off. We’ll all meet again at the west sentinel post. All of you be there as quick as you can. We can’t allow the Citans to cover too much ground.”

The defenders left the building except Pine and himself. He smiled at Pine, resting a hand on his shoulder.

“Go, kiss Lily and Savannah goodbye. Tell her she needn’t worry about you, I’ll take care of your back!”

He heard the rumble in Pine's chest as he forced out a bellowing laugh. He smiled; it was what he wanted to hear from his friend, who at the age of eighteen was much more mature than his years. Pine needed to laugh, he was too serious and worried too much, being one of the eldest bore too much responsibility.

He looked affectionately at Pine. He was heavier than all of them, although a bit shorter than Oak, his body was thicker, larger than any other boy in the clan. He was muscular and strong, no one could beat him physically except Oak and he’d done that through trickery, taking an unfair advantage that Pine had never let him forget.

“You look after my back?” Pine laughed as he gave Oak a look with eyes glittering filled with friendly mockery.

Oak smiled back in understanding. Pine had saved Oak's life two years ago. It was during a foolish time for Oak, his one silly plight at valour (he’d learnt from it and become much wiser from the experience). He’d wanted to be looked upon with awe by the clan. Had Pine not been there Oak would now be dead and some other member of the clan would be their leader.

Chapter 5

Oak at the age of sixteen had been determined that he needed to prove his valour and hunt down a terakian beast (a mutated creature that was either the product of the Devastation or one of the scientific experiments) he wanted to bring back its skin to the camp, proving that he was the best defender they had. Pine, being a good sensible friend tried to talk him out of it but Oak was foolishly insistent. So, Pine said he would go along as a companion as he wanted to see this amazing spectacle for himself. Oak should have known then that he wasn't thinking properly and was falling into the same mistakes that many years before had left the cities in dust—proving himself through pride. Now later, he knew that he couldn't be like his forefathers, he had to be different otherwise they wouldn't survive.

Oak and Pine travelled for two days enjoying each other's company and regaling themselves with stories they'd heard from other defenders of the creatures that frequented their forest. Instead of making a camp (which was always risky) they slept high up in the trees, bracing their backs against the trunk and extending their legs upon the branches. They awoke stiff and stretched for a good long time under the trees. Then eating melini tablets they travelled on still trying to limber up their stifled bodies.

On the second day they found the terakian beast, they heard it before they saw it. The beast made its presence known by its loud disgruntled growls, the animal sounded displeased. Perhaps it had missed its prey and was angry at losing its meal. He was not sure but one thing he found out quickly was that the beast was indeed in a vicious and determined mood.

When they came upon it in a small clearing they drew back to the trees in surprise. They'd seen the beasts before but always from a distance as they normally took care to avoid them as much as possible. Up close they were even more frightening their size alone was intimidating (larger than one of their homes).

Its face had small black eyes, the skin wrinkled, ears that spiked up on top of its large almost square head and black nostrils that flared with every breath it let out showing the red inside. Worst of all was its mouth, it caused the most fear, the mouth never closed, as if the mass of large yellow serrated and pointed teeth were too many for it to ever shut. A huge black tongue lolled back inside and wagged from side to side in its present state of annoyance. They couldn't have picked a worse time to come upon the beast for it had indeed been foiled of its dinner and it didn't like the feel of its empty stomach.

It didn't see them as quickly as they saw it but when it did, Oak could have sworn that the creature's black thin lips curled into a smile. The huge mouth obscured the rest of its squat flat face. Its neck was thick and wrinkled, the body had no hair just a thick dark brown skin. Its shoulders were huge jutting out like massive boulders, leading to striated trunk like legs, the skin lying in thick folds descending to large clawed feet, the claws nine inches in length with six on each foot. Its body was surprisingly short and wide filling to a powerful hind end that looked ready to spring. A stumpy fat tail swung from side to side like a cat figuring out just what it was about to do.

It was only a short time that they stood staring quietly at each other. The beast sprang forward at the unprepared duo. Pine and Oak split leaping away from one another. Oak almost stumbled going to the right of the beast and Pine hastily to the left. It seemed the beast favoured its right because it pursued Oak with a voracious snap of its teeth as if readying itself for the rending of flesh. Regrouping, Oak found himself running as fast as he could. Although, his thoughts were disjointed he had the good sense to withdraw his sheathed sword.

The sword glinted from the sunlight slanting between the trees as he dodged between them and he wondered if he could temporarily blind the beast with its reflection. The beast's tiny eyes he thought

were probably weak and it wouldn't prove to be an advantage. It was more likely used to hearing and sensing through smell to track and take down prey, so he thought better of even trying to make the effort.

He could hear the crash of trees and the splintering of branches behind him too close, much too close for him to be safe. He could feel the vibrations through the ground as the beast heavily leaped onto the earth. The disruption of the land sent tremors through Oak's body.

He was running full sprint, jumping over roots and fallen branches. His breathing was becoming laboured which was unusual for him. He knew it was fear that was making it difficult for him to breath. His chest had never felt this tight and he was sure he couldn't push the air out that was in his lungs, it made him feel desperate. His heart was going so rapidly that he could hear it pulsing in his ears. It was making his head throb and he had to shake it to try and get his senses back. He'd only known such fear once and all he could think was what a fool he was. How ridiculous it would be for him to be remembered as the defender who took on a terakian beast on his own and failed.

That was only if Pine should survive and get back to camp. How could he be so stupid? He'd put himself and his friend in danger and would be remembered for it. All the other good things that he'd done to help others in the camp would be forgotten just because of this one instance—possibly the final part of his life.

This thought enraged him, drowned out the fear, made him angry but with anger came control. He'd always been good at controlling his anger. He'd lost it too many times as a child but he'd purposefully taught himself how to rein it in the older he became. Now through a mantra he'd made for himself he was able to quickly re-direct his anger into energy to help himself. Weaving between the burnt ochre trees speckled by the rays of sun, he listened to the crash of broken branches behind him whilst he repeated the words that he now lived by; *anger is energy, I shall control my energy and not let it control me*. His head felt lighter, a placebo perhaps, but he was breathing better, with deep breaths he managed to slow his heart rate and think more clearly.

He was still ahead of the beast as it hadn't made up much ground but he was coming to another clearing. If he tried to veer left or right the beast would gain ground on him and he would be finished, if he went into the clearing his chances were only slightly better. The beast would pounce and he would have to hope that he could plunge his sword into the beast before its teeth tore into him. He drank a deep breath of air and leaped into the clearing.

Once he was well out of the trees he turned to face the beast behind him. It was too close, slimy; saliva slobbered from its mouth, its black tongue was darting from side to side in anticipation of the kill it was to make. Before he could ready himself the beast was already in the air, the huge body hurling toward him, the mouth wide open ready to take him down. He knew this was to be the end of his life as he stared into the black pin hole eyes rapidly descending upon him.

The high pitched yell seemed to come from nowhere but he knew it was Pine. How Pine had managed to get there so fast he didn't know but he was most certainly glad. Oak concentrated on the beast knowing the distraction would perhaps be enough to save him. The beast turned its head toward the sound and Oak saw his chance. Quickly, Oak angled his sword to a clear area of the beast's throat that was now displayed to him.

The beast was too late as it started to swing its head back to look at its prey. Oak already had a free site of flesh to attack. The massive animal came down upon him as he plunged his sword into its thick neck with all the strength he had. It gave a horrifying scream of rage and pain before abruptly falling upon him, knocking him to the ground, covering him completely. Only Oak's head was visible. Oak was panting for breath, his lungs hampered by the weight of the massive creature upon him. His body was numb but the blood coursing through him tingled with the relief of being alive.

As Oak lay there unable to move Pine looked down at him and cocked his head to one side, “Do you still want to tackle this beast alone?” Oak could see the smile wanting to form on Pine's lips as he said it and Oak swallowed his ridiculous pride and replied. “Indeed, I would greatly appreciate some help to get the creature off”. Pine gave him a huge smile and Oak smiled back. He knew his face was covered in blood and could tell how grotesque he must look with the dark purple fluid that was pouring from the creature's wound, by the look on Pine's face. He could feel it smeared upon his teeth but worse was the feeling as it dripped from his eyelashes no doubt looking like visceral tears.

“How did you get here so fast?” Oak asked looking at the smiling but concerned face of Pine.

“I cut through the forest when I understood which direction you were heading and ran parallel to the beast. I don't know myself how I managed to run so fast, perhaps some invisible guardians were there to push me along?” His smile broadened upon saying the last words. Pine was not the fastest runner, with his big body he would sometimes crash through the bushes and branches rather than avoid them and they often slowed him down.

“I'm glad they gave you their assistance,” Oak replied, smirking himself. “Otherwise even more of the forest would have been destroyed.” His eyes glinted and he felt Pine's foot softly knock his head to one side. He knew Pine was still smiling as he walked away to tackle the task of moving the dead animal.

It took a long time to remove the terakian beast from Oak's body. Pine made a pulley from rope. He tied it around the beast's throat and then around a tree from where he hauled in huge long strokes. The pulling on the rope caused the beast's wound to open more and Oak was bathed further in dark purple blood, his clothes soaked through to his skin.

Although he was sore and hurt, he wouldn't admit this to Pine. Not even when Pine cleared the creature's body from him and asked. “Are you hurt?” He'd looked up at his friend's hand, grasped it tightly, grimaced as he stood up, and with his own hand waved him away.

“I'm fine, thank you.” His friend smirked at that, knowing full well that Oak was hurting everywhere.

He thanked Pine for saving his life whilst he pulled his sword from the severed flesh of the animal and slipped it back into his sheath with the intent of cleaning it later. Heavily, he sat down and placed his head into his hands. Pine joined him and the two silently rested. Quietly, they both went over the events that had just occurred. They hunched over feeling tired from the drop in adrenaline, as their sympathetic nervous system gave way to the parasympathetic to take their bodies back to a normal state.

The beast's blood had dried onto Oak's clothes becoming a black tar giving him a strange arrangement of stripes and blotches. They sat cross legged beside the creature and ate melini tablets whilst Pine watched Oak to see how badly hurt he really was. After a period of about twenty minutes Oak carefully arose and suggested that they skin the beast. The job was difficult and took several hours but they were rewarded with the tough hide. They wrapped a rope around it and Pine tied it to Oak's back where it stayed until they returned to camp. Here Pine helped him remove it and Oak showed it to the other excited clan members.

Oak glowed at the *oohs* from the girls as they looked upon him with admiration. The boys patted him on the back and said “well done!” Oak smirked happily at them. He noticed Pine about to leave and grabbed his friend back into the middle of the crowd exclaiming, “But Pine is a hero! If it weren't for Pine I wouldn't be here, this defender saved my life!” Pine received many pats on the back from the boys and the girls hovered over him with wistful smiles, for heroes were much more exciting than hunters.

The hide was made into clothes for Oak. He offered Pine some of the leather but Pine replied, "I'm happy with the saros leaves that my clothes are made out of and I wouldn't want anything of that vile beast upon my body." He went on to say with a smirk, "Since you've bathed in the beast's blood and probably absorbed part of what the beast was, it would suit you better and it's about time that pretty boy face of yours became uglier!" Oak gave him a feigned look of anger and then the two of them roared in laughter until there were tears in their eyes. The leather proved to be hard wearing and reminded Oak never to be foolish again.

That had been two years ago, he'd been their leader for one of those years and still the skins he wore (even though faded) showed little sign of wear. As much as he regretted his rash behaviour he didn't regret the clothing it had afforded him. The leather was waterproof, warm and the bugs couldn't bite through it. He could sit in a tree, watching for hours without the downpours bothering him. He had four sets of clothes made from the hide for all the seasons of the year. At present it was summer and the leather was sticking to his skin in the heat. They were close fitting so they didn't catch on branches and they were warm to sleep in at night.

He wished he didn't have to wear the long pants for every season but legs and feet always needed to be covered. Even baring arms was a risk, bugs could be lethal. There were many dangerous creatures in the forest especially the bescens—annelids; a type of leech that had mutated and survived. Many insects, though they were now mutated and more dangerous had also survived. The bescens were the size of a human finger and lived in the long grasses waiting, wavering in the breeze for whatever passed through.

One end of the bescen suctioned to the stem of the grass the other moving from side to side trying to find something to latch onto. Its aim—bare skin, once latched they would suck as much blood from you as they could gorge on without exploding. These leech like creatures not only sucked your blood but left your blood unable to clot even after you had pulled them off (which in itself was very difficult) the blood would continue to trickle out from the finger sized hole that the creature left behind. Without action the bleeding would never stop.

A simple small lime, a hardier variation than the ones they'd eaten growing up, was carried by all defenders. If a bescen attached itself to them they would squeeze the juice onto the creature, this would immediately cause the creature to release its hold and drop to the ground. The Almist also gave all his defenders a good supply of niaphron root powder to pour onto the wound to help the blood clot again and heal. Everything other than their sword was carried in the small woven bag that sat on their hips. A rope was tied carefully around their waist above the bag that hung on a belt next to their short sword, sheathed but ready to protect them when required.

Oak's defenders went through rigorous training when not on the duty of patrolling the forest or on assignments to see what was going on in the city. The defenders never went into the city as it was too dangerous and unnecessary, but they'd brought back interesting information about what the Citans were doing. Such as; repairing wind turbines, using solar panels, they now had vehicles that could go short distances. They were also ploughing the land to grow food. Oak was glad of this, it meant the Citans had no need to come into the forest. They kept themselves busy and Oak knew as long as they were busy the Woodlanders were safe.

The defenders had a special clearing in the forest, it was not a large area but big enough that they could practise grappling, wrestling, and practicing choke holds and sweeps to take down their

opponents. They also practised boxing and the use of their feet in defence, mixing as many protective and evasive moves as possible. They fought with wooden swords on these training days, performing blocks, attacks and disarming moves. He chose the most agile defenders that he knew would do well with the tasks and always stopped fights before any broken bones or other injuries occurred, although sometimes they couldn't always be prevented.

His home guard also trained hard, they had to be fit because they were the last line of defence should the defenders be beaten. They trained with the defenders and also learnt to climb up and down trees very quickly. This was of great importance for the sentinels, as they were the watchers; they were the caretakers for the camp. Oak sat with them and told them how important they were. Some would complain that they were not out in the forest with the other defenders. He emphasized that the whole camp relied on them, that the Woodlander clan relied on them, they were their only hope should an enemy get through.

Although, his defenders trained hard and were tough, he knew none of them were killers. He wondered if it ever came down to having to fight for their lives if they would destroy another person. He sincerely hoped that it would never come to that. His were a kind, gentle people, and a people that had left the ravages of war behind. Knowing that the clan's mandate was peace, he was unsure that they should even have defenders. After considering this he knew that it would be unwise not to have them. They couldn't allow cruelty to rule them again and they should and would fight for their beliefs.

If evil came to them, they'd all sacrifice themselves rather than become something that they hated so much. His mind's eye could see the camp, the girls collecting fruit, the boys working on repairs and rebuilding homes that had been damaged by storms. Would he let them be cut down and destroyed if the outsiders attacked? His body steeled at the thought and he knew that even though he was opposed to battle, he wouldn't let the Woodlander camp become a wasteland like his own home had become. They would fight for what they loved and the life they believed in.

Within the main building, reflecting on this Oak noticed that Pine was smiling. Not to be outdone he'd rested his hand upon Oak's shoulder. Their closeness gave the impression they were about to dance. "All will be well Oak. I don't think these Citans are looking for us and if they are, then they have been given very poor directions."

Oak dropped his hand and his gaze to the floor for a moment. Slowly, raising his head, catching Pine's eyes once more he replied, "Thank you my friend. Let's be positive for sure, no matter what, positive energy will get us through whatever we're to face."

"I agree," replied Pine. His face became concerned. "Oak, why do you think they come out of the city now?"

Oak was thoughtful, "The sentinel said that they don't seem to be searching for anything? They're not looking around, other than to see if they are being watched. They keep to one direction. Depending on where they're going it could take weeks, months but their food supplies don't seem adequate. This makes me think that their journey will be short. Whatever, they seek; I don't think it is us."

They stood quiet for a while and both dropped their hands back to their sides whilst they went through their thoughts. The Citans arrival bothered Oak. There was no clear reason for them to be there. He was sure they had no interest in the camp. Why would they? What interest would the camp hold for them?

Even though it made sense that the Citans weren't looking for the Woodlanders it still left him uneasy. Pine moved forward a little and glanced at the door, then back at Oak. Oak realized they needed to prepare to leave and he was delaying Pine.

Pine was twisting his body toward the door once more. “Excuse me Oak, I must give Lily a long kiss goodbye, as she has much to miss in my absence, and will pine for her Pine.” He smirked.

“Yes, Pine you believe that! Since, I know that Lily will be glad of the peace and quiet and the chance to get many things done!” Both were laughing as they exited the main building.

Chapter 6

Oak had two visits to make before he left the camp to find the Citans. He strode past the clan members' homes mulling over his concerns. As he approached the home he sought he stopped. Would she be there? Would she have done as he asked? If she wasn't there what could he do about it anyway? He had too many other arrangements to make, she was insignificant in comparison. He thought this but he knew she wasn't, not to him.

He gave a soft sigh as he saw her inside the building stride past her open door. She was deep in thought, her hair cascading over her shoulders like lava flowing over rocks, the magma within presently contained. She was walking back and forth obviously going over everything that had happened and probably making her own plans. He was still observing her when he heard someone come up behind him and turned to see the smirking face of Elm.

"So, you've come to say your farewells to Fern?" Elm's eyes glittered in amusement. He knew what difficulties Fern posed for Oak how often she crossed him and how he still always sought to protect and care for her.

"No," Oak replied, rising a little taller in his defence. "I'm on my way to converse with Willow about our leaving. The camp members will need her support and guidance whilst we're gone."

Elm's eyes shone back at him, knowing that had not been his original intention and an eyebrow rose slightly in further amusement. "You certainly keep busy with the affections of the loveliest members of our clan. Perhaps you should make a choice so that another may have an opportunity with your cast off?" He raised both eyebrows this time at the end of the question and his sarcastic smile broadened.

Oak repressed the rise within him. "I assure you Elm you are quite mistaken, both are available. I have no claim to either of them, my concerns are for the clan only but as single girls I am bound to protect them." His face was sterner than he meant it to be as he dug into Elm's eyes, trying to banish the dislike and ire that was raising itself within his own.

"How noble of you Oak, only, if I'm not mistaken there are many more single girls in the clan that would be happy of your protection, or would that be taking on too many pretty females? What was the term for that in the Middle East, a harem? Is that what want Oak?" Elm's eyes were laughing now, he was getting the re-action from Oak that he sought and he was enjoying having the upper hand.

"How observant of you Elm, you are correct there are many single girls but there are only two who live alone; the other girls live with family members and friends. Therefore, I do believe that Fern and Willow are in need of protection more than the others." He stopped for a moment for effect and then went on, "to answer your last question Elm. No, I don't seek a harem for myself. If I did it would be filled with many girls by now."

He saw Elm's smile drop and felt a moment of triumph. Oak was not stupid, he knew how many girls were attracted to him including Fern, and he knew that was one of the many things that bothered Elm. Oak's hold over Fern irked Elm to the point of anger. Oak's triumph was short lived as he realized he was stooping to Elms level and almost regretted the outburst, but not quite.

He turned away to look at Fern still striding back and forth past her open doorway and had to stop himself from becoming rigid at Elm's retort.

"Whom do you need to protect Fern and Willow from Oak? Are there dangerous members within the clan?" The sarcasm in Elm's voice came through clearly and Oak was starting to tire of the goading.

“No Elm, no one within the camp but the stray beasts that pass through.” He gave Elm a look that said he included him with the beasts. Elm scowled in return. “However, today they’ll be worried about the presence of the Citans in the forest.”

“I can see wild animals perhaps being a problem for Willow and the Citans too...but for Fern?”

Elm's eyebrows popped up again and he continued. “She has her own wild animal within her home and has no fear of anyone as far as I can tell. So, I certainly wouldn’t have too many concerns there!”

Elm was watching Fern too now as he spoke and Oak could see the interest flickering in his eyes. He saw one side of his mouth curl up more than the other causing the eye above to wrinkle in a carnal hunger, it made him want to tear them out.

How dare he look at Fern in such a way, how could he even think that he was at her level? Keeping cool and calm Oak looked away from Elm and from Fern's home.

“You’re quite right! Fern is very capable of taking care of herself. She’s a valuable member of this clan and I have no doubt she can not only take care of herself but others in the clan too, including you!”

He slapped Elm on the back watching a scowl replace the sickening smile and immediately felt rewarded.

“Get yourself ready Elm, we leave soon.” With that Oak strode away in the direction of Willow’s dwelling. He didn’t look back to see the darkened face of Elm watching him retreat, nor did he see Elm stride toward Fern's abode.

When Oak arrived at Willow's home, he noticed the door was closed. He paused since that meant Willow was meeting with a clan member. She often advised them when they had concerns or disputes. He was about to turn away when the door opened and a girl stepped out, her head was turned as she said thank you to Willow and she almost walked into Oak as he stood waiting. She flushed bright pink and mumbled a quick sorry as she hastily moved away. Willow was standing in the doorway, the sun shining upon her hair making it glisten, her pale face becoming reflective of the sun's rays. The day was warm and she’d pulled her dress down off her shoulders showing the white skin of her throat and clavicle.

He hadn't known he was staring until he noticed the pink flush that was expanding across her cheeks as she said, “Come in Oak.”

Gracefully, she turned leaving the door open wide for him and recovering he strode into her humble, holistic home.

The air always held a scent and he breathed it in as he turned to close the door behind him. It always calmed him whatever the scent was and he plunged deep breaths into his lungs to award himself the privilege of peace. Willow always brought peace to him. She was a river running over him, cooling his skin, slowing down his heart, bringing tranquillity and serenity.

The image of Fern sprang to his mind. Her lively eyes, taunting lips, her rankle of words and defiant stance. What was Fern to him? She was a fire, raising the temperature of his skin, causing him to sweat, his heart to race, his adrenaline to flow, excitement to build, his senses to be swarmed. He tried to dispel the images of the two. Damn you Elm for giving me more conflicts and worries! He softly shook the picture away from his head.

“Please sit down Oak.” Willow motioned to a piece of furniture that had been built specially for her. Willow had seen it in an old photograph it was called a “tete a tete” settee, which was originally from the Victorian era. Willow had thought it perfect for her to communicate with the members of the clan when they came to her for advice or to talk of their concerns. The settee held only two people in

what looked like two separate chairs but the chairs were fixed in such a way that when sat the two people were facing opposite walls. However, with a simple turn of their heads they were able to look at one another comfortably and converse across the S shaped railing that curved around and separated them.

Oak sat down and stretched out his legs, he laid one arm upon the central arm rest that curved into the middle of the S from one chair to the other and his other arm on the outer. Willow sat down next to him with her hands in her lap. She looked a little disconcerted today and Oak after a while concluded that it was probably because of the Citans being in the forest.

“Willow you must keep peace and calm in the camp whilst we’re gone.” He looked down onto her bowed head as she studied her hands.

“Yes Oak, I will.”

“Don't be afraid Willow; I don't think the Citans are interested in our camp. You must make the clan believe that.” Still, she didn't raise her head but calmly looked upon her folded hands.

“Yes Oak, they will.” She replied softly. Slowly raising her head, she looked at him, and her eyes seemed to flicker as if she were struggling with something within herself. His own thoughts were skidding in so many directions that his intuition couldn't grasp what she felt.

He became immediately concerned and leaned closer to her grasping a hand that lay in her lap and gently squeezed it to re-assure her.

“Is something wrong Willow? You look worried and perplexed. Does the presence of the Citans make you uncomfortable?” He could feel the coolness of her hand within his and thought how small it was and how good it felt in his own.

“No Oak, they don't worry me at present.” Her eyes held his now as if she was searching for an answer within him. “Oak?” she became intense and then hesitated.

“Yes Willow.” He squeezed her hand once more and watched her take a breath before she spoke.

“Your aura is strong with red, orange and green.”

“Yes Willow?”

“They are strong emotions that you feel, anger and passion—love.” She dropped her eyes for a moment and then quickly returned them to his.

“It's been a difficult day filled with many problems to face,” he replied.

She leaned forward toward him now as she spoke. “Are you in love?”

She said the words so slowly and softly he had to lean forward in order to hear them and as he did so he also felt her breath waft upon his own lips. He could smell a sweet aroma upon her and he became almost heady with it. He was lost for a second in the sensations that were going on within him before he could focus on her words and he faltered before he could reply.

“I...yes, I am in love.” He searched her eyes wondering why she was asking him at this very moment.

Her eyelids lowered a little and her mouth opened slightly then closed again. Deliberating she continued, whilst he watched every movement upon her face enraptured by her features.

“You feel strongly today Oak, the wall that you normally have around you has cascaded to the ground and I can see many emotions flowing from you.”

“As I said it has been a day full of events.” He smiled at her and she gave him a small smile in return. He found himself staring at her mouth. She truly was the loveliest of the Woodlanders, so feminine, so gentle and so salubrious.

“And your love, what event caused it to erupt so violently?” Again her words were spoken quietly as she leaned toward him and him toward her to listen. Her eyes held his as he replied.

“Perhaps a fear of loss?” he was drowning in her empathetic stare.

“Why would you lose your love?” She asked her eyelashes fluttered a little and her head tilted slightly to listen.

“Because I’d realize my love too late?” It came out as a question because he didn’t think he really knew how to answer and he leaned toward her further to see if she knew.

“Is it too late now?” she asked searching his eyes expectantly.

“No, I don’t think so.” He leaned closer and Willow did too. It seemed only natural that he should kiss her. It was what her lips were asking for, it was what her whole body was suggesting should happen and he obediently obliged not just for her but because his own body was making the exact same request.

It was a soft, gentle kiss, his hand was still holding hers as he leaned over the railing that separated them, it presented an obstacle and some discomfort but they both ignored it. When Oak pulled away he was looking into a face that was puzzled and a little distressed. His eyebrows raised in curious concern at what had caused Willow to change.

“I apologize!” he said hastily, “I was rash; I shouldn’t have taken advantage of the situation.” He watched her as she carefully arose from her seat and walked away from him.

“You didn’t take advantage Oak. I misunderstood the situation that is all.” Her voice was sad and sent Oak into even more confusion.

“You misunderstood nothing Willow. You know I love you, you saw it!”

“I saw passion and love Oak but the passion was not for me.” She looked at him now her eyes sad, tears starting to form within them.

“I love you Willow! How can you say I have no passion for you?”

He was standing now, angered by what she was saying, moving purposefully toward her as if she were about to run away.

“Your passion lies with another, another that you love.” Her chin was a little defiant now, as defiant as Willow could be since it was not in her nature.

“I love another?” His question was unanswered as he stared at her, it didn’t need to be answered he knew who she meant.

Conceding, he went on, “I agree; I love another, another that I’ve loved for many years, we are bound by our experiences together, but that’s all.”

He pushed back his shoulders as he looked at Willow. “I love you Willow!” he softly proclaimed with as much sincerity as he could muster.

Leaning toward her in the hope that he had assuaged her fears, he continued, “and upon my return we shall be together forever.”

In a quick movement so she couldn’t get away he took her into his arms and held her to his chest, stroking her hair slowly, gently to alleviate her worries. His hold was strong as if someone would try to take her away from him at any minute and he wouldn’t allow it. He knew it was Willow herself pulling away that he feared.

“I can’t let you do that,” she replied as she looked up from his chest. “You can’t make this decision now. Many things could happen and since it was obviously she who broke down your defences, she should have a chance to love you.”

“What!” He said pushing her from him to arms length. “Are you crazy? I could no sooner share my love with her than I could have a terakian beast as a pet!”

Willow’s eyes stared at him unblinking and her face was firm as she replied “You and she deserve a chance, don’t deny yourself or her!”

He couldn't believe what she was saying and looked back at her in shock, unable to respond. Carefully, she prised herself from his hold and walked to the door slowly opening it as she turned back to him.

"You must go. Be careful, be a defender, forget us for now. The choice can wait until later. I love no other but you Oak. However, I will not take someone who may want another for the rest of his life."

Turning her head away once more she stared out of the open door.

Oak could almost feel his jaw drop, his sweet, kind, gentle Willow. Why couldn't she accept he loved her and be done with all the other nonsense? There would only be Willow, why would he even think about Fern when he was with her? How shallow did she think he was to ask her to be with him and still love Fern, it was ridiculous.

He was angry by the time he reached the door and barely noticed Willow had dropped her head where quiet tears were flowing, they fell upon her face in a silent silver stream, her lashes the cliff edge of a waterfall curved and pale. His anger left as the hurt hit his heart to see her tears. Knowing he had caused someone so loving and compassionate pain caused him distress at his selfishness. Now with guilt for carrying his love for Fern, he determined that he would rip Fern out and dispel the chaos that had been caused. He wanted Willow, he would be with Willow, and he had to believe that, it was what was right.

He stopped at her side and lifted her head, earnestly searching her face as he spoke. "I don't lie when I say I love you."

"I know Oak, but you love two of us, one of us more than the other, you need to realize which love is stronger."

He bowed his head in thought for a moment. "You're wise. I will try to prove myself worthy of you but if you should deem that I'm not, know that I'll always love and admire you."

She lifted her wet cheeks up to him, her pale blue eyes a sea of rolling waves crashing over her lashes. "Yes Oak, I believe you will." He kissed her moist cheek and turned to go.

"Oak!" he heard from Willow as he moved toward the pathway. He turned to see her stood in the doorway her face luminescent with tears.

"I had a vision of a strange man, I could sense evil in him, and he wanted to bring pain, pain to everyone. I'm not sure if this has any relevance to you and the defenders but the vision was unsettling, please be careful." He saw a slight shiver run over her before he made his reply.

"Thank you Willow, I'll watch out for him." After listening to his answer she turned and walked through the door, gently closing it behind her. He gave a deep sigh and walked along the path going through the jumble of his thoughts.

His reflections were momentary as he stopped and then quickly after short consideration strode toward the Culineers, to restock his supply of melini tablets. Going through his planned schedule for the day he hastily walked along.

After Willow's words he knew he couldn't think about his feelings, it was time for him to push them away and become the leader that his clan had made him. He needed to watch carefully and be wary.

Chapter 7

Fern stomped around, until finally she kicked at the table and cursed at the pain in her foot from the move. Still cursing Oak in her head, she plunked herself down onto a rush seat, the grass giving under her weight but not breaking completely, although it tilted dangerously.

“So what!” she exclaimed, “If I have broken another seat, it is better than breaking his neck!”

She seemed to have a habit of breaking seats lately. She would take what was left of them to the task takers and Walnut would give a “tssk” as he looked at it. She had wondered why he’d chosen the name Walnut, it seemed silly but it suited him and somehow Fern knew that it was his sense of humour that made him pick such a name. She was sure it amused him that people raised their eyebrows when they said it.

He’d look at her studiously. “How is it Fern that boys weighing much more than you can sit in these chairs and never break one?”

He paused to make sure she was paying attention. “But you have brought me three damaged seats!” He raised a brown eyebrow at her as he ended the question and she looked back at his tanned face. He worked outside in the sun and his eyes were wrinkled from squinting, she realized Walnut was a good name for him.

She smiled apologetically and replied, “I don’t know how I manage to break them? All I do is sit down and puff they fall apart!” Her hands splayed in animation as if she’d been demonstrating a small explosion.

“Are you saying my workmanship is shoddy?” he questioned giving her a serious, slanted look.

“No...no...I’m not saying that! It’s just that I sit and they fall apart.”

She stared at him upset that he thought she’d insulted him. Until, she saw the smile raise his lips and realized he was teasing her. Walnut was always teasing her.

He made and repaired everything that was needed for the clan’s comfort. One piece he’d made for Oak was a handsome desk and seat. Oak sat at it for hours writing and planning. Depicting all that had happened to them, the history of the camp over the years, why they were there. At this desk he made the rules that he and his defenders had agreed upon. He didn’t like making the rules. It reminded him of his childhood and the many restrictions they’d lived by.

The desk was dark brown and yellow ochre; it was woven intricately into the most amazing pattern. Fern had no idea how Walnut had managed to do it, it was art, just like the lovely paintings there had once been before they were confiscated by the government for the surplus. She’d seen the pictures in art books in with the antiquities building. They were lucky to have found so many books.

In the past they’d been allowed to keep some books by the government but not all, even books could be deemed unfit by the Regime and had been confiscated. Unfit could mean anything from Huckleberry Finn to the Bible. Some people were lucky enough to keep their books. Other people were said to have ideas outside of the Regime and eventually all books were taken away from them, so that no further ideas could be instilled into anyone’s heads. Reading could evoke rebellion. In the end, books made it to the list as unsafe and all books were confiscated.

Oak read many books at his desk spending hours over them. He said his desk was something special to him; it was something of his own. It couldn’t be taken away and used to provide income for a crooked government. It was a thing of beauty and value to him because it symbolized the new treasures of the Woodlander clan.

She looked down at the rush seat she was sat on. Oak, Oak, Oak, why couldn’t he just step out of her thoughts forever and give her some peace? He was the one that drove her crazy. It was his entire

fault but then, she knew she was partly to blame, she vexed him too much. It seemed to be in her makeup.

She wished she didn't dislike Willow because she would be good to talk to and she needed someone to tell her feelings to. Willow understood and helped people with their problems giving them good advice. Fern had no one to talk to other than Abacus but even the big snake wrapping itself around her didn't always make her feel better

Thinking about the huge snake made her wonder where he was. Probably out hunting, although, what he hunted she had no idea. She only knew that he would be gone for days and would return to her with a partially deflated lump a quarter of the way down his body. He would curl up and sleep for a long time taking up a large portion of her home. Not that his large presence inconvenienced her much, she was glad of the company. Once a month he would leave her to hunt, he'd been doing that for four years now.

She'd found Abacus whilst she wandering through the forest. He was the most colourful thing that she had ever seen. At that time he was only two feet long with an intricate pattern of diamond shapes and lines that were black edged filled with orange and bright red, and with a belly of bright yellow. He was another anomaly that didn't fit in with their environment. Without thinking she'd picked him up and he'd spat at her angrily. She knew now that had he bitten her she would have died, his venom was deadly but he didn't and after she'd sat talking to him he'd snuggled up to her and stayed.

She'd taken him back with her to the horror of everyone else, who had all wanted the creature out of their camp. She'd sobbed her heart out to Spruce their leader telling him that this snake was the only thing that she felt was really hers. That she felt a bond with it and because it hadn't bitten her wasn't that proof that it too wanted to be with her. It was young and needed her to protect it.

Spruce had sighed and declared that the snake would stay as long as it was of no danger to anyone else in the camp. Everyone had been too scared to ever go near the snake, so much so that they wouldn't even visit Fern but she didn't mind that, some of them were annoying anyway.

She never had needed to protect Abacus, he turned out to be very good at taking care of himself and would slither off to find himself food, return and snuggle under her bed in a pile of grass alms and seeds that she'd placed there for him. She'd looked through the books in the antiquities building but never found a snake anything like him, her conclusion was that he escaped from the laboratory with the other creatures and was man-made just like them.

Within two years he was full grown. Now he was twenty feet long and a thickness of two feet wide. His colours were still brilliant red, orange, black and yellow but in addition he now had a dark blue that wove through the squares and lines too. The first time he'd been about to shed his skin she'd noticed how opaque his eyes were and thought he was ill, she'd worried at what she should do.

Then, when he finally shed and she found the skin on the floor of her home, she'd been horrified thinking that he'd disintegrated and searched for him blindly with tears streaming down her face. When she found the lovely new Abacus glistening with vibrant colours beneath her bed she'd been taken aback and gazed at him in awe. She'd been filled with pride that this lovely creature chose to stay with her and be her friend.

Giving a little sniff she thought of her fondness for the snake that the whole camp ran away from. She knew it amused Abacus, she could tell by the look in his eyes. Others would think she was silly if she told them that but the bond between her and Abacus was strong and they did communicate, it was just a different communication. He knew her and she knew her snake.

Getting up from her seat she strode through the large room that was all her home was composed of. It contained two main pieces of furniture; a woven bed at one side with rush leaves upon it and a table with two chair at the opposite side of the room. The bed sat below one of four windows; the sun was shining through it warming the room and the bed. The leaves upon the bed would stay warm through the night when the temperature dropped and she would snuggle under their warmth like a chinchilla burying itself in the ground at night in the dessert.

In one corner was a pot bellied stove that stood upon a cut piece of rock, a pipe erupting upwards through the roof. Cofrin tree sap lined the roof to fill the gaps between it and the pipe. It had accidentally been discovered that the sap wouldn't burn when they'd tried to burn the wood from the tree for a fire. As was usual for the Woodlanders, there was always a use for everything.

The building had a window on each wall, the windows of the north and south wall were diagonal to one another as in the centre of those walls was a door opposite each other. The breeze was gusting lightly from the north door through to the south door; it brought a welcome coolness to the already warm room. Across from the bed was a table pushed against the wall and two seats, the one she'd been sitting upon and one for a guest (she needed no more than two since her only guests were Oak or Willow and Elm, no one else visited because of Abacus).

On the table was fruit from the camp grove and vegetable garden where most of the girls worked. A pear was already starting to become soft because it had sat there for a few days but she liked them that way. She would go to the meals and bring her food back and eat alone.

Sometimes Oak would follow her, asking if he was intruding but immediately settling into the chair beside her and not waiting for her reply. Whilst tucking into his meal with relish and giving it an appreciative look he'd say, "What do you think of the meal Fern?" She'd then have to take a bite herself, reply that it was good and then finish the meal until her plate was empty. After which she'd remember that she was originally going to ask him to leave. He would lean back contentedly in his chair and smile, knowing full well he had the advantage over her yet again as she would compress her lips together in frustration and let it go, yet again.

Rising she decided she was not going to let these occasions of him getting the better of her go on. Walking back and forth she started to formulate a plan. In agitation she went over Oak's words and her own, and then tried to figure out what she should do. She thought her head would collapse at the pressure of everything weighing down on her. It was during this time that Elm quietly walked in. She almost walked into him in her trance as he studied her.

She was so surprised that he took her hand in his and led her aside out of the way of the open doors and windows into a shadowed area of her home.

"Why are you so distressed Fern?" he gently moved a strand of hair from her face and she almost fell back in revulsion. He grabbed at her waist as she stumbled and she had to steady herself by laying her hand upon his chest. His eyes immediately dropped down to it and she hastily pulled it away. Worst of all was the look in his eyes. Fern knew that Elm had affection for her and she constantly tried to ignore it. She wasn't comfortable with the thought of desire and it was evident in his eyes at this moment as they turned from hazel to a yellow glow.

She was still unable to say anything and felt distressed at her sudden lack in ability to speak. He was staring at her intently and she was very aware of his hands tight around her waist, the feeling of entrapment was intense and she felt a rise of panic until quick words burst forth.

"I'm distressed at the Citans being in our forest!"

"But Fern, they are no-where near the camp. You've nothing to fear, everyone is safe here."

"How can you possibly be sure? How can anyone other than they know what they are up to?"

His hands slid slightly up and down her sides and she shuddered, his eyes became warmer as he misinterpreted her reaction for pleasure.

“The defenders will watch them until they’re gone. They’ll have no opportunity to double back or try to deceive us in any way.”

His head came down to her level, she staggered backwards until she hit the wall. Elm didn’t let go but followed her, his hands encompassing her more as he was pushed into her by the force.

“Well then, thank you Elm for visiting and apprising me of the situation, I feel calmer now.” She hoped he would let her go but he didn't.

“Won't Oak let you go with us Fern?” he was once more moving her hair back from her face and she could feel her jaw become rigid at his touch, making it difficult to answer.

“No, he won't.”

“But you want to go, don't you Fern? You want to be a defender?”

“Yes, I do.”

“If the other defenders want you to be with us, then what can Oak say? He can no longer refuse you.”

Her eyes widened at his last words. Was he saying what she thought, that he'd help her to become a defender, or was this a trick against Oak?

“I don't need to be a defender.”

Elm tilted his head as he studied her. “I don't believe you Fern.”

“He's promised me a job, so you needn't worry that I'm being treated unfairly.”

“But I always worry about whether you are treated fairly. I've become attached to you. I admire your effervescent nature.”

Fern became sullen. Really, she thought, effervescent? She knew he meant explosive but he was trying to be charming about it.

“All will be okay. Upon your return, that is yourself, Oak and the defenders, I'll be given a job that fits my skills.”

“You have a great many skills Fern,” he was leaning into her and she could almost hear the unsaid words “you raise my blood pressure,” she looked at his glowing eyes, felt the immovable close proximity of his body.

“Why Elm, how rude of me not to offer you a chair,” she exclaimed, hoping the distraction would work. It didn't, he simply cocked his head to one side and smiled even more.

“I'm very comfortable here. In fact, it's been a long time since I've felt so comfortable.”

She almost wanted to shriek at him and wondered why she didn't. She wasn't sure if she'd become comfortable in the grasp of his arms and hypnotized by the yellow in his eyes. His face she realized was not unattractive. Was it that she liked the fact that he desired her? That couldn't possibly be it. Or was she really that desperately lonely that any attention was good attention? She reflected that the latter was more likely.

“Why do you visit me Elm? There must be more of a reason than just to assure me that the camp is safe from the Citans?”

His face became softer and his lips parted slightly as he stared at her. She was suddenly fearful that perhaps she'd asked the wrong question. Afraid that she might have brought forth a secret that she would rather was kept hidden. In the past she'd had the feeling many times when he visited her that he was in love with her.

“Can I offer you a pear Elm? The one on the table is ripe and quite delicious.” She was scrambling but she knew no other way to get out of what she'd started. She must distract him from

taking this further, she couldn't handle refusing him and gaining him as an enemy, when he was one of her few visitors.

Did she really value his visits? Most of the time she just thought him an arrogant, self absorbed oaf but she knew he was not an oaf, he was clever when it suited him. Their conversations had covered many topics and she found he was well read in many subjects. They argued about things but unlike Oak, Elm took enjoyment in their clash of beliefs and he would always listen to her without interruption. Once she was quiet he would present his point of view. She would desperately try to hold her tongue and listen but words would burst out and he'd laugh at her, telling her she could speak in due time but for now it was his turn on the podium.

In the end with both points of view aired they'd come to an agreement, which would always surprise her and leave her feeling good about their conversation. It was then with her guard down that she'd wonder if he was merely manipulating her, trying to gain an advantage by raising her opinion of him. Was he working her like a marionette waiting for a time to use her against Oak? Anger would take over and once more she'd drop her thoughts of him to the level of deceiving and conniving.

His face was gentle and disconcerting as he looked down at her, his eyes were unsure as he was about to speak. She knew what words he wanted to say and fear of them drove her on.

"Oak and I had an argument!" she exclaimed, trying to be as dramatic as she possibly could, which was not difficult for Fern because her whole life was a drama. "He says we can no longer have a bond with one another."

The words tumbled out before she realized just how much more she'd placed herself at risk and her mind reeled trying to find another approach as she watched the smugness and then hope enter his eyes.

"He is going to assign me a defender to protect me as he says he can no longer be my protector." She stumbled on her words. What was she doing? She may as well be asking Elm to take the job.

"However, if I have a partner he won't need to assign anyone." She was exasperated at the hash she was making of the conversation and watched as Elm's eyebrows raised.

"You have someone in mind?"

"Yes," she watched his facial expression change becoming more curious and hopeful.

"May I ask who it is?"

"No, I can't tell. Not now, not until the Citans are gone, and I've been given my new job. Only then can I tell you who it is."

His head had moved back to upright and he was frowning slightly, unsure whether this was going to be good or bad for him.

"Fern I've always held you in high regard."

Her pulse raced once more, was he going to ask her anyway? Would he not wait? Her eyes darted from one side of the room to the other and she tried with difficulty to come up with another way to stop the conversation.

"We've been friends for many years." he continued. She'd never thought of him as a friend. "I've watched you grow into who you are. Strong, forthright, kind, lovely..." his voice trailed here for effect and she could hear herself screaming in her head, move away, move away.

He was leaning down toward her once more his lips dangerously close to hers. She could feel his breath upon her skin, could feel the sweat peaking out of the pores in her arms, face, all over her body.

"You're special Fern." His face held sincerity as if he believed what he was saying.

How practiced he was! How many times had he gone over this conversation?

“I will always treat you well.”

“I am not special,” she blurted, “I need nothing. I don't require platitudes. I don't need anyone to attempt to placate me because they think I am different.” Her eyes flashed wildly at him, he slowly leaned back readying himself to take control of the conversation once more.

“My apologies if you think I'm being detrimental. I was only meaning that you have so much more to offer than most intellectually.”

She felt some sense of relief; at least they were talking about her mind rather than her body. Her body that was becoming traitorous in the way it was feeling. As hard as she tried she couldn't stop the hairs rising on her neck and the feeling of exhilaration.

Elm recognized the excitement within her, could feel her body craving for what nature had created it for. She felt her strength caving; her emotions had already peaked that day with Oak. They needed release and the warm hand that was once more sweeping her hair away from her face as she moved her tormented head in desperation for escape, was encouraging her to succumb.

The jolt of Elm's body as he was prized away from her brought her back to her senses. She heard him curse as he stumbled back and looked down to where his attention had forcefully been pulled to. Abacus, his thick long body sliding between them curled around Elm rising high in intimidation. His hiss and rattle of his tail could be mistaken for nothing other than a warning. Elm was trying to move backwards to get away but couldn't as his heel hit the huge snake's body behind him. He stared at the vibrating tongue and flattened head that was pointing ominously at him.

“Why do you still have this thing around?” he yelled, all the softness and gentleness gone from his face as he looked at the snake in absolute fear and fury.

“He's my friend. He'll always be here.”

“Not if I'm around.” Then realizing his mistake quickly added, “for I would want some alone time with you, Fern.”

Her eyes were cold as she stared at him and he could see he'd lost all the ground that he'd made. He looked as though he wanted to kick something, as though he wanted to kick Abacus. It was never a good idea to aggravate a viper. Abacus dropped to the ground where he continued to swirl himself in circles around her, once again rising up even higher, his tongue vibrating once more.

She could tell that Elm knew there was nothing more to be said, so he bowed to her in acceptance of defeat by the snake.

“I would kiss your hand but I fear that the snake would take off my head!” He cocked his head to the side to give her a clownish look and a forced smile.

She laughed at his quick change to humour, unable to stop her admiration of his quick wit and self-control. “You may be right.”

She saw a look of relief and satisfaction. He knew he'd redeemed himself slightly. His smile was half hearted as he moved to the door. “Take care Fern. Keep safe.”

“Goodbye Elm. Good luck to all of you on your journey.”

With a fleeting look back at her, a look that surprised her at its sadness, he left her home and vanished as he ran to attend to being a defender once more.

Fern placed a grateful hand upon Abacus, sliding it down his beautiful body of scales. “Thank you Abacus!” Her shoulders drooped as she said the words, the last of her resolve gone for the day. “I will be leaving for a few days Abacus or even longer, however long it takes.” She continued to stroke the huge snake beside her, enjoying the calmness it gave her.

“There are Citans in our forest and I need to find out why. Please don’t follow me Abacus; I want to know that you are safe; I want to come back to you. Don’t try to protect me; I’ll keep myself safe, you understand.”

The snake gave nothing back in reply but lowered his head a little and she took that as an acknowledgement. At the moment she was tired, mentally and physically, she felt the need to rest. She’d leave tomorrow.

“I’ll be leaving tomorrow, so don’t worry if you can’t find me here for a few days. I’ll be in the forest tracking the Citans.”

Abacus gave a wiggle of his tongue feeling the air, as if he could sense her emotions upon it and dropped to the ground, sliding over to the bed. Exhaustion took the last of her energy and she too stumbled toward her bed. Flopping down onto it she closed her eyes and shut out the world for that day, welcoming oblivion and nothingness.

Chapter 8

The defenders met at the West Sentinel. Upon them they had a good supply of melini tablets and a blanket made from dureski leaves rolled up and folded until it was no larger than a hand (though thin the blanket was warm and waterproof). Their swords hung from the same belt that carried the woven bag. The Woodlanders had made the swords from various metals that they'd found. They'd melted the metals down and poured them into clay casts making them into swords they carried and tools.

Oak looked at his defenders awaiting their final instructions before departure, he gave a short speech, wishing them speed and safe travel and hastened the split groups to go their different directions at a run.

Oak led his group with Pine close by, he noticed Elm lag a little behind him and he wondered what sabotaging thoughts were going through his head. He stopped himself from going any further, scolding himself for thinking in such a way and reminded himself he was the leader, it was for him to bring out the best in his clan. If he thought negatively of Elm, how could Elm be any different? He had to shake this bad image he had and think of Elm as good. If he encouraged Elm perhaps, he'd surprise Oak and become one of his best defenders. Somehow, he didn't think that would happen but he pushed that thought aside and concentrated on how he would help Elm to be a better defender.

They ran for twenty kilometres heading north, his group tracking the Citans. Oak stopped them for a short break and a chance to eat a melini tablet. They all sat crossed legged between the bushes and trees, staying as close together and yet with a respectful distance apart as they could. They ate slowly, taking advantage of the rest and enjoying the pleasantness of the summer day, it was not yet overly hot and the temperature was quite perfect for lazing in.

Oak sat a little away from them, he had an uneasy feeling and he wanted to get in touch with his senses to find out why. He closed his eyes and concentrated on his rhythmic breathing. He could hear his heart beating and felt the blood coursing through his veins; his ears were alive to the breeze as it softly brushed against the leaves of the trees and bushes. The smell of wood and scuffed up earth reached his nose and the soundless cracking of twigs. They were close to the Citans. The air sent goose bumps through his flesh.

He could see them now in his head, their feet landing heavy on the ground, he felt the vibrations. Someone stumbled and cursed as they righted themselves. Their leader stopped and turned, they all halted to look at him. He raised his hand into the air, palm facing them, telling them to stay. He turned his head from one side to another, listening. Oak could hear him sniffing the air, raising his chin feeling the breeze upon his face. It was then that the Citan leader's eyes lit up. He knew they were being followed.

Oak started out of his trance. The Citan leader was more than he'd imagined. He thought they would be easy to follow, that they wouldn't be aware of the Woodlanders but this wasn't to be the case. Oak realized their observation of the Citans was going to be more dangerous than he'd originally thought. This group was already wary and watching out for anything different in their surroundings. He'd felt their fear escalate, this would make them unpredictable.

He'd have to change his strategy for he had too many with him and so large a group would be sensed quickly. They would have to split up into smaller bands. He didn't feel comfortable with the idea, even more so when it came to Elm and which band he should be with. He had to stop this and trust Elm, he had no choice. He quickly scanned the group immediately splitting them mentally and deciding where they would go and what they would do.

“Defenders, we have been found out. The Citan leader knows we’re following them. We must be extremely cautious as their fear is now heightened and they’ll attack if they see or hear us.” His defenders looked up in surprise, their faces aghast that their leader had such insight to know these things and they marvelled that they were so lucky to be in his group.

Pine raised a questioning eyebrow but he said nothing. They all waited for Oak to continue.

“We shall split into groups of three, except for my group, that shall include Pine, Elm and Blackthorn.” Going through the names of his defenders he placed them into two other groups.

“Cedar, you shall take your group east of here and travel beside the Citans keeping two kilometres in distance. Beech you will travel west and perform the same task as Cedar's group. My own group will follow behind the Citans.

Do not break your concealment, if you are discovered leave immediately and when safe return to a distance of three kilometres. Be wary, if they find you out and are alarmed and pursue, retreat, making sure you lose them.”

His eyes rested upon each face of his defenders. “Let’s hope,” he continued, “that we’re not found out.” His eyes were upon Blackthorn, he was smaller and wilier than the others, dressed in black he stood out in the sunlight but at night he disappeared like the smoke from a fire vanishing in the air.

“When any changes in plan are to be made I will send Blackthorn to tell you. Good luck!” With his last word he jumped to his feet and set off at a run with a startled Pine, Blackthorn and Elm following as fast as they could.

Oak had dispelled the thoughts of his own defenders; he was too entranced with the vision in his head as he quickly followed it. The Citans were travelling faster, they were more on edge and some of them were stumbling more because they were unsure of what was going to happen. Their leader was annoyed at them for slowing the procession down. His face was tight and drawn; his fingers kept reaching inside his coat touching the rifle hidden inside there. Oak knew it was loaded and ready.

Their heightened fear made them easier to feel but he couldn’t tell what the Citan leader felt. He didn’t fear, nor was he angry, Oak knew he was frustrated since he shouted orders to his uncoordinated band but that was all, only strong emotions were easy to pick up. This Citan was difficult to read, Oak would have to be very careful around him, and he wasn’t to be presumed to be the same as the others.

Abruptly Oak stopped and the three following him had to make a concerted effort to stop their own bodies from crashing into one another in a domino effect and all end up on the ground. Pine smiled, he enjoyed how Oak always kept them on their toes. Oak had no tolerance for laziness or lapses in concentration; you couldn’t slip up ever as it was too dangerous for everyone. Now, standing still, they all looked at Oak to see why he’d stopped so suddenly. He immediately dropped to the floor and they followed, looking left and right to see what danger they were in.

Oak listened, softening his breathing to hear more. They were not far from the Citans and the Citans knew they were here. Their leader had stopped and dropped to the back of the group. He was scanning the forest right now with his rifle at his shoulder, looking over the sight, scanning from left to right, searching, his finger resting upon the trigger. He’d already taken off the safety.

Oak crawled along the ground, silently indicating to his defenders they should do the same. In single file they followed him, when he stopped they stopped. He gave a motion, letting them know that they were to stay where they were and Oak continued to crawl on his belly through the undergrowth. Roots and twigs brushed against him but he didn’t notice he was getting closer to the Citan leader.

Denver, the Citan leader stood still, halting his group to do the same. Slowly, he left them and as quietly as his big boots would allow (which was not as quiet as he'd hoped) he traversed the roots and bushes, avoiding twigs as best he could, whilst scanning over the top of his rifle. He knew they were being followed by Woodlanders and knew they were much closer now. Soon he would be within sight of them but his senses didn't tell him what direction they were in, just that they were close. He stopped, realizing that he was foolish to leave the other boys and be out here on his own. He didn't feel that they were many but they were still more than one and because he didn't know who or what he was dealing with he thought he'd better not to stick around.

He knew some details of the Woodlanders who lived here in the forest but the details were holed and unreliable. How dangerous they were he had no idea, sightings of them had always been brief. He knew they were smaller and lived a very basic life in the forest and that they were territorial allowing no-one anywhere near their camp. Carefully, he stepped back, still watching, observing, and looking for anything different in the forest, any sight, sound, breath.

He heard a mumble from one of the boys and turned his dark, sharp eyes upon him, he immediately became quiet. Such disobedience didn't help his search for the trackers that followed. Indicating that they should keep going with a wave of his hand, he continued his vigil behind them of scanning the forest, whilst walking backwards for a while and then swiftly turning he followed his band.

Denver accepted there was nothing he could do. Whoever was following was too good at hiding for him to find. They were also careful enough to comprehend that he could shoot them should they make the slightest mistake of making a sound or being seen. They would fall back to a safer distance now, so he and his group may as well keep on travelling.

He would keep paying attention to how close they were for now but tonight he'd find them and discover why they were following and exactly what they wanted. For now they would keep covering as much ground as they could. They still had a long way to go and their food and water supplies were diminishing too rapidly. Denver was very uneasy about this whole endeavour.

Although, he himself had left no-one behind at the city, many of them had and he knew they were not happy about it. However, he felt no pity for them; this is what they'd trained for, hours and hours, week after week to be the protectors of the city. They were the strongest, largest, most undefeated fighters in the city. They could be quick, ruthless and break a neck within seconds if they wanted; they were bodies of muscle and strength. He doubted that anyone could beat them in a fair fight. In a fair fight he thought but there were other ways to kill a person and they weren't always fair.

He'd watched the long kisses of farewell as they'd readied to leave the city. Tall, athletic girls holding tight to their loves with fear in their eyes fear that they wouldn't see them again. He sincerely hoped that they would all return alive but he couldn't guarantee it.

Boston, a lovely brunette, had stared at him sadly; her usually thrown back shoulders slumped slightly. Her eyes had looked bright and he wondered if she was going to cry over his leaving and was surprised at the thought. He changed his mind thinking he was being foolish. Boston was all good sense and efficiency; she had no time for silly emotions. She was the one who organized, sorted things, gave the right people the jobs they needed and would be happy attending to. She seemed almost robotic at times the way she worked and made everything run smoothly. He admired her but he didn't love her.

Denver knew she loved him and he wondered why. He'd never encouraged her, never talked to her any differently than he did anyone else. He was polite and friendly as he would be to anyone but he didn't flirt with her as some of the others did, she never flirted back with them. She didn't even flirt with him; he doubted she even knew how to flirt. Boston was too practical. He could envision what their relationship would be like.

“Denver,” she would say. “We are both physically attractive to one another; we have similar interests, are organized, comfortable in each other’s company and communicate well enough. Our chemistry works together both mentally and physically, so it is only natural that we should form a relationship.”

He could see it develop in a few years to...“Since we’re in a relationship Denver and physically healthy, being good specimens of the human race, we should procreate for humanity and have a child.” Everything would be practical, logical, functional, the way she believed a relationship should be. Not the way he believed it should be; filled with passion, emotion, flares of wanting, desire, even dispute, anger, jealousy, and all the things that made a relationship unpredictable.

As he moved away he'd smiled back at her and given her a wave. She'd lifted her elegant hand and given a slow wave back with a small smile that barely touched her lips. He thought he saw that aquiline nose twitch and cheekbones raise a little. He sometimes wondered if she would ever be passionate, she wasn't the emotional type, her feelings ran as smoothly as a Swiss watch.

He'd never seen her show any sign of emotion, other than annoyance at a job that was poorly done. Obviously, he was wrong now if he thought she was upset by his departure. He'd scanned the rest of the people and turned, indicating to his group that it was time to go, he hadn't looked back.

He was now taking huge strides onwards as he went over his thoughts and returned to his group. He sensed someone retreating and knew they'd now keep a greater distance to prevent themselves being caught. He needn't worry about the followers until tonight. He'd other things to concern him right now, mainly his group who were worried that they'd never return to the city again. Perhaps some of them wouldn't but as long as they followed his orders their chances of getting home were higher than they thought. He shook his head, they should have more faith.

Oak saw him but there was little he could do, it was too late to retreat. His breath caught in his mouth as he wished his heart to stop and any other noise that his body made to live. The Citan leader was large like Fern had described and he was not twenty feet away from where Oak hid in between two bushes. He could see the Citan's finger squeezing and releasing upon the trigger of the rifle as he was searching, he was sniffing the air. Could he smell Oak? The Woodlanders smelled very much like the forest just because they spent all of their time in it, he hoped that was all the leader could smell. The Citan leader's group stood still waiting for him, they were curious as to what changes he'd noticed and Oak could sense that some were impatient to get on.

Oak's brain was on fire going through scenarios of what could happen next and how he would respond. He was ready to leap to the right should he be seen and shot at, his body was tight and ready to make the spring into the air. Hopefully, he would be quick enough to be missed by the bullet, he knew the chances of the second bullet missing him would be less once he was up and running, unless he could weave through the trees. He scanned the forest for what trees he could use to block the shots at him should he be quick enough to get up and away. His only chance would be to zigzag making it difficult for the Citan to target him. His fingers were clenched on the ground waiting to push him up quickly.

The Citan leader stopped, he was stepping backwards now, retreating to his band. Oak slowly relaxed as he saw the leader take more steps back and then turn and walk to the group. The crunch from the Citan's heavy boots was loud to Oak's ears. The Citans had no stealth in this environment, that was a bonus for the Woodlanders, also, the Citan leaders long coat caught on branches causing distraction and this slowed him down too, another plus for Oak.

He was dressed in black jeans and a tight knit shirt; he'd be much quicker without the coat and would blend well into the dark. Oak noted he would be dangerous at night. At the moment the leader was encumbered and weaker, except that he had a rifle and they only had swords. His rifle wouldn't work for him in the dark but Oak's eyes had seen the strap on the calf of the Citans right leg, a sheathed knife. At night he would be very dangerous.

Oak breathed normally again, he relaxed his tense muscles and stretched. He lay there for a little while before retreating to his waiting defenders. He had a lot to go through in his mind and none of it was good. If they should get into a fight with the Citans the chances of survival would not be in their favour. With the leader being so conscious of everything around him he would quickly alert his group and unless the Woodlander's had the advantage they would be defeated by the power and size of them.

He knew the Citans had trained hard just as his own defenders had, these boys were the best from the city he had no doubt of that. He could see the muscle tone under their tight shirts. They were at their physical peak. He'd have to keep his own defenders tightly under control; they couldn't afford to make even the slightest mistake, as it would cost them too dearly.

Once he reached his defenders he signalled for them to sit. They were all looking at him in concern; they could see he wasn't happy. Gathering his thoughts he told them of the Citan Leader and his telepathic abilities. He told them of the rifle and the sheathed knife on his calf.

Resting his gaze on each of them individually as he spoke he continued, "He'll keep travelling with his band during daylight. He knows he is safe because of the rifle he carries, he can shoot anything at a great distance, so we must be careful to stay well back." He paused for a moment and then with an intense gaze upon them all he continued, "We will be in the most dangerous position tonight."

All eyes looked at him in question. "He'll come to find us tonight, probably with a few of his best hunters. He'll either kill us or he'll question why we follow him, then he might kill us anyway. I don't know for sure, he's difficult to read, I can't tell if he's evil." He stared at the anxious faces before him. They didn't like this development. Everything was riskier, their one plus of being unknown was gone and they were also dealing with a Citan that could sense presences.

Blackthorn looked at Oak in shock. Oak could tell the young defender was bewildered at how Oak knew all this. How being one of them, he could sense so much more than anyone else. Blackthorn had even told Oak one day, that Oak was like Hercules from the very old stories—myths from Greece about men being of human mother and having a god for a father. Oak had laughed and patted him on the shoulder telling him that he was indeed only mortal and nothing more.

At fifteen years of age Blackthorn looked up to Oak and Oak realized that he was his mentor, the person whom he aspired to be most like. It was quite a burden for someone only a few years older. He knew Blackthorn would gladly die for him, so Oak worked hard to prove to be everything that Blackthorn thought he was. He would guide and protect him as best he could.

Oak gave Blackthorn a smile. He was a faithful, unquestioning defender and he made Oak feel proud of him.

"Don't be alarmed." Oak continued, not directing the words at Blackthorn even though they were meant for him. "He will seek us out but he won't find us. As soon as dusk arrives we'll travel back three kilometres and each climb a tree at a distance of fifty feet between each of us. High in the branches we shall settle unseen for the night. We shall take turns on lookout, I starting the first shift, Pine the second, Elm the third and Blackthorn the final." He stopped to make sure they were all good with the instructions.

“Let’s continue but at a good distance from the Citans. Let’s keep a bit of distance between ourselves also and be silent at all times, understand?” All heads nodded in acknowledgement and Oak and his defenders were once again running in pursuit of the Citans.

Chapter 9

Elm travelled behind Pine going over what Oak had said. How could they believe what Oak said was true? For all they knew Oak could have them following nothing, could be making the whole thing up, none of them had even seen a Citan as yet. He glowered as he ran along; he hated how everyone put their trust in Oak so willingly. No one ever questioned...except Fern. He'd watched her change the last two years. Even though she still looked at Oak with those adoring eyes, there was anger in them and rebellion.

Rebellion was a word that reverberated a lot in his mind. He knew that Fern wouldn't willingly hurt Oak but he was sure he could manipulate her so that she did, unintentionally of course. A cruel smile played upon his lips at the thought but just as suddenly vanished. She was a pretty thing and he often thought about her but he knew that was foolish. There was only one she wanted and he wondered why Oak ignored that. There were feelings between them, no one doubted it. They had a strong emotional bond, yet Oak distanced himself from her as much as possible. Perhaps, he could see just how dangerous his weakness for her was. She was the only one who could make him lose control.

Instead he fawned over the pretty, pathetic, pale, Willow. She floated around like her head was made of air and smiled so sickly sweet to everyone that he wanted to taunt her, just to see if she could actually show any anger. Everyone treated her as if she was of the greatest importance. They brought her gifts almost bowing down to her like she was some deity. How ridiculous, she was nothing more than a wisp of a creature, yet she had so many hanging from her every word. It was because of her words that he hadn't become leader and he despised her for it. When he was eventually leader and he would be, she wouldn't be choosing any of his defenders for him. She'd be talking to the girls about their troubles and that would be all.

His lips curled again at that thought. He knew that she hadn't told Oak to choose him to be one of his defenders; he knew she'd advised him against it and he knew why Oak had gone against her wishes. Oak took him with him everywhere and watched him carefully, every move he made, every expression on his face. He knew what he was planning and the thought made Elm laugh all the more.

Oak was just waiting for the day that he would try to take over his role as leader but Elm was too clever to try anything physical. He would bide his time and win that role through using others. He was not going to put himself at risk but he would manipulate other members to do his bidding. He'd already carefully planted the seeds; it was just a matter of patience to wait for them to grow. He was too smart for Oak to figure out and by the time he did, it would be too late for him to do anything about it. If he was lucky and his plan went well Oak would be dead anyway and Elm would walk out of the whole thing looking like a saviour to the other defenders.

It was unfortunate that Oak had picked Blackthorn to come with them; he'd hoped he would have chosen Hemlock; the seeds were growing well within him. It didn't matter, Hemlock was in the group to the west of them and so he was close by, whereas, Linden was far away in the south patrol. He could even be days away but he was not as easy to manipulate as Hemlock. He'd found the chink in Hemlock's armour long ago and had whittled at it until he was now sure he would follow Elm's instructions without question.

A silent laugh left his lips and his eyes narrowed. Be patient Elm, wait for the time, place and the event, it will all come together, and your intelligence will have proved you can outwit Oak. He'll have no time to respond and when he does grasp what is happening, he'll be unable to change anything.

He sharply stopped his thoughts when Oak halted again. They crawled to the spot where Oak had dropped down. His eyes were closed when they got there and Elm felt like slapping him, he was so

tired of his visions. When Oak's eyes quickly opened and stared straight at him he felt uncomfortable. It was as if Oak knew everything in that one look and Elm become edgy for a moment. Laughing internally he thought himself foolish as Oak then motioned for them to be silent. They waited for what seemed like a long period of time but it was more likely only seconds.

Oak's eyes went into a trance again. Elm's thoughts travelled once more. Perhaps he and Willow would be good together; they were both the same, both as flaky as each other. What a quiet household it would be, both of them sat in their trances all day long. Perhaps they could produce imaginary children that could float along behind Willow and her long billowing dresses. He looked up to see Oak staring at him and he smirked. Oak looked annoyed, Elm liked that even better and smirked all the more.

Oak rested his gaze on all of his defenders. "We shall rest and eat, the Citans have found themselves a place to rest and they are making camp for the night. Their leader will be planning to come and look for us soon as it will be dusk in a matter of minutes and dark soon after." The defenders looked up at the sky. They had not been paying any attention to it since it was often obscured by the large trees they were travelling under but they noticed the tinges of grey that were seeping through it now.

"We shall drop back since they have no plans to move any further in their travels tonight but they will rise early and be off with first light and so shall we."

Still sat cross legged each ate quietly. Elm was considering the days ahead, watching the other defenders as they went through their own thoughts. He looked at Pine and Blackthorn, he wished fervently he could get rid of them; they made his plan difficult to put into action. Don't worry he thought; soon, soon his opportunity would come.

When they'd finished eating they followed Oak once more as he assigned them to their trees for the night. Elm was disgusted by it; he was tired of Oak treating them like they had no minds of their own. He knew however, Oak had his reasons for assigning them certain trees and a lot of it had to do with him. Oak at least didn't remind them of what order they were on watch, they were expected to remember. He'd made it clear to his defenders long ago that they were given orders only once.

Taking the rope that was wrapped around his waist he wrapped it around one hand threw the rest around the tree and wrapped it tight around the other hand so that his body was no more than an arm's length from the tree, the rest of the rope dangled down loosely. Then with toes pointed outwards in his flat shoes he rested his feet upon the tree trunk and with a quick strong movement slid the rope up the tree, adjusting his feet to follow. It didn't take him long to reach the under branches and once there he grabbed one and pulled himself up into the foliage.

Elm picked his spot to sleep since Oak was taking first watch and he was to take the second to final shift. That was very sneaky of Oak slipping him in between shifts, so he probably wouldn't see the Citans at all, since the Citans would search for them immediately at dark or early before the light. There would be no sneaking for him to the Citan leader to gain his trust as an ally. He took out his blanket and quickly settled for the night. He'd make sure he was well rested before his watch; he had a lot more planning to do when he awoke again.

Oak sat in the tree mulling over his thoughts. He'd enough to think of with the Citans but these emotions of Elm's were becoming stronger, Elm was usually careful not to be so unguarded. He was eager to be rid of Oak and it was leaving him open. It wasn't the first time that he'd felt Elm's ridicule but this had been much stronger than the other times. Oak didn't feel comfortable with Elm's lack of

fear, he thought himself invincible and this could be a definite problem. He wished he could distract Elm with a girl but the only one he ever looked at was Fern and he was certain that was because he knew Oak had feelings for her. He'd often dreaded that Elm would pick Fern to be his partner.

There were times when he was sure that Elm was going to approach Fern to ask her. He'd felt Elm's emotions when they'd been strong and it had left Oak almost beside himself with fear that Fern might say yes, just to spite him, because he himself didn't ask her. He knew she wanted to be with him but Oak couldn't ask her, she'd make him weak; she'd be his ruin as a leader.

Elm liked to play on her rebellious nature and take advantage of her because of it. Fern disliked Elm almost as much as Oak did, was it dislike though? Or was it distrust? Had he, himself, placed that distrust there when he'd talked to Fern about Elm? He was right to have done so; she needed to know what Elm was up to. It would be wrong for her to be jostled in the middle between both of them, but then, wasn't that already happening? Once more he felt aggrieved at the mental injuries he caused Fern.

If Elm asked her, she would say no and Elm knew it. One day Oak saw Elm pause by her door; his feelings were strong to approach her as a lover. Oak had watched him in fear but Elm had turned and walked away. Oak's body had crumpled as the pent up air escaped from the relief, he thought he aged a year that day.

Elm was waiting, waiting for a time like today when Fern was broken. When Elm could slither to her, like that snake of hers and wrap himself around her and hiss into her ear that he was with her, understood her, that she was right to do the things she did, he would stand by her, that they were both misunderstood. Would Fern in her time of weakness, fall for his charm?

Anger shot through him. Had he approached Fern after he left? Oak had no idea where Elm had gone, he hadn't tried to sense where he went, he'd been caught up in his own emotions and by that time was thinking of Willow. Elm could have crawled his way to Fern and set all his vile charismatic words into play, leaving her to mull over them. To stew for however many days they'd be away and seek out Elm on his return to discuss more, to hear more of the lies he could spew forth with such ease. Oak wanted to hit something in his anger. Elm wouldn't get near Fern on their return, he'd see to that.

Unexpectedly, his thoughts changed and he could see something large moving through the dark forest in his mind. The Citan leader was looking for them and he wasn't far away. Oak stared into the darkness and saw the illumination from two dilated eye pupils. He was impressed that the Citan was so quiet. As Oak knew he would, he'd taken off the black coat and left his rifle and belt of bullets behind. He moved stealthily, his knife still sheathed so the moonlight that scrambled through the tree branches wouldn't glint off it, giving his position away. He didn't come near the tree Oak was in but passed under the tree where Pine had been sleeping.

Had been sleeping, Pine too was now wide awake. He was looking at Oak to see if he was giving any instructions. Oak pondered, it would be nice to capture the Citan leader but he was sure that he wasn't alone. He had no doubt there were others and in a fight they themselves may not fair too well against them. No, like Elm, Oak could be patient. He would wait to find out what he wanted to know but he would let them pass for now.

The Citan leader moved away and as Oak suspected one of his group pursued him and then another. There were only three of them but it still wasn't worth the risk. Oak looked across at Pine, he was motionless but ready for action. It was Pine's shift now to watch. Oak leaned his head on the tree bark, pushing his thoughts and images away, he went to sleep.

Oak was dreaming that he was with his father. They were on the bus, which consisted of four carriages that picked up its passengers at assigned stops. They'd had to walk a kilometre to get there,

as they were travelling on the east bus to get off at a stop that had the south bus line connection. Everyone travelled on the buses, there was no other form of transportation.

His father had his screen with him, it was the size of his pocket and he pulled it out to be scanned as they stepped onto the bus, everyone behind them did the same. Every family was given a screen. There was no money, just the screen. Everything you received from the government was determined on that screen. Your weekly food ration, travel expenses, energy expenses. Once you used up your weekly allowance there was nothing left for you, so you had to be careful. Especially in winter; to have your energy switched off because you'd used your limit meant: no heat, no light and no power to cook.

Everyone was allocated a job to match their intelligence or what they were most skilled at. There was no choice. Today they were going to get food. He loved it when his father took him. Normally he had to sit on his knee on the bus, children were meant to stay at home and be educated by the screens installed in their house. They were not of enough value to be allowed a seat on the buses that were often full and today was no exception, his father stood holding onto the metal bar that ran down the middle of the carriage as he held onto his father's legs.

He was not able to see anything other than the legs before him but he liked the motion of the bus, it excited him. When they came to a stop for the sixth time his father nudged him and he looked up to see him smile. "Come on son," he said, "our stop." He followed his father holding tightly onto his hand as they made their way through the people that were also standing in the carriage and got off the bus into a crowd that had departed from theirs and all the other compartments.

They stopped with the group and waited for the next bus. His father was smiling down at him again. He was so tall and his blue eyes shone with pride as he looked down at his young son. "Simon," he waited for his complete attention. "Make sure you stay close to me at all times, okay?" Simon nodded enthusiastically and squeezed his father's hand in his. His father gave a small laugh and then looked toward the south bus that was approaching

This bus was not as busy and Simon was able to sit on his father's knee and look at the people sat in front of him. They were a young couple; a pretty young woman sat nearest the window, the young man nearest the aisle. The man fidgeted a lot and the woman gently placed her hand on his shoulder and smiled at him. He calmed immediately but Simon was curious as to why he was nervous. They were approaching the next stop, so people arose staggering slightly as they made their way down the aisle.

The bus drew to a halt as usual and people got off but the bus didn't start again as it should have. Simon wondered if the bus was broken and in disappointment thought they would have to walk the rest of the way. He was just looking down at his shoes wondering if his toes would hurt whilst walking, when three soldiers came on board. They were dressed in grey camouflage wearing threatening expressions. Their rifles were slung over their shoulders, a hand gun resting upon their hips. He stared at the military as they slowly moved amongst the passengers and noticed the fear as everyone's eyes followed the uniformed men.

He'd forgotten the fidgety passenger until they got to him. The first soldier held his screen out to the other.

"This is him." The man had paled so white that Simon thought he would pass out. He had no chance to as two of the soldiers grabbed him and started to haul him down the aisle of the bus.

"No!" the woman beside him yelled, "You're mistaken. This man has done no wrong. Let him go!" The woman was shoved back in her seat by the third soldier, where she proceeded to rise up again.

"Sit!" growled the soldier who'd pointed out her man, pushing her roughly down again. "Or we'll take you too!"

“Then take me as well. Neither of us has done wrong. You can falsely accuse both of us because I will not be left behind.” She arose to her feet again and stumbling out from the seat pushed past the soldier, wobbling with fear, she struggled down the aisle.

Swiftly, the soldier followed, grabbing the woman before she could make it off the bus. Once he had hold of her he pulled her roughly down the two steps to the ground, she almost missed the last as she lurched forward toward the other soldiers and the apprehensive, waiting young man.

The bus still didn't move, he could sense agitated movement around him, people shaking their heads sadly but nothing was said, no one dared. It wasn't until an armoured vehicle passed them by that the bus started to roll onwards once more. Simon was still staring behind him out of the window to where the armoured vehicle had gone. His stomach was churning, he didn't feel well and he was afraid, he was afraid for the young woman and the man. He felt his father squeeze him tighter and he looked into his father's eyes to see fear in them too. “Simon, we're safe, there's no need to be afraid. I won't let anyone hurt you.” His father hugged him tightly and Simon was ashamed to feel a tear run down his cheek.

Oak awoke with a start to find that the sky was already approaching that moment between stars and the grey light of dawn. He gave a quick glance around him, noticed that Pine was awake too and saw that Elm was asleep and Blackthorn was looking around him intently. With dexterity he quickly leaped down the tree using the rope to slide down in jumps. Pine was doing the same, as was Blackthorn and Elm was starting down his tree too.

“You didn't want to trap the three Citans last night?” Pine asked when they all gathered together.

“No Pine. The risk was too great and it wasn't worth the risk to lose one of you or maybe all.”

Elm gave a grunt and they all looked at him. “Why would you think those giants could beat us? We're smarter and quicker, they wouldn't stand a chance.” He looked at them all with an air of superiority. They glanced briefly at one another and let the comment slide.

Oak continued “We'll follow the Citans at the same distance. I have a plan that I will set into play but we must be patient and wait for when the time is right.” They nodded at him and Elm gave a brief scowl. He'd talk to Elm later but not now. The Citans were already moving and they must keep up.

“Eat on the way,” Oak ordered. “We must leave now.” The sky was already grey, with the light seeping into the forest as they set off.

The day was long and hotter than the previous one. Blackthorn had left the group for a few hours to seek out the other members of their own group of ten and see if they had more news and make sure they were safe. He returned to say that both groups had seen the searching Citans that night but had remained unseen themselves. Oak was pleased they had done so well and told Blackthorn he'd done a fine job at finding his fellow defenders. Blackthorn beamed in delight at his praise and Elm gave a look of derision. Oak turned away from the scene disgusted at what Elm thought of Blackthorn's servile attitude. He understood that not only was he and Pine in danger from Elm but Blackthorn was in danger too.

They continued their pursuit of the Citans but Pine, Blackthorn and Elm no longer followed Oak. He split them off into sections about fifty metres apart from one another, in the hope that from four different angles they might be able to see more of what was going on and the number of Citans in the group. Oak hoped that the Citan leader would not be able to track all of them.

He had a feeling that the leader sensed his own presence more than the others. He was not sure why but when they were once again quite close to the Citans; the leader fell behind his group with his

armed rifle. Oak noticed it was his own position that he went toward and not any of the other's. As silently as possible Oak blended into the trees and the Citan leader returned to the group. However, the distraction was enough that Pine was able to get closer to the group whilst they were looking out for their leader.

Oak hung further back and awaited Pine to meet up with him and tell him what he'd seen. It wasn't long before Pine appeared grinning broadly; he looked quite pleased with himself and confident that he was in no danger.

"There are a total of twenty of them, they're all armed with knives at their waist or holstered on their calves. All are boys close to seven feet tall. They seem to be an unruly lot," he told Oak. "They quarrel amongst themselves when the leader is not there. Their fear becomes obvious and there is little trust between any of them. There is no doubt that they do not want to be here. Something forces them, I don't know what and it isn't all to do with their leader. Their leader is strong, acute and they respect him. They trust him and follow his directions immediately. He has strong senses, I only just escaped his detection when he returned, and he knew I'd been there. I would say that he is allowing us to follow him."

Oak raised an eyebrow at this observation. "What makes you say that Pine?"

"He scours the trees like he knows and his mouth curves at one corner in a slow smile. He isn't afraid of us. He doesn't believe that we'll attack. He almost beckons us to come out from the forest but it's only a feeling. Perhaps it's nothing but the uncertainty of what is going on here." He looked at Oak to see if he had anything to say but Oak said nothing.

Oak compressed his lips and continued to walk alongside Pine. The distance between them and the Citans was larger now. The Citans took huge strides and covered a lot of ground quickly.

"Pine my friend; I agree something is going through the Citan leader's mind. Maybe it has to do with us. You're correct in thinking that he knows we're following, of that I have no doubt. He is disturbed by something more though. Perhaps by the reason he's out here, a reason we need to find out."

Pine nodded toward Oak his step slowing a little. "What do we do Oak?"

"We'll have to change course. I don't like to be predicable. I don't want the Citan leader to think he knows our moves."

"I agree." Replied Pine as he nodded his head again.

Oak pulled his gaze away. "Let's find the others."

Before they were able to take their first stride to run, they heard the cry. Both of them stopped in horror. They knew whose voice it was, it was Blackthorn. The cry was one of surprise and extreme pain. Oak had a fleeting vision of Blackthorn on the ground writhing in agony and he felt his stomach clench. They sprinted as fast as they could toward the sound until Oak pulled Pine down to the ground. He signalled to him for silence and to stay where he was. He himself crawled along the ground until he had the Citans within his sight.

What he saw caused his stomach to tighten even more and he ground his teeth together as he clamped down his emotions. Before him at the back of the Citan group was the leader holding Blackthorn by his hair like he was nothing more than a doll. Blackthorn's head reached the massive boy's chest where he was firmly pulled. A knife rested upon his throat and even from a distance Oak could see Blackthorn's face was wrenched in pain and fear. Blackthorn held one leg off the ground and Oak could see a gaping bloody wound. He knew Blackthorn would soon pass out from shock.

Oak understood what the Citan leader had been up to. He'd planned a trap all along, probably set it last night. He'd made sure that he directed one of them to it. Oak didn't know how he'd done it

but he'd managed to get Blackthorn into the trap and Blackthorn was usually good at sensing danger. He'd been clever to be able to capture any of his defenders but Blackthorn, he was surprised at that.

The boy was dwindling fast, he had to do something and he knew Pine wouldn't be happy with his next move but Pine had instructions, he knew what to do. Rising slowly from the ground he raised his hands into the air, palms forward to show he had no weapons in them. He stood very still so the Citans could see he was giving himself up, meanwhile he took in the scene before him more clearly.

The Citan leader stood ahead of the others, holding Blackthorn easily, as if the boy weighed nothing. The Citan group stood behind him, some were grinning broadly, looking proudly upon their leader as if he were a god. Others looked troubled and uncomfortable, eyes darting to and fro; to see if more of them would rise out of the earth. They were dressed similar to their leader but they had their coats slung over their arms, not a good thing for a group who should be at the ready in case of danger.

Gazing at them he understood why they didn't care, the Citan leader didn't see him or his defenders as a danger. He knew where they were and he knew they posed no threat to any of them. He looked at their leader once more and saw that he was eyeing Oak cautiously from top to bottom, then he surveyed his left and right moving his eyes only.

The Citan leader's words came to him sharply and firmly.

“Drop everything you wear at your waist to the ground.”

Oak obeyed and unclasped the belt around his waist, dropping the sheathed sword and woven bag, then finally his rope. He stepped away from them still with his hands high in the air.

“Walk slowly toward me.” The leader's eyes were flickering from side to side in search of Oak's other defenders.

Oak comprehended the leader knew there were more than just the two of them. Moving slowly, although he wanted to run to Blackthorn's aid as quickly as possible because even now Blackthorn was slumping over, he walked toward the Citans.

Chapter 10

She'd waited a whole day and night and now she was going to leave and discover on her own just what was going on. The defenders were long gone and she'd have to catch them up. She wasn't sure how many hours it would take and she would have to be careful, because if any of the defenders spied her she would immediately be sent home and she didn't want that to happen. She was quite adept at tracking so she had no doubt she'd find their trails and make sure she kept away from them when she was too close. Making a mental note of everything she'd need and what direction she'd take as she stared out of the window she saw someone she'd rather not see heading toward her door.

As if Fern hadn't had enough unwanted visits with Elm having slunk his way in the day before, Willow now made an appearance in Fern's humble home. She wafted into the room like she was on a breeze, her hair flowing slightly behind her as she moved, her long dress gathered at the front by her fine fingers, showing beneath her small feet and slim ankles. Everything about Willow was delicate and it made Fern annoyed that her appearance showed girls to be the weaker sex.

Dropping the dress in front she looked around the room for a place to sit whilst Fern eyed her carefully, trying to mask the lack of welcome at the arrival of her guest.

"What can I do for you Willow?" she asked trying to keep her voice light, even though it had been growing heavy of late with the stresses of the day before.

She watched Willow decide to sit at the table, pick up her dress skirt once more and glide toward the chair of her choice. Once she had gracefully sat down she indicated to the chair opposite for Fern to join her.

Taking a breath for patience Fern obliged sitting with a hand resting on the table, her other hand dropped to her side and her legs stretched out relaxed before her. Willow's hands were resting upon her knees, her legs tucked off to one side under her chair and crossed femininely at her ankles. She leaned forward toward Fern her eyes taking in her appearance and Fern thought checking her aura.

There was little that she'd be able to hide from Willow, her eyes were already giving that soft sympathetic show of concern that she always gave Fern whenever she came to visit. Let her see my anger instead thought Fern as the feelings welled up inside of her and she saw Willow taken aback for a few seconds.

Taking her eyes away from Fern she looked toward the window as if looking for a distant source to help her speak. She brought her light blue eyes back to Fern but this time Fern saw Willow's emotion in them, not a reflection of what Fern was feeling. Willow's usually soft delicate features were tight, even her small up turned nose was twitching slightly and Fern realized that whatever Willow had to say was causing her difficulty and distress.

She leaned forward suddenly making Willow jump slightly and moved her face close questioning her again. "What can I do for you Willow?"

Her eyes widened a little and Fern could see fear in them which caused her to be confused. Why would Willow be afraid of her? She'd never struck her or threatened to strike her. Yes, she was angry and felt like beating her fist upon something but it wasn't Willow, it was Oak and Elm and her own frustrations.

She softened her eyes and did something she would never have done before, she took Willow's hand. Looking sincerely into her eyes she said, "Willow let me know what is wrong and I will try to help as best I can." She was surprised when Willow quickly looked away and gave a small gulp. Still she waited, calming her own thoughts; she'd deal with them at another time. Right now she needed to know what was bothering Willow so much that her normally serene face and body were anything but.

“Willow,” she leaned even closer, “trust me, I won’t hurt you and I can’t help you if you don’t tell me what troubles you.” She’d softened her voice to almost a caress and surprised herself at the empathy in her words.

With the tables turned Fern felt more confident and decided to push on. Whilst doing so she became another person, someone she’d never known before, a person that interested her.

Gently squeezing Willow's hand she went on, “Willow there have been many occasions that you have come to me seeing me in distress and tried in vain to help me. I’m sorry Willow for never being grateful.” She had to choose her words wisely because she had in fact been quite rude at times but this wasn’t an occasion for asking for forgiveness, it was a time for diplomacy, to wield from Willow the words she was unable to say.

“I’m distressed from yesterday's presence of the Citans. I have felt a lot of anger lately but not toward you, toward others that have treated me wrongly.”

To Fern's surprise Willow's head quickly came up and with a fervent voice she asked, “Is it because of Oak?”

Fern didn't want to touch the subject; she’d had enough of Oak in her head for one day and preferred something different to talk about.

“Yes it is but it’s of no consequence right now.”

With concern in her eyes she squeezed Willow's hand once more and looked into her saddened eyes.

“What is of consequence is what ails you.” She watched Willow pull in her bottom lip in thoughtfulness and Fern pressed on knowing that Willow's resistance was deteriorating. “Why are you so upset Willow?”

To Fern's discomfort tears surfaced into Willow's eyes, the droplets forming on her lower lash and then trailing down her pale, drawn, face. Even more shocking was Fern's reaction, she stood up and moved beside Willow where she crouched down placing her arms around her adversary, holding her while she silently wept. With patience that Fern didn’t know she had, she waited until Willow's last small sob sunk in a final shiver.

As Fern held onto Willow she felt Willow's hand touch her face and stay there. She felt uncomfortable with the gesture but didn’t want to offend Willow by pulling away.

“What I have to say,” She whispered, “will upset you too.”

This gave Fern an excuse and she pulled herself up and sat down in her own chair. She contemplated the words and knew what was coming before Willow said anything. The only upsetting thing in her life was Oak.

Sitting she stared at Willow with eyes that told her she was ready.

“I don’t want to cause you more sadness.” Fern raised an eyebrow as Willow went on, “I know he’s brought you enough already, I can see it.”

Fern sat still, remaining quiet, just waited. “I know you love him Fern.” Willow faltered here and when she continued her face was pained once more. “He loves you too.” As she spoke the last two words were barely audible.

Fern's heart began to thrum against her ribcage and her mind began to spin with images of Oak. Had he told Willow that he loved her, that he loved Fern? Told her that she was the only one for him, just as she’d always dreamt he would say to her? Her face was eager now and she saw the look of surprise upon Willow's face as she hastily added, “he won’t admit to it Fern. He won’t let himself believe it!”

Her own face became tight and drawn as she clamped her lips together after Willow's last expressive words.

“He hides his feelings from himself.” With this Willow dropped her head again, whilst Fern with a look of disappointment stared at the top of her head.

Fern waited once more for Willow to collect herself to continue, a foreboding was developing within her chest and she almost felt like running away but she didn't, she stayed strong, straight in her chair waiting for the blast she knew was coming.

Slowly, Willow raised her head and looked at her with pleading eyes. “He came to see me before he left with the defenders.” She took a quick breath, “I misunderstood his intentions, as his aura was of anger, love and passion. I misconstrued his feelings, I thought his anger was for the Citans and his love and passion were for me. Why else would he be there before he left but to say goodbye to the one he loved?”

Her eyes were large with the look of someone who'd stepped on something sharp as she saw Fern's body become rigid and heighten a little.

“He sat next to me with love in his eyes and I showed my love for him in my own.”

Fern jerked a little and Willow leaned back in distress. Taking a deep breath Fern waved for Willow to go on, unsure that she herself could speak. Willow faltered for a second and continued, “he saw what was there and he kissed me.”

The anger that shot through Fern would have melted iron, her breathing became shallow but still she sat quietly, her hands now fists as she fought for self control. Willow sped on knowing she had to finish what she'd started.

“At the end of the kiss I realized that his passion wasn't for me. The kiss was gentle and kind but it didn't show what blazed within him, too late I saw that it was for you, that it had never been for me!” Her voice had risen as she struggled to keep her sobs under control and her own distress at her mistake.

Fern's body relaxed a little and she even felt a sense of elation until Willow said, “He asked me to be his partner.”

At this Willow's head dropped and all Fern could do was stare in shock and horror at the silver blond head before her. But he loved her—Fern! Willow had just told her that, he loved her, yet he'd asked Willow to be with him when his passion was for her. Why would he ask Willow? She knew why. It was because Willow loves him, needs him, and dotes on him and most of all because she is obedient.

As Fern looked upon the nodding head of Willow who was sobbing once more, the answer came to Fern with the taste of bile in her mouth. He didn't see Fern as a fit partner for the leader of the Woodlanders but he saw Willow as one. The dawning of a knowledge that had been known all along was painful to bear and her shoulders slumped at the weight of it. Her only love, the person who truly loved her for herself, wouldn't accept her as a partner because of whom and what she was.

Now all the words that he'd said to her fit into place, including his cruel final cut off of their relationship at the end. Without seeing her rise Fern felt Willow beside her and the roles were reversed as Willow stood with her hands upon Fern's shoulders, gently stroking her hair to calm her. “I didn't say yes.”

The words hung over Fern for only a second before her head came up and she stared at Willow, looking at her face in relief.

“I told him that I could see his passion was for you Fern and that he needed to decide for whom his love was stronger.”

Fern stood up and turned to face Willow with hope in her eyes. Maybe he did love her most; maybe there was a chance that he'd let his love for her win. Her face clouded. No, she knew Oak, stubborn, controlled, hating to show his emotions, always quelling any that should chance to arise from beneath the rubble of stones that he'd pushed upon them. She saw Willow's look of surprise as Fern's expression changed. She quickly arose and moved away from Willow, walking to the middle of the room.

She was scouring the room, searching for the words that were firing through her mind, destroying her very chance of happiness with Oak.

Turning she looked at Willow, "Oak will never be my partner Willow." Her eyes felt tears pricking to escape. "He's ashamed of me and what I am; he'll never allow himself to take such a girl as his partner."

"No! No!" Willow sputtered stepping toward her but Fern had raised her hand into the air to halt her in mid stride.

"He loves everything about you Willow, the way you are, your gentleness, kindness, your acquiescence to his guidance, how the people love you. He sees you as the most perfect person to have at his side."

"But that's wrong," Willow expressed, "when his passion is for you."

"Passion like the embers of a fire fades into nothing but ashes in time, and our wise leader sees this. His intelligence tells him that he must go for lasting and pure. His love for you is pure, you bring everything good in him to the surface, and you give him strength to be the leader he wants to be. Whilst I..." she quelled a sob, "I bring out all that he deems to be the worst in him."

"No Fern! You love him, he loves you, and how can anything wrong come from that?" Willow's voice was filled with disbelief now and Fern turned away from her in order to gather herself to give her a reply.

"It isn't what you or I think that matters here. It's what Oak thinks and believes. I've known Oak intimately for many years as a friend and almost as a sibling. It's only the last few years that our relationship has changed and as adults our love for one another has become..." she struggled for words, "has become a passion between a girl and boy but it is from anger and dissimilarity, even hate." She dropped her head in defeat feeling like she'd wrenched her soul from her body as she listened to Willow's response.

"Hate and love can be the same thing. If love is unrequited it becomes hate but the love is still there. Your differences draw you to one another. Your strength against him fills him with desire for you. The hate is love, it is passion, it's there wanting to surface on both sides."

Fern was gaping at Willow wishing she could believe her words, wanting to continue loving and hating Oak. She couldn't. She knew it had to stop here; he'd made his choice there was no point trying to fight for him when he would not concede.

"Oak has strong ideals and beliefs. He'll never let them be shaken, he lives by them, they are his pillars they cannot be toppled and..." she earnestly watched Willow's face, "and if they were then he wouldn't be the Oak that we both so dearly love."

Willow's eyes changed a little at her words and then became full of sorrow. Sweeping toward Fern who wanted to run rather than be gathered in an embrace by her, she took Fern to her and hugged her tightly. "Your love is worthy Fern. Oak is making a terrible mistake."

Gently, Fern pushed Willow away to look at her face. "No Willow he makes no mistake. He is a leader. He makes his choices because of his people not for himself. He does what's right and Willow before you try to dissuade me from my resolve of letting him go, you must believe that his is the right

decision. On his return, if after pondering all that you've said he still asks you to join him as his partner, you must give the answer that you want to give without any thought of me."

"How can I do that?" she cried back, "when I see what lies between you!"

"There is nothing between us. Oak has severed any relationship that we once had."

"What do you mean Fern?" Willow asked searching Fern's face.

Fern kept her expression closed and firmly set, determined not to break into tears from her destroyed romantic illusion.

"Before he left me at the podium he said our friendship was dissolved, that...that he was going to detach himself from me and have someone else within the clan watch over me. He will have no more contact with me."

Willow's face showed her shock at what he'd said. "How cruel!" she cried, "why would he hurt you in such a way?"

Fern turned her head slightly as she made her reply in a low voice, "Because I told him I hated him."

"What?" Willow's usually soft, subtle words had turned to a higher piercing pitch.

"I was angry, frustrated with my lot here within the clan. I fit in nowhere Willow! I cannot bear it anymore!"

"You're loved by all of us," was Willow's response once more soft and soothing, "you're special to us."

It was the second time within days that she'd been called special and she quelled her annoyance at it.

"No, I'm foolhardy and annoying! Don't try to lessen my problems; I've felt them for a long time now. I'm no master of cooking, growing vegetables, sewing or even caring for children. My patience runs short and my energies are always drawn elsewhere. I don't know my place here but I have to find it because I love my people. I want to be of use to them."

"You are of use to us Fern. You look out for us all."

"But not through being elected, only through my own persistence and interference!"

"It hasn't been recognized what role you have within the clan Fern, but let me tell you it is an important one, a necessary one. You're needed please believe that."

Fern looked at Willow, questions still within her, but didn't say anything. Her face was stretched tight with stress. "I'll leave today to go in search of the Citans."

"Yes Fern, you will."

Fern's eyebrows rose in surprise, "How do you know?"

"No magic Fern, I know you and your ways. You love this clan, you want to protect us and sitting and waiting is not in your makeup."

Fern gave a small laugh at Willow's conclusion of her character; she was actually beginning to like Willow.

"Please tell no one. Promise me?"

"I promise."

Stepping toward her once more she grasped Fern's hand in her own and squeezed it gently. "Watch out Fern there are many dangers."

Upon tiptoe she kissed Fern's forehead, whilst Fern cringed internally.

"I wish you well and may everything good be with you and come to your aid when needed."

With a sweep of her skirt she turned and with silent steps walked through the open door.

The sun was embracing the camp as Fern watched Willow's retreating figure and her own body drooped as the fatigue of their discussion invaded her. Her limbs felt weak and she lunged to her bed as if aggrieved that she might fall down. Upon her bed face down she cried, her sobs unheard as they smothered themselves within the leaves that lay there.

As Oak walked toward the Citan leader, he wondered if he'd just given up his and Blackthorn's lives. It didn't matter; he couldn't let Blackthorn die without trying to save him. He had to talk the Citan into letting him tend to his wound. The closer he got the more pain he could see upon Blackthorn's ashen face.

The Citan had released Blackthorn's throat and sheathed his knife. He was holding him by his hair and neck as if threatening that at any time he would snap Blackthorn's neck sideways and back in a twist to break it. Oak recognized the threat and locked his eyes on the Citan leader's keeping his hands raised evenly until he finally stopped in front of him. The Citan towered over the two of them like a giant from the children's stories he'd read as a child before books had been banned completely. Jack and the Beanstalk had been one of his favourites, especially the idea that little Jack could beat something so large. He doubted that, right now, as he stood before this enormous boy.

"My name is Oak." He held the Citans gaze and then looked at his captured defender, "This is Blackthorn." He was going to say one of my defenders but changed his mind, defender was too threatening. "He's one of my people. We're the Woodlanders and we live here in this forest."

"I know that!" growled the leader, "Why have you been following us?"

"I'll explain everything to you but first please let me attend to Blackthorn before shock and blood loss makes it too late to save him?" He looked pleadingly into the Citan's eyes, he was showing weakness but he didn't care, saving his defender came first.

The Citan leader nodded his head and relieved Oak went to Blackthorn's side dropping to his haunches to see to his wound.

"Have you checked him for hidden weapons?" One of the Citans asked their leader, pushing his way through the group with an arrogant air as he eyed Oak.

"Detroit, he has nothing upon him, it would be obvious under his tight leather clothing," the huge Citan answered. Then turning his head slightly to the others continued, "Unless he carries a bag of poison at his crotch, which still wouldn't be a problem since I don't plan to have him cook for us!"

Laughter roared through the group at the crude joke and Detroit grumbled and moved away in his embarrassment. Oak sensed the discord between the two and recognized that Detroit had notched another strike against his leader.

Releasing Blackthorn from his grasp, his face solemn once more as he stared down at Oak, he ordered, "See to him!"

Blackthorn crumpled as Oak only just caught him in time before he dropped to the floor.

"I have you Blackthorn don't worry," he quickly checked the young defenders expression, "I'll stop the bleeding."

He gave a brief smile at Blackthorn in his arms who tried to return the smile but his lips barely curled and it came out more as a sneer.

Oak gently placed him on the ground and immediately began to pull away at the remains of his pants. The original cut was two inches above his ankle and sliced straight across his shin. The trap had then ripped down tearing down both sides of his leg leaving the skin hanging loosely; the bloody red

flesh looked like a lolling tongue. Luckily the tibia bone was not damaged. It looked as though whatever had cut into him had stopped him whilst running and continued to cut into him as he fell. He realized it would leave a deep scar but only if Blackthorn had a chance to heal, he hoped he would. He had no idea what the Citan leader was planning to do with both of them.

Quickly he removed the bottom of Blackthorn's pant leg; he split it into two makeshift bandages, pulling the flopping flesh back up he carefully placed one of the bandages over it, ripping the other into four more pieces he tied two together of each and then tied one over the top of the bandage and one below to hold it there. It was a poor bandaging job but it was all he had right now. Blackthorn could no longer see the wound which was what he cared about the most, going into shock could kill someone quicker than an infection.

“In my bag I have a substance that helps the blood to clot; I can stop the bleeding with it. Also there are leaves in this forest that I can use to help it heal.” He looked up at the Citan leader to see if he'd heard him. He was staring down at him with an unreadable expression. Oak waited with hope in his heart that this Citan boy was not as cruel and cold hearted as the rumours about the Citans had said them to be. The Citan leader's head jerked up.

“Flint!” he called and a darker skinned boy came forward, he looked Native and Oak stared at him in surprise since he'd never seen a Native American before (only in books). They'd been banished to the confines of their reservations many years ago. They were the only ones who blatantly continued their beliefs in faith, hope and trust. They'd been deemed “a danger to everyone”. The boy gave a small smile at Oak's stares and Oak brought himself out of his brief distraction.

“Go to where the Woodlander dropped his things and bring them back to me. I have your back.” With those words the Citan leader raised his rifle to his shoulder, again taking off the safety and eyed the sight. Watching Flint move carefully through the forest to Oak's possessions he continued to talk to Oak. “My name is Denver I'm in charge of this band. I'm sure you already know that we come from the city.”

“Yes,” Oak replied and heard Denver give a slight grunt as he continued to keep his eyes upon Flint.

Once Flint was at Oak's possessions he quickly and lithely for someone so large dropped to his haunches. He grasped everything in his hands and slowly raised himself upright still scanning every tree, bush and twig around him. Satisfied that he was safe he stepped backwards and continued until he'd returned to Denver. He handed everything to him whilst Denver put on the safety and transferred the rifle from his own hands to Flint's. Flint immediately took the safety off again and scanned the forest with the rifle just as Denver had.

Denver gave the sword and the rope to one of the boys and proceeded to search the bag. He pulled out the blanket and then thrust it back in, pulled out a handful of melini tablets looked at them with distaste and put them back. When he took out the lime he gave a slight smirk toward Oak as he quickly dropped it back into the bag. Finally he pulled out the small green bag of niaphron root powder.

“Is this what you want?” he asked waving the bag toward Oak watching his reaction.

“Yes!” Oak replied and quickly went to grab the bag. Denver closed his hand around it.

“Show me what is inside first.”

Obviously he didn't trust Oak. Perhaps he thought it was a trick and it was filled with a noxious smelling plant that Oak would throw into his face and make him unconscious. Oak opened the tied bag and showed him the yellow powdered contents. He looked at it and nodded satisfied that it was safe and indicated for him to go ahead with what he was going to do.

Oak dropped to his haunches beside Blackthorn, he'd been wafting in and out of consciousness whilst Flint had been retrieving Oak's things. Oak looked fondly upon the boy with the spiky brown hair and small almost flat nose, it was a cute face, not hardened like most of his defenders but he'd proved himself well enough.

"It will be okay my friend," he encouraged, "I'll save your life." To what end Oak didn't know but he hoped that these Citans were not barbaric and if they were going to kill them, he hoped they'd make it an instant death rather than torture them. He didn't want to save Blackthorn so that he could suffer further later.

Untying the makeshift bandage he kept some pressure upon the wound. Grasping the small open bag in his hand he readied it to pour, whilst his other hand carefully pulled up the bandage into folds with his fingers pulling the flesh back at the same time. The blood oozed but he managed to pour some of the powder onto the wound and released the skin letting the accordion bandage spring back. Placing pressure on the wound with his hand once more he tied the bandage down. Blackthorn convulsed at the pain but then stopped as he became unconscious again.

The results were immediate. The properties of the niaphron root were amazing, it didn't take much. Blood was no longer oozing from beneath the bandage and Oak nodded in satisfaction. He tied the bag of powder as he arose to get Denver's attention.

"Can I find the leaves I told you about? They'll prevent infection and help the wound to heal."

Denver was once more holding the rifle and Flint had Oak's possessions in his hand. Oak stepped forward to place the bag of powder back into his bag but Flint took a step back.

"I only want to put it back into the bag." Oak placed his hands wide in an open gesture of good faith. Flint stepped forward and took the small bag from him shoving it roughly into the woven bag. Oak turned back to the leader to see if he would consent to his request. The other boys were shuffling in discomfort.

Denver's eyes looked to be grilling his own for a moment until he looked away toward Flint.

"Give the Woodlander's things to Detroit and go with the Woodlander to search for the leaves. Bring back as many as you can, we'll keep some for ourselves."

Denver watched Flint give Oak's things to Detroit and spun around to focus on Oak again. "Now Woodlander, tell me why you're following us?"

Oak looked down at Blackthorn for a moment satisfied that he was stable and turned his attention to Denver.

"We live in the forest and were patrolling our borders when we came across your group. We decided to follow to make sure you weren't a danger to the rest of us." He saw a light of humour flash in Denver's eyes and knew that he didn't believe him.

Turning to Flint he said. "Go with him and be on your guard."

Flint gave a nod at the instructions and pushed Oak forward. "Lead the way Woodlander."

His voice was different to the Denver's; it was deeper, with a different accent to it. Oak went over his words and opened his mind to him. He knew this was a good man, honest and true, faithful to his friends. He would be a good ally to have.

Chapter 11

Flint immediately obeyed but his stomach rolled. He didn't know enough of these Woodlanders and their ways. Oak made him uncomfortable: he was too calm, too in control of himself to be trusted. Who knew what plans were going on in his head and how many others were out there waiting. What were they waiting for? Tonight, when they were sleeping, would they attack then? They knew there were a number of them in the forest, perhaps even more than ten. Although, some travelled a much greater distance away than the others, they still followed them.

The trap Denver had set had worked well and he marvelled at the skills of their leader. He'd follow no other. Should anything happen to Denver he would leave and live out his life alone in the wilderness. It was only due to Denver that he stayed with the Citans, only because of him that he was on this journey. He was not as tall as most of them, being only six foot five but he could beat all of them except Denver, no Citan could beat Denver.

The Woodlander was leading Flint into the bushes and watchfully he followed. He knew that at any sight or sound Denver's rifle would take out whatever was there. Denver wouldn't risk losing his closest friend. They had been together for six years.

Denver had given him a new life. He'd rescued him from a deep ravine he'd fallen into. That was after the death that had taken all of his people. He didn't know why he hadn't died at the time but found later it had to do with his first three years living with his mother in the city. She hadn't been a Native American but she'd loved one, although it was forbidden.

His mother met his father outside of the city. She would have been taken away to a camp if she'd been found. So why she did it he wasn't sure but he guessed she had the same adventurous spirit as his father. The two of them met in the forest and fell in love even though he was from the reservation. If he'd been found it would have been immediate death, luckily they were never caught. They met many times, enjoyed each other's company and longed to be together forever, but they couldn't. When she told him she was expecting his child he'd made the decision that they would never meet again. They both agreed to it so as not to risk the life of their child.

She managed to keep the fact that he was half Native secret until he was three. That was when someone close told her secret and he was taken from her and sent to the reservation. He knew now that she would have been sent to a camp where she may have died but no one knew for sure

He cried at the loss of his mother, her warmth and affection, her soothing words and gentle songs that had lulled him to sleep. He was not at the reservation long before his father found him and in his joy cried at the gift of his child called Heath. Word spread fast through the reservation. No blame was placed on anyone for any wrong doing. A child was a blessing even if it was from outside of their home.

His father loved and cared for him, devoted himself to his up-bringing and learning. He taught him of the old ways and the new ways, giving him a choice of either and even the joining of the two. Heath liked that his options were always open. He could question and disagree. He knew from Denver that that was not the case in his own childhood. Heath lived happily on the reservation with his father, sharing ideas, learning, always learning so many things. He lived with him until that day, the day when they all died. That was when he soon after became Flint.

He'd just turned twelve when his world died. It was a lovely fall morning, the sun was shining her smile upon the orange, yellow and red of the changing leaves. He sneaked out of the reservation. The soldiers knew he did this but they didn't care, what harm was a young boy. He travelled through the

rough ground, kicking up some of the already fallen leaves, pretending he was an important warrior, waving a long stick as he ran.

Although, he knew they would never have carried swords but knives, it didn't have the same effect for the game brandishing a small stick above his head. He needed to hear the whoosh as it passed through the air. A large stick as a sword did this very well. He'd gone to his cave. No one knew of the cave or if they did they didn't go there because as everyone knew, grizzly bears lived in the area, and the caves often housed the huge hairy Hun like animals. He wasn't afraid though.

"Try and attack me grizzly bear I have my sword."

Thinking back on everything he wondered now how he never ended up as dinner and was surprised that a bear never had made its home in the cave.

He went into the empty cave, going deep inside where it was dark and made his heart thump hard against his chest, because it was so black, too dark to see anything and so quiet. His heart pounded so much that when he put his hand there he could feel it. He liked that, to feel his heart beating, it was like an old war drum. Boom boom, boom boom, boom boom.

He'd heard the beat when the elders gathered and gave all the young people a display of the old ways. He found it exciting, the colours, the textures of feathers and leather, the sounds—chanting, the beating drum and the dances that went with it. That was his favourite.

He chanted now and danced to the beat of his own heart. "Ahhhh naaaa naaaa naaaa. Ahhhhh naaaaa naaaaa naaaaa," he made up his chant as his feet stomped around on the hard cave floor.

By the time he heard the roar, the cave was already vibrating and he fell down curling into a ball whilst covering his head as dust and stones fell upon him. He began choking and coughing terrified that he was going to die. He was disappointed that it wasn't even going to be by a grizzly bear. When the vibrations finally stopped and there was silence he felt that a long period of time had passed when in fact it hadn't. He scrambled to his feet shaking off the rocks, covering his mouth and nose to avoid breathing in the dust. Tripping over the fallen rocks he headed to where he knew the entrance was, even though he couldn't see it for all the dust.

Outside he couldn't believe what he saw. Trees flattened completely; the whole forest was down. Huge boulders obscured his view, who knew where they'd come from. All he could see was destruction, a land of nothing. He ran as fast as he could to get to the reservation but there was no reservation. Everything had been picked up in a giant hand and flung across the land like seeds of death. He could see bodies scattered for kilometres around him.

Knowing they were all dead he still ran to them. Horrified, he looked down at the glazed gazes and blood covered faces. It was nearly nightfall by the time he found his father. His body was nothing more than mangled bones, misshapen and frightening. He hugged him anyway, no matter how terrible he looked he was still his father and he loved him.

He rocked back and forth, his slight body cuddling the large one that grotesquely lay in his small arms. Rocking he sang to his father with tears overflowing his cheeks, singing, just as his father had done when Heath was afraid, to settle himself, because he was afraid again and he needed his father now.

He'd slept on and off that night with his arms wrapped around his dead father's body. He cried and cried until he slept again, his sobs echoing along the open expanse of land but there was no one there to hear him. He awoke cold, his body hurting everywhere with his father stiff in his arms. Carefully, he pulled himself up from the body and looked around for a place to dig.

With a sharp flat rock he began to dig into the ground. It took him hours but he finally had a hole big enough for his father and dragged his father's body to it. He pulled him over ripped up foliage to get there and the broken limbs moved at odd angles as the body slid along the ground.

Lovingly, he placed him into the grave. He kissed his face and blessed him in the Native way, then covered him with the earth. He dug up more soil to cover the body completely so there was an unmistakable mound. He continued until the lump was huge and he was finally satisfied with the grave. When he was done he took a deep breath, content to let his father go, and with one last blessing he left. Trekking to where he didn't know. He just knew he had to find water for his increasing thirst and the river was not too far from him.

He found the river and drank from its depths. The water tasted bitter and nasty in his mouth but his dehydrating body needed the fluid. Whilst he walked he passed dead animals but noticed that insects were still scrambling through the ground. He even went by an ant hill where the ants were busy collecting the fallen leaves and carrying them to their hill as if nothing had happened. In their world nothing had happened, he wished he was one of them.

"Yuk!" he uttered at the thought, no, he didn't want to be an ant.

He had no idea where he was wandering to but he continued following the river which was his only source of sustenance. That and a few berries he found which were not completely crushed. Like a wandering nomad he travelled on. His young mind trying to process what had happened, his heart trying not to burst with the pain and sorrow he felt.

By the third day he was waning and starting to stagger. He'd had two nights of being cold and his body was feeling the hurt from his stiff muscles. He hadn't been able to find any berries today and wondered about eating some of the fallen vegetation. If he had a knife he could cut into the bark of one of the plants and chew some of the goodness out of it. He even tried to strip one branch with his teeth but the taste was so awful it made him gag and he gave up. It was starting to darken when he fell, he didn't see that he was walking into a ravine, he was too tired, too hungry. Only his screams reverberated through the fading light.

He slid and bounced down over outcropping rocks. Free falling at several drops, feeling earth fly up when he hit solid form again, only to continue rolling with gathering speed. He felt the heat of searing pain rip through him as his leg was torn on the sharp edges. Instinct told him to reach out and grab something no matter how much agony it caused him. He did and luckily caught hold of a rock. Claspng onto it with both hands and sheer determination, he pulled himself up and perched upon it.

Once he was settled and aware of his senses he let out a cry of pain as he grabbed his left leg. It was bleeding, the warm blood flowing over his fingers. He felt dizzy, things were starting to spin, so he leaned his head back against the earth behind him and took deep breaths. He wasn't sure how long he was there before he heard the voice, a human voice, a ghost? No, this voice sounded alive, it was agitated, it was a boy and he was shouting down to him.

"Are you alright?" the voice called. Looking up he couldn't see anything and it made him light headed tilting his head back, so he just concentrated on answering the question.

"I'm bleeding from my leg," he replied, his hand still grasping the very spot he'd mentioned.

"I have a rope," said the voice. "I'll drop it down to you. Tie it tightly around yourself and I'll try to pull you up."

"Yes!" Heath replied and repeated the words he'd just heard in his head. "Try to pull you up." That didn't make him feel good.

The rope fell down but away from him and he reached for it falling forward too much, causing him to almost lose his balance, he quickly scrambled back again. The rope started to swing and on its second swing to the left he caught it.

"I have the rope," he yelled, "I'm tying it around myself now."

He was very proud of his rope tying skills, it was something he was very good at, good sturdy knots. Carefully he tied it around his chest underneath his arms double checking that the knots would hold,

"I'm ready!" he yelled and waited for what was to happen next.

The rope tugged tight and he took a deep breath. He felt himself slowly moving and started to panic. As he moved his legs jerked and the throbbing from his wounded leg intensified, temporarily distracting him from the upward movement. Both hands tried to go down toward it. Another jerk and his fingers were desperately grabbing at rocks and foliage as he continued to slowly inch up higher. Panicked by the feeling of hanging mid-air, all his limbs struggled to hold onto the earth and rocks, allowing him to forget his wound for a while.

He bounced roughly against the ravine wall yelling "Ouch!" every now and then.

At his yells there would be a pause in the pulling and then it would start again. This frustrated him all the more as he wanted it over with. It was a laboriously long time before he got anywhere near the top of the ravine. By which time he'd given in to the fact that he was at some points hanging in the air. There was nothing he could do other than hope he wouldn't fall.

When he reached the ridge he grabbed with both hands onto the crumbling earth, hauling himself onto the surface ignoring the pain that was screaming from his bleeding leg. Once he was sure he was safe he stopped crawling and lay panting. Both hands went down to his wound and he carefully pulled his leg toward his stomach to protect it. He heard footsteps rapidly coming toward him and looked up into the face of a dark haired boy who looked the same age as himself. He was taller than he was, he could tell that even in the diminishing light.

"Let me look at your leg," he demanded and Heath felt irked by his pushiness and almost said no. But he was too late as the boy pulled his hands away and examined the wound as if he were a doctor. He laughed at that thought, a twelve year old doctor.

The boy ignored his laugh, so he looked incredulously at him instead. He was athletically built, broader than himself.

The boy was rolling up his pant leg and getting a better look at the wound. He was touching parts of his leg which caused him to yell. He gave the boy a hard, angry stare, not that the boy seemed to care, he shrugged the look off and continued with his prodding.

"What are you doing?" Heath asked as he grimaced with pain.

"I'm making sure the bone isn't broken," the boy replied.

"It isn't, so quit poking it!" Heath retorted, irritated and pulling his leg out of the boys reach.

"The wound has stopped bleeding which is good. We can clean it up if you can walk on it." He pointed into the growing darkness. "There's a spot quite a bit further down where we can get to the water and set up camp for the night."

"Set up camp for the night. What are you a Boy Scout leader or something?" Heath pursed his lips as he rose aided by the boy and gingerly put weight upon his wounded leg.

"You know very well Boy Scouts were disbanded years ago!" the boy replied. "I'm a survivalist, my dad taught me."

Puffing out his chest the dark wavy haired boy looked at him with pride, his blue eyes sparkling in the fading light.

“Come on, we don't have much time it's going to be dark soon. My name is Denver by the way, it used to be Richard but we've all changed our names since the Devastation.”

He was pulling Heath along now as he talked. “We believe that all the cities were destroyed since no-one has come to save us, so everyone must be suffering the same. Well, that's what Washington thinks, so we decided we should all name ourselves after cities to remember them. It's a good idea don't you think? It was Washington's idea; he used to be called George, appropriate eh? He's twelve, the leader of us all. I'm twelve too by the way, how old are you?”

“I'm twelve and my name is Heath,” he replied as he limped along beside him.

“Oh you can't be called Heath anymore,” Denver continued, he gave him a quick glance over. “You'll find a lot of us are twelve, there are some younger kids too, but not that many really young kids, a lot of them died in the buildings, we managed to pull some out but most of them died under the rubble. You're from the reservation aren't you?”

Heath nodded back and looked down at the ground as he stumbled along, limping and feeling sorry for himself and his loss of everyone from the reservation.

“They're all dead aren't they?” Denver questioned stopping. Heath still looked at the ground and nodded his head, his lip was starting to quiver and he didn't want Denver to see.

“I lost all of my family too. All the adults and some of the kids are dead in the city too, the oldest of any of us is twelve. Those that survived the blast and falling buildings died quickly once they stepped into the air from the Devastation. You're not alone, there are more of us survivors and you can come and live with us, we're always happy to welcome new kids.”

He patted Heath on his shoulder and Heath looked up, this was the first hopeful moment he'd had since he'd played in the cave.

“Let's get to the river.” Denver was pulling him along forgetting momentarily that Heath had difficulty walking until he stumbled and Denver slowed his pace.

“I know what would be a great name for you,” he cried excited by his revelation, “Flint! My Aunt and Uncle lived there, it's a cool name don't you think? What do you think; do you want to be Flint from now on?”

“Not really, my mother named me Heath, I like the name.” Again, he looked up briefly at Denver; he'd been walking with his eyes on the ground and he dropped his head tiredly in resignation once more to his grief. Denver stopped so Heath did too.

“Yeah, it is a pretty good name I agree but Washington won't let you keep it. If you want to be one of us you'll have to change your name. We're like a new tribe, clan or whatever you want to call us. We take care of each other. We talk together, exchange ideas, and discuss our feelings. It's different from how it used to be. No more restrictions and we can keep whatever we want to.”

“We used to do all of those my things at the reservation,” responded Heath. “That isn't different for me except that none of friends or family has survived.”

“I'm sorry Flint.” Denver shuffled his feet a bit and started walking. Heath followed appreciative of Denver's attempts at compassion. He wished that he could unload the feeling of despair that rested upon him but he knew his grief would stay for a long time and although Denver hid his own feelings well, he too would suffer the grief for a long time yet.

“It's up to you what you want to do. You don't have to stay. I go out often looking to see if I can find other's like us, other survivors, I don't mind being out alone and I don't mind the dark. It isn't as if there's anything to fear anyway, all the animals died too, or at least I assume they did, but then you survived so maybe I could be wrong. How did you survive by the way?”

Heath was struggling to keep up since Denver had picked a much faster pace and was in a hurry to get to the spot he'd picked out in his mind. "I was inside a cave at the time of the blast."

"How come the air from the Devastation didn't kill you though? The only reason we survived, well, this is what Washington tells us, is because we had the SM2 shots as babies."

Heath pondered on this. "I lived for three years in the city with my mother."

"That explains it then, you got the shots too. Only those that had the shots have survived." He was looking ahead at a spot he could see in the dark that Heath couldn't.

"Here we are! Yes, just over here. That's it, you sit down there and I'll soak a towel that I have in the water."

Heath sat down slowly, squashing his lips together against the rush of pain, once sat he looked to where Denver had disappeared toward the banks of the river. Denver was occluded by the dark and it made Heath shiver to be alone again, he liked having the company, even if Denver talked too much.

When Denver returned he had with him a small towel soaked in water and applied it to Heath's leg. The cold felt good and Heath leaned his head back to relax and closed his eyes.

"I bring the towel with me to wash and cool myself off when I get too warm during the day. I don't need to bring much with me since I don't usually go too far from the city. I usually just fluff up the dead leaves to make a bed at night and that keeps me warm enough. I don't leave the city for any longer than one night though, that way the rest know if I'm in trouble, because if I'm not back by noon the next day they'll come out looking for me. I'm glad to say they haven't had to do that."

He was staring at Heath looking self-satisfied and smiled. "I've found someone to take back to Washington, he'll be pleased. Our group is growing larger and everyone has been given jobs to do."

He continued talking to Heath even though Heath's eyelids kept closing as he tried to stay awake to listen.

"It's been terrible getting over what has happened and trying to bury the bodies became too hard. Eventually we had to pile them up and burn them, that made me feel sick and want to cry but Washington was so tough, so hard, he wouldn't allow crying. Crying didn't help you to survive he said and we're all to be survivors." He drew in a breath and continued.

"Washington was impressed when I told him I knew survival skills. My dad taught me but they didn't help him any when the Devastation came."

Heath was leaning against a tree with his eyes closed listening to Denver and feeling more and more sleepy. He heard rustling and then felt Denver gently push him down, throwing clumps of leaves over him. He rolled onto his side as Denver threw more leaves upon him. He was fading away from the sound. The last noise he heard was more rustling and then there was only silence as his mind wandered far away, away from the pain and distress.

In the distance he heard a small voice saying, "Goodnight Flint."

The Woodlander leader was taking Flint deeper into the forest and he wasn't feeling comfortable about it at all. "Why do we go so far?" he asked his voice low and grating with distrust.

"The healer plants grow only where the vegetation is most intense, where the least amount of sun can get through. They like the moist and darker areas of the forest."

They were definitely in an area where it was darker and Flint knew this was a good spot for an ambush; he looked around cautiously, wondering if he should stop the search and turn back. He was out of Denver's sight now; he was in a dangerous position and an easy target to become a hostage. He fingered the knife at his hip and noticed the Woodlander looking at him.

“You needn't worry, you won't be ambushed. My group watch but they have no thoughts of attack.”

“And just how do you know this?” Flint scoffed.

“I know they will not attack.” responded the Woodlander.

“You can know no such thing!” Flint returned. “Unless you're their leader and they fear for your life?”

“I know they will not attack,” the Woodlander continued, “because I have the sight and I know when danger is at hand. I can sense emotions and their intent.”

Flint stopped momentarily and then quickly began to walk again.

He'd just told him that he had the gift of sight, why would he give away such a secret? Perhaps he was telling him this so he would have more respect for him. He most certainly did respect anyone with the gift of sight. There had been only one member of the reservation that had the gift, an elderly man; he was much revered by the rest of the reservation. He could sense the good and bad in others and could foresee the future.

Flint saw many men and women go to visit with the gifted one. He was told they went because of worries they had, or to find out if their partners really loved them, but mainly it was to find out if their future would be good or bad. Some of them would leave happy, others would leave sad. The Chief often sat with the gifted one himself, he would be with him for hours and when finally, they came out together their faces showed little expression. He'd hated that because he had wanted to know what they talked about, whether it was something to be joyous about or something to be sombre over.

The gifted one had known what was coming, he knew of the Devastation, knew they would all die and had known there was nothing that could be done. He hadn't understood what they talked of until later, after, when they were all dead. He understood then, why the men and women had held onto each other so tightly, hugged their children as if it were their last time. Knew why his father had held him close and told him how proud he was of him. Told him that he had been happy to have had the chance to watch him grow over the years and that he loved him. He'd hugged him that very morning before he left the Reservation. He'd held him as if it was to be their last time together and it was. They'd all died, even the gifted one.

The only other person he knew with the gift was Denver, he was strong with it but not for seeing into the future, just for knowing what was going on, what people felt, it was enough to give him control over them all. He doubted that this Woodlander could see the future but he was certainly comfortable with what was going on around him as if he could sense whether there was danger or not.

He managed to stay calm when others would have shown some emotion and Flint found that unnerving. He was unsure of this Woodlander, unsure of how safe he was being with him; he wondered what plans were going through his controlled mind. Perhaps he did have a similar gift to Denver, a gift of knowing when others were nearby and whether they meant good or evil. With this new information of the Woodlander Flint knew he would be much more wary of him.

Flint pondered what the Woodlander had said and he wondered again why the Woodlander would tell him. Keeping it secret would be more advantageous to him. Telling meant that Flint would guard his own mind, close off his feelings to protect himself. So why would the Woodlander willingly give out this information if it would not benefit him? Unless this was just a ploy to make him nervous, unsure, lose his confidence and fill his mind with doubt that would make Flint easier to take advantage of. This made more sense to him.

The Woodlander stopped and knelt down searching amongst the plants, and then he let out a gentle, “Ah!” and triumphantly arose with a handful of small leaves.

“Those tiny things will stop infection and heal?” Flint asked, wondering if this was all just a set-up and he would suddenly be set upon by other Woodlanders.

“Yes, these are healer plants.” He looked fixedly at Flint. “Don’t be nervous. No one is going to jump out of the bushes and take you hostage.”

Flint gave him a quick look of surprise and then shook his head. It didn't take a psychic to realize he was edgy and why, that didn't mean this Woodlander had the gift.

“You’re safe,” the Woodlander leader continued. “You needn’t be afraid. No one is going to harm you. We’re not violent. We believe in peace. That’s why we live simply to enjoy life and give back to our world only the good things.”

Flint let the words go through his head. Words his own people had lived by on the Reservation. To give prayers of thanks for food Mother Earth had provided and thanks to the soul that left the body of the deer they had killed. They took only what they needed. It was a good way of life, it had been a happy time, he’d believed in the ways of the Reservation.

There were things about the city that he disliked; he stayed true to the rules because of Denver. He stayed because of his friend and the fact that there was nowhere else for him to go, no-one for him to be with. He’d often hoped he would find someone in the city that he admired but none really interested him spiritually. Although, physically they interested him, he wasn’t prepared to share his life with them.

He thought most of them to be selfish and wilful. Then, there was Boston who tried to rule all of them. He disliked her aggressive ways to get things done. He believed a girl should be gentle, kind and want to please. Boston pleased no one, not even Denver, even though he knew Denver was the only boy Boston wanted to please.

No, his world had ended with the death of his people. He was a Citan; he would be faithful to Denver as his leader and believe in none but him. He owed Denver his life. His goal was to die helping his friend; he felt it would be a good death. He would die honourably and his people would be proud to let him join them when he took the boat to the other world, to travel from the land of life to the land of death. Then he would enjoy his people again.

“You’re not alone Flint,” the Woodlander was looking at him. “You’ll always be welcomed by others that have lived the way you did on the Reservation. The ways of your people are not gone forever, others still enjoy them.”

Flint glanced at him with hard eyes. He didn’t like how this Woodlander was trying to manipulate him, change his allegiance from Denver. It was obvious the Woodlander knew of the Reservation and their ways. Now he was using his loss of it against him, to work on his emotions and confuse him. He wouldn’t fall for that.

The Woodlander leader stared at him for a short while longer, gave his head a small shake and then asked. “Do you have pockets?”

Flint showed him that he had. Gathering up more leaves the Woodlander handed them to him and Flint pushed them deep into them all the while eyeing him distrustfully. The Woodlander leader continued to take more which he kept.

He looked at Flint with kind eyes that were tinged with sadness. Too kind, Flint thought, he’d easily be destroyed. There was a change in the look from the Woodlander and Flint wondered if he had understood his last thought and hadn't liked it. He stared at him feeling somewhat nervous at the idea that perhaps he did have the gift.

It was a moment later that Flint mentally shook his head and thought he was ridiculous to have even worried about such a thing. No-one could understand someone to that extent no matter how gifted they were.

The Woodlander turned away abruptly. “We can leave now, let’s go,” he strode off and left him standing with pockets full of leaves somewhat stunned. He was already quite a way ahead before Flint could get himself together and discern that his captive was no longer under his control. Flint followed him quickly biting his tongue, he didn’t like being told what he was to do by his prisoner, nor did he like being left behind by him.

Chapter 12

Oak had seen Pine watching them and he'd carefully, without Flint's knowledge, indicated that he lay low. Pine had quickly followed his instructions. His defenders were well disciplined and he was glad of it; fewer mistakes were made when immediate action followed instructions. Flint was anxious and would kill immediately upon being attacked. Oak didn't want to lose one of his defenders, and right now his own situation was safe and it may well give him the knowledge that he sought.

Denver wasn't the vicious brute he made himself out to be. Oak was certain it was show for the sake of keeping the group's respect but that was all. He hoped he was right, he tended to want to see the good in everyone, and it was perhaps one of his failings as a leader. Flint thought him weak. Would that be his downfall wanting to trust? His thoughts went to Elm; he was a constant danger to everyone. Pine warned him many times yet Oak let Elm stay with the clan.

"Do you keep the danger and watch it or do you send it away so it can multiply and bring back more danger?" he said to Pine and Pine hadn't been able to answer him. Pine never spoke of it again. Those were his choices, the other choices were unacceptable to him; to lock Elm up or kill him. He had to protect his people but he also had to abide by his ethics.

His concern was that his Woodlander defenders wouldn't want to kill but these Citans, the very ones he was now to travel with, would kill without a second thought. He could sense it; he knew that at least two or three of them had killed before. One in particular had killed without regret and he knew he would have to watch him the most carefully, for he was the one in charge after Flint, the one called Detroit.

Oak strode faster through the forest to get back to Blackthorn, he was impressed that the large Citan behind him had no problems keeping up and negotiated the forest almost as well as he did. He could sense Pine and Elm moving along either side of them and he dropped both hands palms facing the ground to indicate they were to stop where they were. They did but only just in time because Denver was now within view and his rifle was pointed right at the spot where Elm was hiding.

If Denver shot Elm he would take away one of Oak's biggest concerns. His mouth filled with a bitter taste and he knew it was from his unethical thoughts. He was a leader of high morals and even if it cost him his life he would stick by them. The first Woodlander, the male that had built the Woodlander camp, had taught them not to follow the wrong path. He'd made them change their names for their new start. They were a new race, a race that would follow what was right. Oak would make sure that he continued what Sequoia had taught them.

He never understood why their leader had left. Sequoia had talked with Willow and made Spruce leader. With a tearful farewell he'd hugged as many of them as he could and walked away. He'd explained that he needed to see what had happened to the rest of the world he loved so much.

To Oak it had been a devastating blow, for Sequoia was his mentor, he was everything Oak wanted to be and even now he hoped that he was successfully following the path that Sequoia had started them on. He missed his friend greatly, Sequoia was the only one he'd ever talked to about his life, what he'd seen and how it had affected him, Sequoia had been a balm to his emotional wounds.

He was almost running now, he didn't know if he hurried because he was worried about Blackthorn or to get away from his own thoughts.

When he approached Blackthorn, he noticed that he'd recovered consciousness, a good sign that he would be alright and Oak smiled down at the young defender in relief. Quickly he went down on his haunches and carefully undid the makeshift bandage and gave an unconscious contented nod as he looked at the already closing wound. Carefully he placed a few of the healer leaves upon the atrocious

tear and proceeded to retie the blood encrusted bandage. He didn't like the filthy bandage but with the healer leaves upon the wound they would prevent the risk of infection and it would suffice.

He smiled at Blackthorn and patted him upon his shoulder; he could see that his spirits had risen a little. "You'll be fine Blackthorn."

To his surprise Blackthorn was suddenly wrenched up to his feet by Denver.

"Then get up and let's get moving." Denver growled through clenched teeth. "We have two hostages, now they'll come in very useful." Turning to his band he gave his head a jerk to everyone as an indication that they should get moving.

Blackthorn staggered a little but he was still held up by Denver so he didn't fall. He gingerly put some weight onto his wounded leg and winced. Oak was soon at his side where he wove his shoulder and arm under Blackthorn's arm and bore his weight to help him. Denver let go of his hold and strode alongside As Blackthorn walked slowly with Oak his face contorted with the pain he was experiencing. Oak heard Denver's powerful voice say, "Keep up with us. We won't be delayed by you. Cause any trouble and your lives will be over. You're nothing to us, so if you want to stay alive do everything you're told without question. There'll be no second chances."

Oak heard a laugh from Detroit at these words and he perceived that Detroit would enjoy being the one to perform the task of disposing of them.

Looking down at Blackthorn struggling by his side he asked, "How do you feel? Are you still dizzy?" Blackthorn's face was still pale as he winced with every stride.

"No," Blackthorn replied. "That has passed but the pain is difficult to cope with."

Oak nodded and responded, "The healing leaves help somewhat with pain but it won't go away whilst we travel. Can you cope with it?"

Blackthorn smiled weakly, "I guess I'll have to Oak!"

Oak nodded again and thought through ideas on how he could help Blackthorn walk with less pain.

He looked over at Denver who still walked beside them his eyes straight ahead; he was deep in thought too. Looking back at Blackthorn he carefully took more of his body weight. "Lean most of your weight on me."

"Thank you Oak! I may need to do that." He made a grim expression again as he hopped along, every now and then cautiously placing his foot on the floor at intervals only to pull it quickly back up with a painful wince. Blackthorn became quiet and Oak could tell the boy was trying to cope as best he could with the discomfort and exhaustion his body was feeling. He hoped Blackthorn would make it through the long walk ahead without collapsing and Oak unconsciously shouldered even more of Blackthorn's weight.

Oak's curiosity was peaked with so many questions he wanted to ask Denver but he knew that he had to wait for the right time and place. Even so he had an opportunity now to study the Citans in the group and assess them; this would make it easier for his defenders, if it should come to a fight, to take down the weaker ones first.

Pine had been correct, there were twenty of them including their leader, his own group of fifty he felt would be able to overcome them but there would be costs. A lot of them had a brutality about them; they would fight viciously in order to win. He sensed that some of them had morals and he was relieved that one of them was Denver. Flint too had strong morals, he still believed in his origins and Oak sensed he disliked some of the company. He had a strong allegiance to Denver and Oak knew that was why he was there.

Oak focused on each of Denver's band gauging them by their emotions, putting them into categories of ethical, cruel, weak minded, strong minded, and evil. Only two came under evil, Detroit and another, another that he knew was not a Citan. This boy puzzled him, he came from somewhere else, of that he had no doubt, he was not from this area and he could sense his home was much further away.

He could also sense that this boy had a strong evil purpose that he was leading this whole band to; a trap that would mean death for some of them. This knowledge surprised him the most for he knew that Denver could read the boy just as well as he could and yet they were here travelling with him. Journeying with this boy to their death? Where was he leading them? What had he told Denver and how had he managed to persuade Denver to go with him?

None of the others travelled near him or communicated with him. Oak didn't know his name and he noticed that Denver kept away from him as much as possible even though the boy would give him surreptitious glances to try and get his attention. His hair was black and he wore black clothing over his skinny body. He hunched a little when he walked and often looked tired, as if he weren't used to physical exercise. He never looked back at Oak but Oak knew he was thinking about him and gloating over how he now had control over him too. He could also sense that he was pleased with himself. He tried to gain more knowledge but he could sense nothing else. Everything in the boy's head was confusing and jumbled; there was no clear line of action, just wandering thoughts.

Oak smiled, this boy had shown that he had a weakness, a lack of discipline and now he knew why Denver was not that concerned with what went through his mind. The boy's plans could be foiled unless, he thought, many others were involved; however, he knew Denver would know early enough of their arrival.

He caught a quick glance from Denver. Denver knew he was studying his group and Oak noticed a slight curve to his lips and realized that Denver had been assessing Blackthorn and himself too. Oak was unperturbed, his emotions and thoughts were well hidden behind the wall he'd lived behind for years just as Denver had made his own that was also impenetrable.

Oak knew that Denver was picking up a lot of emotions from Blackthorn in his weakened state but he didn't know to what extent Denver's gift of sight went. He certainly managed to stay calm with his thoughts just like Oak did; such comfort often meant more knowledge than anyone else had, an edge, a length ahead of everyone else in the race.

He was beginning to admire Denver and he couldn't allow that to happen. He was a Citan; he continued some of the old ways, ways that were wrong. Oak had a faith to uphold, a faith passed down from his grandfather, his father, and Sequoia; never would he embrace the old ways again. The old ways had produced pain, distrust, betrayal, cruelty, corruption and chains; chains that had held them down, preventing them from living a good life. He didn't understand why these Citans continued something that was so wrong; living with memories of the city and everything that had destroyed it.

Elm could not believe his luck when he saw Oak get up and walk toward the Citans. He would never have thought such a thing could happen and he felt like he'd just been handed everything that he'd ever wanted. Here was his opportunity to become leader. He'd seen Pine indicate that they follow and moved away from him to relish in his enjoyment of the new situation. He almost wanted to dance he felt so happy and had to make sure his face was turned away from Pine so he couldn't see the wide smile that wouldn't leave it, couldn't leave it. This was his day.

He'd followed Oak until he came to a halt and had stayed behind as he'd indicated for them to do. After a while he and Pine had carefully moved to follow. When he looked across to Pine he saw that he'd stopped and was cautiously watching.

Being attentive Elm looked to see what was happening. It was then he saw Oak get up. He deliberately walked toward the Citan leader who had a knife at Blackthorn's throat. Could things get any better? He was almost singing with joy at the thought that the Citan leader may well get rid of two of the people he'd been planning to oust from the Woodlander camp for so long.

He wanted to throw his head back in laughter. All the months of planning and here everything was coming together in one unplanned moment and Oak was the one that was giving it all to him. He could hardly contain his excitement. Self control, he thought, calm down Elm, don't celebrate just yet, it can wait, wait until later. For now he had to play along with Pine and then make his move.

Oak was kneeling next to Blackthorn. Elm couldn't hear what was being said, he was too far away. He only knew that Oak was pointing to his bag and sword and one of the Citans was now heading toward where he'd dropped everything. Elm moved back further into the woods, he was too close.

The Citan retrieved Oak's bag and everything else that he'd dropped and was returning to the group, giving the bag to the Citan leader. To his disbelief he saw the leader hand something to Oak. Oak was bending down once more to Blackthorn. What was he doing? Why didn't the Citan just kill them? Oak was standing again and motioning toward the trees. There was movement and then Oak was walking into the forest with one of the Citans in pursuit. He looked at Pine, who was indicating to follow them.

What was going on? Why didn't these Citan's just have done with them? Kill them! Just kill them! As he was following, he briefly looked back to see the Citan leader with a rifle at his shoulder but paid no attention. His mind was reeling; it had gone from rejoicing to frustration.

He lost track of time because he was going through so many things in his head and had to drop quickly when Oak stopped with the Citan. So close, he was nearly seen. He scrambled backwards quietly, away from the direction that they would return. When he felt he was a good distance away he relaxed and continued to ponder the situation.

It didn't matter that the Citan leader hadn't killed them immediately. He was obviously keeping them alive to protect himself and his band from the rest of the Woodlanders. Smart, he thought, yes, I'd do that too. He'd keep them with him whilst he travelled the forest but once they were safe out of the forest then...then he'd kill them because they'd no longer be of any use. This was the Citan leaders plan he was sure. He needn't worry; he just had to be patient, continue the same as he had for all this time. Things would go his way, he was sure, and this would turn out just how he wanted it to.

He noticed Oak was striding back through the forest with the Citan behind him. The Citan looked angry and no wonder, what did Oak think he was doing just taking off? He was lucky he didn't have a knife in his back. There was Pine again, giving him orders, your last orders Pine, he thought. These will be the last orders you ever give. He crawled along through the undergrowth following once more until he saw Pine suddenly halt and stare at Elm with enlarged eyes. Elm looked at the group and saw the Citan leader through the bushes, the rifle was rested upon his shoulder, his eyes looking over the sight, and the rifle was aimed at Elm's head.

He almost choked and had to remind himself to breath as his lungs gave short sputters. He could do nothing, other than wait to see if he pulled the trigger. Closing his eyes he waited for the bullet, his body rigid waiting for death.

Nothing—he opened them. Oak and the other Citan were at the group now and the leader had dropped the weapon from his shoulder. He gasped releasing his pent up breath and breathed normally once more.

Elm rolled over onto his back, his heart going so fast it felt like it would jump up out of his chest and run away. His abdominal muscles were tight and he became filled with rage. That stupid Pine had almost got him killed. Idiot, he would most definitely suffer for that, no quick easy death for him. He moved back onto his stomach and looked again through the undergrowth.

They were gone. Where was that fool Pine? He looked around but he could see no sign of him. He kept scouring the forest but saw nothing to show him he'd even been there. He must still be following the Citans. That worked well enough for him. Let him follow them. He was going to go to tell the rest of the defenders that the three of them were dead.

Pondering this idea, which appealed to him immensely, he became cognisant that if Pine should turn up, his chances of being leader would be shattered. No, first he had to find Pine and kill him. Then he would go to the others and with heartfelt emotion over the loss of their great leader he would tell them of his death. How he valiantly tried to save them all but the Citans were too strong, they were too many. Another fault in the plan, there were two other groups following the Citans from their original ten. Obstacle, always obstacles! He was always so close and then everything would become so distant.

He sat up going over the thought of the two sets of three boys on either side of him. Hopefully, they wouldn't have seen what had happened and even if they had, perhaps he could work it to his advantage anyway. He'd seek them out and send them to the others with word that they were to get all of the groups to return to the camp.

He smiled at this. From the camp they would all together go in search of the Citan band but by then it would be too late because they would've already left the forest. He himself would follow the group alone and hide their tracks. By the time they found any trace of the Citans they would be long gone and he'd no longer have to worry about them saving Oak. He would then be their only option as leader.

Heartened by his plan, he rose to his feet; his smile was broad once more. This was going to go well for him. Perhaps not as easy as it had originally seemed but it didn't matter, he was going to get what he wanted; he was going to get what was rightfully his. Now to find the two groups, send them on their way and then find Pine and kill him.

He set off at a run into the forest in the direction of the group to the east of him; they could send messengers to find the others and all meet back at the camp. He'd tell them that he couldn't go with them as he had to go back to try and save Oak. Some would try to come with him but he'd say it was safer for him to travel alone, since that was how the Citans had known they were there. Being more than one had led to their discovery and now Blackthorn and Pine were dead because of it and Oak was a hostage. With the condition Blackthorn was in, he was as good as dead anyway.

He'd tell them he needed to avenge the anger he felt and save their leader. That as one he would go unnoticed as he followed the Citans and later that night he'd sneak into the camp and rescue Oak. The boys would admire his bravery and on his return he would be called "a hero" even though he hadn't managed to save Oak, who he'd say had been shot in the back whilst they escaped. He'd tell how grieving, Elm tried to drag his dying body along, desperate to save his beloved leader, who'd died in his arms whilst another bullet had just missed Elms own head. He liked this story. The defenders would tell Willow of his courage and that his reward was to be their leader.

His thoughts brought him pleasure as he ran, they were distracting and took away his sensory awareness, but he wasn't disciplined enough to realize it. As he ran there was a slight movement,

something that caught his attention at the corner of his eye, but when he turned his head to look he saw nothing. He dismissed the vision as nothing, just a slight blurring of his vision and he continued forgetting that he should be concerned, that he should be wondering as to where Pine could be.

Chapter 13

It was a long time before Denver indicated it was time to rest. Oak had been practically carrying Blackthorn for quite a few kilometres. His arms were tired as he sat Blackthorn down upon a rock and checked the boy's leg. The wound was still closed which was good. Oak had been concerned that the travelling would re-open the wound. Blackthorn was still pale and Oak wondered if he'd be able to continue for much farther at the pace that Denver was setting for them.

Denver had been leading the way having left Detroit in charge of watching them and telling him to make sure there were no attempts to escape. Detroit had gloated at the opportunity to play jailer and threatened them further in an effort to intimidate. Oak ignored his words but he knew they bore heavily on Blackthorn and he whispered to him in encouragement to pay no heed.

"He's weak minded. Ignore him, he isn't worth any thought. His fate will be brutal and vicious in the end, yours won't."

Blackthorn had looked at him in surprise. "You can foresee the future?" he asked.

Oak smiled and replied, "no, but I can read his character and certain types follow definite paths. His is a path of evil, yours is good."

He looked at the boy at his side wavering dangerously backwards. "I won't allow anyone to harm you anymore, trust me."

"I'll always trust you Oak." He gave a weak smile as he continued, "I'll follow you anywhere and into any danger, there's no better defender to fight alongside."

Oak looked at Blackthorn, his eyes were serious.

"Let's hope Blackthorn that a fight isn't where we're heading." His voice was low and his face was set into firm lines. "Fighting isn't the answer, we must communicate; only with communication can we dispel fear, its fear that causes the fighting."

He was quiet now as he sat taking a much needed rest. Oak looked around to see where the other Citans were. He was considering how he was going to handle the situation he and Blackthorn were in and knew he had no choice but to trust the Citan leader. Detroit was to be avoided as much as possible, his mind was set and there would be no changing it, but the others were more open than him and not as inclined toward physical action as he'd first thought. There was still one that caused him great concern.

Every now and then the evil boy would move beside Denver and say something in a low voice so Denver had to tilt his head to the side to hear. He could see Denver's look of distaste at being near him. He was much shorter than the rest of the Citans, although he was still taller than Oak, who assessed him to be less than six feet tall. He was thin, in a wiry way, possessing no muscle and very little fat; his skin was pale bordering on almost yellow and sallow. Everything about him was repulsive but worse was the evil that emanated from him. Detroit was nasty and looking for trouble but this boy was evil to the bone and not stupid either. He was a thinker and a planner, he would bide his time to get what he wanted and he would do it in a way to cause the most injury and damage.

It concerned Oak that he could read little else about him, couldn't sense what he was up to. Of everyone in the group this boy was the most dangerous and the most malevolent. Oak gave an involuntary shudder. He'd never been around anyone that carried so much evil within him and Oak didn't know how to deal with the feelings he evoked.

He took a few deep breaths and brought the wall up further in his mind, the wall that protected him. He cleared his head and prepared himself for a simple meditation, concentrating on his breathing, relaxing his body, removing himself from the present. He hadn't had his eyes closed for long when he was aware that Denver was beside him. He looked up as the shadow of the large boy enveloped him.

“We need to talk!” Denver strode off expecting Oak to follow him. Oak took a quick look at Detroit who’d overheard and was staring after Denver. He checked Blackthorn who was laid down beside him and almost asleep then arose and quickly followed.

He caught Denver up near a couple of particularly large trees and Denver went behind them so he was out of view of everyone else. Oak was a little confused as to why he should do that but he followed.

“What do you want Denver?” he asked, eyeing him suspiciously.

“Tell me who makes you the most wary from our group?” asked Denver looking at Oak intently.

Oak stared back and waited a little while before answering.

“The thin boy in black with the black slicked hair and dark brown eyes, the one who isn’t a Citan.” He saw a flicker of a smile from Denver and continued, “I don’t know who he is, or where he comes from but he brings evil with him and he encourages evil within others.”

He saw another small, smile surface on Denver's face then it was gone and a grimace took its place.

“He is evil!” Denver spat out in disgust as he looked away. “He’s the vilest creature on earth. Not even the monsters that were created in the laboratories compare to him.” His huge chest heaved as he said the words and Oak could see that Denver was keeping his emotions in check.

Denver looked back at Oak and leaned in toward him.

“He’s like a demon following orders from the devil.” He rubbed a thumb against the side of his mouth as if the words he was saying left him with a bad taste. “He brings fear, distrust, anger, greed; he works on every unethical motive there is and he brings them out in anyone he is around who is weak enough to succumb.” He swallowed and went on, “he is a nasty manipulator.”

Oak looked back at him confused. “I don’t understand. If he is all you say and someone else guides him, then why are you with him?” His eyes were locked with Denver's.

“We have our reasons,” was all he received in reply but Oak could see that there was more, a mix of emotions from concern to anger upon Denver's face. He held his gaze waiting for more.

Denver gave Oak a look of resignation and continued. “I think he’s mad. I don't know for what reason we’ve been coerced into this journey. I know that this creature, “Rancor” as he calls himself, is an abomination. He came into my city and killed five protectors with what seemed to be little effort. No one saw what happened. I don’t know how he managed to defeat such a number alone.

“They were all peace keepers, the guards that watch and welcome strangers. They wouldn’t have attacked him of this I’m certain, so why did he kill them? I can only conclude to show his strength in heinous crimes. Rancor had no regret for what he did. Be wary of him he’s not all that he seems.”

Denver was chewing on his lip, “Rancor calls his people Lavats—people of fire. They live in the volcanic caves and hot springs.” Taking a pause he bent his head toward Oak, “a game is going on here and we are the pawns that are being controlled by the black knight and his black king.”

Denver leaned back against the tree watching Oak digest the information. “We follow him, possibly to our demise. I don’t know what awaits us. We’ll stand firm if it comes to a fight but we have a problem...” he stopped and looked intently at Oak, “he’s gained Detroit’s service.”

Denver gave a disgusted laugh after he said this. “A service not worth anything anyway but Detroit had gained the respect of Washington our leader. How I don’t know but Washington had trusted him and placed him third in command of our group and now he takes his orders from Rancor more so than from me, he tries to keep his alliance secret but I know.”

Taking a deep breath Denver looked at the forest around him. “We may be going to our deaths, I don’t know where or to what we travel so it’s hard to prepare. We must plan along the way from whatever information we can gain.”

Oak was wondering why Denver was telling him so much. Did he want an ally? Or was he using Oak as a pawn just as he’d inferred that Rancor was doing. Oak was aware that Denver had almost taken Blackthorn's life in a brutal way. It now left Blackthorn very weak with an injury that may always prove to lesson his abilities and he’d bear the scar forever. Denver had been the one to take Blackthorn down not Rancor. Was Denver playing him or attempting to recruit him.

Soon his defenders would come and descend upon the Citans. Then there’d be the possibility of a battle. He knew that Denver was aware that Oak would have many defenders, he was no fool, and he expected a fight. Was he trying to become a confidant so as to stop his band being swarmed? Or was he befriending him to gain the knowledge of how many defenders he had and how soon they would come so he could prepare to defeat them? This Rancor, was he really who Denver said he was, or was he a ploy to distract Oak from his defenders being in danger from the Citans themselves? If only he could read this Rancor better and read Denver's mind, he would be more prepared on what to decide.

Oak also leaned against the tree absorbing everything and slotting it into areas of his brain to be retrieved for future reference.

“If you expect me to suddenly become your friend you can think again!” His voice was hard with his own conviction. “You almost killed Blackthorn and now you take us as hostages. You’ve shown me nothing that suggests I should trust you.” He turned to Denver as he uttered his last words. “Or believe you.”

His face was set and his eyes cold as he looked at Denver. He wouldn’t let Denver believe that he was weak and easily persuaded. He’d need to give much more information than that to gain his trust.

Denver gave a grunt and stared aggravated into Oaks eyes. “I warn you Woodlander I’m not your enemy here. The trap I set was due to Rancor's demand.” His eyes lay heavily upon Oak's whilst Oak went over what was said. “I believe that that was part of Rancor's plan. To entrap the Woodlanders along the way and involve you in this confusing venture.”

He ran a hand through his hair in exasperation as though he’d exhausted his powers of persuasion. “We must get back. Rancor knows we’re here and suspects us but then he always suspects and he trusts no one.” With that Denver strode away toward the Citan group. Oak followed mulling over in his mind everything that Denver had told him.

As Denver passed Blackthorn he gave him a kick to wake him up. “Get up! We’re leaving.” He continued on toward the group where in a loud voice he expressed, “The Woodlander is stupid, he’ll give me no information as to how many more of them there are but I’ll get that from him in time. I have more persuasive methods that I can use.” He gave the rest a brutish smile before continuing, “For now we must make haste. We need to get more kilometres under our feet before we rest for the night. Tomorrow we'll leave the forest and travel by more relaxing means.”

Oak caught the last words and repeated them to himself. That meant they would be travelling on the lake. They would be reaching the lake soon and he wondered why he hadn’t realized that earlier. The lake was where they’d been heading all along.

Denver walked to the front of the group and beckoned that the group move on with him. They followed some more heartened at the last few words and the idea that they’d no longer have to walk but would travel in comfort which meant transportation. Once more Detroit was at Oak's side pushing him roughly forward to get Blackthorn up. He bent down and pulled Blackthorn to his feet slipping his shoulder and arm beneath helping him to return to the trek they were on.

Detroit followed pushing at both of them unbalancing Blackthorn, whilst he muttered, “you should use your feet better”.

Oak closed his mind to him and instead he watched Denver's determined face as he ploughed on through the forest. His thoughts were suddenly filled with Rancor and he quickly looked toward him. He was watching Oak and he saw Rancor start to smile, as Rancor turned away to look at Denver the smile curved into a malevolent grin. Denver had not fooled Rancor.

Chapter 14

After crying for what seemed way too long Fern got to her feet and with a face of determination grabbed her woven bag and sword, fastening the belt above her hips. She placed in the bag her blanket and noticed she was still out of melini tablets, mentally noted she'd pick them up and wrapped a rope carefully around her waist loosely tying it. After one last look around the room she left to restock her bag.

Whilst grabbing the tablets at the Culineers building she overheard conversations and picked up on snippets of them. The defenders had split into five groups; going north, south, east and west, Oak's group were following the Citans. There were ten defenders in each group and Elm was with Oak. She gave an internal cringe at that information but even though it made her worry, she understood why Oak kept Elm close. She would have to re-think what she was going to do and left the large building where so many people converged to get food.

Once she was at home she sat once more at her table. She had no other furnishings and felt no need for them. Abacus enjoyed being able to stretch out across the full expanse of the room with his tail outside the north door to the forest. He could face the south door watching people go by and make an exit if he needed should Willow, Oak or Elm appear.

Now, here she was trying to make some sort of plan. Rebelling against Oak was going to put her in trouble, but she didn't care about that. It was forming mental images of *how* she was going to achieve her goal that was bothering her. In her mind's eye she could see herself in the group of Citans conversing with their leader explaining the Woodlanders concern over their presence.

"What was she thinking, idiot!" That was all very nice and how she wished it could be like that but reality was that Citans didn't trust anyone. This was one of the reasons the Woodlanders had formed this forest camp. It was to bring back all that had been lost, lost many years ago even before the Devastation. The Citans had chosen to stay in the surroundings of the oppressive city and chances were they thought no differently to the people that had lived there earlier.

She knew they were dangerous, she'd heard that many times. Why did she get these silly ideas where everything went perfect in the world? She wanted to slap herself when she did. The world was far from perfect. Outside of the Woodlander Camp was nothing but danger.

She was going to find the Citans but she must make sure she was out of sight of the Woodlander defenders. She'd watch the Citans for a while and wait for her opportunity, probably at night since she only wanted the Citan leader to know of her presence. She could escape him easily enough, he was big and clumsy no doubt like rest. She could handle one large boy. She would talk to the leader and find out why they were here. Oak wasn't going to be happy with her going in search of the Citans; he wasn't going to be happy at all.

Fern left the camp sneaking past the sentinel without him knowing. She quickly ran in the direction that the Citans had been heading toward. They had a whole day of travel on her, so she had to move fast and efficiently in order to catch them up. She knew that she could cut through the forest and connect with the path that they were on since they had taken a longer route parallel to their lines of defence and would be dropping south with the lay of the land.

Hills arose to the north making it difficult to traverse the trees and slopes and in order to travel west they would have to go south for a while to resume their westward journey. She would have to be careful not to collide with the paths of Oak's defenders and be as silent as possible. No-one was as quiet as her in the forest, her steps were light, and she almost glided along the ground, as if she wore skates on ice, she doubted anyone would know she was there.

Her thoughts took her back to a time when she tried skating with an old pair of skates that she'd found in with the antiques building. All the Woodlanders spent many hours with the antiques learning from old books, reading about inventors, painters, history and geography. Everything they learnt was from the books and the old pieces they had salvaged, showing them remnants from the world they had come from.

Spruce had been there teacher, he'd taught them to read and they had learned from the books. Some of the books told wonderful stories but she hadn't understood some of the words and had pulled the huge dictionary to sit beside her whilst she read, quickly rummaging through to find a word so she could understand the writer's meaning. It had been quite the discovery the books.

Sequoia had found the antiques with his search party of boys many years ago (at the age of twelve he'd shown more wisdom and good sense than anyone else). The books and antiques had left them with knowledge and understanding of the people from the old world.

It was a strange building they'd gone into, he told them as they had all sat around him and eagerly listened.

It was practically unscathed by the Devastation because it stood low behind a hill into which the one storey building was built. The building was made of concrete. It had no windows and carried a forbidding air about it.

The fence and gates that had surrounded the building were strewn about in a mangle of steel. They carefully wandered onto the once prohibited property with fear in their hearts but curiosity in their heads. Once outside the building they studied it further to see if there was any immediate danger.

They walked around the building finding only one large open doorway. It held two huge doors that had been pushed wide, they were not broken or damaged but purposefully pushed ajar. Sequoia had wanted to turn and leave because his fear was rising to terror but his quest to know could not be squelched and he stepped through the open doors with his hammering heart hailing their arrival.

The quiet was oppressive within the concrete walls; the corridors were wide, so wide a vehicle could drive through. Their only light was from the door and the further they walked into the depth of the building the darker it became.

Their eyes adjusted to the oncoming darkness and with careful steps they arrived at another huge open door. They were surprised by what lay within. On entry to this new room they found it to be large, extremely large, the ceiling was high, probably twenty feet was Sequoia's guess but it may have been more. What was more arresting to them was the smell. Their noses twitched at the putrid aroma of rotting cells and as they walked further in they felt a soft squelch of matter under their feet.

The room was filled with dying vegetation, vegetation Sequoia had never seen before, enormous plants with leaves that probably spanned five to six feet were now shrivelling into lifelessness. Looking closer he noticed some plants were not dying but thriving from the death of the plants around them, growing out of the decay. They went no further, who knew what else lay deep within that room that stretched for hundreds of feet, a small world of its own. With the smell of dying cells still in their nostrils Sequoia led the boys away from the dank dark dungeon to walk to the door opposite to the one they'd been in.

This metal door was locked and Sequoia shook his head in frustration. He wanted to see what was behind it and he was going to find out. They all tried kicking at the door but the effect was only to give each of them sore feet. So they went back outside, glad of the air that was fresh and welcoming after the stench they had left. Sequoia sat down to think. It was what he liked to do when he was perplexed. He immediately squatted down into a form of repose. With his head resting upon the heels of

his hands, his elbows resting upon his crossed legs he stared ahead, whilst the other boys looked down at him in expectancy. His eyes drifted around him until they finally settled upon the mangled steel fence at one side of them. His eyebrows came curiously together and he smiled. Leaping to his feet he yelled, "Come help me get a metal post."

After managing to pull most of the wires off one of the steel posts (which they'd pounded off with a fallen branch of a tree) they carried it. It took at least six of them to lift it and take it into the building. Once there another six (since the others were tired from the carrying) with hands wrapped in their shirts to save their flesh pounded at the door with steel post. It took a while and a few changes of shifts of labour (Sequoia taking the most turns in his determination that what was behind the door was of importance) until the door lock started to give.

The door meanwhile was pummelled with dents and scratches from the post and the noise had been excessively loud making them cringe with each crash upon the steel. At times they stopped and looked into the huge room of decaying plants in fear that they had woken something that lingered there. All of them had the feeling that not only plants had been created in that room but creatures as well. They weren't wrong and it was only weeks later that they came across them, luckily not yet fully grown and because of that they'd been able to fight them off.

When at last the door buckled at the lock and opened in one huge last crash, they stood looking into the darkness but not moving. Putting the steel down they slowly ventured inside to find it overflowing with boxes, some were to their delight on wheels. Pushing a wooden crate out into the corridor they opened it and found wind up flashlights inside (these had been confiscated so people would not venture out past the curfew of nine o'clock at night). They took the flashlights and the crate out into the sunlight.

Looking through the treasure they found pens, lighters, journals of blank pages, rulers, compasses and what seemed to be never ending delights for all the boys. Soon after they went back inside with the flashlights to fetch more crates and brought out the steel post to smash the tops off the locked crates to see what they contained.

They'd not been disappointed for the boxes were filled with books that excited them and brought their spirits up. They found boxes filled with various seeds of fruit and vegetables. In other boxes they found greater treasures of jewelry, watches, glasses, mirrors, crockery, cutlery, small shovels, large shovels and even small pot bellied stoves. When they came across relics of swords and daggers they were at the point of dancing about the crates in their happiness.

They took all the crates, the journeys had spanned many days of going back and forth but the reward had been more than they ever imagined. They'd been living from tins and boxes of food that they had found under the rubble of homes but this new find gave them much more than something to eat. It gave them knowledge, tools and a chance to live a life of self sustenance. They could provide for themselves rather than having to scavenge through the dirt and stones of the city.

Sequoia and his group returned to look in the large section of the building (taking flashlights with them) and found it to be a huge terrarium, a living area for the plants and animals that the scientists had created. Someone had released the animals and the plants had died without the fake sunlight that had originally been provided. Spores and seeds from the plants had been carried out on the animals and from gusts of wind playing in the corridor. The boys had found the room very creepy and didn't venture into it very far.

Even the laboratory room that was filled with interesting microscopes and Petri dishes made their skin crawl too much to have them look for very long and they quite happily left it unexplored. The creatures made their appearance to them not long after and they had no doubt that they'd come from the

very building they'd been in. They proved to be prolific and their numbers increased steadily within a short period of time but they were nocturnal and only a danger to them at night. All, except the terakian beasts who hunted day and night.

The discovery had changed their lives and the makeshift home that they had made from the dying branches of trees had been abandoned. With their new found treasure they had moved further into the forest where they found the strange insidious plants that had survived. They decided to use them as a line of defence assuming they were originally created in the building where the dying vegetation lay decomposing. Carefully they cleared the rapidly rotting dead trees and bushes, surprised at how everything was disintegrating faster than normal. They made their new home, a camp, one that they would stay in forever.

Flanked by the strange plants which they dared not go near, they made a life for themselves as a clan and the Woodlanders were born. The antiquities as Sequoia had called them were later placed in a huge building made from the fast growing plants that had sprouted at an amazing rate around them. They found that they were constantly having to weed (a term that Sequoia used) the plants from growing within the camp but enjoyed their resilience and rapid growth outside the camp to use for their buildings and furniture.

The books, tools, and other objects that had filled the boxes including the seeds, provided them with everything they needed. They learnt to build, farm and cook, the books giving them an education. They built a community, a self sustainable village much to the admiration of Sequoia whom they unequivocally made their leader. Sequoia named their forest "Elanclouse".

Fern was back to thinking of the skates once more as she ran on through the heat of the day. Such strange looking things, so uncomfortable and ridiculous she'd thought when she put them on. She was sure she would break her ankles as she walked through the antiquities building, wavering, until finally her ankles almost did go over to the side. When she found the pictures of women wearing them and skating on frozen ponds she decided she would do the same.

As soon as winter arrived and she knew the bay at the lake would be frozen, she went to the lake on her own. It was a long trek, two days in fact (spending one night in a tree listening to the creatures that came out at night). She was tired when she finally got there and sat to rest for a while.

However, her excitement at the idea of walking on ice succeeded in raising her energy level and she unfastened the skates that hung from the rope on her waist. Once the strange boots were strapped onto her feet she tottered toward the ice. Looking out to see where the ice stopped and became water once more, she was happy to see that she had a good stretch of solid ice that she could play upon. After reaching the ice she confidently stepped onto it and immediately, helplessly watched as her feet flew up into the air and she collapsed into a heap. Groaning in pain at the hard knock her bottom took from hitting the solid ice, she pushed herself up with her hands and gingerly placed her feet on the ice again, trying to get up only to thump the ice hard yet again.

Fern wouldn't give up as it wasn't something she did, although she knew many wished that she sometimes would, especially Oak. He would impatiently shake his head at her and tell her to give up on her silly ideas. She wondered if her ideas were silly. A lot of times she'd been left in abject failure but it never stopped her from still trying something else. She'd watch everyone else look at her in disbelief as she continued to dream up more new ventures to try.

With her bottom getting cold on the ice she pushed herself up and tried again to move on the skates only to topple over and hurt her wrist trying to protect herself from the fall. She grimaced and

become angry. Hoisting herself up once more she managed to get a few brief steps on the ice before falling again.

When she heard the laughter from the side of the lake she knew who it was. It only heightened her frustration, causing her to be more annoyed and making her more determined. He sat there leisurely watching her, amusement all over his face, a huge smile and eyes that twinkled brightly with tears of laughter.

Ignoring him she pushed herself up again, tottered along for a few steps, slid on one foot and crashed to the ice again. The roar of more laughter caused an eruption of words from under her breath—something in the line of “Oak is an obnoxious pig”. Then she changed her words because she liked the pictures of pigs. Even though they’d been unattractive she thought they were rather lovable looking and so he became “an obnoxious runt of a terakian beast with bow legs and squinty eyes” instead.

She was on her feet again and this time she didn’t try to move, she just concentrated on balancing. She took a few deep breaths, found her core, kept her body in alignment, head, shoulders, hips, knees and ankles, from which she slowly slid, softly feeling the ice beneath her like she was stroking a docile animal.

When she heard applause from the banks of the lake and a bravo yelled at her she knew she’d perfected it and her heart swelled. Knowing that she hadn’t failed and this was another victory to add to her very short list made her happy. Her senses soared with elation, her pleasure sensors activated, pulsing energy through her, quickening her responses and delivering a glow to her whole body.

She was grinning broadly as she traversed the frozen waters and when she turned around to go back she could see Oak standing at the edge of the ice, smiling broadly back at her. His face was filled with pride and her heart faltered at the sight of him openly admiring her. She felt a rush of heat travel through her and was embarrassed knowing her face shone bright red from the flush. That was one of the last times he had admired her, it had all been a downward slide from there; with disagreements, arguments and fractious conversations instead.

That was over a year ago and here she was in the forest wondering why their relationship had turned so bad. Slipping past a huge tree barely missing it by an inch as she ran, weaving and dexterously turning, her mind flooded with thoughts. The image of the lake glazed through her head and in an instant a new knowledge flashed through her brain. She realized that the Citans were heading toward that very lake. She quickly calculated their route and where it would take them. A short cut would take her to the same bay that she had skated upon. It was a closer section of the lake that would be quicker for her to reach. It was not where the Citans were going but it would give her a view of them, a view from which she would be provided safety and disclosure.

She knew that they were heading to the point, open land where she would easily see them from the confines of the bay and its vegetation. Her heart quickened and she spurted into a faster sprint as her adrenaline rushed and excitement engulfed her. She was almost a blur now as she ran, thoughts of Oak’s defenders gone, only the thought that she needed to get to the lake as fast as possible.

Luck was with her, even though she was taking risks of being seen by Oak’s defenders she wasn’t. As night began to fall she was within hours of the lake. She knew she couldn’t stop for the night and rest she had to keep going, she had to get there before they did and the only way she could do that was to travel through the night. It was dangerous; there were creatures that came out at night, bloodthirsty and hungry. She needed to listen carefully because they hid themselves well in the darkness waiting for their prey.

The Woodlanders had been lucky, although some of them had encountered the creatures they’d managed to escape with their lives and just been left with the scars from their wounds. It was decided

that Woodlanders would never travel alone at night. They kept to groups so they could protect one another when attacked and had been able to save each other by their numbers. Mainly, they chose not to travel at night and slept safe within the camp (protected by the sentinels that would spear the straying creatures) or slept high up in the trees that the bulky creatures couldn't climb.

Her pace was slower as the grey ebbed to black, her body thrummed with the beat of her heart in the quiet of the night. She felt its sound alone would alert the creatures to her whereabouts and glanced with darting eyes from side to side becoming fearful and nervous. After a while the silence became onerous and the sheet of darkness morphed from black satin to tar encompassing and smothering her. Her breathing began to falter becoming shallow and quick as an immense feeling of panic began to overwhelm her.

She'd always been high up in the trees where it was safe at night, she'd heard the creatures stir beneath her, even circle the tree that she was in but it hadn't mattered because she was out of their reach. Now she wasn't. On the ground she was an easy meal and she began to question why she was doing this? Why she was travelling in the dark amongst the danger, vulnerable, terrified?

There was so much going on in her mind that she thought the noise was just another part of her inner turmoil but when she stopped moving the noise continued for a second after. Unsure how far away the creature was she began to run again. It could be that it was quite a distance away and the quiet of night made it sound closer. Every snap of a branch beneath her feet sounded like explosions in her ears and her body throbbed with her heightened pulses.

She was using her peripheral vision to avoid bushes and trees as she ran. Was it nothing or did she see a movement beside her. She couldn't be certain for the sound of her heartbeat and her feet hitting the ground were so loud to her ears that she was feeling almost insensible with fear. Overwhelmed, she had to make an escape to somewhere.

Slowing her stride she looked to the nearest tree and ran toward it, readying herself to climb. She lunged, stretching to the trunk grasping it beneath her fingers. It felt cold and its uneven texture stabbed into the tips, it was then she heard the loud snarl that erupted behind her and knew she was too late. The small hairs at the nape of her neck stood erect as her time stopped briefly until she quickly turned and stared at it. Her mistake was realized as she saw the creature ready itself to leap at her, its huge glowering eyes transfixed on hers. *Its* prey. Its mass of hair upright on a hovering, huge, hunched over body. She was immobile as she stared at the bared teeth that were before her, heard the claws ripping at the earth as it sought traction, solidity and smelt the soil that rose from the ground as it launched itself toward her.

Chapter 15

Denver was fatigued, he was feeling worn down by all the emotions he was picking up from everyone, and he needed to close off from them all. It was starting to get dark, the sun had disappeared behind the trees some time ago and they'd been travelling in the dark grey of evening for a while.

He'd noticed that some of the boys had become more clumsy and almost fell face first as they tripped over roots and grazed themselves against the bushes. He'd be glad when they were out of the forest. He missed the concrete of the city; even if it still had a lot of rubble at least it had some open areas, not like here with this feeling of always being closed in by trees and bushes. It seemed they had to continually meander and weave a winding route. He needed to rest and so did his group. It was time to make camp for the night and to set up watch for the Woodlanders that might choose to attack.

Raising his hand and halting he looked around for an area that was perhaps slightly more open, one that would avail them some moonlight and stars. He saw a place with a slight gap between the canopies of foliage above. That would do.

Turning to the rest and taking in the sagging shoulders and grim faces he instructed, "We'll settle here for the night."

He beckoned Flint and Detroit to come to his side, noticing Detroit's scowl at Oak and Blackthorn. As Detroit left them he indicated to another to keep watch over the captives. They both wearily approached him and he turned away from the rest of the group, so they had to get closer to him to listen and his orders without the others hearing.

He pointed to the area that they were to camp.

"We'll rest here. Flint shall take first watch, then me, and lastly you Detroit. Expect that the Woodlanders may attack to take back their own, so never drop your guard and alert us of anything, anything at all."

Both Flint and Detroit nodded their understanding. He looked over toward Oak and Blackthorn and continued. "Detroit, the Woodlanders shall sleep close to me, that way if they move or think of planning an escape I will know." He didn't say that he would pick up their thoughts for Flint and Detroit already knew that. "Let's quickly prepare food and get some rest. Tomorrow we'll travel to the point." He stared into the expanse of black that was descending, leaving his face barely visible in the haze of grey light. "Let's hurry the night is coming too quickly and the creatures will come if we don't get a large fire going."

Detroit moved away back to Oak and Blackthorn but Flint stayed at Denver's side his voice low as he asked, "can you trust him?"

"No, we can't trust him but there's little that he can do at this point, so we needn't worry for now."

Flint nodded in agreement his face unchangeable, he never showed his emotions. Denver had noted long ago that his quiet and calm expression was disconcerting to the others. It made them uneasy not understanding him or having any idea of what he was thinking. He knew Flint liked the fact that they were wary of him, that way they never dared challenge him. He watched him walk away, his footfall soft upon the ground in comparison to the rest of the Citans. Flint gave brief orders to the others, ordering them start a fire and begin to prepare the evening meal. They quickly did as he requested.

Denver stood alone for a while watching them all, his eyes rested upon Rancor who was openly staring back at him. He knew Rancor was near exhaustion (one of the reasons he'd pushed so hard was to see what physical strength he had). He was satisfied with his conclusion that Rancor was not

physically strong; obviously he had other means to be able to defeat and kill people. Still, he couldn't find that out since everyone that had challenged Rancor were now dead. He could sense ridicule from him as his sallow face gave Denver a slanted look and his lips twisted up into a snake like smile. He reflected on what he'd said to Flint about Detroit; Rancor definitely couldn't be trusted at any time and he would always be someone to never turn your back on.

Once camp was set up and everyone had eaten, he readied his sleeping area and left a space for the Woodlanders, his bed being a blanket and nothing more. He slept in his coat since it kept him warm, probably warmer than the thin old wool blanket. Supplies were carried in backpacks by a number of them and switched everyday to someone new who would share the load. Denver had already carried one of the packs himself during the first day when it had been full. Now the packs were much lighter, food and drink having been consumed along the way. Tonight they'd eaten the last of their food supplies, all there was to carry tomorrow was the last of the water and the blankets.

"You, Woodlanders!" he called, "come here, you are to sleep beside me." He watched Oak help Blackthorn to his feet; from there he practically carried him to where Denver was. The young Woodlander had struggled all day to keep up and he'd noticed how Oak had picked up the boy, lifting him whilst he hopped on one foot. He'd been impressed by the strength of Oak since he was so diminutive in size compared to the Citans.

He couldn't underestimate these Woodlanders; they were much stronger than they appeared. They may be svelte but they were muscled and their endurance was formidable. Oak couldn't be dispelled as no match for him because he could never be certain just how much there was to the Woodlander leader. He chuckled to himself at the thought; he'd managed to capture the leader of the Woodlanders, quite a feat for a first attempt.

The fire burned brightly as they stepped around it, the glow throwing itself onto Oak's concerned face. He worried about Blackthorn, almost as a father would for his son and Denver smiled at the show of Oak's fraternal feelings. No doubt he cared about all of the boys in his charge and would try to keep them safe; this could be a weakness that would work in Denver's favour. As yet, he hadn't told Rancor that Oak was the Woodlander leader and wondered if he should wait a while before he did or whether he should tell him at all. Although, he didn't want to put them all in danger by not revealing his knowledge, especially if it meant that he and his group would be safer with Rancor, something told him that the Woodlander leader would be of help and Rancor being in the dark would help them both. He'd have to think things over some more but first he needed rest.

Oak and Blackthorn were approaching now and he indicated to the ground beside him.

"You are to sleep there. Blackthorn you are to sleep next to me, Oak beside you."

Once the eyes of his captives were raised from the spot back to his own he forcefully warned. "I want you to know Oak that I sleep with my knife close by, should you try to escape or if your Woodlanders attack it will make contact with Blackthorn's heart."

He watched Blackthorn pale at his words as he gave a quick glance to Oak who responded with no reaction. Oak was expecting as much, his words were no surprise.

Detroit walked over and threw the small blankets of the Woodlanders to the floor at their feet, he looked like he was going to spit at them but instead he turned and walked away. Denver sensed a mix of emotions within Detroit and he had no doubts as to who had caused such a stir. He'd seen Detroit sit with Rancor as they all ate, his attention completely taken with what Rancor had to say. After the conversation he'd stared at Oak and then toward himself with a look of disgust. Rancor was succeeding at poisoning Detroit's weak mind.

It left Denver with no doubt, that Rancor was working on Detroit to betray the rest of the Citans, especially himself. Rancor distrusted Denver and Oak. Denver believed it was because he was afraid of them both; he'd picked up the fear now and then even though Rancor tried to hide his feelings. Rancor knew that Denver was gifted with the sight and he probably had an inkling that Oak did too. Two dangers in one group, perhaps more than Rancor had bargained for on this journey.

Oak and Blackthorn had wrapped themselves in their strange blankets, so Denver lay down and covered himself with his wool blanket. His finger ran across some of the threadbare areas, they were lucky to still have so many supplies. So much had been destroyed but the things that had survived had helped them pick up their lives again and continue the fight for survival. The dust had lingered for a long time after the Devastation, he'd wondered if it would ever go away or if it would always hover just like the ring around Saturn.

He'd always enjoyed learning about the planets. He'd even wanted to be able to fly like his grandfather had. His grandfather's stories of flying jets planes were exciting but that had changed. Flying was only allowed if you were in the military, even the supply planes were flown by them. His father had told him of the old days, when there was freedom, choice and trust. He wondered if he would have joined the military just to be able to fly a plane and then thought no, his father would have been against it. He'd loved and respected his father enough to never go against his wishes.

He was looking up through the small gap, he couldn't see a moon but he knew there was one. The sky was too bright for there not to be. He was looking at the stars, trying to find Orion's Belt when he heard a hushed sound. It was human but wasn't talking nor was it snoring, just a low guttural noise. He turned his head to look in the direction it came from past the sleeping body of Blackthorn and saw Oak looking back at him. Oak's eyes moved to his left. He couldn't see much beyond Oak because of the bodies that lay in the way and it took a while for his eyes to focus as he was looking past the flames of the fire.

After his eyes adjusted he saw Rancor. He was hunched over doing something. Now and then he made furtive, jerky movements causing his clothes to rustle slightly. For a moment he stopped what he was doing and looked around him, checking if anyone was awake.

Denver knew Flint was on watch somewhere and would see what Rancor was doing but Rancor wouldn't know this. Flint had chosen a spot that no one could see. Rancor finished his perusal of the camp and then satisfied that no one watched he continued to look at something in his hand.

Denver knew what it was as soon as he saw the flames reflect from it. It was a screen, just like the ones that had been used years ago to give everyone directions and their allowances for food, electricity and heat before the Devastation. Rancor was communicating with someone.

The screens were basic, operated by either touch or voice; they were audio and video. There was a keyboard on screen for you to type information or you could use voice to get what you wanted. The screens had been useful for those that wanted to betray others; they could video offenders and send it to the military. His father had told him that those in high positions had screens that could do much more than gain information and communicate. They could make things happen. He'd been very curious to know what things but his father had not elaborated.

Denver was confused, how could Rancor be using a screen? Screens hadn't worked since all the towers had been destroyed. How had they managed to make the screen work? The thought made him nervous, having technological knowledge and control could mean that they would be up against a lot more than he originally thought. He was dreading meeting Rancor's leader, he knew he was going to be much worse than he could ever think of.

He looked back at Oak and recognized the worry on his face. Would he ever gain the trust of the Woodlander leader? Should he trust him? It was a dubious world they were going into and mistrust could be disastrous. Men had turned on men so easily in the past. He didn't want to put himself nor his band into a situation in which he could easily be betrayed, he would have to have a safety net as back up.

Rancor distrusted him but then he was certain Rancor trusted no one other than his leader. He knew what Rancor's intentions for Detroit were. At the end of his usefulness he wouldn't receive the reward he thought. He could feel Rancor's anticipation of that day. Denver closed his eyes; he had a few hours to get some sleep before his watch. He'd better get what rest he could and ponder the screen and Rancor during the hours of his watch instead.

It seemed like only minutes had passed when Flint woke him and he shrugged off the bleariness, stiffness and wiped the remnants of sleep from his eyes. He nodded to Flint that he could leave and sat up pulling the blanket around his shoulders. He looked over to where Rancor now slept and once again thought how he would like to stick a knife up under his ribs, hear the final gurgle of life escape his lips and know that everyone was safer for his having left the world.

In time he thought, he'd make sure this nasty creature took his last breath before he himself lost his own life. Rancor stirred in his sleep, unsettled, as if he'd just felt the hatred that was directed toward him. Denver gave a silent grunt as he went over the fact that the boy had no feelings. No feelings other than the vile ones of delight in death and destruction.

He slowly pulled his attention away from Rancor and his gaze rested upon Oak. He was surprised to see that he was awake, then he shook his head at himself, of course he was awake, he would have sensed Flint and himself moving. He looked down at the sleeping boy. He looked younger than his years now with innocence and peace upon his face and he felt sorry that Blackthorn had had to endure such pain. He'd born it with little complaint and struggled admirably to keep up with them. He was fine and worthy, he hoped he'd heal quickly as he'd come in useful for the fight ahead.

He gazed around the camp, everyone slept soundly from the exhaustion of the day. They'd covered many kilometres. No-one had verbally complained, even though he'd felt all of their complaints in his head. He hoped that most of them would return back alive to the city but he wasn't sure, his doubts were increasing more with each day. He'd save as many of them as he could before he, himself died. He wondered why his death seemed inevitable. He had to change his thoughts to positive, to expect to die only made the possibility more likely. He'd do his best to help everyone survive what was ahead and he'd make sure that he'd take down as many of the evil ones as he could before they escaped.

He looked at the young Woodlander again; it was too bad they'd followed. Rancor wouldn't have instructed him to capture them and they would be safe in their camp. There was nothing evil in either of these boys, only good. He looked at Oak, who stared back and the knowledge passed between them. What did it matter if Oak knew what he thought of them, perhaps it would help Denver to gain Oak's help as an ally.

The night was quiet, not even the creatures were stirring through the bush in search of food. That unnerved Denver and he looked back at Oak again, his eyes were closed. Did the Woodlander know an attack was about to happen? Was that why he'd been awake? Denver felt for his sheathed knife to comfort himself and relaxed, he'd not been aware of any new presence. He didn't think the Woodlanders would risk the death of their leader. A flying knife could be as lethal as one in a hand. He wouldn't let him escape alive should an attack take place. He saw Oak's eyelids flicker and knew the Woodlander knew as much also. No attempt would be made, at least not tonight.

After a few hours Denver rose to find Detroit and quietly shook him awake. He then went back to where Blackthorn and Oak lay. He'd taken his loaded rifle with him just in case Oak should think of trying to escape whilst he was a few feet away. Oak had continued to lie still as if asleep but Denver knew he wasn't. He was surprised at how little sleep the Woodlander leader needed. He himself was going to get a few more hours under his belt before sunrise. He had an idea of what awaited them and he would need his wits about him.

Elm had travelled quicker than he ever had before. He was starting to feel frustrated that he couldn't find the three Woodlanders to the east and he was not as quiet as he should have been. So, when Cedar suddenly appeared from behind a tree he nearly fell over backwards from trying to stop.

"What has happened Elm?" Cedar asked his eyes narrowed at him. "Where are the rest of your group and why do you run with so little concern at concealment?"

Elm gave a small one sided sardonic smile at this question realizing his own foolishness; he would have to turn this around.

"I don't care about my safety!" he cried. "My concern is only with our leader, Oak."

He'd sparked interest now as he watched Cedar's eyebrows raise and his eyes become eager to know more. "He's been captured by these cruel and vicious Citans and is surely to die if we don't save him!"

"Pine and Blackthorn where are they?" Cedar questioned already beckoning the rest of his group out from the trees to join them.

"Blackthorn is dead!" Elm cried dropping his head, feigning distress, and then shooting his head back up. "They knew where we were and how many of us. Our numbers gave us away."

Once more he dropped his head bringing up a frantic hand to his worried forehead.

"Where is Pine?"

Elm left his head lowered for a moment as he worked on a reply.

"We ran in different directions. I don't know where he is now."

Cedar looked to the others and turned back.

"It is unlike Pine to break with training."

Elm shrugged his shoulders in response. "We do not have time to reason."

He noticed Cedar paid him no attention, he was turning away. "Let's go we must save Oak."

"No!" cried Elm.

Cedar was spinning toward him looking angry now, distrust crossing his face.

"No," replied Elm, more softly, "it's our numbers that gave us away. The reason why Oak split us up originally remember? Because the Citan leader knew we were there. The leader's senses are too strong."

He could see that having Oak's own words as his back up was working.

"I will return to save Oak alone. As one my chances are greater to follow unnoticed and later tonight I'll sneak into the camp and aid Oak's escape."

He looked from Cedar to the rest, no-one said anything and he smiled inwardly as he knew that he'd won this small battle.

He could see Cedar's doubts going through his mind and thought "damn him for not trusting me" and so continued. "You must come with me to find the group to the west and we shall send out

messengers to the rest telling them to go to the camp. As one army you can all come to the aid of Oak and myself and wipe out these Citans who are only twenty against our many.”

He knew the odds were in their favour and this would help Cedar to believe that his plan could work. Elm went on, “with all of the defenders together even if I’m captured or killed you will be able to save Oak, whom they keep as a hostage for their own safety.” He watched Cedar going over the scenario in his mind and waited.

“Let’s travel to the west and find the others from there to send messengers and make our way to the camp as Elm has suggested. We shall save our leader as an army, taking out these Citans who choose to invade our land.”

Nods of agreement came from the other two. Without further thought Cedar was running through the forest with Elm in pursuit.

Elm was unhappy at the balance of dynamics within the group since Cedar had now taken leadership of it and he was again only a follower. Maliciously he thought he would like to take Cedar out for ousting him from control of the situation but then he reflected that if he continued to think this way he would have few defenders left. He'd let Cedar lead the group and then go to the camp to return as a small army because when he himself returned to the camp he would take control, even if it meant using force against Cedar.

Surprisingly they were quick to find the group to the west. Birch appeared from the trees with two others as soon as he heard their approach and awaited an explanation expectantly.

Elm was quickly trying to regain his breath to tell them of the plan. Cedar began before he could get a word out. Elm seethed in rage at the arrogance of Cedar and mentally noted that here was a defender that he would have to watch in his army. However, he was pleased that Cedar wasted no time in getting them all together and ready to be on their way. With all explanations covered for Birch to peruse, Cedar gave him little time to make any other decision than to go to the camp, impressing even Elm at his dominance of the situation. There was more to Cedar than he'd thought.

About to leave, Cedar only gave a small cursory glance toward Elm (which again held distrust) whilst giving Elm a few brief words.

“May all go well with Oak in your rescue.”

When Elm reflected upon Cedar’s remark he realized they weren’t words of good luck to Elm but words of support only for Oak. This caused another shot of annoyance to go through Elm and his reaction was to give a biting retort to Cedar but it was too late as they were already on their way. Elm could say nothing more.

He was left standing alone feeling like he’d been hit by a whirlwind, left spinning unsure of which direction to take. As he watched them disappear through the trees he collected his thoughts and went back to resuming his plan. Now he had to find Pine. What to do with Pine? He had to stop him finding Oak and if it came to it he'd have to kill him. He had no doubt that Pine was in pursuit of the Citans and his beloved Oak. He was a faithful dog to the leader but he was a pet that would soon be destroyed, his yelping cries unheard by any of the other defenders as they'd be far away.

Once Pine was dead he'd watch the Citans leave the forest, from a great distance since he didn’t trust the large leader. After they were gone and well out of following range (he didn't want the defenders to think they should continue the chase beyond that point) he would find the defenders, then, feigning his effort to save Oak in a tale of his gallant but fallible brave rescue. He would from his hunched position of exhaustion tell of the disappearance of the Citans.

He would have to say that the Citans were long gone and that revenge was not the answer for their peaceful people. They would have to forgive and forget and not stride on into the footsteps of their

forefathers. They had become Woodlanders so that they would never do what their forefathers had done and must be wise in continuing the ways that Sequoia and even their good Oak had designated for them to do.

He'd return to hails of a hero and the clan tossing cheers to him as he passed through to the podium to tell everyone his heartfelt story of Oak's demise and the evil Citan's burning of their beloved leader's body whilst they taunted the scorching flesh in a satanic fashion. He could even add how Oak had asked that he, Elm take care of his people and save himself.

A huge smile spread across his lips. Yes that would work very well, who could dispute the leader passing the succession to another? How could anyone challenge him on it? Since they'd not been there and if they did dispute it, he could demand that his name be cleared of being a liar by fighting them. They'd either back down or he would fight for his honour. Woodlanders were opposed to fighting to the death, so they'd more likely concede and he'd tell everyone their harsh words were due to the stress of grief.

Feeling much more cheerful than he had been in Cedar's presence and once more certain that he would get his way yet, he began to run to find the Citans. They had a large lead on him and he would have to make up a lot of ground to catch them. He must also be careful when he grew close because he didn't want Pine to be aware that he was there. He'd find Pine and silently sneak up behind him, perhaps even plunging his sword deep into his body whilst covering his mouth to keep his dying cries unheard. He would leave his body, no need to worry about it's being found, the creatures of the night would dispose of it quick enough.

The sun was dying down to the west as he moved warily through the forest. He must be close to the Citans now. Where was Pine? He still had no sight of him and it was making him uneasy. He was quickly chewing on another melini tablet when he came across the fresh overturned earth. He knelt down touching the area of soil and moss that had been scuffed upwards.

The Citans were tired, they were also close. Constantly looking around him he lightly traversed the same ground as the Citans, his ears peaked and ready for any sound. He was quiet, regulating his breathing so his attention was sharp, his senses clear.

When he finally caught sight of the Citans they were already making camp for the night. One of them was building a fire and the rest were placing backpacks upon the ground and rummaging through them. They were tossing blankets out and pulling out bags of what he supposed was food. They hung a large metal container over the newly sprouting fire on a metal arm and it wavered over the gathering flames, back and forth. Tossing food into it they then poured in water that they carried in pouches. One Citan stood stirring the concoction with his long knife, whilst bowls and spoons were passed amongst them.

Taking everything in and the fact that he still saw no Pine he slunk further back into the shadows. There was nothing more he could do today other than find a tree, climb it and settle himself down for the night. Even if Pine was somewhere around here and watching Elm he wouldn't risk attacking him in a tree. That would be too foolish and one thing Pine was not was a complete fool, only partially he sneered.

Chapter 16

All manner of things went through Fern's mind though nothing in particular. Some of it even nonsense in those few seconds watching her life about to be taken away from her. It was the sorrow that overwhelmed her, the sadness to leave the people she loved, the person she loved. What foolish thing had she done? She could see the reflective eyes of the creature as it came toward her, teeth bared, wide open mouth waiting to take her flesh and tear it from her body. She closed her eyes, drawing her last breath and succumbed to what the fates had devised for her. She felt the rush of air on her face and the foul acrid smell of the creature before her as she steadied herself for her demise.

Standing tall and proud, she waited, listening to the final beats of her heart. Awaiting the searing pain and suffocation the beast would cause when its teeth sank into her throat bringing her down to the ground and holding her there until she gasped no more. The milliseconds were turning into a lifetime, interminably long but leaving no time to cry, no time to scream, no time for regret.

Suddenly there was something different, air from a different direction. Not just the creature in front of her but something else as well, something powerful. Then they were gone and her ears heard the heavy crash of bodies falling to the ground nearby. She heard a half crazed scream come from the creature as it struggled and then a gurgling, which she comprehended was its dying breath.

She was shaking violently leaning against the tree, quivering so much that the bark was catching upon her clothes. She didn't feel it trying to pierce through to her skin for her body felt it was no longer hers just a flexible band that was wavering ready to fall. She was afraid to open her eyes but she had to, she had to see how she had managed to survive and what she was to survive to.

Her eyes were open; they were staring at the dead creature beside her and the large body that slithered across it. She stared at the fangs that were dripping blood and poison, the glowing eyes that were turning to look back at her.

“Abacus!” she whispered, “Abacus, my saviour, my friend.”

She fell forward onto the snake and the dead creature's body sobbing soft shivers of delight at the gift of life as she gave her thanks. She was trembling with such intensity that she could barely control her limbs.

The snake circled around her, wrapping her in his strong body controlling her convulsions, pulling her away from the thing that she lay upon. Her face was soaked with tears from fear, relief and joy.

“Thank you!” she mumbled and continued to weep but now she was not just weeping from relief at being alive. The turmoil of the last few years swept through her. Visions amassed together, sneering females, fights with Oak, distrust of Elm, the indecision at what her job was within the clan, feelings of being unwanted and finally her own disobedience against her leader. Her tumultuous emotions crashed over her in waves as she grieved her whole life, a life ended, a changed Fern now reborn.

She fell asleep with Abacus circled around her, a moat of safety, and a moat that nothing would dare to cross. Her sleep was filled with violent nightmares; she was running trying to escape an ever pursuing enemy, an enemy that she didn't know, invisible, there but not there, no form or shape but always chasing her, always close at hand. She was always gasping for breath, so tired, so very tired, but still she had to run. Always running because her enemy was relentless it wouldn't give up, it would never stop and although she tried to run faster she was never any further away from it. She awoke at the touch of Abacus thrusting his nose into her side and gave a start as she remembered what had happened.

It was still dark, she must have only slept a short time but Abacus wanted to be on the move. That meant danger must be approaching and she realized that the smell of blood and death would be

attracting many creatures of the night. She arose slowly noticing she was sore. She was stiff too but she knew that once she moved the stiffness would leave, her mobility would increase. Abacus was already moving through the forest ahead of her, leading the way so she followed carefully stretching her arms to release the tightness and moving her head from side to side to release the tension in her neck.

“Abacus,” she whispered, “we must head toward the lake to the bay.” Abacus continued to slither through the leaves, she knew he’d heard and he would guide her safely to where she wanted to go.

She was still sleepy and stumbled over roots making more noise than she really should have to be safe. Her attention was grabbed from sleepiness when she heard shrieks and cries behind her. She heard something being dragged and a roar followed by a screech, crashing of trees and more angry cries. The beasts had come and found the dead creature, they were fighting over it. She shuddered involuntarily once more glad that she had Abacus and his intuition to save her.

She watched him quietly move in amongst the trees, he must have heard the cries too but he paid no attention. She tried to dispel the sounds as best she could and concentrate on being quiet and quick, the two seeming to be incongruous at the moment. The noises continued, her senses spiked by the arrival of the creatures. She could now discern the tearing of flesh and the breaking of bones in amongst the throaty growls and snarls. She could almost picture the creatures’ bloody satisfied faces as their fangs ripped skin and muscle tissue from the stationary carcass.

They’d been travelling for what seemed like hours, it was hard to tell without the sun to go by. The grey mist of dawn was falling upon the ground as the earth had cooled during the night, causing the air to fog, dropping dew upon the now cold leaves and forest floor. Fern reached into her bag and took out a melini tablet and ate it whilst travelling, she stopped for a moment next to a bush of extremely large leaves and ducking her head under one leaf poured the water that had collected upon it into her mouth. Abacus stopped too, he looked around at her and then continued on his journey. Fern had to run to catch up with him.

When the sun finally started its climb in the sky she knew it was going to be a beautiful day and her spirits rose with the hot plasma sphere. She was feeling more agile again, her stiff limbs becoming supple once more, her confidence rising as her physical condition improved. The melini bar gave her an energetic burst that made her feel like sprinting but there was no reason to waste her fuel when she was already so close to the lake. She knew she would have plenty of time once there to wait and ponder on what action she would take when she espied the Citans.

She smelled the water before she saw it. The air was fresher, vitalizing, it stimulated her being and left her tingling before she even cast her eyes upon its soft waves upon the shore. Abacus stopped before he reached the edge of the forest and Fern knelt down beside him. Stroking him affectionately she thanked him again for saving her life and kissed the snake upon his flat head.

“I love you Abacus, you’re my only true friend, having you makes all other friendships nothing more than trivial relationships. You mean so much to me Abacus, always take care, I never ever want to lose you.”

The giant snake raised his head and she watched his tongue vibrate in pleasure, giving him one last stroke she turned and walked out of the forest.

By the time she turned Abacus was gone leaving nothing but a few overturned leaves. She sighed, thankful at having such a faithful protective companion. A beautiful animal to care for her could only mean that she was worthy, she must remember that when she doubted the reason for her existence, she was worthy. She would prove herself to the Woodlanders and to Oak, she would squash her emotions and be more careful, she could not rely on Abacus to always be there to save her.

Looking across the massive lake to its horizon of water she wondered just what the Citans planned to do once they reached the point. She figured that from wherever they had slept for the night they would be making their way through the forest to their destination but she was confused as to what that destination could be. On the point there was nothing. Where and how would they go from there?

She sat for an hour amongst the grass and bushes, hidden but bored. She took off her shoes and rubbed her feet, wriggled her toes, twirling her ankles for a little while and then put her shoes back on. She laid back looking up at the blue expanse of sky and grabbed clumps of grass with her fingers, feeling the texture of it within her hand, it was cool and felt good. The sun was warm upon her face so she pulled her bandanna off and placed it over her eyes with the point of the bandanna falling down over her chin. She listened to the soft lapping of the waves on the shore and became absorbed in the rhythm of it, the sound softly vibrated in her head until it became nothing more than a hum.

She awoke with a start. Something was happening, activity somewhere. She listened carefully but all she could hear were the gentle slaps of water upon the shore. She pulled the bandanna from her face and continued to lay still, her eyes darting to either side of her, her ears straining. Still, she heard nothing. Something had startled her, this was no dream or imagination, the air was different, it was expectant. She was breathing slowly, taking deep regular breaths to calm herself, her adrenaline was pumping, and her intuition told her she could be in danger.

There it was, a sound, she didn't know what it was but she heard something, a scraping. Now she heard a thud of something hitting the earth hard, followed by whispers, definitely whispers from people. Careful to be as quiet as possible she rolled onto her side and then onto her front. From there she brought herself together onto all fours, this way she could be ready to spring if necessary. The whispers were to her right and she purposefully turned herself to that position so she could perhaps glimpse them through the grass and bushes. Still, she couldn't see anything. Everything was silent and her heart beat faster, she tried to keep her breathing slow and steady. The silence seemed to go on forever and she felt like screaming with the suspense, then she heard them, close, very close, almost touchable close.

She caught sight of them at the same time they caught sight of her but she was already upon her feet and running, running as fast as she could for the forest, a vision of two boys in her head. A picture of boys with dark hair, unshaved, short sleeved shirts, canvas pants, one with a knife in his hand. She couldn't tell what they were yelling at her, all she could think was that she needed to reach the trees; in the trees she would be safe. She heard the crunch of feet behind her, stones, earth and grass being trodden heavily upon and knew they were chasing her. Her thick red hair was in her face and she hastily swept it away from blocking her view of trees to where she was making her get away to. She could feel the sweat upon her from laying in the hot sun and the increased amount from fear and sudden exertion.

She was near the trees, only a few more strides away and she would be safe. That was when the bullet whizzed past her ear and she dropped to the ground. Quickly she leaped to her feet again and was almost at full sprint when she heard the voice yell, "Stop now or I'll kill you this time!" The trees were so close, could she make it? Would he miss her again or did he really miss her on purpose or would he just shoot her anyway if she stopped? The growl of the words, "I mean it!" came to her ears and she halted, still looking at the trees that had been her hope of escape. There was no gunshot, he was keeping his word.

Slowly, she turned around to face her pursuers. The two were close and she now knew that had he wanted to kill her, he very easily could have. He still held the handgun pointed at her, threatening her not to move, to stay where she was, to wait, to be at his mercy. His partner still held a knife in his hand; it was pointed at her too.

A scowl crossed her face, she didn't like the idea of being at anyone's mercy and she wondered if she could take the two of them. Perhaps she could distract them and take them down with the small sword that rested upon her hip. A small smile crossed her lips and vanished as the boy with the handgun stopped in front and stared at her. The other was there as well; they both looked to be appraising her. Scanning her from head to toe she saw a flash of excitement in their eyes, a look of interest.

"Who are you?" the boy with the gun questioned, his voice softer now as he drank her in as if she could quench his thirst.

His eyes ran up and down her body making her shudder in repulsion. A further shiver ran through her with her emotion of revulsion, it was anger. How dare he!

"My name is Fern." she replied, her voice haughty with irritation and she glared at them defiantly. The other was looking her over too, as if she were a piece of expensive merchandise that they'd been lucky enough to find. She shifted a little, feeling not the danger of death but something else, an experience she knew nothing of and it made her wary.

The boy with the gun stepped closer, smiling, she could see that his mind was actively processing many thoughts and she felt none of them could be good. He was closer to her now and she could see that his skin was ruddy and tanned, his eyes were wrinkled from squinting, and his hair was as untamed as her own, a long mass of thick dark brown held back from his face in a ponytail. Using the gun in his hand he ran it down the side of her face. She wanted to pull back but her stubborn nature made her stay still in defiance. A self satisfied look crossed his face.

Once more he was looking her over even though she glared at him in disgust. With his gun he picked up some locks of her hair and then to her surprise bent down and sniffed it. She pulled back in disdain appalled by his actions. She clamped her mouth shut as she felt the surge of vitriol spurt forth in words of anger, at her hatred of being treated with so little respect. The other boy was also closer now and his eyes were stripping her of her dignity too.

"Who are you people?" she yelled at them turning from one to the other.

She was rewarded with nothing more than a sneer from the boy with the handgun and a grunt from the other who had now put his knife away. He no longer viewed her as a threat.

The boy with the gun was circling, evaluating her.

"What are your plans?" she asked, "are you going to sell me?"

The boy with the gun laughed. "Can you be bought Fern?"

"What?" she yelled back in shock flinging her hair back as she spun to face him, causing him to laugh more and poke at his friend as he continued to walk around her like a predator circling its prey.

"Feisty isn't she?" he nodded at her to his friend.

His friend nodded back enthusiastically, a lascivious grin crossing his face, his eyes brightening as thoughts she didn't want to know went on behind them.

The boy with the gun was talking again. "You're going to make our Captain very happy. He has a penchant for good looking girls." He gave a self satisfied smile, "and because of that he will be pleased with me."

He was still circling her whilst she stood listening.

"You're going to help me to become second in command Fern." He nodded at her now as he passed her front. "My lovely Fern, you're going to be a very useful persuasive piece that I'm going to play."

"You'll not use me!" she sneered back at him turning her head to where he was. "I would rather die!"

He stopped his circling to stare into her face as he smirked and continued to walk around her.

“Now, now, Fern, that would be such a terrible waste, something as lovely as you to become nothing more than rotting flesh when it’s such a fine soft flesh too.”

He stopped once more and touched her face with his fingertips; she turned on him like a spitting cat.

“Keep your hands off me!” She warned.

Again, there was the smile and then a nod as he walked on once more.

“So much enthusiasm Fern, such a strong passionate nature, I’ll bet you’ll be really hot in bed!”

Her face lost all of the blood within it; her breath was stifled at what he was suggesting. She pushed the images away of this horrible brawny boy before her, his hands upon her body. His smile broadened more as he saw the fear develop in her eyes.

“I can promise that no-one will touch you Fern, well no-one except the Captain. You’re to be a gift from me to him.”

His look filled with pleasure at the thought and she realized that she would have no choice but to be a prize for his Captain, a bribe to step this boy up in his Captain’s esteem.

“I am no-one’s gift!” she yelled and grabbed the sword at her hip but the other boy already had hold of her hand as she struggled to raise the small blade.

Bringing his knee up, he knocked it from her hand, still holding her wrist. She stood wincing as he twisted her hand behind her back, a look of glee upon his face and relish at being so close to her, at touching her, his body getting closer as she squirmed.

“Fern, would you rather Gisburn touched you? I can see he’s enjoying this way too much but you aren’t enjoying it at all and I don’t like the idea of my gift being damaged before it reaches its recipient.” He stopped and leaned in closer; Gisburn was still holding her right hand and pressing into her right side. The boy with the gun moved to her left side and whispered into her ear. “If you promise to behave yourself I promise that no-one will touch you other than our gentleman Captain.”

He was leaning further toward her now, her squirms becoming more insistent but Gisburn’s hold becoming only firmer.

“You stand a better chance of keeping your honour with the Captain Fern, than you do with us.”

He pulled back a little watching her as her facial expression changed from anger and disgust to query.

“I can see you’re clever Fern. Be clever and behave so we don’t have to kill you, because if we decide to kill you, we’ll do some very unpleasant things to you before you die.”

Her look of sheer horror showed he’d had the effect he wanted and both boys laughed. She couldn’t tell if they were serious or if they were just trying to scare her. Did things like that happen, like years and years ago, in the terrible stories that had been passed on through books. She felt nervous; her pride couldn’t allow her to die in such a way. She had to bide her time and at least give herself a chance to live and escape.

Her eyes hardened now as she looked at the two gloating boys, one was holding each arm, Gisburn purposefully leaning against her body. He was grinning as he made a writhing motion. She wanted to vomit but most of all she wanted to thrust the blade that lay at her feet deep into his disgusting beating heart. The boy with the gun moved away.

“Let her go Gisburn!”

To which Gisburn begrudgingly did.

“Pick up her sword and let’s go.”

Gisburn bent down and picked up the sword and whilst doing so he ran it along the inside of her leg toward her thigh. Swelling with anger she stepped back bringing her foot to his shoulder as she sent

him backwards onto his backside. He looked up at her his face tight and angry. The other boy was laughing but immediately stopped when he saw Gisburn lunge at her. Deftly, he grabbed the back of Gisburn's shirt and pulled him back. "Don't touch her again," he warned, "unless you want to wake to the feel of a cold blade against your ribs!"

Gisburn drew back his face contorted in anger and fear. Fern now knew who had control. But it was power he gained through fear and fear could turn on you, it was a weaker power that was usually short lived. She was going to have to be careful with this boy, she'd need to try and stay on his good side, and he obviously wasn't one to try to play. Taking her arm he pulled her along at the same time grabbing the sword harshly from Gisburn.

"Let's get back to the boat," he growled.

As he hauled her along with the gun at her ribs Fern went through scenarios in her head. Ways that she could escape now, rather than later, but every scenario ended in her being shot dead and so were not plans she could go through with.

It wasn't long before they reached an anchor settled deep into the dirt, the thud that she'd heard. Attached was a boat that had been dragged onto the gravelly shore.

"Get the anchor Gisburn," he growled brandishing the gun toward the object and then quickly thrusting it into her ribs again. He was looking out to the lake but she couldn't see anything out there and wondered where they'd come from.

"Who are you?" she asked, studying him more now, taking in his bulky body, his height, which was not much taller than any of the Woodlanders and noticing the hard muscles on his arms.

He gave her a sneer, "Lakellers," he replied, pulling her once more toward the boat.

She didn't know much about the Lakellers, she knew they lived on the lakes, collected food on shore and ate the envillions, a fish that had taken over the lakes after the Devastation when all the other fish had died. She also knew they were thieves.

"What's your name?" she asked trying to soften her voice to become more coaxing and friendly.

He gave a snort, recognizing what she was trying to do and gruffly replied "Madden," as he grabbed her hands together.

She noticed that he'd put the gun in his pocket and had pulled out a rope. Her chance to escape she thought as she wrenched her hands upwards but she'd forgotten Gisburn who was now behind her, his hands tight around her waist his body against her back.

Madden gave her a rueful smile and grabbed her hands again knotting the rope around one and brutally pulling it behind her back whilst Gisburn moved out of the way. Taking hold of her other arm he wrenched the rope tight around it, biting into her wrists. Without warning he pushed her forward making her stagger.

"Now get in the boat," he growled.

She climbed into the boat and sat at the front as he directed her to. She watched as Madden dragged one side of the boat toward the lake and Gisburn dragged the other. When the water was gently lapping at the sides, both boys being knee deep in it, they leaped into the boat. With their backs to her, they grabbed an oar each and whilst they sat side by side took long pulls. Looking beyond them she noticed the boat had more benches and four more oars resting inside. Obviously, it was used by more than two normally and she could see that Madden and Gisburn were having problems directing the boat.

The process was taking a long time to get the boat to move through the water and she resigned herself to her thoughts. She could try to escape, throw herself over the side but what good would it do to drown? Slowly, the boat edged its way through the waves and started to pull away from the grasp of the

land, inch by inch going further into the lake. As she watched the trees become smaller she wished that she were like the other Woodlander females at home safe, obediently going about their business.

Chapter 17

With first light Denver was up on his feet and nudging Blackthorn to get up, Oak was already standing and leaning over to help the boy. Denver looked for Detroit and found him once more standing next to Rancor. Today was not a day that he would place any trust in Detroit. He searched the rest for Flint and found him staring back, his face tight. He understood his friend's worries but for now nothing could be done. He called him over, watched him grab a metal mug, pour in cold coffee from the night before and make his way over.

Flint smiled at him but it didn't reach his eyes, they were hard and drawn. "As much as I hate coffee," he muttered. "I do enjoy the stimulating effect it has upon me."

Denver gave a small laugh and placed a hand upon his good friend's shoulder. "I would make you a hot pot of it but we must get moving we're to be at the point by noon."

His friend eyed him and nodded, "Do you want me to watch over our prisoners?" he asked. Denver smiled, he enjoyed the understanding and close communication between the two of them.

"Detroit has made plans with Rancor; I wish I knew what they were. I can't pick anything up from Rancor other than his delight in the chance of success and all I get from Detroit is his hunger for power. Nothing that helps me make plans.

"Watch over the Woodlanders, today may be one in which we can expect an attack from the rest of them. Their numbers are probably great and they'll come as an army so keep your wits about you." Flint nodded and Denver carried on, "If they come as a large group I will quickly be aware of them and know from which direction they are coming but if they split my time for registering where they are will not be as adept. However, I will give as much warning as I can."

Once more Flint nodded his head.

"This Woodlander is peaceful though," Denver continued, "he doesn't want a battle. He wants only the safety of his people even if it is at his expense. I know you feel this in him too."

"Yes," Flint replied, "I gained something of an understanding of him during our walk through the forest."

Denver looked into his friends eyes, Flint respected Oak. He sensed that Flint felt a feeling of betrayal toward Denver because of it. His admiration of Oak tore at his faith in the Citans. Smiling Denver dropped his hand from Flint's shoulder.

"Help bring him onto our side Flint," he encouraged. "He is more powerful than we are aware." With this he strode in amongst his group.

"Today we travel to the point. Take what is left of the food and eat whilst we walk."

Turning he faced Detroit. "Detroit you will make sure that nothing is left behind and kick out the remains of the fire."

He saw Detroit's face darken at what he thought were lowly orders and Denver smiled as he turned away. He had every intention of making his life the living hell that he deserved it to be; he would make sure he treated him worse from here on.

He watched as backpacks were slung onto shoulders. From the corner of his eye he saw Detroit kicking the ashes and stomping the glowing embers in anger. He smiled again, he needed some form of amusement and he'd enjoy using Detroit as a distraction. The more he made Detroit hate him, the more likely he was to make a mistake, and then Denver would be upon him like a beast on prey.

He led the group with his rifle armed and ready. He carried it in his hand and quickly sent it to his shoulder when he heard a sound. The sounds were always from the band he was with, tripping up and cursing. He wondered how he managed to have such a cumbersome group who were so heavy on

their feet. Perhaps in the future (if they had one) he should have one of the girls teach them ballet so they could be balanced and more agile. The vision made him laugh out loud and the boys beside him gave him a sidelong look that insinuated “he's losing it”. Was he losing it? Were they going to lose everything?

He smiled at the boys to placate them and said “I was just thinking of a joke I'd heard—if a girl is alone in the forest is she truly alone, or do the other sides of her personality count as many more?”

The boys laughed and one of them turned to him and said, “That's my girl alright! She asks me if I'm seeing any other girls, I tell her why would I? There are enough of them in you to keep me busy for a lifetime!”

The boys laughed again and nodded, it was an old joke but one that still bound them together in their bewilderment of the female sex. Denver looked at them still chuckling and was glad that the heavy air was lifted even if it was only temporarily.

Denver thought of Boston. She didn't seem difficult to understand, there was nothing mysterious about her. Perhaps that was why she was of so little interest to him. Then again, he didn't think that mystery was what he was looking for. The chemistry had to be there, emotions stirred, senses heightened, making you yearn. Longing for something always made it more special when it was finally yours.

He'd always wanted to have a gun, had searched and searched, hoping he would at least find one of the military guns but every gun he found had been crushed beyond repair. One day whilst digging through rubble as usual to find supplies, he'd found a basement full of food and clothing, useful goods. It had been someone's storage. He'd found a locked box, broken it open and found within it a carefully wrapped rifle. It was an old reproduction, garishly fancy with its silver but it worked and it was now his. To him it was like finding treasure, there was nothing else he had ever wanted since his dad had told him of his own trips with Denver's grandfather to hunt rabbits and deer. He'd told him how good a shot his grandfather was and he, his father, had become just as good. Denver had practiced every day after he found the rifle. For three days he used thirty precious bullets that he had found in the locked box and he too succeeded in becoming a good shot.

They had been trekking through the remainder of the forest for a while when he noticed the thinning of the trees. He breathed a huge sigh of relief, he would be glad to be out of it and in the open air. He picked up the pace eager to exit past the last tree.

When his step took him out onto the grass of the point he felt triumphant, one part of the journey was over, now for the next. He continued to walk to the cliff edge and stared across the broad expanse of the lake. Taking two deep breaths he scanned from one side to the other and saw nothing, nothing but water and the trees they had just exited. His group were beside him looking around them. They too saw only the huge open area of grass with cliff drops on all sides of twenty feet to the lake below and water seeming to stretch to infinity.

“There's no one here!” Detroit looked at Rancor in question. He wildly looked from side to side, as if he might have missed something the first time. Rancor smiled and sat himself down.

“We shall wait here. All close together if you please.” His yellowed teeth took on a particularly slimy look in the bright light of the sun. Denver indicated to the others to sit down. They may as well rest until whomever Rancor was waiting for arrived.

Some of the group soon fell asleep, snoring loudly because they were on their backs and he nodded to those beside any snorers to give them a push with their boot. This made the offenders wake temporarily and turn onto their sides, rewarding everyone else with grunts and then silence. Rancor continually stared at him with a foul smile upon his lips. He felt like taking the butt of his rifle and

hitting him across the head, he found him irritating and obnoxious. Shaking himself inwardly he reminded himself not to let his emotions be at someone else's mercy. He looked away toward Oak and noticed that he sat cross legged in a trance.

How foolish Denver was, he'd become caught up in his dislike of Rancor and hadn't been paying attention to what was going on in the distance. He could feel it now, air moving, others approaching. Were they Woodlanders? They were getting closer. He looked to the trees, nothing. They were still travelling toward them, they were close but they were not on the ground. His vision was disturbing, he could see clouds.

They were in the air! His eyes shot upwards at the same time as Oak's to see the huge dirigible that was coming toward them; it was dropping through the clouds, losing altitude. The giant airship moved by propellers. The airship was heading in their direction.

He was shocked, he couldn't believe it. Rancor was being aided by the Aviatilians—the people of the air. Oak too was staring at Denver in surprise. Denver quickly got to his feet, he knew Rancor's eyes were following him but now was not the time to worry; he had to talk with Flint and Oak. By the time he reached them they were on their feet.

Denver looked at Flint and then at Oak. “What do you know of the Aviatilians?” he asked Oak.

“We know very little of them since they cannot land their airship in the forest. I don't know them or their ways, however, they have I hear, always been peaceful. So why would they be bound to Rancor?”

“That, I do not know,” Denver replied. “They only land to pick up supplies; their airship can carry everything they need so their time in our company is usually brief, for a few days at the most. We've been happy to share our fruit and vegetables with them and they in return have caused us no problems. Now though, this is a problem if they have joined forces with Rancor or could it be that they are the same as us? That they have no choice but to play the game?”

“And just how bound are you?” Oak questioned, he was watching him carefully and Denver knew he was opening his mind to sense his own reactions and feelings. He rewarded him with nothing, just a small smile and then looked up to the airship. He concentrated on the airship above them but he could gather nothing other than there were many on board.

He watched Oak close his eyes and just as quickly open them again. “They are hard to read but perhaps once we are with them, they will be easier to understand and we can formulate a plan from there?”

Now Denver's eyebrows went up. Was the Woodlander offering to work with him? He could see Flint move uncomfortably, having two people with the gift was unusual but for two of them to be beside him was making him uneasy.

Denver looked at Rancor who was also on his feet and pulling Detroit to his side. “Let's see what the slime Rancor has arranged for us.” He strode away quickly to avoid the descending airship.

By the time he reached Rancor, he approached a fidgety, excited boy; he was staring up at the airship in awe and admiration. Denver suppressed the disgust he felt for this boy yet again.

“So Rancor, is this the transportation you promised?”

Rancor's smile was almost reaching his ears and Denver could have sworn that he could see demonic laughter in his eyes.

“Yes, yes indeed it is, indeed it is.” he repeated, more to himself than to Denver.

He left Denver with no doubt, that Rancor and probably his leader were both insane. They were one step closer to whatever Rancor and the Lavat leader had planned and it made him uncomfortable to think what reception they had concocted for them.

“Tell everyone to get out of the way so the airship can land.” Rancor ordered and Denver called their attention.

“Move out of the way, the airship is going to land.”

Hastily they moved away as they looked up to see the great airship gradually descending vertically, it was surprisingly quiet.

With the ship on the ground, Denver told his group to follow Rancor who was already waiting for the falling ramp to reach the ground in order to board. They dutifully followed the hunched over figure with Detroit at his side. Rancor was mumbling to Detroit but the words were unintelligible because they were softly spoken. The rest of the group were silent as they waited their turn to step onto the ramp into the huge airship.

He left them to their task and wandered around the large open point. He had a feeling of being watched and he wanted to get an idea of from where and at what distance. He slowly did a sweep from one side of the point to the other, searching the bushes and trees that edged the forest. There was no one that he could see. Turning he looked at Oak, Oak was searching the woods too, he looked confused. Swinging his eyes they rested on Denver and they both turned to look out at the lake.

If they hadn't both looked at that very instant they would have missed it, the object that they saw at the opposite point as it came out of the bay and disappeared around the corner. It was a small boat and he knew it contained two boys and a girl (he sensed a girl who was there against her will). When he looked at Oak again, he didn't understand the pained expression on his face, a mix of anger and distress. It was the first time Oak had shown emotion and Denver realized it was because of the girl.

Elm awoke before the first light of dawn had approached the sky. He moved his body to stretch the limbs that had been folded against the tree he'd slept in. He looked blearily about him. He'd heard very little that night other than the usual grunts and growls from the night creatures. Feeling well rested and content with himself, he sat for a while going over what he would do that day.

First he would find the Citans and follow them out of the forest making sure they were gone for good. Although, now he thought about it, he wondered just how they were going to traverse the lake. If they planned to swim they had better watch out for the envillions that would soon swarm them and enjoy such a large meal. The thought of Oak being finished off by the huge vicious fishes brought delight to his eyes but it was soon squashed when he realized that the Citans wouldn't be that stupid and obviously had some other means to get across the lake. He wasn't sure what that would be; perhaps they already had boats waiting there. He didn't really care how they travelled, he just wanted them gone.

In the grey of morning he descended the tree and dropped lightly to his feet at its base. He scoured the forest around him, still curious as to where Pine was. He didn't trust him, he might suddenly pop out from behind the nearest tree and jump upon him. However, Pine didn't and he gradually made his way to where the Citans had last made camp.

It took him a little while to find it, they had done a good job of concealing that they'd been there. Besides the overturned dirt and grass upon the remnants of what had been the fire, there was little else other than depressed leaves and a few broken twigs.

He followed their route, watching carefully for a leaf sunk into the earth and a scuff of soil from a boot. It was a slow process as he didn't want to come upon them too quickly, giving himself away as he almost had the day before. By the time he finally caught up with them they were already at the point.

He stared at them from well within the trees, noting where the Citan leader was and dropping even further back and away from him.

He decided to climb a tree and wait to see what would happen. He felt more comfortable from his elevated position as he was well hidden. Although, now his vision was more occluded by the foliage of the canopy he sat in. Still, he saw no sign of Pine. He didn't like how he was feeling, he was uneasy and he knew it had to do with Pine. Where was he? Why didn't he just show himself? He was sure that he would have followed Oak but he hadn't come across him or any sign that he might have been there.

Disgruntled with his un-obliging enemy he continued his vigil of sitting in the trees. He could see the Citans were sat also, waiting for something. He saw the leader move and talk to another Citan. It was then, he espied Oak holding up Blackthorn. His heart lifted at the thought that he would soon be rid of him forever and happily, he himself hadn't had to lift a finger.

He noticed sudden movement within the band and wondered what all the scrambling was about as they jumped up to their feet, but then he couldn't see everything because his view was blocked by the leaves. When he finally saw the huge airship descending to land, its movements slow and steady in its descent, he was surprised. Its giant size was not encumbering at all as it landed as lightly as a falling leaf.

He hadn't thought fully about how they were going to travel from the point. He hadn't even taken in the fact that there were sudden cliff drops from all sides of the point and no direct access to the water. The airship made sense and he smiled at not having figured out that it was their only means of travel. They would've gone to the bay if they were travelling by water.

He was shocked at the sight of the large airship. He would not have thought that the Aviatilians would be involved. He'd considered that the Lakellers might have been coerced into helping them travel. They would do anything for goods and antiquities but the Aviatilians had rules that they followed and one of them was to allow no-one, other than Aviatilians onto their ship.

He patiently waited until most of the Citan's had boarded the airship. His eyes were piercing through the forest when he saw Blackthorn gingerly climbing up the ramp with Oak's aid. Elm saw them vanish into the ship with the Citan leader. The ramp was raised and finally the door closed. The airship ascended until the canopy obscured it from his view. Nothing was left except the open point and the depressions in the grass that had once held a massive airship on its ground.

He remained in the tree for a further five minutes curious as to where the Citans and Aviatilians were going. The curiosity was brief, he had other things to arrange now and one of them was to make himself leader. He'd almost forgotten Pine as he was descending the tree and halfway down he stopped and peered about the forest below to make sure he was not suddenly going to be accosted by him. He reached the ground with no problems, no Pine, only the quiet of the forest.

Tying his rope back about his waist he gathered himself together for the run back to the defenders. He had his story already in mind having gone over it many times. They'd become well rehearsed lines. The day seemed fresher to him than any other and he took deep breaths of the woody scent that pervaded the air. His body was tingling with his excitement. He would never forget this day; he would record it in the historical archives that Oak kept. They would be his now, he would be the writer of the events and this would be marked as one of the most important, the day he became leader.

He'd been running for a while perhaps almost an hour when he became aware that something was different in the forest, he came to a halt and scanned the trees and bushes around him. He saw nothing, no movement, no sound but he knew that he was not alone.

"Pine!" he yelled, "I know you're there. Stop this foolishness and show yourself immediately."

Pine stepped out from behind the tree that obscured his presence.

“I’m here, Elm.” Elm smiled, his mind was already planning the demise of Pine and his sad tale to tell the defenders. “Why are you hiding?” he asked, indicating that Pine should move toward him.

“Perhaps, to watch you, Elm, to see what you are up to, what game you’re playing. What game are you playing, Elm?” Pine was warily moving toward him.

“What game? Why would I be playing a game? There is much at stake here, we have lost two of our clan members, our great leader...” he almost choked on the words but recovered himself. “We are in a difficult situation, we have no guidance, and we need a new leader.”

Pine was coming closer now and Elm was itching to grab his sword to pierce him through but he knew he must wait, wait until he was near, unsuspecting, keep talking, and keep him distracted.

“And who do you suggest we promote to be our new leader, Elm?”

Elm, didn’t like the way he said his name, the sarcasm and sneer upon Pine’s face was goading him and it took an effort to brush it aside.

“That is for the rest of the defenders to vote upon and who puts himself forth to be considered.”

He was watching Pine’s every move carefully, checking to see if Pine was as ready to reach for his sword as Elm, himself was. He saw Pine cock his head to the side quizzically and show a slow sardonic smile.

“And would you be putting yourself forward, Elm?”

He was getting irritated at the way Pine was using his name at the end of every question, saying it as though it was something repulsive.

“If the defenders should want me to be their leader I wouldn’t refuse them. They’re my clan and I respect their choices.”

“You think they would choose you, Elm?” Pine was almost within striking distance now and Elm’s fingers were twitching in eagerness.

“I have been a faithful defender, I have proved myself. Yes, they would choose me.”

Pine stopped and gave an acerbic snicker. “So you want to be leader do you, Elm?”

Elm was becoming frustrated at the game that Pine was playing with him, he was still out of reach for a fatal blow and Elm was not going to take the risk of being beaten by him. He may be a better fighter than Elm, he wasn’t sure. He had to rethink what he was to do, Pine was one step ahead of him so far, and he needed the advantage.

“Why would I think of being leader Pine, when we already have a leader, alive with the Citans?”

He could see his new course took Pine by surprise and his face was suddenly occupied with other thoughts of disquiet. Pine’s face was rigid now as he stared back at Elm and Elm had to stop a tick of a smile that wanted to place itself at the corner of his mouth. He’d baited him.

“Why do you stand there when there is much for us to discuss about Oak and how we are to save him from the Citans. Come Pine let us put our heads together and consider all the angles that we can use to make an effective rescue possible.” Elm’s voice had softened in what he hoped was a coaxing and encouraging invitation.

Pine’s eyes narrowed as he studied Elm but still he didn’t step any closer. Elm was thinking he would have to step forward himself but he didn’t like the idea. What if Pine suddenly pulled out his sword and impaled him upon it? He would have no time to save himself and Pine could tell the defenders that it was in self defence that he’d killed Elm, since that was what he was going to tell the defenders after he killed Pine.

He was in luck, Pine was stepping toward him once more, and he would soon be within striking distance. With eager eyes he stared into Pine’s, wondering if he had any inkling that he might be walking to his death. Elm tried to quiet his heart, as it beat faster, preparing his body for the rush of

action it was about to take. He watched Pine approach the invisible mark that Elm had set for himself to withdraw his sword and strike Pine down. He waited.

Drawing in a breath at the very point he'd imagined his attack and Pine standing no more than a sword and arms length away, his hand hovered above his sheathed sword. With a quick movement he went to the hilt and was suddenly grasped in a painful hold from behind. Swinging around in agitation whilst he fought off the burdensome object upon his wrist, he came face to face with Cedar.

The gratified smile on Cedar's face made Elm want to spit at him.

"What are you doing you fool?" he raged.

"Saving the life of a fellow defender." Cedar replied, leaning toward Elm as he twisted his hand back, watching Elm wince in pain.

"I was not going to attack Pine! What would make you think such a thing?" Elm had to bluff; there was no other way as he was now afraid that he would be struck down by either Cedar or Pine.

"Then why were you going for your sword Elm?" came the words of Pine behind him.

Elm stopped his fight for his hand and twisted his head to look back at Pine, his mind scrambling for ideas.

Defenders were coming forth from all sides of the forest now and they were all looking at him with distrust. Elm felt a surge of panic rise within him and quickly suppressed it. He had to keep calm, he had to keep the bluff going or he'd lose his life.

"You're mistaken Pine! I wasn't going to my sword but to my bag. I'm hungry and felt the need of a melini tablet to aid my discussion with you. My need for food was fogging up my brain."

"There was more than that fogging up your brain, Elm!" Again, Elm cringed at the disdain in the pronunciation of his name from Pine's lips.

"I assure you there was not!" he spat back at him.

"We have no time for this!" Pine retorted giving a wave aside with his hand. "Your fate will be decided upon later. It will be brought before all the defenders to discuss. After which a vote shall be taken as to what is to be done with you!" Pine's eyes were filled with hatred and Elm took a quick deep breath to quiescent his fear.

"Cedar, place Elm with one of the other defenders. I need you with me. We have little time and a lot to discuss." Pine was walking away and indicating to the other defenders to gather around him.

"Hemlock!" Cedar shouted.

Elm smiled, a chance he thought, I have another chance. Who said they can prove anything, he could tell them their view of what he was doing was askew, that he'd no intentions of injuring Pine. He could sway them to think that Pine's own intentions were to be leader and Pine was trying to get him out of the way so there would be no opposition. Pine wanted control and wasn't he taking control now? Ordering the defenders around like he was already their leader? Pine was the one who wanted to lead the Woodlanders Elm would say he was the victim here.

New ideas presented themselves one after another as he watched Hemlock walking toward him. Pine's words barely came to his ears.

"Tie his hands behind his back and never take your eyes away from him. He is cunning and will escape at any opportunity."

Cedar had released his hold on Elm's wrist as he saw Hemlock nod his head. Cedar left him to join Pine, whilst Hemlock tied a rope around one of Elm's hands. Looking at Elm he gave him a knowing smile, then he took Elm's arm behind his back and grabbing the other wrist tied them loosely together.

Chapter 18

It was Madden who saw the Citans first upon the point, he indicated his finding to Gisburn who looked up anxiously and muttered, "What can they want? Why would they be here, Madden?"

"I don't know, Gisburn," Madden replied. Although Fern couldn't see his face because his back was to her, she could sense that he was grimly considering the question.

"Keep quiet and as close to the shoreline as possible. I don't want them to see us." Madden's back had stiffened as he spoke. "Hopefully, we will blend in with the shoreline. Row faster Gisburn!"

Fern looked upon the two hunched figures as they hauled on their respective oars, the veins in their arms snaking down with each pull. She looked up to the point; she could see the Citans but couldn't tell what they were doing. They were all sat down, resting...waiting? She wasn't sure. Madden and Gisburn were fighting with the movement of the water as they strove to reach the point that they needed to get around. They stopped pulling when the airship came down from the sky. She knew that Madden and Gisburn's jaws must have dropped in surprise because their oars lowered and their heads tilted back slightly as they stared. The Citans were all standing now as the airship slowly descended to them.

"Pull Gisburn, pull!" cried Madden now fearful and Fern sensed that if seen they could be in danger. Perhaps their fear stemmed from a past disagreement with the Citans and Aviatilians, she wasn't sure but she was sure that Madden was desperate to get out of their sight. Gisburn tried to haul faster but all he managed to do was put them out of sync and Madden became angry.

"You idiot! In time with me! Now pull! Pull!" His breathing was heavy as they took huge strokes to get them to the end of the point. Both boys hauled on each large oar in their hands and swiftly they made progress to get around the point.

Fern looked up to see the Citans disappearing into the airship. Suddenly her breath caught in her mouth. She saw him—Oak. How could she not recognize him? Everything about him was in her mind as permanent as the copper etchings she'd seen in the art books. He stood with the Citans holding onto a figure, one of his defenders. Only one reason came to mind for his need to hold a defender, it meant he was injured. What terrible thing had happened for one of them to be hurt and both of them to be caught?

She now saw the huge Citan leader, his presence still strong and controlling, dominating even amongst the other large Citans. His was looking toward the trees searching; turning he looked at Oak and then both of them spun around and were staring at her. She felt her heart cry out to Oak. I'm sorry! Oak I am so sorry! Too late, they were gone and the boat was pulling away past the point and Oak was no longer there for her eyes to see. He was gone from her, just as she herself had declared not so long ago that he was gone from her heart. But could her mind dispel his image? He had after all been the only person that had held a role of importance in her life. Could her heart and head ever truly let go?

Staring at the back of Madden she wondered what was in store for her now. She was on her own and her only protection was to have her wits about her, to be ready for the challenges ahead and be prepared to displace herself temporarily from her body to cope. Her stomach tightened and her mouth became dry at the thought.

She hadn't been the type to dream of romantic encounters, imagining herself having exposed soft silky shoulders, receiving light tremulous kisses or the caresses of gentle fingers. Her thoughts of love had not been of kisses and racing hearts but standing equal with Oak, having his respect, his admiration, his companionship. All she'd ever wanted was his words of congratulations, a look that showed he was impressed by her, or that he shared an idea with her, asked her opinion. She didn't need him to look at her as if he were going to devour her like these Lakellers did; she wasn't sure how she would respond if

he looked at her like that. She'd noticed lately, how differently her body behaved when he was around, the heat she would feel at the nearness of him, but she'd dispelled that as not being well. Probably nothing more than the onset of her dreaded monthly bleed, she never felt right at that time. Her mind became confused by things and her body was uncomfortable with swelled breasts and belly. It was annoying that girls had to suffer such a distraction every month.

This she felt was another reason why she should become a defender, to prove that females were not just vessels for children. How many times had she argued with Oak on the subject of female defenders, she knew there were some girls who wanted to learn to fight and protect. She wasn't the only one; she was just the most vocal. It didn't matter, she would never see Oak again and love wasn't going to be a part of her life. She was going to survive and that was all that mattered. She would be strong, she would watch, learn and find a way—a way to what? Save Oak? No, that was no longer a viable objective. She had to find a way to escape and return to her clan, scathed or unscathed, she was determined she would be going home.

Madden turned toward her now and a smile spread across his features. She thought he was smiling at her and scowled back but realized he was not paying her any attention, so she turned around. Her jaw dropped as she stared at the ship they were approaching. She sat waiting like a large grey thundercloud hovering over the rain. Fern's heart and resolve faltered, she felt her panic rise, as she gulped at the air that she was having difficulty swallowing. Madden was looking at her now with a wicked grin upon his face.

“Now my pretty Fern, we find out just how much you are worth.”

Fern glanced away from his avaricious gaze to the expansive water, and then toward the land they'd left behind. She wondered if she would see this land again or was she now only to live upon this floating metal cage? Would her feet set foot on her beloved clan's soil? Would she ever run through Elanclose again?

Oak couldn't believe the despair he felt when he saw the boat and knew that Fern had been captured by Lakellers who had clear intents to do her wrong. His dismay was all the more acute because he was here but unable to do anything to save her since he too was a captive. His anger surged at the thought that once again she had disobeyed him and because of it she was in danger.

Staring bleakly at the place where the boat had vanished he tried to collect his thoughts into some kind of order. Order, he needed order, he needed structure. His gaze went to Denver who was staring at him in surprise. Denver, knew of course all the emotions that were surging through his body, uncontrolled, so very easy to read. Breaking away from Denver's gaze he looked up to the airship. He needed to dissect the part of him that was in turmoil about Fern's fate. He had to be practical; there was nothing he could do. His concentration should be on what he and Blackthorn were facing and how they were going to escape. Only then could he think of a rescue plan for Fern, if, by then, it was not too late.

Nearly everyone was inside the airship now and Flint was looking at Blackthorn and himself. He didn't say anything, he didn't need to. They were to board the ship. He knew that Flint was uneasy about getting onto the airship, not because of the ship itself but because he didn't trust the Aviatilians. Denver was beside them now, he too was silent.

Carefully helping Blackthorn toward the dirigible, Oak shouldered him onto the ramp. Blackthorn's face showed concern, he was wondering what would happen once on board the airship.

Oak just smiled in encouragement and gently guided him up the ramp. He looked up to the waiting figures and wondered what the Aviatilians were like, he would soon know.

On the lip of the open doorway one of the Aviatilians was stretching a hand to Blackthorn pulling him in. He helped him away from the edge as Denver followed. Oak peered around taking in the open cargo area, noting crates and boxes piled on either side of them all strapped down to the floor, secure so they would not move no matter what forces hit the airship.

The Aviatilian stood before them so Oak nodded thanks to him, noting his small bulk and short height. His hair was red, curly, cut close to his head so it corkscrewed upwards and twirled inwards like fiddleheads, his skin was pale with a few freckles. He turned his eyes away from him. There was only one other person he knew with red hair and he couldn't think of her right now. Perhaps he would allow himself to remember tonight before he went to sleep. Perhaps he wouldn't even allow himself that.

Turning to the group, since Denver had now joined Oak and Blackthorn, the Aviatilian gave them a bright smile as his hand pressed a button and the ramp slowly began to rise.

"Welcome!" he said, "To the Avila Rose. The only airship we know of in the sky and the largest airship ever built," he continued with pride.

Oak stared back at him in surprise at his jovial manner, he noticed that Denver did too and realized they'd both been expecting a much less friendly greeting.

"Thank you," Denver replied. "The Woodlanders are my captives. I want them to be close to me at all times. Can you see that they are?"

He gave a huge beaming smile again. "Yes of course I can. I'm Radcliffe by the way."

He stepped forward eagerly offering Denver his hand, which Denver gave a quick shake and said, "Denver."

"Pleased to meet you Denver!" he turned with his hand outstretched to Flint.

"Flint," he returned, whilst his hand was also heartily moved up and down.

Oak leaned forward and gave Radcliffe his hand keeping with the spirit of the occasion.

"Oak." He motioned toward Blackthorn, "my friend here is injured and he needs a place to rest."

Radcliffe who was still enthusiastically shaking Oak's hand released it and quickly turned to Blackthorn. As he grasped his hand he looked at his face taking in the pained expression as Blackthorn muttered, "I'm Blackthorn." His voice was small and tired as he continued, "I need to sit, please."

Still holding onto his hand he studied him for a while longer and then with a look of disquiet Radcliffe offered, "Do you need me to aid you? I can take you to where the bunks are and you can lie down there." He turned back to the rest of the group, "If Denver will allow you to be out of his presence?"

"Of course, in his condition he won't be making any effort to escape." Denver gazed at the unhealthy body before him.

Blackthorn looked at Oak unsure as to whether he should stay with him or go and sleep. Oak was already letting go of Blackthorn and encouraging Radcliffe to take him.

"Yes, that would be a very good idea. Thank you!" Oak replied nodding to Radcliffe in agreement. Radcliffe attentively slipped an arm around Blackthorn.

Taking most of Blackthorn's weight so that he was tilted like the Leaning Tower of Pisa and with his other free hand Radcliffe pointed to a nearby door. "Go through the door along the corridor past all the closed doors to the lounge. There is an opening to a large dining area; you will find the rest of your companions in there."

"Thank you!" responded Denver who quickly strode ahead of Oak. He walked through the mentioned door as Oak followed with Flint on his heels.

Once through they were walking on a carpeted corridor with doors on either side. Eventually they came to the huge doorway Radcliffe had told them of. It led into an expansive room of benches and tables and was brightly lit by many windows. They could hear laughter from the Citans. Oak wondered what they could have to laugh at but he couldn't see because Denver's expansive body was in the way and his internal vision was only of many bodies huddled together.

When he was amidst the group he was surprised to find that they were being entertained by a short, stocky, sandy haired Aviatilian, who was performing card tricks on a table that they were all gathered around. He exchanged a glance with Denver who seemed equally astonished and confused as to what was happening. The boys' laughter erupted again as they stepped back and one of them gave the Aviatilian a slap on the back whilst saying, "I have no idea how you did that but it was cleverly done!"

"Then you have to see this trick," replied the Aviatilian gathering them around him once more.

Denver indicated to a table at the window and Oak went with him and sat down, both of them in a position to watch the proceedings. Oak was already making a mental note of who was there and who wasn't. One person was missing, Rancor. Flint looked as if he were trying to decide whether he should join them. He watched Denver give a signal for him to stay put and Flint gladly sat at a table by himself as he often liked to be, a lone entity.

Looking out of the large windows, they were given a magnificent view across the lake. Oak unwillingly searched the ripples below. He was trying to find the boat containing the two Lakellers and Fern. He knew Denver could sense his emotional turmoil, especially when he espied the ship. Oak stared at the massive, morbid, metallic freighter and the land behind; both were receding into the distance. The vessel sat still on the water just past the point they had seen the small boat disappear. They both knew that this was the ship the trio had been heading toward and were now on board. Oak memorized it; he planned to rescue Fern when he got the chance.

"You're right; she's probably on board the ship by now." Denver ventured as Oak slowly brought his gaze to his. "The Lakellers have taken her. They've done it before, taken girls." His glance swayed to the ship and back to Oak. "They took Rachel, a beautiful, brunette from our city, we never saw her again."

His eyes dropped for a moment in respect. "We've been told that girls have gone missing elsewhere, always attractive ones. They only take the pretty ones. Where they go I don't know but I do know the Lakellers are untrustworthy and mean."

His eyes strayed back to the lake as Oak's spirits dropped like the breakers on the water below at the words he'd heard. He knew Denver could sense his thoughts but cared little at this moment. He wondered if he would see Fern again.

"You have no idea what became of Rachel?"

Denver returned his gaze his eyes showing his knowledge of Oak's feelings.

"No, we assumed the worst." Denver gave Oak a sympathetic glance and then continued to look out of the window.

"She's important to you isn't she?" Oak was startled by Denver's statement. He stared solidly silent for a moment as Denver continued to gaze across the water. He faltered becoming perplexed as to whether he should continue this personal conversation and sensed Denver patiently waiting before turning to look him.

Oak relented. "I saved her after the Devastation." He looked away for a moment rallying his self control. "She was eleven at the time, I was twelve; we grew up together and became family. She's like a sister."

Denver raised his eyebrows but said nothing, so Oak chose to ignore the look.

“So what happens now?” He felt Denver's surprise at his sudden familiarity and acceptance of there being no other option but to be open with him.

“I don't know. We go along with Rancor and see where the airship takes us.”

Oak nodded back and turned to gaze out of the window again. Denver did the same. Oak closed off to him and he felt Denver follow his lead. A sense of relief wafted over him as he welcomed the silence between them and a chance to go over his own thoughts.

He thought of his clan, his defenders and what was happening to them. He thought of Elm. He knew he would be trying to enforce some plan to become leader now that Oak was no longer there. He hoped that his defenders were astute enough to know and tackle him on his vie for power. Who would lead them now? He had no doubt it would be Pine, he was strong sensible self-assured, he was the best person to take care of the clan until his return. That was if he ever returned.

It was strange that only a few days ago he had thought of Willow as his lifetime companion. Such thoughts were to be vanquished now; the survival of Blackthorn was his only compunction for now. The young defender had stepped into this maelstrom because of Oak and Oak would do his best to keep him alive and get him back home.

Going through his thoughts he segregated his concerns to one side of his brain and structured his plans into a list of three on the other. Number one: to keep Blackthorn alive and aid his recovery from his injuries. Number two: to escape from their kidnappers and save Fern. Number three: to return to the clan.

He was uncertain about his second and third plans since they could deviate in different directions. Should he escape or join forces with Denver to defeat Rancor and his leader? Whether he joined or not, returning to the clan would still be their goal unless they died. If they aided Denver and survived, should he send Blackthorn back to the clan and then search for Fern or have Blackthorn with him and search for Fern? Everything was becoming too complicated. He would stick to one thing at a time.

Sub-categorizing his plans in his mind he went back to number one. Blackthorn needed rest so he would encourage it as much as possible. He would check his wound again when he awoke. He would also talk to the Aviatilians to ask for a bandage, after which he would clean the wound and distribute the leaves upon it and redress it. His calculations for healing were two days at most with rest. The travelling that Blackthorn had been forced to do had delayed the healing process.

Content that he had his thoughts under control he felt more able to relax and sat back in his seat. Denver was smiling at him.

“You sure have a busy mind Oak. I don't know how you sort through it all.”

Oak was disturbed by his words he'd felt sure he'd closed his mind off to him or had the sensation only been Denver closing his thoughts off to him. How foolish of him to leave his thoughts open. He immediately raised his barricade his face becoming tight as he clenched his jaw in reproach at his lack of discipline.

“Don't worry Oak. With all the confusion in there I was able to retrieve little of your plans. It's obvious that your concerns are with Blackthorn, that anyone can see and escape would be another major directive. It doesn't take the gift of mind reading to figure that out.”

Oak gave a small smile. He liked Denver even though he distrusted him; he had a winning way about him. No doubt that is how he'd managed to become leader. Still, it made sense for Oak to remain wary, persuasion was just another form of manipulation and Denver was no fool; he would use everything possible that would benefit himself and his band.

Since Denver was being more lax in the captive/captor situation, Oak saw no reason why he couldn't benefit from it too.

"So, Denver was there someone special that you left behind?"

Denver raised an eyebrow in amusement at the familiar question. "No Oak, there was no one and you? Did you leave someone special behind?"

"Yes, I left someone special." His eyes were brighter as he eyed Denver and he knew thoughts of Fern were tinkering through Denver's mind.

"No, I'm not talking about the girl in the boat," he continued to allay Denver's concerns that Oak would perhaps become desperate to escape and save her.

"The girl I talk of is safe with my clan." He watched Denver's eyebrows rise even higher and felt a spark of annoyance.

"There are two girls in your life?" Denver's smile was broad as he rubbed his chin to hide his amusement. "You have your hands full Oak!"

"Fern is not a girl in my life as you put it. We have a history together and as a member of my clan I am responsible for her. There are no other emotions involved here."

"Tell yourself that Oak and perhaps one day you'll believe it." Denver only grinned in amusement at the glare Oak gave him and even gave a small chuckle.

"I'm glad to be of humour to you Denver in this situation where there is little to be amused about."

He expected Denver to become serious at his words as they brought him back to their present situation but he didn't, instead he received a gust of a laugh as Denver continued to grin.

"Oak, no matter what life throws at you having a sense of humour can get you through it all. Humour is one of the best gifts around. I'm sorry you have been deprived of it."

Oak was shocked. What was there to be amused at when you were a leader maintaining order and the survival of your clan? He watched Denver chuckle more and felt nettled by it.

"I can assure you that I enjoy humour in the correct setting. I am rigid in my beliefs because they help me to be a better leader. Discipline is everything."

"Indeed?"

"Without discipline only chaos can ensue."

"So your life is disciplined in what way Oak? Do you live your life by rules and regulations that cannot be changed?"

"Rules and regulations are there for a reason. They create stability and structure. If they are changed it would be like trying to replace part of a stone foundation. Taking it out would leave the structure very precarious."

"I see. What if the stone foundation was removed and replaced with steel there would still be stability wouldn't there?"

"Yes once the replacement was made but during the interval in between it would be chaotic and chaos causes weakness."

"So, you're saying there is no room for weakness?"

"Yes, if it interferes with something that works well enough."

"It sounds very regimented to me Oak. Is that important to you?"

"If I'm to guide my clan it is necessary."

"But Oak these are not guidelines, guidelines can be changed, you say there can be no change."

"Change can cause confusion it is best to go with routine. Routine is comfortable."

"By restricting your clan to a routine aren't you leaving them without choices?"

“If they wanted choices they would ask. However they don’t need choices because they have everything they need. They know what their lives are about and therefore live without worry.”

“Interesting. No-one ever questions the rules?”

“No no-one.” Oak paused, “only two people question my rules.”

“Only two? Perhaps they’re the only people that have strong enough characters to question your rules?”

“No. One doesn’t openly question me he revolts against me in an underhand way. He only seeks control.”

“But the other he is open and questions you outright?”

“The other person is not a boy but a girl.”

Oak didn’t need to look at Denver to know that his face was alight with curiosity.

“A girl questions you? She must be quite a personality; I would like to meet her.”

Oak stared across the water, with bitter words he replied, “You can’t she is now on board the ship of the Lakellers.”

“Oh!”

Oak looked up to see many conclusions pass across Denver's face and he didn't like any of them.

“That is why you won’t confess to your real feelings for her because she stands up to you and will not be controlled.”

“She is foolish and disobedient. She should realize that I give her orders to keep her safe. They are in her best interest.”

“She doesn't want to look out for her best interest. She looks to other things as more important than herself just as you do. So why is it she’s wrong and you’re right?”

“I’m her leader. I know what is right and I enforce it to protect.”

“Isn't that what the military said when we were all to keep to the orders of the day upon our screens?”

Oak looked at Denver in surprise. “Are you saying I’m enforcing a military regime upon my clan?”

“When only you have say and control you’re enforcing a dictatorship upon them.”

“My defenders have a say.”

“Then you have a military regime.”

Oak's emotions were rising. How could Denver state that his clan were living no different than they had before the Devastation?

“You know nothing of how my clan live.”

“I know that you have a regime and we all lived in a regime originally.”

“What we have built is not a regime. It is a safe environment of happy people. Everyone is happy.”

“Except for two.”

“They are the exception. No one else questions their lives.”

“Perhaps they do and just don’t say. Do you ever give them a chance to express their opinions? Do you ever ask them how they feel?”

“No, but there is no need to ask. I know they are all content.”

“They are not all content. Two of your clan oppose your rules.”

Oak grated his teeth together and stopped immediately when he realized what he was doing. “One does it to seek control and the other... she does it to be difficult.”

“Oh! She’s just difficult. She has no other reasons?”

“I don't know I haven't asked.”

“You haven't asked. Don't you think as a leader that you should ask?”

“I don't need to ask. I feel I can sense what goes on.”

“I think perhaps you sense what you want to sense.”

“That is ridiculous!”

“Is it? My grandparents were both psychiatrists. I learnt a lot from them about human behaviour. Their assessment of you would be obsessive compulsive.”

“I don't know what obsessive compulsive is but I'm sure that it isn't a compliment.” He gave Denver a hard stare in the hope that he would feel uncomfortable by it and stop the conversation. Denver sped on.

“Obsessive compulsive has different levels; in a high level it isn't conducive to a normal life but it can in small levels bring about determination which is a good thing. Tenacity eventually makes things happen and encourages results. However, not allowing change can cause problems.” He paused, “change can be for the better.”

“Our clan doesn't need change. We get along very well, everything is perfect.”

“There is no such thing as perfection, especially when so many are involved. As you have already found out with the two who present themselves as an obstruction, the two that cause you grief.”

“I will control them both. They'll no longer be a problem.”

“You *will control them*?”

Oak reflected on the words that Denver had repeated and wondered at himself for having said them. He wasn't their master he was their leader, their beloved leader they called him, they weren't his pets or his underlings.

“I'm incorrect, I don't control them. I do however try to persuade them to abide by the rules.”

“Persuasion? Is that what you really use Oak or are you trying to alleviate your fears of being a dictator by fooling yourself into believing something else? Just as you're trying to fool yourself into believing that you're not in love with the girl who was kidnapped.”

“I am not in love with her!” Oak felt a seething rage, rising rebelliously within him. His self control was failing and once more it involved Fern. The heat of anger thrust itself up into his chest and he leaned forward to Denver, his voice suddenly gritty. “She is a member of my clan and nothing more! She causes me concern because she is a danger to herself!”

“And you, since you were her saviour once, must be her saviour forever?”

“No! I will be forfeiting that role to someone else quite gladly.”

“Does she know this?”

“Yes, I've told her.”

“And do you have someone already in mind? Is it to be an arrangement?”

“No, there is no arrangement. She will make the choice.”

“I believe she already has made her choice. Her choice is you!”

Oak's words stumbled out over his tongue. “She will not get me! I have already made arrangements to be with another.”

“Does Fern know this? That you *have made arrangements*?” Denver didn't wait for a reply but kept on goading. “Was that a difficult task or was it just another part of writing out your rules and regulations?”

This Citan was truly infuriating; he was on a par with Fern for causing Oak's blood to boil. He must calm himself and not be drawn in. Closing his eyes Oak took two deep breaths and opened his eyes to see Denver openly laughing.

“You can’t bury your emotions forever Oak. They will take over one day and in such force that it will almost tear you apart.”

“I will always maintain control of my emotions. I’ve managed for many years, you will not rile me any further Denver. Your amusement is over.” Keeping his eyes cold he watched the smile drop from Denver's face.

“Be aware of your weakness Oak. You have my respect but I warn you that these emotions you exclaim to have control over are magma beneath the surface. My taunts are nothing to what may lay ahead” and with that Denver bowed his head to him, conceding that that respective conversation was now finished.

Looking over at the boys still crowded around the table Oak returned to his plans. Namely plan two: their escape or their aid to the Citans. Non-plussed by the conversation that had taken place, it had already been sent to the other side of his brain with the rest of his angst’s. He concentrated on whether he should trust them.

He watched as they laughed in their amusement of the tricks that were being performed. Their pleasure was obvious, their worries alleviated and their guards down. They could be a danger to themselves being so easily distracted. What chance would they have against a maniac when they didn’t enforce self-control? Allying themselves with them could just result in their deaths from the sheer foolishness of the Citans.

“I can see you doubt their capabilities. I can assure you Oak when it comes down to it they will rise to the occasion and be more than you think they are.”

Oak was still watching them, tapping into their thoughts and noted that Denver was right, even though they were going along with the entertainment they were still at the ready. Flint sat alone to one side. This Citan he believed would be worth fighting beside.

“It wouldn’t be fair of me to try and gauge their value. I haven't seen them in action. However, I respect your judgement.”

There was no need to destroy the friendship that he had managed to attain with Denver. Even though the conversation had not been that advantageous to him, he had set Denver more at ease and he was now more trusting of Oak. Denver's control of the conversation would leave him more open, he would now be relaxed around Oak. He himself could disconnect between friend and enemy any time he wanted, he doubted Denver's discipline would be the same.

Oak's attention was caught by the entrance of Rancor, his expression confident, cloying, and conniving. Even if he couldn't read minds he could see his thoughts were racing with manipulative plans just from the smugness of his smile. His estimating brow was drawn up into sums of devious calculations. With him stood another Aviatilian, he carried himself with pride and expressed a small smile when he saw the card trick activities that were taking place. He looked over to Denver and Oak. Rancor was staring at them too, his eyes distrustful and unhappy at their close proximity and apparent leisurely behaviour.

Rancor spoke quietly to the Aviatilian as he looked in their direction. Within seconds the Aviatilian was striding purposefully toward them, upon reaching them he placed both of his hands upon the table and directing his gaze between them he introduced himself.

“I am Captain Rumello. I am the owner of the Avila Rose. Welcome aboard.”

Chapter 19

All the defenders were sat close in a circle except Elm and Hemlock who were told to sit off to one side so they couldn't hear the conversation. Voices were raised every now and then. Elm caught heated words such as *traitor*; *false rescue* and *power hungry*; he knew they were about him. The discussion soon continued onto a different vein and he heard Oak's name mentioned.

He had one option that would put him in control of them all. He went over it and other ideas but he always came back to the same conclusion. If they sent him back to the camp his fate would be a poor outcome. If however, he presented them with a chance to find Oak, then his own chances would be improved. He would be directing them on where to go and what to do. Through this he might still be able to get rid of Pine as well as Oak.

He drew in a breath. "I have knowledge of Oak that you might be interested in," he shouted to them. They all stopped talking and looked at him. "I know what has happened to him and in what direction he travels."

That was only partly true, they could have gone anywhere for all he knew but his calculations were that they were going south across the lake.

Pine was raising himself from the ground and strode toward Elm, the hatred in his eyes wasn't hidden or masked and Elm was taken aback by it. He would have to be very careful around Pine or he would perhaps find a sword in his back, although, he doubted Pine would do that because of his high sense of morality. It was not so for Elm and he knew Pine would reflect on that and could change his own moral stance because of it.

"Tell us!" Pine grated out from his tightened face, fighting to control his loathing.

"I followed the Citan trail so that I could try to save Oak." He looked now from one defender to another trying to make them believe his innocence in the accusations that were assailed toward him. "I found the Citans at the point where they sat waiting."

"Go on!" Pine was standing closer, his eyes attempting to burn out Elm's.

"I saw all of them including Oak get onto an airship."

Everyone was quiet as they processed the information and Pine even turned his penetrating gaze away from Elm's for a few seconds before continuing his cross examination.

"The Citans are in league with the Aviatilians?"

"Yes!" Elm smirked within; he was one up on him now.

Pine began to stride away. "We must leave for the point. Twenty of us shall follow Oak; the rest of you will go back to the camp. Hemlock you will take Elm back with you under your guard and confine him at the camp until we reappear with Oak. Oak's decision will be final."

"No!" yelled Elm.

"You have no say in this Elm." Pine stopped in his tracks and stared back at Elm, his face a sheet of steel.

"I should have a say. I stand wrongly accused; I should be given the opportunity to prove that I am a faithful defender to the Woodlanders and our leader."

Quiet descended as they all looked at Elm and then Pine. He knew he had Pine now, the defenders wouldn't allow him to ignore Elm's request. They had vowed allegiance to one another and if one made a request to prove himself it had to be obliged.

He could see Pine grating his teeth together in disdain of their discourse, his feelings deepened across his face as he decided what should be done. "You will come with us Elm but I warn you one

wrong move, one step toward being a traitor and I myself will put my sword's blade into your paltry heart!"

With this Pine spun around and began conversing with Cedar in a low voice so that nothing could be overheard. Elm gave a half smile. He had granted him his way and Elm vowed to himself that it would be he who'd be plunging his sword into Pine's paltry, penal heart.

"Thank you!" he exclaimed loudly interrupting the conversation. "For giving me the chance to prove that I am a faithful and trustworthy defender."

Pine ignored him and continued his conversation. "Hemlock, you'll be at Elm's side every minute of the day. You will never, ever, leave him."

"Yes Pine." Hemlock looked at Elm his eyes blank of any expression but Elm knew what thoughts lingered behind and he gave an internal laugh at how he would manipulate Hemlock and control Pine further on their journey. He would enjoy all of it up to Pine's final dying moment, which would be one of Elm's ultimate experiences. Oak would be the other.

Pine was organizing the defenders, choosing who would go back and who would stay. He kept nineteen defenders, including Elm and Hemlock. Elm was surprised and curious at the odd number and whispered to Hemlock that he should find out why. He suggested giving the excuse that he would prefer to be at Pine's side rather than travelling with Elm and someone else should be jail-keeper instead. He smiled at this thought, to take Pine in and have him believe that Hemlock didn't like Elm any more than Pine himself did was a clever plan. Hemlock, dutifully left Elm strategically secured to a tree (to show that he was no fool to leave his charge free to escape) and requested a word with Pine.

Elm watched the conversation and was impressed at the adamant behaviour of Hemlock in expressing his disregard for Elm and distaste at having to be constantly with him. His energy in putting forth his request for a change of guard (although, he could not hear the words Hemlock's expression and hand gestures were very telling) made Elm himself question how faithful Hemlock was to him.

Pine dismissed Hemlock who glared back at Pine with a blackened mien and instead continued to question him further about the trip. Pine most willingly gave Hemlock answers to placate his anger at being warden and even placed a hand upon Hemlock's shoulder as he talked. Hemlock's face changed to one of interest as his head nodded up and down at the words Pine was saying. He placed a hand upon Pine's shoulder and Elm could see the words *for the Woodlander's* mouthed as he turned quickly away and strode toward Elm.

On his return he untied Elm from the tree but left Elm's hands tied behind his back. Using the rope as a leash he loudly told Elm. "We're leaving now. Cause me no trouble or I will not be as forgiving as Pine." Elm looked at Hemlock in surprise and then slowly nodded his understanding.

"I'll cause you no trouble," he retorted. "As I am innocent of all charges against me and will prove my innocence by helping to rescue our leader." His words fell on only a few listening ears as Pine and the others were already running through the forest.

"I don't care what you profess. You're in my charge and you'll listen only to me and obey only me." With this Hemlock pulled on the rope and began to run with the rest of the group towing a stumbling and unbalanced Elm behind.

They travelled for quite a while before Hemlock carefully pulled Elm slightly away from the others and spoke for the first time since leaving.

"Pine intends to ask the Lakellers for their aid," he whispered under his breath keeping his eyes staring straight ahead so that if anyone should glance over he wouldn't look to be conversing. "He's sent Cedar back to camp that's why we are nineteen. However, Cedar will be returning with goods to trade with the Lakellers for our passage. He is to bring ten watches, five pieces of jewelry, five folding

knives from the antiquities building and five bags of fruit and vegetables. Quite a haul for him to carry but it will cover travel for twenty. At least Pine hopes it will.”

“How does he mean to find the Lakellers? They could be anywhere.”

“He was told by some of the defenders that they had seen the Lakellers on land searching for food. Their proximity was close to where you saw the Citans on the point.”

Elm pursed his lips as he began to formulate his new plan. Travelling with the Lakellers would be to his advantage. They could be bought; although they could not be trusted he might be able to form some kind of allegiance with them. Hemlock had fallen silent at his side absorbed in his own thoughts and Elm eyed him, wondering, if it came down to sides, would he support him or betray him?

Elm didn't believe in anyone but himself, only you were true, everyone else was there only as long as it benefited them. There was no such thing as sacrifice, he disbelieved the books that he'd read that told of heroes giving their lives to save others. He had queried it to the defenders and they'd said it was history and history was fact. How could they prove that? To Elm historical events were just stories, someone else's perception of an incident. How they saw things happen might not be what actually occurred.

He knew himself from incidents that had taken place within the camp how one person's story of an event could differ greatly from another's. Who was to say that the person writing the records hadn't thought that certain things were of more interest than others and given precedence to them, therefore giving a skewed angle to the story? He would be writing his own history and it would be perfectly recorded.

They'd been travelling quietly for a long time. Their footfalls were light upon the soft mossy earth and the fragrance of damp lichen and dew had vanished long ago. He could sense clarity in the air, a freshness that meant they were close to the lake. They ran past huge trees, a blur of dark brown bark and bushes their huge green leaves shining back at them from the sun's rays as she reflected her smile upon them.

He travelled behind the group with Pine dexterously leading them speedily along, picking up the trail of the Citans with little difficulty. As much as he disliked Pine he had to admire his proficiency. He followed the trail with ease maintaining a fast pace and never deviating from it through error. It was a shame that he would have to die; he could have proved valuable to Elm.

The sun was in the west when they arrived at the point. Elm knew she would soon be shining orange and red as she waved farewell for the day. They had little time to find the Lakellers and it was important that they find them now and travel through the night in order to follow the airship across the lake.

The airship travelled slowly but compared to defenders on foot they may as well be trying to outrun the wind. They needed to cross the lake fast so that they could get an idea of which direction the airship was headed and follow blindly as best they could. Elm smiled, the whole trip was fruitless but it was saving him from a worse fate and he would go along with it until he could change the course of the Woodlanders future.

Pine was calling defenders to him and quickly discharging them with orders. They took off as fast as they could in various directions. The rest of the defenders were now at Pine's side including Elm and he listened with interest to what Pine had to say.

“We shall wait here until the other defenders return with word of the Lakellers. There is a chance that we may not be in luck. That they may have already left shore and are making their way out into the lake.”

Everyone looked across the massive expanse of lake. Like a sea she stretched for miles to the horizon, the only land visible was the land they were on.

“If they are not found...” Pine halted for a moment as he too gazed across the lake. “We'll have no choice but to wait for their return even if it is days or weeks. We will not give up our search for Oak. We'll contact others on our journey and question whether they have seen the airship. From there we'll follow their sighted route to the airship's destination.”

The defenders nodded their heads in agreement and Elm scowled at them. He saw Pine's eyes rest on his and quickly turned away so Pine couldn't see his expression. The whole palaver was foolish and Pine knew it. Oak was gone for good and everyone should accept that. They should return to protect the clan and their home instead of going on this ridiculous journey that would lead to nothing

Elm couldn't say anything and no one else had the courage to say a word. Only he was courageous, the rest were just followers. They would be his followers though, soon enough. He wasn't afraid to fight for what he believed in and he would when the perfect time came. For now he would keep his lips tightly closed, his thoughts would be his own and his concerns would be forgotten. He would dance with the jester for a while longer.

Chapter 20

Fern was jerked back to reality when the boat hit the side of the metal cage she'd been thinking of. Her head was flung slightly forward, her red hair falling over her face. She couldn't push her hair out of her eyes because her hands were still tied behind her and so she had to peer through a waterfall of wavy, wandering hair.

Chains were being thrown down to Madden and Gisburn who'd manoeuvred the boat alongside; they were placing the chains onto hooks on either end of the boat. Soon they were being winched up, she could hear the creak of the winch as it slowly turned and a grunt from a boy above them.

Fern watched the receding water with interest as she listened to the last drops fall from the bottom of the boat. She was floating elsewhere, somewhere kinder, safer, a place of trees and a stream. Water was dashing upon the rocks as it flowed downwards through the watercourse, drops of water splashing, like falling stars, brightly glistening. She heard a final clank and saw that the boat had been pulled in toward the ship itself. She braced herself for what evil awaited her.

Madden was out first and roughly pulled her out too. She tried to land lightly outside of the boat but her balance was off and she fell forward onto the boy that had winched them in. Turning her head up quickly to see who'd caught her she looked into cold dark humoured eyes and recoiled. How would she survive all this? How would she be able to be strong when they looked at her as if she was nothing but a toy? Something to be played with, discarded when weary, and then played with again; a repeated process of agony for her.

She tried to quell her fear but it invaded her body like an unwelcome disease. She didn't want to cry. She mustn't let them reduce her to quivering and begging for mercy. She looked at the boy with malice in her eyes and saw him throw his head back and laugh.

"Madden what have you found?" he asked in mock question. "This is not food to fill our stomachs! The haul you brought a few days ago was good but now you bring back something that needs feeding instead. I think you misunderstood your instructions!" He laughed again whilst Madden ignored him. "This girl is not from the city, she's wild looking just like the animals that used to roam the lands. Who will be the one to tame her?" His smirk was wide as he gazed at her and back to Madden.

Fern's back went rigid at the very idea. She'd not thought that by fighting and being angry she only made the game more enjoyable for them. Madden just grunted, making no reply to the boy's questions. He grabbed hold of her elbow and pulled her along as she tilted toward him almost falling into his arms. Madden grinned at the distress she expressed upon her face, realizing her distaste of him.

"It doesn't matter what you think of me Fernie but it does matter what you think of the Captain. You give him what he wants and he won't hurt you or maybe not as much. You be a good girl now and make him happy. He likes his girls more sophisticated but he can still have some fun with you. You might not have the curves but your face is pretty to look at and he does like a pretty face."

All Fern could think was how she loathed them. How she despised their control over everything. How right now, all she wanted to do was put her sword to this boy's throat and watch the blood come out in spurts as his heart pulsed it through the open slit. Her blood thirsty thoughts made her smile and Madden misconstrued them as an eagerness to see the Captain.

"You'll see him soon enough. He should like you. I think he will find you entertaining; you're different from what he's used to."

Her eyes opened wide as she looked at him. She was revolted by the amusement her fear gave him. Once more she pushed it down. She wouldn't give him any pleasure at her expense.

They were walking past other boys all staring at her, so she closed her eyes to them pretending they weren't there. That she wasn't there.

She was thrust through a door to travel along a corridor until Madden was beside her; he suddenly pulled her down some steps. She didn't see them and felt her body fall forward onto the hard muscles of Madden. He caught her making her right again whilst giving a low curse under his breath at her stupidity. The noise from Madden's boots echoed around them reverberating from the metal floor and walls, her own soft footfalls were unheard.

"I'm not here, I'm not here," she introspectively told to herself. She thought of Abacus gliding through the forest and the bright colours he bore, she could see his beautiful red and orange design and deep black lines as he glistened in the sunlight.

Hearing a quick rap of knocks and a door being flung open she returned to the present and found herself temporarily blinded by sunlight as she was dragged into a room. She was placed in the centre where a stream of sunlight came through the windows to make a spotlight for her, a stage for her audience to view her. She kept her head down deciding that servile was the best approach to the situation and perhaps less harm would ensue. She heard the scraping of a chair as someone rose and a gruff voice asked, "What do you want Madden?"

"What do I want Captain Laroche? I've brought you something that you may want!" Madden's reply was spoken with a voice that was unctuous and excited.

"A girl?"

"Yes and she's pretty too. Lift your head up for the Captain Fern so he can see!"

Fern lifted her head as she was told and through her cascading hair saw a dark haired boy with a stern expression upon his face staring back at her. He wasn't tall, probably an inch shorter than Oak but he was stocky and broad in his shoulders. He'd been sat at his desk and his hands now rested upon it as he stood behind a stack of maps and papers.

"She's a tiny little thing, why do you think I'd want her?"

Fern felt a surge of fear, if he didn't want her, then what? Would she become the play thing of the crew?

"She's thin I agree but she is a spitfire. I think she will provide you hours of amusement." Madden responded with disappointment in his voice, upset that his gift hadn't evoked more gratitude.

"She doesn't look like a spitfire to me, see how she cowers."

Madden turned back to look at her. "Damn you girl. Now you show fear! I can see you are of no use. I'll just throw you to the others, after I've had fun with you first."

Fern's head shot up her hair a mass of flames to match the blazing face beneath. "You touch me and you'll regret it. I promise one day you'll feel cold steel between your ribs. You'll never dare to sleep because I'll be waiting for my chance to pierce your cold hearted body and listen to the gurgle of blood fill your lungs." Staring with absolute hate at Madden she looked like a savage from another world.

"Enough girl!" Came Captain Laroche's voice rising louder and more authoritative. "Madden you may leave. My thanks for the surprise; I believe she may be of amusement to me after all."

Madden's broad grin was splashed across his face as he left, a knowing nod bobbing his head up and down as he took a last look at her. Fern glared back at him wishing her eyes could shoot spears into his sickening face.

She heard the chair scrape back further and turned to see the Captain coming toward her, his lips a grim line upon his face. He stopped a foot before her and stared. His hazel eyes were surprisingly soft; they gave his face a gentleness that made her determination to hate him more difficult. His gaze was caressing her face now, she almost shivered at the way his eyes moved over her forehead, eyes, nose

and mouth and then once again rested upon her own green eyes. Holding them like a fragile bird that mustn't be frightened.

When his hand came up she just looked at it ready to move away but the action was so slow and careful that she didn't. Instead she simply stared at it as he continued to move it toward her. It rested upon her hair moving it back away from her face. She felt an unusual tingle at his touch; he saw her startled expression and his smile became warmer, more honeyed.

"Yes, you are pretty," he agreed, his voice surprisingly gentle, leaving her confused about her opinion of him; he didn't seem to be like Madden and Gisburn. There was no burning, boorish boldness in his eyes when he looked at her. His eyes held her softly with interest, even sadly, as if he was tempting her comfort to return and dispel her fears to another place. It was as if he were coaxing something wild to trust him.

"Where did he find you?" His eyes hovered over her but she gave no reply. She just stared at him; she didn't want to talk anymore. She'd had enough of talk with these callous boys and she still didn't trust that their Captain was any different, no matter how smoothly he spoke.

"Did he beat you?"

"No he did not!" she retorted and then grabbed her lower lip with her teeth. In a grating, gravelly, grouchy voice she replied. "He didn't want to damage his prize for the Captain." She knew the Captain could not miss her sarcastic remark and almost turned her head waiting for a reprimand to follow.

No reprimand occurred. She looked at the Captain in surprise. "No, I'm not going to be angry even though you repudiate me. If you don't wish to converse now we can at another time. I have lots to do."

He walked back to his chair to sit down, whilst Fern looked on in shock.

"And what am I to do? Just stand here?" She pouted, shuffling her feet.

"Yes!" was all he answered as he sat back down giving his attention to the map he'd been perusing.

Fern stared at him wondering what she was to do. Stand with her hands behind her back until she fell down from exhaustion?

She stood quietly deciding, she could play the game too and would not concede to him. After viewing the room for the sixth time, noting all the books and boxes, furniture, the two doors close to one another, plus the door from which she had entered, she realized she would rather talk. Everything here she thought were all the comforts of what used to be in their homes before the Devastation.

She noticed a large leather sofa against the wall and looked at it with wanting in her eyes.

"Would you like to sit and talk to me now?" She looked back sharply at him still sat at his desk looking at her as if he were deciphering another map.

"Yes I would," she replied. After all, what could a conversation do to hurt her? She would tell him very little of her clan. She didn't want to put them in any danger.

She could see that from the amount of belongings he had that he'd scavenged them from the cities. Some things may have already been on the ship but not all of the luxuries she could see in the room were. The mantel clock was an antique; she'd seen pictures just like it, and the small table that sat beside the sofa, that too was an antique. He was nothing more than a pirate.

He was beside her now guiding her to the leather sofa and helping her to sit.

"Will you untie me?" she asked feeling her arms and hands hit against the leather at the back of the sofa.

"No!" was all he gave as he sat down beside her.

Staring straight ahead Fern ground her teeth together in her agitation.

“If you grind your teeth they will wear down faster. You wouldn't want to be without something so important and look like an old hag before your time would you?” There was amusement in his voice as she turned to him.

“I'm sure my teeth will last longer than yours. At least mine are not yellow!”

The Captain gave a small laugh, “I agree your teeth are quite perfect. Mine unfortunately, have yellowed from smoking, a disgusting habit but one that gives me pleasure.” He looked toward a pipe that lay upon his desk.

It was large and curled up into a large cream coloured bowl, just like in the pictures of Sherlock Holmes from the novels she'd read. Sherlock Holmes was always painted or drawn carrying a pipe and she smiled at the sight of it.

“Why do you smile at my pipe? Did your father smoke?”

“No,” Fern turned back to him no longer uncomfortable with his close proximity to her on the sofa. “I was remembering some books that I read about a man called Sherlock Holmes.”

The Captain's face brightened, “Yes, I too have read some of the books. They are quite entertaining. Did you particularly enjoy *The Red-Headed League*?”

Fern cocked her head to the side for a moment and on realizing his reference to her own red hair laughed. She saw satisfaction cross his face.

They conversed about Sherlock Holmes and the different stories they'd read. Telling one another their favourites and which ones they had thought they were able to solve but were wrong. They talked about Sherlock's quirks and Doctor Watson's patience, the time period, restrictions and morality issues of the time. Fern became quite excited by the conversation; she'd never had a debate with anyone other than Elm before and found the Captain's replies informative and interesting. In fact the experience was quite thrilling and her face became animated with delight.

The Captain smiled warmly at her as he asked, “Do you read a lot?”

“I read when I can. I'm not sure what a lot would be.”

“You're right, I should think that compared to how it was before; we read more than anyone else was ever allowed to.”

He was staring out of the windows and Fern did too. The windows ran in a long row, all of them square with the sun still shining through them even though it was now sinking in the sky. Her rays cast a variety of colours upon everything they landed on, beautiful yellows and oranges, the light display gave Fern a sense of tranquillity.

“There are many advantages to this new world that we live in but still there are disadvantages. It seems we cannot have a perfect world.”

The Captain was still staring at the solar phenomenon that was lifting their spirits. Fern was almost about to retort that the world she came from was perfect but caught herself just time. She noticed the Captain was now watching her; he raised an eyebrow as if he knew she'd stopped herself from giving away important information.

Now he knew she was being wary he would be more likely to try to trip her up and find out more. She needed to redirect the questions.

“How old are you?” she asked, giving him a curious look up and down to which he gave an amused smile.

“Not much older than you, I shouldn't think.”

“Really?” Both Fern's eyebrows were raised as she viewed him more critically. He looked older than anyone in her clan, older even than Madden and Gibson.

“And by not much, how many years would that be?” She questioned as she studied him.

He gave a patient smile. “Since no one past the age of twelve survived the Devastation, you would have to realize that I am eighteen.”

She gave a quick nod feeling silly for even asking. Her eyes rested upon him again. She was fascinated by his looks; everything about him was so different to what she knew.

She noticed a scar on his chin even though he had rough bristles growing to cover it. His hair was pulled back into a pony tail like Madden's it was dark straight and sleek with an oily sheen. There were lines around his eyes and between his eyes were deepened marks, he must frown a lot she thought as she continued her blatant examination. He had more bristle growing down his throat leading to a hairy chest at which Fern stared in amazement at the curls of hair that popped out above his open shirt, she'd never seen so much chest hair. She looked at his arms under the rolled up sleeves and again saw more thick black hair growing, perhaps he was closely descended from the gorilla, as he was nothing like any of the boys in her clan. Her inquisitive eyes were raised to his now and she jumped back a little in surprise at how intensely he was staring at her.

He smiled, a cheeky smile, not quite a grin but close and asked, “Is there anything else you would like to see?”

Fern blushed in embarrassment and felt her fear returning by what she'd stirred within him as she stared down at her lap.

“I'm sorry,” she stammered, “you are just so very different.”

“What kind of boys have you been with if I am so very different?”

Looking back at him she quickly replied, “I have been with no boys.”

“You misunderstand me,” he carried on, “I meant what kind of boys have you had around where you live that they are so different in looks from I?”

He was prying and she was having a hard time side stepping his question. Her hair covered her face again as she dropped her head forward. She tried to come up with a diverting answer.

“My family are mostly blond or fair haired.” She didn't look at him because she felt guilty at steering him wrongly but then she appeased herself with the thought that the clan were her family now.

He was studying her and again he brushed her hair gently back behind her ear as he continued. “You are lucky to have a family that survived. How many are there?”

Now she was stuck, what did she say one hundred and nineteen? How did she take the fib from here, it was not in her nature to lie and she found she couldn't do so now.

“I've misled you by calling them family. They are people that I live with and are families rather than family.”

He pondered what she'd just told him and gazed around the room, his eyes fell upon some boxes that rested in one corner and Fern's eyes followed his own to them.

“The contents of some of those boxes once belonged to families from years ago.” He sighed now as he gazed sadly at her. “From families that didn't survive, we are lucky to still be here.”

He looked morosely at her his eyes glowing amber, soothing, she felt swayed by their warmth and compassion. Her heart swelled at his mournful expression, leaving her feeling almost nurturing toward him. The very idea shocked her. This rugged not exactly handsome boy was winning in his ways and gradually pulling down her defences by making her feel much more feminine than she ever had before. This was not a time to be feminine, she was a defender and she wouldn't be caught up in this melancholic nonsense that he was dispensing.

“Many were lost. It is of little consequence now,” she responded.

She saw his eyes harden and regretted her apathetic words for a moment but cautioned herself that she was being too easily taken in by his charm.

“Of little consequence, it was of great consequence to those that died and the loved ones they left behind!” he retorted but his anger was subdued, it was more of a reprimand at her pragmatic behaviour.

“You’re right,” she corrected looking at him in regret. “We all lost someone we loved. It is not a thing that can be made light of. I’m sorry.”

She looked away from him to the beautifully carved table that sat beside her. He brought her chin back toward him and she was surprised that she didn’t flinch. She remained quite relaxed as she looked into his hazel eyes, the colours looked to be swirling, deep, almost making her drunk. She felt herself failing in her resolve. She wanted a friend and sadly he was the closest thing she’d had to a friend for quite a while. He was not like Oak who was frustrated by her, nor was he like Elm who would needle her for scraps of information in between their discussion. If the Captain wasn’t happy with her replies he tried to change her answers with firmness and kindness.

“You have so much to learn about the world Fern. I will help teach you. You’ll find it remarkable in its tenacity to survive. It is surprising how beauty can unfold from the ugliest of situations. You’ll find Fern that this dire place you now find yourself in can be as warm and inviting as a beach in the sunlight. The cool water tickling at your toes as you walk, the sunlight drenching your skin with its comforting rays, the atmosphere a drink that is intoxicating. Trust me Fern and your life will be filled with lovely things, and I will treat you like a goddess. I will protect you from everyone and you will inspire me to be the great captain I seek to be.”

She was confused by some of what he was saying but the intensity of his eyes was sincere and she smiled back at him knowing she had no choice but to accept his friendship.

She was surprised when he arose abruptly and went over to the boxes they’d been talking about. Pulling off a lid he began to root through the objects, she could see he was shifting things from one side to the other but she couldn’t tell what the contents were. She was curious as to why he’d suddenly stopped their conversation. He’d been in control perhaps that was all he sought to achieve for now.

He was quiet and still didn’t look at her as he continued to rummage around in the box. When he pulled out a black dress she gasped in horror. She didn’t want to wear a dress, ever! What was he thinking of? Then she knew exactly what he was thinking of and she chided herself for being so easily deceived. He was no different to the others on board, he was playing with her. Now they had reached the stage of dress up and role playing. Her mouth was dry at the thought as she wondered what exactly her role was going to be. He walked toward her the dress laid across his arms, his face closed and unreadable.

“You’ll wear this,” he placed the dress over the back of the sofa next to her. “I eat with my officers. You will be joining us as my guest; I want you to be appropriately dressed.”

“That is appropriate!” she scoffed staring at the dress as if it were some horrendous slain creature that she was expected to drape about her.

“Yes it is appropriate for dining with the Captain.”

He eyed her sternly and Fern clamped her mouth shut to stop any further words from escaping her lips.

He knelt down at her feet and she pulled both of them up toward her in concern at what he was about to do. Gently he pushed her foot back down and slipped off her shoe, whilst carefully with a soft almost caressing hand he placed her barefoot back onto the floor. Striding over to the box again he was once more searching, he placed her shoe inside the box and compared it to other objects within until finally he pulled out a pair of black leather pumps.

He was smiling as he brought them over and once more he knelt down to place his hand upon her naked foot. Confused she couldn't explain the tingling that his tender, tremulous touch sent through her. How she enjoyed his hand sliding along her instep to her heel and the sensations it brought. Taking off her other shoe with the same careful precision that again caused her turmoil of awareness at the pleasure; he replaced it with the other black pump.

She almost gave a visible sigh of relief when he finally took his hand away and looked from her feet to her face with a gratified smile. She was sure she could feel a tick starting at the corner of her eye as she sickeningly thought how easily he was reading her physical and mental signs. She saw a flicker of self-assuredness and amusement cross his face and vanish as his eyes became awash with solicitude once more.

“Yes I like those on your feet much better. What do you think?” He was raising himself up now and looking down at her from a level of power and strength.

“They're very nice,” was all she could say as she stared up at him and gathered herself for whatever curious behaviour would come next. She was not left waiting long.

“Bend forward please.”

Fern was not sure what to do, what on earth was he planning to do now? Should she refuse? He was taking out a small knife and flicking it open. She started to feel panic rising within her, her chest was tightening and her breathing stopped. Was he going to cut her clothes from her body? Breathe Fern, she thought, she must breathe, and she must stay calm.

Her eyes must have been wide and worried because he gave her an empathetic smile as he assured her, “I only want to cut your ropes and free you.”

She gave a gasp of relief and bent forward without delay. She was already feeling quite numb in her arms and fingers from having them tied together behind her for so long.

He cut the rope and she thankfully brought her hands to the front, rubbing them vigorously to re-circulate the blood that seemed to have removed itself elsewhere. She looked down at the shoes, at least they are flat she thought, she could still probably run in them, although on a ship she had no-where to go.

He'd already moved away and was almost at the door his hand already outstretched to open it.

“Fern I'll leave you so that you can dress and do something with your hair. There are brushes, clips and other things in the boxes, use them if you like. My apologies for the age of some objects, they were in the basements of houses and long closed buildings. Our generation has little choice in what we have scavenged and no facilities to create new.” He smiled as he casually looked her up and down. “Although, it seems your own people have managed to develop their own unusual wardrobe of clothing.”

He looked toward the box and returned his gaze to her. “Make your hair look nice for me please. It would be in your favour to do so; I will give you a positive reward.”

With this he turned around and left the room leaving Fern dumbfounded as to what exactly she was supposed to do with her hair and what kind of positive reward she would be given for making it look nice? She heard the click of a lock and knew she had no choice but to look in the boxes.

There were many things in the boxes, dresses, shirts, skirts, shoes, hats, many long lost objects. She sighed confused and tired. She noticed a large mirror on the wall behind the sofa and went over to look in it. The mirror was much larger than what she was used to and she was surprised at the detail it showed. She could see almost all of herself, her pale face, her hair as usual unruly, unkempt and splayed at many angles from her head. She pulled herself upright. She had her pride, she could look better. She was not defeated yet, she would still strive to get through this with as much dignity as she could. What

was the harm in playing dress up? She could actually have some fun with it and not be embarrassed because there would be none of the clan members here to see her.

She would have to be wary of Captain Laroche; he seemed to wield too much control over her and made her behave differently from how she normally would. He also seemed much older than anyone else she knew, wiser, more knowledgeable, as if he knew everything of the world. He made her feel as if she knew nothing. He scared her and thrilled her all at once. She didn't understand the thrill, she should be more careful, but she found she wanted to believe everything he said.

He fascinated her with the way he moved with his self-confident manner as if he were unsusceptible to anyone. The way he talked with words that glided toward her on a wave of caresses. He left her wanting to please him.

She was once more looking through the box and this time she pulled out a brush, grasping it with excitement which she suppressed by telling herself it was curiosity and nothing more. She went to the mirror. She had a comb at home that she rarely used because it was difficult to get it through her mass of red hair. She also rarely bothered to use it since most of the time the comb would break and she'd have to request another.

This brush didn't break it caught on the tangles of her hair at times but when she grabbed the ends of her hair and continued to put the brush through many times, the hair finally became smoother. It became as straight as hair could be for Fern since it was thick and tended to fluff as the brushing continued. Eventually, all her hair was brushed but the image was not what she had hoped. Instead, she stared at a small pale face with hair shrouding her like the taranium's huge mushroom head. Pushing her lips out in thought as she wondered what she could do to make it more like Willow's. It was then she remembered the Captains own sleek hair and wondered what he'd put on it to make it that way. She had to find what he'd used.

She spent a while searching the room and gave up before she wasted her time any further. Her attention was caught by the two doors. She opened one door and peered inside to find a bathroom. They had nothing like it at the camp. Their own back door took them to their area of toilet. It consisted of a closet like building inside which was a seat with a strategic hole above a deeply dug depression of earth. This room was fresh and smelt nice unlike her toilet where she would hold her nose in the summer heat from the stench she sat above.

Here, she was faced with a toilet, a sink, a cupboard and another door. Turning around she smiled when she saw a bathtub. It was white with claw feet, deep sided with a high back at one end and brass taps at the other. The thought of being able to take a bath brought about a pleasure within her. Would the water be warm? How wonderful that would be! She imagined herself sat with bubbles high up to her chin. She tossed the idea aside for a moment; she had other things to do.

Firstly, her curiosity could not resist opening the door. Her perusal took her into a bedroom where she faced a large wooden bed with fluffy blankets upon it. The rest of the room was empty except for a pair of doors that she pushed upon. They didn't move so she pushed with more force and found that the door clicked but instead of going inwards one of the doors slid a little. Curving her fingers around she pulled and found a closet filled with the Captain's clothes and shoes. Sliding the door back until it clicked again she left the room and closed the bathroom door behind her.

She was searching the bathroom, looking through the cupboard, finding cologne, shaving soap, a shaver with a blade (perhaps she could use it to escape?) She thought against it. It would only invite trouble and he would soon know if it was gone, it would be one of the first things he would check on his return. She finally found the gel in a flat round container. Lifting the lid she sniffed at it. It smelled

strange but not disgusting. She put her fingers in and cringed in distaste at the feel of the cool slime upon them.

Placing it upon her hair she tried to flatten it. It worked but only on a small amount of hair, she would have to use the whole container to flatten it all. She looked at the sink. If she wet her hair that would flatten it and she wouldn't need the gel then. Replacing the lid to the gel she set it back in the cupboard and stared at the sink.

She hadn't used a sink since she was a child. She stood studying it for a while as her old memories returned. She felt the pain stab at her heart remembering the fights with her brother for the bathroom, her mom scolding them both and telling them to work things out. She let the thoughts dissipate into nothing and turned the knob.

Unexpectedly she gave a shriek of delight as she was rewarded with a spurt of water and watched as it poured down the drain. Realizing time was passing she quickly placed her hands underneath and threw the water she caught onto her hair. Her action not only wet her hair but the floor and the mirror in front of her. She ignored the mess she was making and focused on wetting all of her hair. After a period of time the floor was soaked to the point of being a pond, the mirror covered in rivulets of water, even the walls were splattered with spots. She gazed at herself finally content with her image of flat hair.

Going back into the room she went back to the box and found the clips that Captain Laroche had mentioned in their own small box. They held semi-precious gems that glowed prettily in the fading sunlight. After fiddling for a while she managed to slide them into her hair.

The look was not what she wanted as she stared at the mirror. She fiddled until her hair was pulled away from her face and her small ears protruded for the first time in years. She stared at the solemn creature before her. Cheekbones taugth, eyes darkened, even her lips looked pale. This was no goddess. Pinching her cheeks and biting upon her lips she was rewarded with a touch of colour. He said he would treat her like a goddess if she did something with her hair, he didn't say she had to look like one.

Now for the dress. Picking up the black dress she looked at it and gave a snort. How was she supposed to put on this pitiful object? She stripped down to her underwear that comprised of a vest like shirt and panties that pulled in at the waist with a tie. She looked at the black dress again and was relieved to see it stretched.

She pulled it over her head and tried to smooth it down but the dress clung to every part of her and the tie from her panties showed through as a bump. Deciding she didn't want anyone to think she was lumpy, she went back to the box to take another look through. Pulling out a black bra and black panties she eyed them curiously. The bra was a padded push up and she fingered the wire that ran around the cups wondering what kind of torture it was. Still, there was no harm in trying them on. She went to the bathroom where she could strip naked without being afraid of someone walking in.

Once out of her own underwear she wriggled into the black panties and gasped at how comfortable they were. They stretched to her body with no lumps or bumps and she liked the way they felt, like they were a part of her, moved with her. Looking at the other contraption in her hand, she was not so sure of it. Putting her arms through the straps she let the bra hang over her breasts and with some difficulty fastened the back whilst cringing in disdain.

Gazing bewildered by the image in front of her she couldn't understand how she had transformed. She'd never looked so curvaceous and in disbelief turned to look at herself from every angle. She looked like the other girls in the camp that the boys could barely take their eyes away from.

Grabbing hold of the dress she pulled it over her head and ran her hands over it to the hem that sat above her knees. The low cut showed off her new found cleavage, making her eyes widen at the sight. Smoothing the dress out she was pleased to find no lumps and admired her reflection in the bathroom mirror, firstly looking at her curving bust line and then her curvy behind. She'd never realized how good her behind looked and proudly wiggled it at the happy image in the mirror.

On hearing a door open, she quickly turned and walked out of the bathroom to find a boy around her own age looking about the room. She was satisfied to see that when he turned his eyes fell upon her and his mouth dropped open a little with eyes that almost popped. He had a sweet, kind face unlike Madden and Gisburn and she watched his face flush when he realized how he'd reacted. She smiled back at him and he gave a small slightly stressed smile back. She immediately knew she liked him.

Striding across the room she took one last look in the mirror and walked toward him. The boy was still standing somewhat gob smacked, so she tilted her head at him in question.

"Why are you here?" she asked taking in his light brown hair, clean and neat uniform and square body. Were all these boys short and broad?

"Um...My name is Ensign Jones, the Captain sent me to escort you to the Captain's Mess for dinner ma'am."

"My name is Fern not ma'am."

"Sorry ma'am it is a term of respect that the Captain orders I use when talking to his girls."

"When talking to his girls? How many girls has the Captain had?"

She watched him flush as he shook away his addled thoughts. He soon stammered.

"You're the sixth ma'am."

"Where are these girls now?"

"I don't know ma'am they vanished."

"Vanished?" She stared at him in horror as her thoughts cried out to her what *vanished* could entail—it was not good.

"We must leave now ma'am." He requested clearing his throat to regain his composure as he quickly strode to the open door.

Fern knew her face had drained of colour. He looked back at her and she could tell he was obviously regretting his error at disclosing such information and causing her distress. He pasted a smile on his face and informed her.

"Cook has made an excellent meal for tonight ma'am. I'm sure you'll enjoy it."

Abruptly, he went through the door.

"Better not keep them waiting." He stood to one side so she could pass and he closed the door after her.

She gazed at the forced smile as he passed her by. She followed him along the cool narrow metal corridor all the while trying to suppress the gnawing words *they vanished* from her head.

Chapter 21

The sky was turning pink with reams of orange wavering through. It had become waves of warning colours that the onset of night was coming and the dangers that crept through its disguise. They'd all been sat silently waiting. Woodlander defenders were not conversationalists. They were physical and fast and preferred to use few words, having discussions that were brief and to the point.

Elm looked at the ground in disgust. He enjoyed talking, questioning things, learning more, even arguing was fun but the defenders were never interested. That was why Fern was so interesting to him. He could talk with her, she was full of ideas herself, questions, arguments. Fern was good at arguing, she became excited and her eyes would shine so green that she became the jungle herself. A wild beast he often thought trapped inside a human female body.

He would enjoy gaining control over her, trapping her and playing with her mind again. His face became a crooked smile. Mostly he would enjoy playing with her body. Would she fight to dominate him physically as well as mentally? How perfect that would be. Her body was perhaps not as interesting as most of the other females, her curves were slight and her movement less sensual but he was sure it would please him more because of the fire that lay within. She'd be his. Yes, he'd make sure of that. She'd be his partner and he'd be her leader.

His thoughts were interrupted as a defender burst forth from the darkening trees.

"I have found the Lakellers."

With a thrust of his arm he pointed to the bay that was diminishing in the fading light.

"They landed there hours ago and were in the forest to find food. They'd collected their haul when I came across them. They're waiting for us in the bay." His eyes rested upon Pine and he was gratified with a nod and Pine's words of well done.

Everyone was soon on their feet and running toward the bay, eager, excited, euphoric. Their eyes widened to see through the growing dimness of the forest. Elm damned the defender for having found the Lakellers so quickly; this fortunate turn for Pine stifled his own plans for now.

The rate of darkness was descending rapidly by the time they reached the bay where they were met by two uncomfortable Lakellers whose eyes darted back and forth from one side of the trees to the other.

"You took your time!" one growled. "We thought we were to become fodder for the beasts!" He moved toward them disgruntled and agitated. "What do you want?" He looked toward the forest once more and added. "Hurry with your explanation I want to get away from here."

Pine stepped forward and concisely told him his request of the Lakellers. The boy eyed him and looked at his partner.

"What do you think Gisburn? Do you think the Captain would like some new treasures? Fruit and vegetables would be a treat too, instead of the tough forest plants that we've just collected."

Gisburn didn't say anything for a while and then looking only at his partner and not Pine or any of the others he replied. "And just where are these treasures and food that they promise Madden? I don't see any here with any of them. What fools do they take us for?"

Madden smiled, "Now Gisburn, don't be so unfriendly, there must be an explanation." He looked now toward Pine an, eyebrow raised in question.

Pine was stifling his displeasure at the aside conversation that had taken place.

"My defender will be here soon with the goods. We are honourable, we always keep our word."

Madden's smile spread further across his face and Elm felt a bond with the man. He knew how his mind worked. This boy would be of benefit to him. There would be a lot that they could discuss and

arrange. Elm turned to Hemlock and caught an expression in his face that he was not sure of. Perhaps it was the fading light that gave him a contemptuous look. His own face hardened and his stare warned Hemlock that he was bound to him. Hemlock gave a small smile and a slight nod, allowing Elm to relax his tightened intake of breath. He could not afford a change in allegiance.

Madden was looking toward the forest now, eyeing it greedily.

“When will he be here? It's becoming too dark to stay much longer. We have to get back with what we have.”

“Then return, but when the moon is up come back with boats to collect us. He will be with us by then. We need to journey quickly and waste no more time.”

Pine looked down upon the slightly smaller boy with the prestige of someone much taller and autocratic. Madden gave a strained smile as Elm recognized the expression of tolerance upon his face. Madden was acquiescing because the expected gains were worth making the effort.

Again the eyebrows raised as Madden looked at Pine and he took his gaze to Gisburn.

“What do you think Gisburn? Do you think they will have the goods as they say?”

“Nay, what if they plan to commandeer the boats and take the ship for themselves?” he cried back his face growing paler as the depths of the grey evening deepened.

“We have no interest in your ship!” came Pine's words, “land only one boat to see the goods and then the other's can come in after.”

“That sounds fine. The first boat can take the goods and travel out to tell the other boats to pick you up.” Madden gave a smile and his eyes were brighter even in the darkening atmosphere.

Elm smiled too, he knew the boats would not come to shore but would leave as soon as they had their cache.

“We may live in the forest Madden but we are not as dumb as the beasts that frequent it!” Pine's anger rippled through his words and Madden took a step back losing his smile and replacing it with a grim stare.

“Then what do you suggest Woodlander?”

“I suggest,” Pine moved toward him again showing his authority and power, dominating to prove he was not to be trifled with. “The boat empty, will return to your waiting group and all the boats will return to the shore to pick up the goods and us.”

Madden nodded slightly retreating backwards as he spoke. “This all rests upon the Captain's decision. If he says no, there will be no boats sent out to you and you'll wait for nothing.”

His gaze was hard and cold, his humour gone now, annoyance had taken its place by the fierce foreboding figure of Pine.

“Wait if you want. You'll either see us again or you won't.” Madden spun around and strode off toward his boat and a confused Gisburn stumbled after him.

Elm gloated, he enjoyed the fact that Pine had made another enemy, all the better for himself. He had hoped that Madden could be bought but Pine had just made it even more certain. A character such as his would want revenge at Pine's display of dominance over him. He would help Madden give Pine what he deserved; he would even let Madden's hand be the one to take him down.

He gave himself a silent laugh pleased with the new events. Pine made Elm's life more difficult by disrupting the plans he made but he would have the upper hand in the end and Pine's proud face would be smote into a mask of death instead.

The boat was pulling away and disappearing into the blur of grey water and grey sky. He felt uncomfortable at the approach of night and their open spot. His hands were still tied making him easy for one of the beasts of the night to take down. He unwillingly looked toward Pine to see what they

would do now. Even in the growing darkness he could see that Pine was not happy. His hatred for the Lakellers was evident; very few trusted or liked them. They were known to be thieves with few morals and no respect for others.

He wondered how they had ever received the stories since few in the clan ever interacted with anyone other than their fellow Woodlanders. He knew the information had to have been from when Spruce was alive; he'd been an inquisitive leader. Elm had no doubt it was probably Spruce himself that sought out the knowledge of other people. He hadn't been like Oak, who kept a tight rein on everyone and everything that went on within the clan. Outside contact was not allowed as he deemed it too dangerous. How was communication dangerous? Oak's quest for total control was too much and Elm knew others wanted things to change too.

Pine was still musing over what had happened as his defenders waited patiently for him to direct them. They could hardly see one another, the onset of evening had dropped rapidly and the sky was now a black diamond, the stars her glittering facets. Elm shifted uneasily wanting to ask why Pine was taking so long to give orders but subdued the words. Finally, Pine spoke to them.

"I am concerned for Cedar. Although, he is fast and capable I'd hoped he would have returned to us before now. I would suggest that we look for him but that presents too much danger to those doing the seeking."

He was silent once more only the breathing of his defenders could be heard as they waited for him to go on.

"If he doesn't return we cannot travel after Oak."

Elm's insides gave a small skip of encouragement and he eagerly waited for what else Pine had to say, hoping it would be for them all to return.

"However, I shall make no decision on that right now. We'll deal with our present situation which is precarious. The beasts of the night will soon be out. We won't go into the forest to climb the trees for safety; we must stay and await the Lakellers and Cedar. It will be easier for him to find us if we are all grouped here together in the open."

He fell quiet again and Elm noticed shuffling of uneasiness from the other defenders, it warmed his soul.

"The beasts of the night prefer easy prey, as a group we're not. We stay awake, close together, ready to draw our swords at all times. If a beast approaches I will give the order and we shall all charge it. This will be enough to make it turn and run."

Elm could see boys nodding their heads and sensed that they were relaxing more, becoming comfortable with what Pine had said. He felt aggravated by their blind belief in his every word. They seemed to be no more than children, following their orders unquestioningly with no idea whether what was said was really true.

"Let's gather together and wait in silence."

All the defenders huddled closer and Elm was glad to notice that he was inside the group; he wouldn't be the first to be picked off.

Chapter 22

When Fern walked through the door of the Captain's Mess she was met with silence as the group of people that had been stood talking all turned to look at her. She was surprised to find that there were other girls on board, all in beautiful dresses too. No wonder the Captain insisted she wear a dress. The Captain approached her with shining eyes of admiration and she was glad that she'd made the effort to abide by his wishes; she hoped it would make things go better for her.

Taking hold of her arm he whispered into her ear. "Fern you look lovely."

Guiding her toward the table he pulled out a chair and motioned for her to sit down. It was a long rectangular table beautifully set, upon which sat a white table cloth and porcelain plates with gold edges. From her seat at the end of the table with the Captain, who was sat at the head of the table, she was able to take in the rest of the decor. In the centre was a decorative display of huge bright flowers (the nastramus poppies were ugly in comparison) she gawked at them in disbelief at the vibrant colours.

People were taking their seats at the table and she looked back at the Captain who was watching her with an amused expression. She was coming to the conclusion that she was something of humour to all boys, since Oak often looked at her the same way and Elm spent most of his time smirking at her. She watched everyone who came to the table; there were five officers plus the Captain and all the officers had a female companion with them.

She found herself sat next to a tanned bulky boy who smiled at her with a gleam that made her uncomfortable. Across from her sat a girl, she looked older but couldn't have been more than a year older than herself. Her hair was dark blond with streaks of lighter blond at the sides where her hair was finer and had bleached in the sun. She wore these lighter curling blond tresses down beside her face whilst the rest of her hair was piled up onto the top of her head.

Fern's attention was caught by her ear rings and she couldn't help but be stunned by them. They shone brilliantly, tiny stones reflecting the colours around the room. Every time the girl moved her head they sparkled more, a smattering of stars clumped together to adorn a naked ear. She hadn't realized how much she was staring until she noticed the girl looking back at her with a self-satisfied smile upon her face.

Fern gave a quick smile back and turned her attention to the Captain. However, when she saw his face she wished she hadn't. It was brief in its duration but it was a look of disdain. He quickly replaced it with a tolerant smile and looked down to the other end of the table as he addressed the boy sitting there.

"Why, Lieutenant Sherbrook you look as though you were in the sun too much today."

"Captain Laroche, I agree with you. I did get too much sun. I was on deck all day trying to organize some renovations. I am hoping to have an area for the girls to sunbathe and relax when the weather is obliging."

The red faced Lieutenant Sherbrook gave a polite nod to the girls sat at the table and they warmly smiled back at him. "I see Captain Laroche that we have a new guest at our dinner table. Perhaps you will favour us all with an introduction?"

"Indeed I will."

Taking Fern's hand he drew himself up to stand, Fern doing likewise.

"This gentlemen is Fern, a Woodlander from the forest."

The girl across from her quickly arose in disbelief, as she stared angrily at the Captain and interjected. "You brought a savage onto our ship?"

Then resting her hard stare on Fern that held abhorrence and repulsion she continued. "Captain Laroche it is one thing to bring a Citan girl on board but to subject us to dining with this heathen creature is too much." She shook her shoulders as if primping her feathers. "She gawks around the room as if she's just been released from a cage and is expected to perform."

The Captain's voice roared immediately in retaliation. "Keep quiet Simone! How dare you insult my companion! Sit down this instant or I will ask you to retire from the table."

His face was turning red, flushing deeply with anger but the hazel eyes calmed as he bid Fern to sit down and he did the same. Simone had already quickly descended to her seat upon the last of his words.

"My guest will be treated with every respect I expect to receive from you all. If anyone upsets her in any way they will suffer consequences and believe me they will not be lenient."

He was looking at Simone now as she sat upright in her chair with an air of defiance but her lips gave away her true feelings as they quivered and her eyes became quicksilver, the grey transforming itself at the increase of fluids.

The door opened and in walked a number of boys dressed in white, each with a covered platter in their hands.

The commotion was forgotten as the Captain rubbed his hands together and exclaimed. "What has our wonderful cook made for us today? Perhaps it is something new to delight our senses."

The rest of the table gave a nod and chorus of hopeful agreement except Simone who remained quiet.

Fern couldn't help but stare at the girl who had viscously, virulently, and verbally attacked her. Her eyes held Fern's with a hatred that Fern didn't understand. Everything about her was beautiful, yet her eyes were cold, cruel and callous, there was not one pleasant emotion in the girl's body. Fern was surprised, she'd done nothing to this girl, and she wanted to know why she disliked her so much? There was a lot more to it than the fact that she was a Woodlander and she meant to find out.

Her locked stare upon Simone was broken by a slight cough from the side of her and she turned her attention to the boy on her left. "May I introduce myself Fern? I am First Mate, Lieutenant Christian." She smiled back at him politely as he continued. "How long have you lived in the forest Fern?"

"Since I was eleven," she replied taking in the snub nose which was blotchy red to match the ruddy cheeks, an overfull mouth and eyes almost hidden beneath hooded eyebrows. They were a dark blue with hints of grey but they were warm compared to Simone, definitely friendlier.

"Was that immediately after the Devastation?" he exclaimed searching her face for some hidden answer for her returning to the Garden of Eden. "Did you continue to read and write?"

"I most certainly did!" Fern retorted annoyed at the assumption that living in a forest meant she must have swung from the trees for the rest of her life. "I read many books and I have written in journals for many years, recording our progress and events."

He smiled at her in interest, "I would very much like to read your journals."

"As would I." Came the Captain's voice and they both turned their attention to his demanding presence. "Lieutenant Christian I would appreciate a little tete a tete with Fern if you don't mind."

"Not at all Captain Laroche." Bowing his head Lieutenant Christian turned and immediately started to converse with the girl next to him.

"My sweet Fern." The Captain took hold of her hand and squeezed it as he gazed into her eyes. His own eyes the soft syrup she had looked into in his quarters. "Thank you for trying so hard for me."

There are many of our ways that you don't know but you'll learn and you'll be the loveliest of all the girls here.”

His smile was gentle and wistful, Fern warmed at his words, squeezing his hand back in consent that she would learn their ways.

One of the boys in white who had been serving food now approached Fern. The young boy smiled, he couldn't have been much more than thirteen. With a bow he presented his dish to her.

“Envillion in herbs and white wine sauce ma'am.”

Fern couldn't stop herself from just staring at the platter of sliced fish covered in a rich white sauce. She'd heard that the envillions were giant fish with sharp teeth and an appetite to shred the flesh from anything that should be within their level of gnashing. To eat something that fed on the flesh of others made her want to shudder.

The young boy waited for her patiently until she heard the Captain say. “Perhaps, Ensign Rogers, Miss Fern would prefer something else. The Woodlanders are after all vegetarians.”

“My apologies ma'am.” The young boy pulled back nervously, nodding his head at the Captain, his shoulders drooped in apology. He quickly moved away and took the platter to the Captain who heaped huge portions of the fish onto his plate.

“A shame you do not eat meat Fern, envillion is quite delicious the way cook makes it. He's quite a genius when it comes to food.”

“I'm sorry Captain.” Fern looked down at her plate for a moment and then back at the Captain. “Perhaps next time I will not be as taken aback and will try it.”

“Very good Fern. Very good.”

The Captain gave her a pleased smile and looked toward another platter that was approaching her.

“Ah! You will enjoy these vegetables Fern, we are very lucky to still have some left. Our travels do not often take us to where they are grown.”

She was presented a platter of vegetables by another young boy who smiled graciously at her. They were also covered in a glorious white sauce that sent saliva sprouting in Fern's ravenous mouth. Helping herself to large spoonfuls she heaped her plate as high as she could until she heard a “tut” across from her and saw an abrupt turn of Simone's head. Fern smiled realizing Simone was afraid of placing herself at risk from the Captain's wrath and had quickly caught and amended her actions.

The irritable look on the Captain's face vanished quickly as Fern turned to him.

“I knew you would like the vegetables.” He said as she smiled at him.

Looking down at the mound of vegetables on her plate and the utensils at the side she tried to figure out which piece of cutlery she was to use. A quick gaze toward the Captain showed her which and imitating him as precisely as she could she ate her food.

Whilst she ate wine was poured into her glass. Feeling thirsty she drank the whole glass and then gave a small cough. The Captain's eyebrows rose in amusement and she tried to suppress the croaks in her throat from the acidic wine. She was used to drinking juices made from berries and vegetables. The Woodlanders never made anything with alcohol (it was deemed a danger to all for it dulled the senses and played upon emotions).

Fern had to admit she liked how it made her feel. She felt like the sun, glowing and warm; her whole body was almost vibrating from the pleasure of it. Even the glares from Simone no longer bothered her. In fact, she started to play a game where Simone would glare at her and she would give a sickly sweet smile back. The torture that this caused Simone was greatly rewarding. Her face went

various shades of red the more irked she became as she grew even more frustrated because she could not retaliate. She gave an acidic smile back which amused Fern immensely, so she craved it more.

A hand slowly rested upon hers and she heard a voice whisper. "That is enough fun. Leave Simone alone, her tolerance levels are short and I do not want to have to ask her to leave the room."

Fern looked at the Captain in surprise; she should have realized he would have been watching what she was doing. He was aware of everything and was no fool.

"The wine perhaps has made me more mischievous than normal?"

"I doubt that. I have no doubt that mischief is quite in your makeup Fern." He leaned in closer toward her and softly continued. "It's what thrills me about you. Formalities aren't in your realm are they Fern?"

Her eyes widened as she stared back into his knowing ones and she realized he probably knew her better than anyone in her camp. She didn't like formalities and even though she was being obliging here, at the camp she was often anything but.

Once more she stared at the Captain in wonder and she saw his eyes become brighter, his face soften as a happy expression spread across it.

"Thank you for coming into my life Fern."

She didn't know what to say so she just nodded. She smiled as warmly as she could and when he released her hand, she went back to the task of eating her dinner. But she was confused at how she felt and by what had just happened.

The rest of the meal continued pleasantly with jokes, stories and laughter and Fern found she quite happily became involved in it all. For a person opposed to social interaction at the camp she found herself quite enthralled with the people around her and the conversations that took place. She seemed to be suddenly transformed into a gregarious, playful nymph.

When dinner was over and they all arose to retire to their rooms or walk upon the deck, Fern was quite sorry. She hadn't felt so lively with other people in a long time. Her interaction at the camp had mainly been with Oak and although he'd made her laugh many times in the past, his intentions now seemed to be to laugh at her rather than with her.

She still felt a discomfort at the way some of the boys looked at her but she found the other girls to be pleasant. Whilst standing and chatting before leaving the Captain's Mess she found she felt quite warmly toward the Lakeller girls. One in particular, Alicia, she found very kind and gentle. The girls were not as handsome as Simone and she realized Simone was well aware of the fact and flaunted her beauty around the boys as much as possible. Their eyes glowed as they followed her form when she walked. She swayed as if music was playing and laughed like the clink of glasses, high and peeling through the room.

Fern noted that the other girls had little interaction with her and even the boy, who would often go to her side only to be snubbed, gave up in the end. Lieutenant Rostin was a pleasant and attractive boy and was obviously Simone's unfortunate other half. He certainly looked unhappy with the role that he had and when Fern very kindly went to him and engaged him in a conversation about the ship, his handsome face took on a new look which both Simone and the Captain saw.

They were almost upon them at the same time to disrupt the talk from going on any longer. Fern was quite sad to leave Lieutenant Rostin for she found honesty within him that she felt in no others on board other than the young Ensign Jones who had escorted her to the Captain's Mess. Lieutenant Rostin escorted Simone out of the room, her hand charmingly placed upon his arm as she wafted away. She left behind a smell of strong perfume that Fern thought was as suffocating as Simone herself.

The Captain was still talking to Lieutenant Sherbrook and laughing loudly as Fern gazed about the huge room. It gleamed with wood that was polished brightly, dark wooden surfaced areas lined the walls and unused glasses were being cleared away to cupboards underneath as the doors clicked locked. The table had already been cleared, the young boys from catering being efficient and performing their tasks quietly and quickly. By the time the Captain reached her side the room was already bare and she gave a sigh at leaving behind her memories of laughter with more than one person.

The Captain took her arm and led her toward the door.

“Would you like a stroll upon the deck Fern?”

She nodded enthusiastically; the thought of fresh air and being outside at once sending her blood to quicken.

“Yes I would Captain!”

He smiled down at her and squeezed her arm in satisfaction.

The air was cool when they stepped onto the deck; the grey of evening was already cloaking the skies and the lake blending into one. Guiding her, the Captain led her to a railing and she happily leaned upon it gazing out to what looked to be infinity. She was not aware of the ship itself but the expanse of water and the breeze that massaged her face, her nose filling with its mossy, musty, almost musky scent. She was lost to its sensations, a virgin succumbing to her seducer as it swept her back to Elanclose.

“It's a shame that it's not as beautiful a night as you deserve Fern.” The Captain's voice brought her back to the Lakellers, her wandering spirit returning from its brief interaction with the elements.

“It's lovely, I'm happy to be out here.”

“Do you find inside too confined?” A quick studying glance shot her way.

“I hadn't thought so but now I'm out here, I admit I do feel more relaxed.”

“I'm glad.”

His arm was encircling her waist and she couldn't help but tighten. She knew he sensed it because his own hold became taught and then relaxed again. He hummed softly to himself to help make his mind and body more restful and she thought perhaps the soothing thrum was for her also. He was so quick to control himself, so quick to cover up his real feelings and mask them. He was also astute to her responses and how to steer them for his own gain.

Finally relaxing and ignoring his arm around her she closed her eyes and breathed. She wanted to take in the scents again that hung over the lake, to feel what it was like to live on the lake, feel its sensations, vibrations. She forgot the Captain beside her as she absorbed the night air and cool breeze. Feeling the slight movement of the ship and taking in the crisp, cool air that was swirling around her she swayed a little to be one with them.

The movement took her closer to the Captain, who to her surprise became inflamed with a desire, that she didn't know was there. His arms tightened around her, heat springing from his body to hers. She realized her mistake too late as his lips crumpled upon her own and the point of his tongue pushed between them. She couldn't stop herself from recoiling back in shock, she wanted to struggle but dare not. She had her eyes open staring without sight at the blurred face before her.

Inside her body was screaming, yelling at the intrusion, at the unwelcome emotion that was being thrust onto it. She knew her body was taught, not pliant as it should be, causing the Captain to let her go, but she still didn't move. She was staring at the face before her, a face that she didn't know, and one she greatly disliked. As if only just remembering to breathe she gasped for air but found she couldn't catch it as she felt herself choking in fear.

The soft honeyed eyes that she was looking at were wild, yellow like a leopard; his face was hot, flushed and his lips swollen as he sucked in a huge breath. She had to reign herself in to be calm, to

keep up the facade she'd been playing, get rid of the fear to save herself from making him angry and possibly becoming the next girl *to vanish*. Quickly looking down to collect herself and then back at the Captain she gave him an apologetic smile, whilst simultaneously pushing her fears aside.

“I'm sorry Captain. I'm not used to physical interaction between a boy and a girl. I'll need time to adjust.” She paused briefly looking into the hot eyes with as much calm demure as she could muster. “Can you give me time?”

She purposefully softened her face to be innocent and sweet (imaging herself after Willow who had perfected the look).

His response was what she hoped for, he pulled back and his expression immediately changed to the soft hazel eyes once more and a smile.

“Of course Fern, it is your innocence that intrigues me. You are as untouched as an orchid growing in a swamp, your beauty hidden from the predation of others, their eyes and touch. Yes Fern, I can be patient.”

He took her arm once more leading her back toward his quarters. His body seemed to have grown taller, she felt smaller, even fragile, she was trembling slightly and she didn't like the feeling.

“Thank you!” her voice was barely audible but she knew he heard because his body puffed out a little more. He was enjoying her submission to him, enjoying his role as gentleman and she knew that that was all it was, just a game he was playing with her. A sigh escaped her and echoed through the corridor they walked through, or at least she thought it did, but there was no response from the Captain. For the first time since she'd been on board her feet fell heavy upon the footing below.

Once they were back in the Captain's Quarters she was given a nightgown and told she could change in the bathroom. Quick to be out of the Captain's sight she went into the small room and noticed that it had been cleaned, the mirror shone as it had before and the floor was no longer a puddle, nor the walls wet stains. Once in her nightgown (which thankfully covered her shoulders and reached the floor) she walked back into the room to the boxes and put the shoes and dress away. Carefully she placed the hair clips in their own small box and put the bra into a corner, along with the newly washed panties that she spread out, damp and wrinkled to dry. She turned to see the Captain watching her and was startled to see he was dressed only in loose pants that dropped slightly below his hips, showing the indentations on either side of his hip crevices.

She tried to stop herself from staring at the dark hair that lay upon his chest, running in a thin line down to the top of his pants. Her naiveté gave her up as she unwillingly stared. There seemed to be so much of it that she was both shocked and surprised. How could any boy have so much hair? Once more she saw the spark within the Captain's eyes forcing her to look down quickly to the floor. Trying not to be agitated she delicately asked where she was to sleep. She felt dread at the thought that he might expect her in his bed.

The Captain had regained control by the time she looked at him again and he pointed to the sofa where a pillow and blanket lay. She smiled pleased with the comfort of it, relieved she would be alone and happy because it was still softer than any of the trees she'd often slept in. She almost skipped toward it in thankfulness.

The Captain bade her goodnight as she stood beside her makeshift bed and flicking a switch he turned out the lights. She knew he was still standing watching her, she could see him in the moonlight. She didn't move until eventually he disappeared behind his door, closing it softly. She was alone; reassured she was safe she released a long breath of pent up fear.

The moon bathed her soft glow to the objects within the large room easing Fern's discomfort more. Grabbing the blanket and tossing herself onto the sofa, she snuggled under its warmth, her bare

arms sticking to the leather. She manoeuvred herself to a sleeping position that offered her relaxation and an opportunity to be able to quickly leap to her feet should she need to. Unsure about the pillow she tossed it onto the floor.

To Elm it seemed an interminably long time before the moon rose. He was feeling stiff from standing so long. They'd heard movement in the forest but nothing had approached them. The search for a meal took the beasts elsewhere. Perhaps Pine was right and the smell of their numbers was enough to deter the hunting creatures.

Cedar hadn't returned and Elm became happier knowing that the Lakellers would receive no payment and no journey would be made. Feeling quite chuffed at the unfolding of events he was almost in a mood for singing. He was quite lyrical and had a good voice for holding a tune, in his mind he had a new song forming.

*In the forest black with night,
We awaited our brave defender.
But he was not within our sight,
But perhaps to beast surrendered.*

He almost laughed out loud at his inference that Cedar had been eaten, enjoying the way his song was forming. However, his thoughts quickly halted.

If Cedar died his hold on Hemlock would be tenuous. Hemlock had similar political views to Elm but it was Elm's knowledge of Hemlock's love for Rose (who was joined to Cedar and no-one could break that bond) that kept Hemlock in Elm's control. He had come across the two of them in an embrace, a passionate kiss, proving Rose herself was in love with Hemlock.

They pleaded for his silence saying it was a momentary lapse of judgement for both of them, promising it had never happened before and would never happen again. He wondered if they would hold true to their words but they knew if he told Oak Hemlock would be thrown out of the clan forever. He'd seen fear in both of their eyes and enjoyed his new power.

He'd watched both of them carefully but they never again broke the clan law. They looked at one another with mournful eyes that turned Elm's stomach at how pathetic they were, but he was glad of the hold he had over Hemlock. Hemlock was a good defender and he supplied Elm with all the news and knowledge of Oak and his plans. Cedar's death would be devastating to Elm's future.

With this new discomfort he started to fidget receiving attention from Hemlock in his curiosity as to what was bothering him. He gave Hemlock a weak smile noticing how bright the moon had become by its reflection on his face and turned away to escape his questioning gaze.

The rest of the defenders were quiet and other than the symphony of breaths, the night remained silent. Elm looked around him noting that Pine looked especially worried now that the moon had made her debut for the evening.

Elm's mind felt befuddled as he tried to process his next course of action. He realized in his interned state that very little was left available to him, perhaps especially if he could no longer rely on Hemlock as an ally.

He wondered if those very same thoughts were going through Hemlock's own head. Whether he also waited with mental pictures of his joining Rose and taking what was once Cedar's in the event of his

death. Disgruntled he gazed toward the forest hoping that Cedar would leap out toward them. His eyes pierced into the thick tree trunks and branches with nothing but black and silence behind them.

He wasn't the first to hear the fall of oars in the water and the dripping as they lifted out. He knew who it was and didn't turn like the rest; instead he looked straight at Pine (who was already looking toward the lake). If Pine could have physically aged during that short period of time since the Lakellers had left he would now be ten years older. Elm had never seen Pine look so taunted and haggard, there was turmoil and distress in his eyes. He'd lost his opportunity to save his best friend and was discouraged by his failure. If Elm felt pity he would have felt it now but that emotion was not within his realm. He turned when he heard the boat scraping upon the pebbles and heard the cry of Madden for someone to help him.

Pine signalled for four of the boys to help with the boat and the rest stayed where they were watching the approaching Lakellers. They could see the stripes of moonlight fall upon two other boats that waited further out on the lake. With interest Elm watched the ensuing conversation.

"The Captain agreed to the trade." Madden looked at Pine and then around from defender to defender. "Where are the goods you promised?" His voice now dropped, replaced by scepticism as he noted the lack of change within the group.

"My defender has not returned yet."

Pine lifted his head in a regal manner that made Elm want to scoff. It wouldn't work on Madden, he had no respect for dignity and probably not even loyalty. The answer Madden gave was what Elm expected to hear.

"Yet!" The silence after the word was as dramatic as the angry word itself. "Are you playing us for fools Woodlander? We don't like being made fools of." Madden growled out the last words.

He didn't expect the response he received from Pine and so was taken completely unaware. Without a word Pine's sword was lying across Madden's throat. The shock of what was happening caused Madden's eyes to bulge and even Elm gave a gasp of surprise. Madden's partner made a fumble to retrieve a knife from his pocket but was quickly disarmed by one of the defenders and he too was held by a Woodlander sword.

Pine's voice was low and soft; Elm almost had to lean forward to hear what he said.

"No Madden, we are not here to make fools of you. The goods are not here yet. My concern is that something has happened to my defender. However, we need to make this journey and I will not let you return to your ship without us." He leaned in more toward Madden's ear. "We will wait a while longer. Your other rowers will grow restless; they will come in to shore to see why there is a delay. You will say nothing or else you will be dead. Do we agree upon your silence?"

Madden carefully nodded his head, all the time aware of the sharpness of the blade at his throat. Elm could see the fear and anger in his eyes and wondered which would win. Would he obey Pine or would he risk death to warn the others? The answer was obvious; Madden would chose to save himself.

Madden's friend was pulled away to one side. Out of view of the lake, he was pushed face down into the grass and the point of a sword pressed into the middle of his spine. His pleas could be heard and he was told to be quiet or die. He simpered for a while and then was silent.

The air became cloying as the onerous silence started to overwhelm them. Anticipation of what would happen sent all their nerves tingling and slight jerks and fidgets could not be suppressed. Elm was still in shock at Pine's actions, his determination to find Oak would not be thwarted and Elm almost admired Pine. Unfortunately, his actions were to aid Oak and that was not what Elm wanted.

Everyone had forgotten about the forest, a bit of a distance behind them. They were all intent on the boats bobbing on the water and the sound of those within them talking. When they heard the noise

from the forest they all swiftly turned and pulled out their swords ready to fight. Swords were quickly put back in their sheaths when they realized the body hurling toward them was Cedar.

Tearing toward them like a beast of burden, bags hanging from his shoulders and waist, his face contorted in outrage with his sword drawn, he yelled, "Prepare to fight."

Only just in time they unsheathed their swords again, to face not just one beast launching its humongous hair covered body through the trees but three, being ten feet tall and easily fifteen feet long from head to tail.

The crash of the broken branches from bushes reverberated through the air. Pausing, their teeth gleaming in the moonlight from the saliva that covered them, they eyed the mass of prey before them. Their expressions changed knowing that the many bodies they were looking at would serve them better than just one. They were ready to devour meat and relieve their aching stomachs. The large black eyes were iridescent and reflective as they looked upon the squad of armed defenders that faced them.

The squall that erupted from the creatures was chilling; it rang with determination and hunger. Launching themselves into the middle of the group, one caught hold of Madden's shoulder and arm with its ruthless teeth and hurled him into the air. Madden's scream resonated across the water. It was soon replaced with the sound of boat oars splashing.

At first Elm thought they were leaving but on listening more carefully he realized they were coming to shore. He could hear the sounds of swords being swung through the air, the growls of angry beasts as they roared deep from their bellies, seeming to make the ground itself shake in fear. He looked back toward the sounds to see one of the large creatures running at him; he drew in a huge breath of surprise, helplessly awaiting his doom.

He forgot everything around him his eyes transfixed upon the bounding body of the beast. In the moonlight he could see the glint in its eyes, the twist of its mouth as it anticipated the kill. The hair and flesh on the back of its neck rippled as it ran, the thud of its huge feet on the ground assailing Elm's ears, growing louder the closer that it came. Still, staring, eyes broadened, bulging, blind to all else but the approaching harbinger of death he looked into its eyes. For seconds he watched, felt the swirl of blood through his veins as his heart beat faster, felt his skin rise as the small hairs stood in horror. Only one thought hit him, he would not see Fern again after all.

He was violently forced to the ground, his face hitting the dirt and grazing his cheek but he felt nothing. He'd expected to feel the searing pain of his flesh being torn from his body, instead, he looked to see who'd knocked him down and saw Hemlock stood above him brandishing his sword at the beast as it charged. Elm could not help but continue to stare even though he was sick with fear, he couldn't close his eyes to a fate of pain, ripped limbs and drenching blood. He needed to watch the carnage.

He saw five of the other defenders running to Hemlock's aid. Hemlock was sweeping his sword toward the beast's head, it jerked away, roaring in frustration at not attaining his death. Leaping forward again at Hemlock, its claws ready to tear off his flesh, its teeth ready to disembowel his body, it went for the kill. Hemlock was quick and small enough to dodge as it lunged, leaving it frustrated once more.

The beast was relentless and thrust itself toward him again, on Hemlock's escape to the side he managed to swing at the side of the beast's head, slicing into the side of its face. It screamed in anger and pain, spinning around to follow him. Whilst the creature turned, the other defenders distracted it further by circling it, yelling and striking at it. The noise and number of bodies around it was enough to cause it confusion and in the heat of rage, its eyes red, it hurled itself forward, ferociously furious as it was struck and slashed again by two of the defenders.

Hemlock leaped to its side, taking aim and plunging his sword into its belly, where it reared slightly in surprise and pain, staggering backward. Hemlock was ready again with his sword and before

the beast could get its front feet fully down to the ground he plunged his sword deep into its chest, ramming the hilt with his body. Elm heard the crack of ribs; the beast's dying cry and saw Hemlock pulling out his sword, whereupon he was doused in the gush of blood spewing out of the wound.

The beast's eyes rolled back, its leg wobbled unsteadily until it flopped to the ground not two feet from him, its head bouncing twice as it hit the floor. He stared at the creature, with its tongue lolling out of the side of its mouth, blood trickling from it. The animal looked surprisingly calm for having died so violently, the fearful face now nothing more than a sad, subliminal speculation of man's game of genetics.

He rolled over onto his back, his tied hands now beneath him. Then he looked back at the dead beast's blind eyes, a morbid fascination drawing him back to his inquisition. The smell of copper was engulfing his nostrils, making his stomach churn in distaste. Hemlock and the five were running to assist other defenders.

There were still two more beasts to slay and they were fighting as a pair, making it more difficult for the defenders. With Hemlock and the defenders gone, Elm lifted his head higher to look around and with tightened stomach muscles pulled him into a sitting position. It was a scene of chaos: swords, blood, defenders thrusting at the beasts as their teeth gnashed at them.

He could see Madden on the ground, he wasn't moving, his shoulder and arm torn and bleeding. If he wasn't dead he soon would be Elm thought, concerned, because he was a boy he wanted to keep alive. He leaped to his feet and because his hands were behind his back he quickly dropped and rolled back again to pull his hands under his feet and up toward his chest. He immediately ran to where Madden lay.

He heard another cry from a beast and the cry of a defender, then the slashing of swords upon flesh. Ignoring the battle going on around him he ripped apart Madden's shirt and tore it into strips (not so very easy with hands tied but Elm was resolute that he was going to save Madden). Making a tourniquet he placed it above the torn flesh of his arm and then using another strip covered the wound itself. Blood was everywhere and Elm was soon covered with the sticky liquid. Ripping more cloth from Madden's shirt he made a ball and stuffed it into the wound at his shoulder, keeping pressure upon it. Now all he could do was hope that Madden was still alive.

The sound of another beast falling to the floor grabbed Elm's attention and he looked up from his patient to hear the roar of the third beast as it ran blindly into the defenders. Its foolish run was its last as swords came down upon it from all around and the beast's fate was sealed just the same as the others. A cheer came from the defenders as they stood over the dead creatures.

The smell of blood made the air hot and sticky, its stench turned Elm's stomach, making him want to vomit. Madden's own warm wet blood was seeping through to his fingers from the wound in his shoulder. Elm hoped that because the torn flesh was not near his lungs but his collarbone that Madden would live through it. He looked up to see Pine standing before him, his face non-descriptive and Elm didn't like being unable to read it. He wasn't sure whether there was a touch of scorn or irony to it but dismissed it as not being important anyway. They needed to get Madden to his ship.

He didn't realize how viscid with blood he was until Hemlock pulled him up. Pine was bending over Madden, feeling the pulse at his neck. The other Lakellers were now on shore. They had seen the battle and were approaching where Madden lay. Pine took command.

"We must hurry to get him to the ship, his pulse is weak and if we delay much longer he will die. The beast bit deep, he has lost a lot of blood."

The rest nodded, gazing down upon the bloody body of Madden. Madden's friend was coming toward them now. He'd heard Pine's words and was trying to repress his sobs, making his shoulders shake like an erupting volcano.

"Madden it's your friend Gisburn. You can't die!" His large body dropped to his side as he grasped hold of his hand. "You have to pull through, so you can be First Mate and then you're going to help me be Second Mate, remember? You promised you and I would be more than just Petty Officers." The sobbing throbbed through his body in amongst sniffles and hiccups.

This boy felt a strong bond to Madden; their friendship had obviously been a long one. He would be angry with Pine when Elm told him he was to blame. The rest of the Lakellers were beside Madden, carefully picking him up and carrying him away, whilst one boy put pressure on the shoulder wound as they moved along.

Placing his hands upon Gisburn's sad shuddering shoulder Elm remarked, "If he had had a sword he would have fought gallantly."

"Yes, yes he would. He's brave and...And he's smart is Madden." Gisburn twisted his head to look at Elm, tears running freely and unashamedly down his cheeks.

Elm felt amused that such a hulking, large boy showed his feelings so freely as any female would. He also had no doubt that given the chance Madden would have been running in the opposite direction of the beasts. He was definitely a smart boy that way.

"I believe he is," Elm replied placing as much empathy as he could muster into his voice and gazing softly at the grieving boy.

Abruptly, he was pulled away from his conversation with Gisburn, as Pine quickly dragged him out of hearing distance.

"Don't think I don't know what you're doing Elm!" Pine's words grated through his clenched teeth and Elm could tell that it was taking a lot of self control for Pine to talk to him and not break his neck. "You keep your words to yourself. If I see you talking to anyone I will personally throw you overboard to feed the envillions and I will not care of the consequences for myself from the clan. I will just be glad to have rid us all of your conniving, deceitful ways."

Elm watched Pine's pulse pound at his temple as he calmly thought what he should say. He was pleased that he made Pine so angry, emotions were weakness. He looked at the normally steel face before him twitching, knowing that underneath was a roiling mass of loathing.

"I was pacifying the boy, his emotions are wounded. I was trying to balm them as I have tried to save his friend."

"Why, because Madden is just like you Elm?" Pine's face came closer now, spittle resting upon his lower lip as his self-control rapidly started to vanish. "Another person out to make a deal that benefited only himself. The same mold as you!"

Elm suppressed a smirk. He was thinking that Pine knew him better than he thought. This would be even more of a challenge. It meant Pine might be able to think one step ahead of him.

"Well you need not fear him now Pine, for he may soon be dead." Elm sarcastically replied.

The hand that caught his throat was a surprise and Elm choked at the fortified grasp of anger and disgust that was stopping the air from entering or leaving his lungs. Gasping Elm tried to grab at Pine's hand but the other hand grabbed his tied hands, so all he could do was flail at Pine, who was not budging. Pine was an angry mass of defender that had rooted himself to the ground, his patience having reached its limit.

“You are not worth anything!” he spat out at Elm, “you are nothing more than a pest of a bug that I will eventually stomp upon. You will not be missed by anyone.” On the last word he dropped Elm, who fell to the floor gasping and writhing.

Pine walked away as Elm struggled to regain his breath, his chokes unheard by the others as the sound of boats being pushed over pebbles covered his desperation to live.

Elm's mind was foggy when he finally felt a hand grab hold of him and pull him up to his knees and realized it was Hemlock. His face showed concern and he kept Elm steady as he continued to rasp for breath, his throat gurgling as it tried to function.

Eventually, Elm gained control and looking at Hemlock his anger blazing, he hoarsely whispered. “He’s dead.”

Hemlock responded with nothing but a gentle pull as he helped him to his feet. He patiently waited for Elm to be ready to move and assisting him, they walked toward a boat still waiting at the shoreline that the last of the defenders were getting into.

As Elm stumbled forward he noted that Cedar was gone with the goods in the other boat, as were Madden, Gisburn and some of the defenders. There were two Lakellers, waiting for him and Hemlock. He looked around for Pine; he must already be in one of the boats making its way across the lake. Elm was glad Pine was not within his sight. The vision of his irate face was still in his mind’s eye and the pain in his throat reminded him of what had just occurred. He needed retribution and he would have it soon.

The anger he felt shook him and Hemlock laid a hand upon his shoulder in sympathy at his apparent physical distress. He said nothing and so Hemlock guided him to the side of the boat and helped him to get in. Elm knew Hemlock must have seen what had happened, otherwise how did he know where to find him. He wondered if Hemlock was thinking that Pine's uncontrolled anger could benefit himself. If Pine eliminated Elm forever, his worry of being found out would be over. Perhaps Hemlock would consider a double cross.

Going over this in his mind, he thought that not everyone thought like he did. Hemlock seemed to be honourable enough. Elm believed he wouldn’t go to such extents. However, continuing along the lines of righteousness, would that mean Hemlock wouldn’t be traitorous, which was what Elm was asking him to be? He halted his thoughts, he was thinking too much and the pain was occluding his understanding, he needed to rest.

In the boat, slumped with pain and exhaustion he sat quietly listening to the grating of the bottom of the boat as it was pushed out into the lake. It seemed loud, grating and vibrated in his ears, he wanted to put his hands to them but they were still tied and sat in his lap. The gravel turned to swamp as they passed the weeds and then the only sound was the sloshing of small waves against the sides of the boat.

He found it soothing, a watery slap as he gazed at the receding shoreline. With the other boats gone the shoreline was quiet. He could see the huge mounds that were the slain beasts, looking like nothing more than hillocks, a part of the landscape in the moonlight. The moonlight waved at them making them look friendly and inviting, rotund shapes sharing her evening walk. There was no sound other than the splash of the oars that each defender held in his hands, keeping with the rhythmic motion of the Lakellers. Pulling back and forth they moved the boat further into the lake, away from the silent shores, away from the stench of death.

Chapter 23

Denver was gazing out of the window as the airship quietly journeyed through the skies. He was surprised at how rigid Oak was with his ideals. He knew that Oak had hated everything about the old ways but he ruled his own clan almost like the old Regime; obviously not to the same extent, but the similarities were there and he wondered at Oak not being able to see them. He gave a short laugh and shook his head. Oak was a prig and thought all of them to be of lesser substance than he and his clan. Denver felt amused by his short-sightedness and his all encompassing need to have control, it was something Oak thought he had, self-control, but Denver doubted it. He felt sure Oak's time of calm was coming to an end, Oak would go up in flames and Denver wanted to see what kind of Phoenix would come out from the fire. He wanted that Phoenix to be on his side.

They had talked for a short time with Captain Rumello and Rancor, in the end little had been said except for generalities and polite gestures for comfort and travel. Captain Rumello was diplomatic, with a continuous smile, but Denver knew the boy was far from happy. His blood was boiling below the surface, his anger and hatred for Rancor bubbled through him, but outwardly he laughed and jested with him. Rancor was oblivious; his mind was intent on other things, all of which were so clumsily jumbled together that Denver couldn't read him clearly.

Oak had left to check on Blackthorn and Denver was glad for the quiet of being alone. Captain Rumello was giving Rancor a tour of the ship, he'd offered to take Oak and Denver but they had both declined, the close proximity of Rancor made both of them writhe. His character was pungently repulsive to them as they were invaded with his unwanted emotions. He had wondered how it could be called the gift, to read other people; he often thought it a curse. In a way he was glad that his reading of Rancor was sporadic, it gave him some freedom from the ugly thoughts, but it also left him unaware of what was really going on.

Looking around at his band who had become quieter and were in small groups talking and relaxing, he knew they were wondering what their fate would be. They looked over to where he sat, their faces questioning and he felt frustrated that he knew of nothing to tell them. He couldn't stop their worries through words of consolation. He couldn't tell them that things would be okay, that they would come through this alive. How could he? He had no idea how events would turn out. His stomach was revolted by the situation ahead. He didn't know why because he was just like the rest of them, unsure of what they were journeying to, but for some reason he knew their fate was going to plunge down toward hell, his senses told him this.

For now they were to have food and lodging, and would be travelling for days in the airship. To where, he wasn't told, and the question was evaded by both the Captain and Rancor. No-one was to know and the onset of doom in their thoughts did not fade any of the smiles and assurances of everyone's comfort on the journey, made by the Captain himself. Denver didn't doubt they were safe for this leg of the journey but he wasn't sure for the rest. His unease and Oak's unease too united them both in knowing that they weren't wrong. This was just the lull in the storm; the full force was yet to hit them.

When Oak arrived at the cabin that had been allocated to Blackthorn he found it empty. The room was quite spacious and had an adjoining bathroom that it shared with the neighbouring cabin but Blackthorn wasn't in there either. He thought it too unusual for Blackthorn to go and take a look around

the airship when he could barely walk and felt a wave of panic flow through him. Someone had taken Blackthorn.

He went over in his mind the room he'd just left and everyone that had been in there. Detroit had been with the other boys being entertained and Rancor had been with the Captain, who had introduced himself with Rancor at his side. He'd felt a wave of emotions go through Rancor, all of them so distasteful that he'd recoiled, but also all of them too confusing to understand. He stood now gazing around the room, looking at the bed and the dresser both built into the wall. Adjacent to the bed was a table and benches, again fixed to the wall; they were opposite to the bathroom door which was at the far end of the room. From the doorway facing the bed Oak spun around and briskly walked down the corridor.

As he strode through the ship he could feel his anxiety growing. He went through what had occurred in the lounge, namely the emotions that had gone through Rancor. He noted that his emotions had been greed and loathing, they had also spiked to self-satisfaction. He had never taken his eyes off of Oak when this had occurred and Oak had been held by them.

What had happened in his peripheral vision? He had to remember. There was movement in the crowd of boys. One boy had moved away from them, he'd moved to the door and left the room. That boy had to have been Detroit. Rancor had arranged something with Detroit he was sure and it involved Blackthorn.

His fear for Blackthorn's safety was spiralling higher; he realized that what Rancor felt was pleasure, that a wicked job was to be performed for him. He'd also felt regret and Oak now knew that it was regret that he wouldn't see the finality of his request with his own eyes. Blackthorn was in danger and Oak might already be too late.

He ran now as he travelled through corridors. He sensed that he needed to make his way to where they had entered the airship. He had to get to the cargo bay, there was a flush of emotions from that area and he knew it involved Blackthorn.

Making sure he was stealthy in his approach to the entrance to the boarding area he took deep breaths in preparation for what was ahead.

The door was heavy and concealed the sounds behind it. He was aware of muffled voices, anger and fear, plus confusion. There were three people within, one was causing some disruption. Opening the door as surreptitiously as possible he was rewarded with no one noticing the movement. He could see that there were three people and he'd been correct in his assumption that one was Blackthorn and the other Detroit. Detroit was angrily swearing at the red headed boy Radcliffe that had helped them aboard.

Oak furtively moved around the door and found an area of large tarp covered items that he could slip between to hide and observe the scene. Blackthorn was white, holding his leg in pain and anxiety. Detroit, huge and intimidating had Blackthorn's arm tightly grasped in his large hand, whilst the small red haired boy blocked his way to the exit ramp. Detroit was insisting that it be let down.

Neither Blackthorn nor Radcliffe were any match for Detroit, brutal and determined he could easily throw them both off the ship.

"I have no order from Captain Rumello that this boy is to be thrown off to his death." Radcliffe was saying staring at the distraught Blackthorn, who looked as if he had given up on life altogether.

"I have orders from Rancor that this Woodlander is not worth saving and is to be disposed of." Detroit voice was deep with anger and waning patience. He would soon strike Radcliffe down and then dispose of him to the outside atmosphere as well in his annoyance.

“Nothing will be done without the Captains order,” Radcliffe continued to insist. Even though he knew his own fate could easily become one of death, he valiantly rallied on with his intent to save Blackthorn.

Through the conversation Oak had managed to get closer to the group without being seen or heard. He was now close enough that he was within six strides of Detroit but still not close enough that he could attack him undetected. All he could do was be patient for his opportunity.

He didn't need to wait long as Detroit's own patience escaped him and he dropped Blackthorn to the ground to grab hold of Radcliffe who stood next to the switch for the ramp. Throwing Radcliffe out of the way he punched the switch.

The sudden pull of air from outside was unsettling for all, as Radcliffe and Detroit staggered toward the wall, and Blackthorn's struggle to get up became more laboured. After a short period of time Detroit had steadied himself against the wall he was facing, holding on to the straps there.

Oak immediately leaped toward him, taking hold of Detroit from the back before he could turn. Radcliffe was trying to scramble toward Detroit. He was holding the side of his head and Oak realized he was injured from where he'd hit the wall. Blood was trickling through his fingers from where the hanging ties and clamps had cut and grazed him.

Detroit attempted to throw Oak off but Oak's arms were clasped tightly around him, his one arm in a choke hold on Detroit's neck that he was not going to let go of. Oak was disadvantaged by his size in comparison to the bulk of Detroit, but Detroit was no fool to what was happening, he knew it could take only seconds to choke someone to unconsciousness. With all of his body weight he spun around and threw his body back into the wall crushing Oak in the process.

The blow thundered through both their bodies and Oak felt the wind knocked out of him as he gasped for breath. The weight of the huge Citan was like being pummelled by a massive beast and although Oak was lithe and fast, this situation called for brute strength and fortitude. Although Oak had the courage, he did not have the strength. Detroit kept on bashing Oak into the wall repeatedly, again and again. His grunts becoming less and less from the lack of oxygen, causing him to react all the more for his survival and swinging his heavy legs back once more.

Oak was stubborn and held on even though he felt as if his ribs had been crushed and his spine shattered, but through the increasing pain he felt his grip slipping and frantically thought what he would do next as Detroit was no longer able to breathe. He was offered a brief release from the pain as Radcliffe came in for the attack from the front, only to run straight into an upraised knee to the chest that sent him reeling backwards, coughing and gasping.

Oak's hold on Detroit's neck had become so loose that Oak knew he would now suffer much more from Detroit. The grasping hands found the weak spot on Oak's arm and it was wrenched away with a ferocious yank. Detroit stepped ahead out of the hold, whilst Oak fell forward only just maintaining his balance from falling to the floor.

Detroit had spun around and grabbed hold of Oak's hair, whilst his other huge fist ploughed into his face, spouting blood from his nose and mouth. Oak's front teeth felt loose and the taste of blood invaded his throat in a sickening sensation. Whilst coughing, drops of blood falling to the floor Oak tried to move away, but Detroit had now grabbed his throat to choke the breath out of him.

He couldn't make any images out as his windpipe seemed to fold under Detroit's fingers but he heard the shuffle of feet and felt Detroit's grasp slacken. With his own hands he continued to struggle to pull the hands away but they yielded no more. He sensed a body upon the back of Detroit as he spun both Oak and the body upon him around.

Trying to make out what was happening Oak figured that Detroit was going to try and throw his back to the wall with the person that was on him. Forcing as much weight into his feet as he could and grabbing at the floor as he was dragged Oak did his best to present Detroit with as much difficulty as possible.

He managed to slow him down but it wasn't enough. Detroit's body slammed the other boy into the wall and he crumpled behind him into a heap. Detroit's hold became stronger once more and again Oak found himself struggling to live.

Oak was not sure why Detroit stumbled but the action helped him to almost become free. Even though he was not completely out of Detroit's grasp, he could breathe again and his fingers managed to get under the hands that gripped him. He was able to see what had caused Detroit's release. It was Blackthorn, although he was still on the ground he was holding Detroit's leg with both hands.

Blackthorn had lunged at him enough to almost unbalance him and his grasp on Detroit's leg was helping to weigh him down. The image was of two children clinging to an adult, they were both of seemingly little consequence to the enormous being they held on to. Oak felt himself lifted into the air. Detroit's grip had slackened upon Oak's throat; he was no longer able to get the force to strangle him. Oak realized he was going to carry him instead and drag Blackthorn toward the open doorway and the black depths of the night.

"I don't mind giving you both a little fresh air!" Detroit laughed sardonically, looking at Oak's pale blue eyes that were now level with his own. "Can't say I'll miss either of you but have a nice time on the way down. I'm sure the view is to die for!" His bellowing laugh rumbled through his chest and out of his mouth filling the room with its evil amusement.

As they gradually approached the open door Oak desperately thought of ways to save them both. If he let go of Detroit's hands, he would perhaps get a punch into his chest but at this close proximity it would be of little effect, also it would leave Detroit open to strangle him as he had originally intended. Instead, bringing both knees up and hanging from Detroit's grip he thrust them into Detroit's gut and was rewarded with a grunt of pain and a pause in his movement. The dark eyes looking back at him were not only murderous but fuming with anger.

The distraction was good, it gave them a chance. Once more he brought his knees up and this time because Detroit was slightly bent over from the pain, he was able to wrap his legs around him. Detroit's grasp had slackened substantially and with a huge effort Oak used his head to head butt Detroit. The pain was blinding for Oak and must have been for Detroit too because he felt him stagger and then they were both falling onto the ramp.

Pain flamed through Oak's back as he hit the ramp floor and rolled. It was immediately replaced with fear as he saw that if they both kept rolling they were going to plunge down through the depths of the evening sky.

They were sliding down the ramp as it angled down to the lake thousands of feet below. Oak didn't understand why they were jolted to a stop until he quickly clued in that it was because of Blackthorn. The agonized boy was trying to stop the two of them from plunging through the night sky to a cold watery death. His face was distorted and unrecognizable as he held on to Detroit's leg. He had managed to grasp hold of an anchoring rope that was attached to one of the walls and was grimly being pulled like an elastic band between the rope and Detroit.

However, the incline was too steep for Blackthorn to keep holding them and Oak was sure they would soon slide down if they didn't grab hold of something themselves. Blackthorn's loss of grip caused them both to slide head first downwards and Oak knew he had to take a risk. He released his hold on Detroit with his legs and searched for something to dig his heels into to slow them down.

Letting go of the hands that held his throat, he let his hand slide and grabbed hold of one of the ridges on the ramp, plunging his heels behind another. It stopped their descent. He expected the hands to tighten at his throat and they did briefly but they quickly released again as Detroit not wanting to go further down the ramp made the decision to grab a ridge with his hand too.

It was an uncomfortable position for both of them. Oak laid beneath Detroit, his right arm stretched out to the side grasping a ridge. Detroit above him his right arm stretched out where it too had been able to grasp at a ridge. Oak was managing to keep his heels upon the other ridge to keep himself from moving but he could feel them slipping. They both still had one hand at Oak's throat; Detroit's grasp upon it, Oak's still clasping to release it.

At least neither of them was moving anymore but they were at a stalemate until one of them could find the advantage, or until Oak's heels gave way and they slid into the vast space below. Oak's senses were a mess; the weight of Detroit and the pain of bruises on flesh and bone were intense as he tried to gain some course of clarity. Focusing on his breathing which was difficult with the bulk upon him, he gasped for snatches of air and avoided the wave of grey that was descending upon him. If he passed out now he would awaken to find himself crashing to earth.

His ears were attracted by a different sound; voices, many of them, approaching. He heard a hand thump upon the ramp button and thankfully felt the movement of the ramp as it started to rise upwards. Detroit had already released him and spun around to see who'd entered. Both of them jumped to the floor before the ramp was completely upright, they stumbled forward to the group before them.

With eyes still blurring in and out of consciousness, he saw Denver and Rancor to his right, in front was Captain Rumello his face red and puffed in rage. An Aviatilian was assisting Radcliffe to his feet and a Citan was picking up Blackthorn who was no longer conscious.

"How dare you do this Rancor!" the Captain bellowed. "I told you this is my ship and only I give the orders here!"

His head twirled around to look at Rancor, who merely gazed back with a slight grimace upon his sallow face. The Captain quickly turned back to Oak; he was trying to rein in his ire. He came toward Oak who was slumped over and swaying slightly. Sliding his arm under Oak's he heaved him onto his shoulder helping him walk toward Denver.

Oak knew this was a ploy for Captain Rummelo to control himself, to suppress his boiling blood and his need to continue his conversation with Rancor without hitting him. They both stopped in front of Rancor. Captain Rumello shifted Oak's weight for a moment.

"If you ever command anyone to do anything, anything at all, to one of my passengers, my crew or even the items upon my ship I will drop you all off at the nearest point of land and you will make the rest of your journey on foot."

Rancor remained silent, his eyes glittered and he feigned a polite bow.

"You are the Captain. My apologies if I've offended you." The greasy bowed head stayed down as he formed the words and when it arose the face was blank except a small curve at one side of his mouth.

Captain Rumello glared at him until Denver stepped forward and took hold of Oak. Slipping his arm under the other side of Oak he looked at the still red face of the Captain.

"Captain, allow me to take care of Oak. You have your own business of flying the ship to attend to. I'll take him to his cabin and make sure he is safe." The last comment was directed at Rancor, and Detroit, who, like a sneaky dog had slunk to his master's side.

"You have nothing to fear from me," Rancor quipped, "I have plans of my own for Oak and they do not happen here on this ship."

With these words he turned and with a quick stooped walk he left the hold, Detroit on his heels like a faithful puppy.

Captain Rumello took in a huge mouthful of air as if he hadn't taken a breath for minutes. His face was returning to its normal colour and he nodded to one of his crew.

“Take Radcliffe to his cabin and attend to him.”

He looked at Denver who'd already caught the attention of the Citan who was carrying Blackthorn.

“Take Blackthorn to his cabin and stay with him, do not leave him under any circumstances, unless Flint or I personally tell you otherwise. Take no instruction from anyone else.” Denver turned his attention to Oak. “You are lucky that when your emotions are high I sense them immediately but unfortunately, on this ship, your location was difficult to find. My apologies for the delay, Captain Rumello wanted to know why I was wandering the ship.”

Denver nodded at the Captain who gave an acknowledging nod back and let Denver take over the task of supporting Oak. Oak's throat was too damaged to reply and he merely nodded his head, accepting the strong arm that practically carried him along.

Captain Rumello followed the Citan and unconscious Blackthorn out of the hold, as Denver, being purposefully slow, turned his head to Oak.

“I believe Captain Rumello will keep us safe for the journey and Rancor and his dog will attempt nothing further. I'm not sure what plans he has in store for you, but you can be certain they'll entail nothing pleasant.” He was silent for a while and added. “Oak I wish I knew what it is we're going to but I don't. Have more faith in me than you do because we'll both need one another in the end.”

He looked at Oak with concern and Oak knew he would trust him, he had no choice.

Chapter 24

The door burst open and Fern leaped to her feet, ready to run and flee whatever was about to attack. As her sleep filled eyes adjusted to the moonlit room, she saw that it was Ensign Jones who had hurled himself through the doorway, his eyes wildly going back and forth scanning the darkened room.

“What's wrong?” she asked.

“I'm sorry ma'am but the Captain is needed urgently.”

He scrambled toward a switch and light glared down upon her as she blinked from its shocking appearance. His eyes were still flitting around the room and she realized he expected the Captain to be with her.

“He's in there.” Fern pointed with one hand, covering her eyes with other, as she watched the stumbling Ensign Jones make his way to the bedroom door.

He didn't need to open it because it swung open as he was about to push and he almost landed in the arms of the Captain. The Captain grabbed his collar and pulled him into the room with him, abruptly shutting the door behind them.

Fern could only make out the Captain's lowered tones and the pleading voice of the young ensign but didn't understand what was said. She heard the Captain murmur something else and the Ensign ramble into a long spiel that Fern could make no sense of, no matter how acutely she tried to attune her ears.

The door was thrust open and out came a pale Ensign Jones, he was trembling as he rushed past Fern barely even noticing her presence. He left so quickly that he didn't even close the door behind him. A practise she noticed everyone on the ship adhered to. Quietly she moved across the room and closed it, glimpsing the last of his fleeing body as he exited the corridor.

Making her way back to the sofa, she sat down, and pulled the blanket over herself as if she hadn't left it. The bedroom door opened and out strode the Captain his face stern for a few seconds but soon turned into a forced smile as he looked at Fern.

“I have had some unfortunate news Fern.” He came toward her as if he were about to protect her with his life. “A member of my crew has been injured by one of the land creatures. They are abominations but these things hide themselves so well during the day that they're hard to track and kill...I would like to kill them all, they are such a travesty against nature.”

He sat next to her, holding her hand, gently stroking it as he spoke. “I must leave you alone for a short time. I have a request to make. In fact it is more than a request; it is something that you must obey.” His eyes hardened briefly and then he smiled at her again. “No need to become so pale and silent. You are in no harm as long as you listen to what I say and abide by it.”

He gazed toward the door as if the terrible creature he talked of would suddenly tear it asunder to get them. His voice softened, coaxing as he raised his hand to her face, sliding his fingers gently down her cheek to her jaw and beneath where he raised her slightly drooped head.

“You must not under any circumstances leave this room. You mustn't allow anyone in other than me. When I leave you will lock the door. On my return I will knock once and call Fern and then knock twice and call Fern. On the second call you will let me in.”

His eyes held hers and she felt a cold chill run through her, making her shudder. He misunderstood and thought it was fear she felt and pulled her into his arms. With his face in her hair, she could hear him breathe, heard him sniff her scent, making her feel a different discomfort.

“You are safe in here but only if you stay in here. Don’t be inquisitive; even though it is in your nature...do not! That is a warning Fern, a very serious warning, that must not at any costs be disobeyed!”

He held her away from him and searched her face for her understanding. She nodded as fervently as she could and he gave her a smile as he dropped his face toward hers and placed a kiss upon her cheek.

“See, I can be a gentleman Fern. I am your gentleman and you are my lady. Stay a lady Fern, do what your gentleman asks.”

“I will,” she whispered, lowering her head for in case more unwelcome kisses came her way.

“Good girl.”

She was surprised at how fast he was across the room and out the door. Staring at it, she heard him shout back to her.

“Lock the door Fern.”

Running as quickly as she could, she hastily locked it; she didn't want him to return for a long time. Leaning close to the switch, she flicked it and was enclosed in darkness. Her eyes quickly adjusted and with the help of the moonlight, she moved back to the sofa. Sitting, she pulled her legs up to her chest onto the seat and she rocked back and forth. Her emotions were terribly unsettled. Trying to calm herself, she started to hum an old tune that she used to sing with Oak. What was wrong with her? Yes, there was commotion on the ship, but what had that sensation been the cold chill and feeling of dread?

She knew it was not that late into the evening and she had only slept for an hour if that, but she had already had dreams. They were dreams of violence. She dreamt she was running through the camp and everyone else was running too. They were all screaming in fear with terror in their hearts, desperate to escape. What had they been running from? Shaking her head she continued to rock, she quieted her questions.

She put it down to the excitement of the day, so much had happened and so much more was to happen, but what? Pleasant dinners? Keeping the Captain's lust at bay? It was too much to think of. She wanted to surrender to the dark in the hope that sleep would eventually take its hold and drain her body of the tension that held her. Perhaps, even keep allayed her tortured sub-conscious. She lay her head down, pulling the blanket around her as tears flowed down her cheeks. Sleep took its hold as she escaped to blankness.

When Elm stepped out of the boat he came face to face with a Lakeller. The boy grabbed his tied hands and pulled him toward another crew member. Both were burly, it seemed all the Lakellers were. Their life, Elm gathered, involved one of strength, heaving and hauling chains, lines, carrying goods. Their every day involved tasks that took muscular attributes to perform. He looked at the stocky boy before him, his hazel eyes, dark pulled back hair and crisp uniform. He held a stern expression of authority.

“Are you the one who saved Madden's life?” the boy demanded.

“Yes,” replied Elm studying him and thinking that this boy was more than he seemed.

He could hear Gisburn still quietly sobbing as he was being led away. He was insisting he should stay with Madden and the other boy's low voice was telling him he couldn't. His attention was brought back to the person before him as he spoke.

“It may have all been in vain but I thank you.” The boy made a quick assessment of him before he continued. “I am Captain Laroche, welcome on board my ship, the Genoa.”

He put out his hand to shake Elm's and as Elm placed his tied hands forward the Captain bellowed.

“Release this boy's hands.”

One of his officer's hastily ran to them, brandishing a knife that he quickly slit the ropes with.

“He is to remain tied.” Pine's voice rose above the commotion. “He is a possible traitor and therefore untrustworthy. He may try to escape.”

He strode toward them, the moonlight glinting from his determined eyes. The three huge ship masts cast shadows across the deck, one of them obscuring the expression on the Captain's face but Elm saw a spark of anger; it quickly diminished becoming no more than a shadow itself. It was replaced with a smile and the look of someone wise talking patiently to his student.

“My crew are on deck at all times. They watch the boats. This boy cannot leave unless he plunges into the waters of the lake, where as you know he will not come out alive.” Holding Pine's stare he continued with a deeper and more menacing tone. “I will not have him restrained on my ship.”

He stood before Pine, the two burly intimidating boys seeming to stare each other down. Pine's challenge still hovered upon him, his tightened jaw twitched slightly as he looked upon the condescending smile of the Captain.

It was Pine who bent his head slightly forward as he conceded to the Captain. “Then he will remain free and I will adhere to your request. I will myself, personally make sure that he does not overstep his bounds.”

Pine bowed his head once more in a gracious manner and the Captain grabbed his hand brusquely and introduced himself. “I am Captain Laroche, welcome to the Genoa.”

“I am Pine and these are my defenders. We will all abide by your rules upon this ship.”

Pine's gaze was cast about the ship and crew, taking in the hurrying Lakellers as they quickly and proficiently bustled about the deck. He pulled his eyes away and back toward the Captain.

“I am very glad that you have come to our aid Captain. We are all thankful for this passage across the lake and in such a splendid vessel. I admire how efficiently your crew have come together to get ready for the journey.”

Pine gave an appreciative smile as the Captain's smile broadened. Elm could see that Pine's diplomatic comments had already gained him good stead with the Captain. Bitterly, he chewed upon the fact. The Captain grabbed Elm's hand, his hand was hot upon Elm's cool one and Elm was once more aware that there was more fire and energy within this boy than was obvious.

“And what is your name?”

“I am Elm.”

“Elm, I don't know your circumstances but my rules will be obeyed and followed directly. Any noncompliance, no matter how slight, shall result in that person no longer being on board my ship. I don't care if we are near land or far out in the lake. Their presence will no longer frequent my ship.” Emphasis was placed upon the last sentence as he watched Elm's response.

Elm nodded his head in acknowledgement and satisfied the Captain dropped his hand and gave all his attention to Pine. Lifting his hand once more he slowly and deliberately placed his palm upon Pine's shoulder diminishing Pine's appearance of control, like a wolf would take down an opponent to be alpha male. All Pine could do was be acquiescent as he waited for what the Captain had to say.

“I request Pine that you make that fact known to all of your defenders.”

Pine once more bowed his head in subservience and the Captain gave a sound of approval. Turning he made his way toward Madden, who was being attended to by the Chief Surgeon. Two Lakellers were stood waiting beside him for instructions.

Elm decided there was a lot more to the Captain and he was determined he would make sure he found out further information about him. Elm watched as the Captain went down on his haunches to look at Madden. The Chief Surgeon was shaking his head and Elm felt a shriek inside him at the thought that after all he had done, that Madden might still die. Striding over, ignoring Pine's grasp upon his arm and tearing away from his hand, he made his way to the Chief Surgeon.

"I am sure he can be saved." Two sets of eyes looked up at him and the Captain slowly raised himself to eye level.

"Go ahead Elm, go with my Chief Surgeon and help him save the life of my Chief Petty Officer."

Looking down at the Chief Surgeon and the boys at his side, the Captain commanded. "Take Madden to the surgery. Dr. Consilla, take Elm with you."

Dr. Consilla was upon his feet and looking briefly toward Elm to whom he nodded, he requested, "Follow me."

The doctor quickly strode after the crew members carrying Madden. Elm waited for no-one's permission to leave the deck. He knew Pine was not fool enough to go against his attempt to save Madden's life and he also knew he would be quietly seething at his budding relationship with the Captain. They were both on an equal standing now and Elm liked the better odds.

He heard the dropping of the square sails on the masts as he hastily travelled across the deck. He was aware of the shadows they cast before him, like the old chess boards in the camp. His thoughts roamed. Was he nothing more than a pawn moving toward his opponent or was he a knight fighting for his queen? Was Fern his queen? He knew he loved Fern; there was no-one else that sent his blood pressure high. No other that he wanted to watch constantly, fascinated by her every move.

When had he realized he was jealous of Oak? Oak, who could have her, but shrugged her off like she was falling snow. He didn't know when the jealousy had started, perhaps long ago, he couldn't remember. Was he fighting for his clan or was he fighting for Fern's love? For once Elm queried himself and his goals. He would do what was right for his clan he concluded, they needed change, they needed freedom and he would give them that.

He was going down steps and turning to more steps where he walked along a corridor following the blue uniformed shoulders of Dr. Consilla. The corridors were well lit and he was glad when they finally turned into an open door and a brightly lit room containing a metal table on which Madden was being placed. Looking around the room, Elm heard Dr. Consilla direct the two crew members.

"Clean off the blood and take off the rest of his clothing. I need to wash my hands."

He saw the doctor walk to a sink in one corner and turn the water on. The others approached wetting towels and quickly turned, moving to the table where they cleaned Madden's wounds. The doctor had washed his hands and handed Elm a bar of soap, so he quickly washed and followed the doctor to the table. The doctor looked expectantly at him and he realized it was now time for him to take action.

Although Pine had taken his sword he had left him with his woven bag. Reaching inside he took out the small bag of niaphron root powder. Checking Madden he noted that the wounds were clean but still bleeding, the shoulder had a puncture wound, the arm a tear where the canine tooth had ripped through. Pouring the niaphron powder onto both wounds he waited and was gratified to see bubbles and the bleeding stop. Dr. Consilla was leaning over him, looking with interest at what he was doing. They both raised themselves upright together and Elm could see the question in the doctor's eyes.

“It is the powder from the niaphron root. We stumbled upon its healing properties a while ago and have carried it with us ever since.”

The doctor nodded his head in interest. “We shall see whether he pulls through, he’s lost a lot of blood and will be at risk of infection but we are lucky enough to have antibiotics. I’ll give him an injection.”

Elm’s eyebrows raised in admiration. “You know about antibiotics and how to give injections?”

Dr. Consilla smiled, his face changing as his old memories returned to him. “My father was a doctor. When it was realized that I had potential in the field I was sent to the hospital to work with him.”

Elm gave him a look of surprise. “But you would have been so young?”

The doctor gave an understanding smile. “The Regime wanted those that were useful to be put to work immediately and to be honest I was glad to be able to leave the house everyday and not study at home. The hospital was fascinating and although I was terrified at first, my father was very supportive and eased my worries. He was always at my side and consoling when there were bad situations.”

Elm’s interest was sparked even more. “What were the bad situations?”

He watched Dr. Consilla’s face darken for a moment until he quickly slid the thoughts he’d had away. “They’re over; we don’t need to bring them up.”

Dr. Consilla strode to a large unit that was built into the wall. He went to the drawer and pulled out a syringe, then going to the cupboard above he pulled out a small bottle of clear fluid. Taking the cover off of the syringe needle he inserted it into the top of the bottle.

“I’m concerned about the puncture wound. They’re difficult to heal, prone to infection and usually need to be drained, but the amount of blood he has lost worries me the most. He’s very weak and our efforts may still not help him survive.”

He was drawing from the upside down bottle, taking the amount he required. Elm watched as he placed the bottle back into the cupboard. He’d noticed how the doctor had quickly changed the conversation.

Dr. Consilla went to Madden and inserted the needle in his arm. Elm noted what he was doing; this was a practice that may help him later.

Leaning toward him he murmured, “I am impressed by your knowledge.” Elm figured flattery would serve him best to become friendly with the doctor. “My access to niaphron root powder is my only claim to medical credibility. I’m fascinated by what you’re doing doctor, I would like to learn.”

He smiled obsequiously at Dr. Consilla who nodded at him and taking the needle off the syringe tossed it into a disposal unit.

“We use the same syringes as often as possible, they’re so difficult to find. I recycle the ones I use, placing them in the autoclave to sterilize them. The needles will be re-used also but we have to use a dangerous substance to make them sterile again. So we wait until we have large batches. We already lost one of our crew due to poor handling of the product; we’re even more careful now and only use it when absolutely necessary.”

He went into a different drawer taking out packages, which he carefully opened. “I’m going to put on sterile dressings, again something that we’re in short supply of. We’re always looking for more but they’re hard to find.”

Dr. Consilla carefully checked the puncture wound at Madden’s shoulder, cut a piece of dressing and placed it onto the wound. With another clear dressing he stuck it to Madden’s skin to cover it.

“Such a difficult place to bandage but the dressing I have here will seal it nicely. The dressing underneath is a silver mesh with antimicrobial properties. I wish we could get more of it.”

He moved on to dress Madden's arm and he cut the silver mesh dressing again being careful as he placed a clear dressing on top of it.

“These dressings should be good for up to seven days and will absorb any discharge, whilst preventing infection.”

Looking down upon his work Dr. Consilla gave a small satisfied nod and instructed the two Lakellers to take Madden to his own quarters.

“Mister Elm would you care to join me for a drink? I think we may have both helped to save officer Madden's life and should celebrate.”

His ruddy face smiled warmly at Elm and Elm found himself nodding in consent even though he was unsure what kind of drink he was about to share.

Dr. Consilla placed an arm around Elm's shoulders and in a conspiratorial tone said, “It's a fine whisky I managed to get my hands on, a single malt that is ambrosia upon the tongue.” He winked.

Elm was at a loss at what to do so he smiled and added, “I am keen to try it.”

This caused the doctor's smile to widen more as he pushed Elm out the door telling him to turn left and go to the second door on the right. Elm stopped outside the door and the doctor grabbed the door handle and opened it to a dark room. Flicking a switch, light sprung to life and Elm saw a furnished comfortable room with two closed doors. The room held a desk, table, chairs and a sofa. Closing the door as Elm passed through, the doctor pointed to the sofa. He indicated that Elm sit down, whilst he fixed him a drink. Elm sat listening to the opening of a door, then the clinking of glasses, bottles, and the sound of liquid being poured. Dr. Consilla walked toward him with his hand outstretched, a glass of amber fluid in it, his other hand containing the exact same.

Elm took the glass and sniffed the contents. It smelled like the forest floor after the rain and he found himself feeling quite homesick.

The doctor raised his glass. “To Madden!” He took a swig of the fluid and gave a pleasurable sigh. “Drink Mister Elm, drink!”

Elm took a sip of the liquid. Even though he'd drunk only a small amount he found the fluid took over his whole mouth in a rush on his senses. He felt a little overwhelmed by it and sat staring at the glass in his hand, amazed at what sensations the liquid gave.

The doctor was already taking another drink, so Elm did the same, this time braving a deeper draw upon it. His cough made the doctor laugh.

“It's as smooth as silk! How can you cough at something that slides down your throat like the wind off the sails of the ship?”

“This is a demanding substance. It certainly gives a glorious sensation but I'm only used to water and juice. This is beyond anything I've ever tried.”

The doctor sat down with Elm and laughing gave him a slap on the back.

“This is indeed more than any juice or water and will fill you with warmth and happy thoughts.”

“Now that is something I would like!” replied Elm, drinking more of the glowing substance.

He was feeling calmer about things. It was as if his thoughts were taking a rest and letting him just hover in a haze of oblivion. Taking a final large drink he laid his head back and closed his eyes. He could feel the glass being taken from him and his feet being pushed up onto the sofa, but his defender reactions were dormant as was his whole body. There was a distant clink of glasses and then a click, soon after which everything was dark. He knew this even though he never opened his eyes. A door opened and closed and he was surrounded by silence. Inside his head a blurred vision of the forest was before him, as the last residual smell of whisky left his nostrils the image vanished into black.

Chapter 25

Denver was sat in Oak's cabin at the table, pen in hand and a pile of notes he'd written arrayed in front of him. Oak was asleep on the bed and had been for the last hour, but Denver couldn't sleep, he needed to plan. He looked through his varying lists, arranged in chronological order.

Perusing the first he went through his initial knowledge of Rancor with his presence in the city. When Denver had arrived, his five guards were dead and Rancor was stood amidst the bodies. How had he managed to overpower them, they were twice his weight, with fighting experience that few could beat one on one? The answer eluded Denver. Rancor must possess some kind of weapon upon him that could kill instantly, not only one but many at once. If it killed only one at a time, Rancor would not be alive, as the others would have taken him down. Rancor had few belongings though. In fact he'd arrived with no food or water upon him and the only possession Denver had noticed was the screen that he surreptitiously viewed.

Sliding his fingers through his thick, black hair Denver went to the next sheet. Rancor had directed them to the forest, purposeful with his directions. He had chosen a route that was longer than necessary but Denver had already figured out why. He had wanted the Woodlanders to follow. He wanted to capture members of the Woodlander clan. Rancor was thrilled that he had Oak. He knew Oak was of great significance to the Woodlander people, although Oak said little to give himself away, his actions did it for him. Why were members of the Woodlander people necessary on this journey?

Were the Aviatilians a part of what was going on? He doubted it. Captain Rumello followed Rancor's instructions but he didn't want to, he had to. He guessed that the Aviatilians would be joining them in their introduction to the Lavats. They were a people he'd never heard of before. The only ones missing from this motley collection were the Lakellers. Why were they exempt?

His imposing face, strained and tired continued to look over the papers before him. If he could gain some idea as to what was going on, he could plan on how to come through this alive. He needed a battle plan but not knowing who he was to battle and on what battlefield it would take place, made planning impossible. He watched his written words blur before his eyes and realized he should accept that he needed to sleep.

Looking around the room, he looked for a spot to settle that would give him some degree of comfort. The only thing available for any sleep or relaxation was the floor. If he slept in the chair he would be stiff and his neck would hurt, at least on the carpet he could spread out and enjoy a chance to stretch his body.

Going to the chest of drawers he pulled out a blanket and spread it out onto the floor, then grabbing another one and sliding the drawer shut, he lay his huge body down next to the bed. He would wake if Oak had problems and also, any unwelcome guests would have to step over him before they could get to Oak. He wondered why he was protecting the rigid Woodlander leader. He was set in his ways and not easily swayed, perhaps that was what he admired, his determination to keep to his beliefs.

Kicking off his shoes (his coat having been taken off long ago in the lounge) he gave himself up to sleep, still wearing his jeans and shirt. He could feel the jeans stick to his legs when he moved and was aware of his body scent upon his shirt. It would be nice to wash, having a change of clothes would make him happier too but he knew that wasn't going to happen. There was a bathroom adjoining the cabin and he planned to use it in the morning to get rid of everything that was stuck to him. As he started to doze into sleep he wished Rancor could be washed away that easily.

When Oak awoke he quickly sat up and found himself scrambling for breath. His throat was swollen and his air intake was still painful. He looked toward the desk to see Denver sat with a cup in his hand and an empty plate in front of him, he smiled at Oak, and his eyes were full of activity.

“Good morning Oak.”

Oak merely nodded back still unable to force words through his battered throat, his rasping breaths were the only sound he could make. He swung his legs over the edge of the bed and bent over, placing his head in his hands. He soon found Denver beside him with another cup in his hand, filled with black coffee. Oak looked at it in dismay and shook his head. He could hardly force the black noxious fluid down when they were camped for the night; he certainly couldn't with a throat on fire. Denver nodded in understanding and went back to the table where he grabbed a glass and poured water from a pitcher. Taking the glass to him he looked down at him in concern.

“Should I find you a physician?”

Oak nodded to the negative and Denver after giving him the glass of water resumed his seat at the table.

“I've been going over all the events since my first unpleasant introduction to Rancor.”

He turned, his expression more animated than normal.

“I had chronologically written everything that had happened. However, this morning when I awoke I realized that I shouldn't only have written what had happened but what I had felt during all of these times and I think I've found something interesting that will help us.”

Oak's raised his eyebrows in interest and Denver proceeded. “I have to admit that I find Rancor's thoughts so revolting that I read his thoughts at...how can I put this? A distance, therefore I never get the full image and understanding.”

Oak's interest peaked all the more and he gave an encouraging nod of agreement, hoping Denver would understand.

“I know you do the same thing. I believe that Rancor does this on purpose. He knows I can read his thoughts and twists them to cause confusion.”

He saw Oak nod again and ventured on. “Rancor is not that clever though. He knows I can read emotions because Detroit has told him but I don't think he has the ability to know how to distract me from what he is going to do.” He paused for a moment checking for Oak's response, to see if he wanted to add anything but Oak signalled with his hand for him to go on.

“We know he uses a screen and with this screen he communicates with his leader. From Detroit's thoughts I've learned his name is Kisin. He receives his instructions from Kisin upon that screen and how to deal with situations. I was at a loss as to how he killed the five city guards but now I think that through the screen he was able to redirect something from Kisin to them and destroy them all.” He dropped his eyes for a moment and Oak felt a rush of worry.

“If Kisin can commit murder through a screen, just how formidable will he be in person?” His dark blue eyes clouded with doom and Oak stared back equally taken aback by his assumption.

“It is all hypothetical but there's something I didn't tell you Oak.”

Oak was wary now, he disliked secrets, especially ones that could be helpful.

“You've always wondered how Rancor could make me leave the city with a group of nineteen.” Oak didn't need to nod as Denver continued, “Rancor told us that his leader could destroy the whole city we live in. At first I merely scoffed at him but when he swung his hand to the dead bodies at his feet I took more notice. We (Washington and I) discussed the possibilities, and concluded that taking the risk

of everyone's lives was not worth it, as opposed to twenty of us and so we packed up and left with Rancor as our leader."

Staring at each other, neither knew what their recourse would be.

"Another thing Oak, Kisin gathers all of us. Citans, Woodlanders and Aviatilians, we all have different skills and ways of life; I can only assume that he requires all of our abilities."

Draining the last of his coffee Denver gave a small sad smile.

"I'm sorry that through all of my hours of research I haven't been able to come up with anything more helpful or positive." He briefly popped up his eyebrows. "We all travel to Kisin. Where he is I don't know, nor does Captain Rumello. Rancor instructs in small pieces, so we can't have all of the puzzle pieces and come to a conclusion."

Denver turned toward the window and stared at the brightening atmosphere outside.

"I sense this will be a long journey and during that time I plan on gaining Captain Rumello's trust. Let's all sit together when Rancor is engaged elsewhere and try to plan. Perhaps Captain Rumello can shed more light upon our situation, perhaps not, but with all of us in league together we triple our chances of surviving whatever fate awaits us."

Denver didn't turn his head; his mind was elsewhere as Oak could tell from the free emotions he was releasing to Oak's vision. He saw a city with people walking through its streets, some carrying babies, laughing as they raised their faces to the sun's touch. Oak stared out of the window and filled his own head with visions of Woodlanders. He let Denver see his clan walking past long buildings where boys worked, weaving furniture from the stems of plants, helped by girls with babies sat on their hips. Looking back to Denver he saw an appreciative smile and he smiled back. The tearing down of walls had begun.

Fern heard the Captain return and opened the door to him but he didn't switch on any lights. He made his way through the room without a word to her and quietly closed his door behind him. She stood for a while half expecting him to come back out again but he didn't. Reaching down she locked the door once more.

Returning to the sofa she curled up into a foetal position, her head thrumming with the familiar song that had helped her sleep earlier. She quickly returned to sleep once more.

When she awoke the sky was already brightening. Scolding herself for sleeping so late she looked to the Captain's door, he was moving around in his room so she quickly jumped up to find her clothes.

Her quick ascent caused her to fall back onto the sofa and grab her head. What was wrong with her, had someone pummelled her in the night? Fern was not the only one to suffer the first time effects of alcohol. Down below a fragile Elm was also moving gingerly around in the doctor's quarters wondering the exact same thing.

When Fern finally arose with only a relatively slight amount of discomfort compared to her sensations from her first brisk movement, she found her clothes and slipped into the bathroom. Her mouth felt like it had lichen growing on it and she stuck out her tongue to take a look in the mirror. She was correct for there was a white fuzzy compound upon it.

Turning on the tap she placed her mouth under the running water and rubbed her tongue with her fingers to get rid of the offending substance. She splashed the water vigorously into her face and mouth in an impulsive gesture to dissipate the horrible feeling that both her head and mouth now held. Whilst

the water ran over her tongue, she found that she was very thirsty and proceeded to take a long drink from it, slurping hastily without care.

She was startled by the door opening and the Captain's appearance. "Don't drink water from the tap Fern. It is lake water and not good to drink. Hopefully, it won't make you sick. I'll have fresh water sent to you."

His face was drawn, his eyes dark. Fern stood with water dripping down her chin and onto her nightgown. His eyes wandered down momentarily and he turned and left the room. She looked back at the mirror and gasped at the sight of herself. In her exuberance to be rid of the scum on her tongue and refresh her face, she had flung water everywhere, including the front of her flimsy nightgown.

Flushing bright red and suddenly afraid of her slatternly behaviour, she noted that she would have to be more careful in her actions. The Captain had only paid brief attention to her and she hadn't seen the rise of heat within him that had occurred during their evening together on the deck. Thankfully for Fern, the Captain's thoughts were elsewhere.

She dressed quickly and stepped out into the room as the Captain was about to leave. He eyed her curiously; seeming to turn over some thought in his mind and then let it go and gave her a smile.

"I see you have returned to your native clothing. That is fine for today; I will find you some everyday clothing to wear."

Looking her up and down once more his expression changed back to one of authority.

"I'll have a selection of food sent to you for breakfast. I'll breakfast with my officers. Cook will visit you personally to talk about what foods you prefer and what you would like to eat for lunch." He paused for a moment his face changing slightly as he dropped his tone. "I demand Fern, that you do not leave this cabin until after twelve noon." He looked up at the clock. "Do you understand?"

Fern stared back in surprise.

"I can tell time," she retorted, "but why am I to be restricted?"

The Captain continued to smile complacently.

"We are refurbishing the deck, as Lieutenant Sherbrook told you. The crew have a lot of work to perform and use many tools which will be laid out and could cause danger to yourself and the girls. I have therefore asked that none of the girls frequent the deck during that time. After twelve noon the deck will once more be safe to venture out onto and the crew will be working elsewhere."

Fern nodded at the plausible explanation remembering it as part of the dinner conversation the night before.

"I understand Captain and I'll stay away until then."

The Captain gave a brief nod and left the room, but after the closing of the door she was sure he halted for a moment before quickly striding away.

Elm was only just starting to feel like himself again. He had drunk what to his stomach felt like a lake full of water. It protruded uncomfortably and sloshed as he walked across the deck. The sun was bright and he hunched his head and shoulder's to escape her exuberant laugh at his expense. No wonder Oak banned alcohol from the clan, how could anyone function after drinking it? He found a quiet spot and squatted down onto his haunches placing his muffled head into his hands. He was sat in the shadows of a mast when he noticed someone in front of him.

He knew immediately it was Pine, his presence was overbearing even without looking up. He raised his head, covering his eyes with his hand but couldn't make out Pine's face because of the sun behind him.

“You know of the rules that the Captain has imposed on us I presume Elm?”

Elm felt this patronizing sentence was hardly worth answering since Pine already knew he was aware of the enforcement, but he didn't want to start an argument when his mind was so un-obliging in its abilities.

“Yes, I've been told.” He dropped his gaze to the floor once more and placed his head back into his hands.

“Are you having problems Elm?”

This time Elm didn't look up.

“I'll be fine momentarily.”

He heard a small snort from Pine, then an intake of breath after which he sensed him leave. Pine's words once more brought about a curiosity as to why they couldn't be on the deck after twelve noon? They'd paid for their passage why shouldn't they be allowed freedom? Elm's instincts told him there was more going on than the Captain had said.

We perform drills in the afternoon to prepare ourselves for any mishap that might take place on board the ship.

It was an unsatisfactory explanation and Elm planned to find out the real reason for not being allowed on the deck of the ship after noon.

Chapter 26

Flint was sat alone at a window table in the lounge, the sun reflecting off the empty glass in his hand. The water jug on the table had moisture upon its sides and a small pool of water forming at its base. He looked across to where Denver's coat still lay across the back of his seat at the window.

It had been a strange change in relationships over the past few hours. The hostages were now the allies and the transporters were now allied with them as well. Although, no one knew where they were headed or what they were to face they were all bound in this journey together.

As a person who preferred being alone and relying on no one, it made him uncomfortable to have to trust so many different people. Especially, when he knew nothing much about any of them, but then that was reciprocated on their side also. He knew Oak and Captain Rumello were of moral dispositions and that reassured him.

He browsed about the room. Denver was back in Oak's cabin with Captain Rumello discussing further options that they may have. Rancor and Detroit were nowhere to be seen but no doubt they were together making some scheme for a serviceable plan for Kisin. The rest of the boys were conversing with the Aviatilians, who'd proved to be friendly in nature and generous hosts. They had all been fed copious amounts of food and drink.

The boys had drunk glass after glass of beer and ended the evening with a battle of songs, the Aviatilians against the Citans. The Aviatilians had won, their vocal ranges being quite amazing and even making some of the Citans jaws drop at the high and low notes they could reach. The applause had been deafening. It had left everyone with good feelings all around. Feelings that had been long missed by many and even Flint had rejoiced in jubilation at the appearance of laughter and happiness in their lives.

Rancor and Detroit hadn't returned to the lounge since they left but Captain Rumello did. He told them that he knew of Rancor and Detroit's whereabouts and warned that they avoid the port side of the ship. Denver had laughingly told them that Flint should put a curse on the port side but Captain Rumello reminded him that many of the Aviatilians had quarters there too. It had however given them brief amusement from their anxieties.

Flint was glad that Rancor and Detroit kept their distance, it made for a much more amiable environment. Captain Rumello told them the journey would be long. He only knew this because of the amount of food he was asked to bring on board. He was told to carry enough to feed them for at least two days with a stop to pick up more goods on the way. Unfortunately, he didn't know exactly where they were to stop, only that they were to maintain a course of south west.

They were still travelling over the lake. Her lace train of white crests spreading behind her to the distant land, her arms opening toward the horizon. It would be a while before they would see land on the other side.

He wiped his tanned face with his hand, passing over his deep brown eyes that were still hooded and disturbed. His long dark hair fell forward as he leaned across the table, sliding his hands outwards as if inviting someone in. Who was he inviting in? The spirits? He often felt the presence of his father, guiding him, consoling him in his loneliness, encouraging him to be more open to others.

He didn't open, the only person he trusted was Denver. Denver knew him well and he treated him with respect and equality. Washington never did. It was only because of Denver that he stayed, he would have been happy to live as a nomad, wandering alone in a canoe down the rivers and through the forests. Travelling, until the day when the last boat would come and take him away, the day he would see his father once more on that unseen shore that the rest of his kin had landed upon.

He leaned back again, his short affirmation of his beliefs locked away once more. Tilting his head he moved it from one shoulder to the other to help release the tension that his neck and shoulder's held. He was gratified with a couple of cracks and felt the mobility in his neck increase. Gradually moving his head from side to side in a slow twist, starting at the group to the left of him and then slowly taking in the seats in front of him, the expanse of lake beside him, until he reached a view behind him of the lake, he felt his neck softening, giving him relief. He was about to repeat the motion but stopped, and quickly turning his head he looked behind him out of the windows once more.

He wasn't sure of what he was focusing on at first it was distant and hard to see, but spinning his body to see more he was better able to make the object out. In the distance was a ship and for some reason he knew this ship. It was the ship they had seen sat in the bay when they left the point, the one that a boat had made its way toward. Flint took a deep breath as he continued to stare. He had no doubt the ship was following them.

Chapter 27

The clock chimed noon and Fern jumped to her feet from the sofa she had been sat upon. She'd been ready to pull her hair out in handfuls because the time had gone so slowly. Congratulating herself on actually obeying the orders she'd been given she pulled the door open and tore out into the corridor almost knocking over Ensign Jones.

He quickly moved out of the way as she stumbled to a halt. His smile was wide and kind, she knew she returned it without thinking when she saw a slight flush move across his face.

"Ma'am, I was just about to ask what you would like for lunch. There are three choices today as we've been lucky enough to be supplied with fresh produce."

He looked proudly at her and she realized fresh vegetables were a luxury for the Lakellers. Always travelling the lakes would give little opportunity for growing their own, trading (or perhaps even taking) were there only choices.

What a dilemma for Fern, she was ferociously hungry but she also needed to be out in the fresh air. Her head flew back and forth looking down the corridor and back to the Captain's Quarters. By the time she looked at the boy's face again, she saw he was trying to hide a small smile.

"If you like I could bring a small meal out to you on the deck, perhaps a salad?"

"Yes!" She looked at him and back down the corridor to what she thought of now as the escape door. "A salad would be good."

Without thinking, in her excitement at having someone do what she wanted, she leaned forward and dropped a kiss upon his cheek. It flushed bright red as his eyes glittered in response.

"Yes ma'am," he nodded his head to her fleeting body as she ran down the corridor, her goal the door to the deck.

When she burst through the door the sun hit her full on and she staggered, temporarily blinded by her intensity. There was a breeze and the air was delicious to her nostrils. Closing her eyes she breathed deeply, distinguishing different scents, enjoying the natural elements around her. Opening her eyes once more she surveyed the deck, noting the few Lakellers working and the emptiness of the ship. Stepping out as if she'd passed through a portal from another time she was transported to air, water and wind. Like a force of nature she flowed with them as she wandered along the port side.

Wandering to the fore of the ship and leaning against the railing, taking in the encompassing view before her as the ship broke through the water, she absorbed as much of everything natural as she could. The sails were all unfurled and the wind was giving them a good steady clip. Her eyes were watering a little as she gazed to where they were headed, the tightness of the air touching her and grazing her face. She missed Elanclose forest, the sights, sounds, smells, they all meant so much to her and being here now made her realize what she had lost. Although she felt safe for the moment, her comfort at home was so much greater, her belief in herself and her abilities were so much more at the camp. On the Genoa she was a captive and felt lost, vulnerable to the Captain who'd kidnapped her. There was so much she needed to learn about these people, their ways, their un-communicable thoughts, their culture.

Last night, her first night on board, she had stumbled through dinner quite well, but the Captain had had to give her a few throat clearing noises to correct her, which most others had thankfully missed. She found she would prefer physical stress in comparison to this mental stress. Being exhausted from running was far less strain than attempting to be diplomatic and amusing. Her brain was fuzzy from her confusion as to what was expected of her here. Was she to be a toy for the Captain until the amusement was no longer satisfying to him? Then what? Would she disappear like the other girls before her, who

had *vanished*? Would he keep his word and let her keep her innocence for a while longer or would he change his mind and force his will upon her?

She listened to the sound of the ship's movement through the water, as with a slap, it cut through and then diminished. The noise managed to lull her, appeasing her briefly in her dilemma over her role within the Lakellers society. Her Woodlander society was scoffed at by them. Their view of her had originally been that of a savage but she believed that had been dispelled last night. However, would she be able to keep up the façade of being lady when she was more used to living as a cultivating girl of the land?

Once more focusing on the water she realized how big the lake was, something she hadn't known before. They'd travelled all night and only now were they approaching land once more. She'd been looking straight ahead at the water and land but now she looked up to the blue sky that held only a few clouds. In the clear atmosphere she saw the large airship. The sun shone upon her roof and sides creating a silver glow around her, her white underside resembling the clouds she floated amongst.

Oak, she thought, he is on the ship and we're behind it. Could it be that the Captain is following the airship? Perhaps good luck was on her side? Looking back at the billowing square sails, she noticed they were similar to the silver on the white airship, bright, glowing just as the airship was, except they seemed more transparent. Perhaps they were the same material as the airship, she was curious as to why they would be.

Turning around her hair whisked ahead of her and she smiled at the thought that the Captain had allowed her to look the same as when he'd first seen her. She wondered what strange clothes he would make her wear tonight and ran her hand over the stretchy leaves that made up her shirt and pants. The blotches of colour did nothing to camouflage her on this steel ship, maybe she could wear grey and blend in with her surroundings that way. She would love to be a chameleon and disappear to walk amongst the Lakellers without their knowledge.

An "Ahem!" sounded behind her and she smiled knowing it was Ensign Jones. Looking around at him she saw his face flush a little as he offered her lunch, no doubt remembering her thankful kiss.

"One salad ma'am."

"Fern." she softly requested and watched him flush a little darker red as he dropped his eyes to the ground and handed her a large bowl of vegetable delights.

The aroma from the salad dressing delighted her nostrils and she smiled even more at Ensign Jones who stumbled backwards a little, as he nodded nervously. She wondered why he'd changed his behaviour toward her and with her free hand touched his arm.

"Thank you Ensign Jones, you are very kind to me."

Her soft sincere statement lightened his face into a handsome smile as he happily replied. "Anything you need Miss Fern I'm glad to get it for you." Then embarrassed and blushing he continued, "You're a spirit of virtue on this ship, where deceit plays her cards too often."

Flushing more at his forthrightness he turned and hastily made his exit with Fern smiling at his quickly retreating back.

"You're a spirit of virtue too Ensign Jones," she responded loudly to the disappearing figure, feeling glad to have found a friend.

She wondered if Ensign Jones was enamoured with her, then shook her head, he was merely making her feel welcome on a ship on which she didn't belong. Her thoughts went to the Captain, he wanted her and through a gilded tongue he tried to make her believe he was her friend but she knew he wasn't.

Looking for a place to sit and eat, she wandered down the deck until she came to the area that Lieutenant Sherbrook had mentioned was being made into a place for the girls to sit on deck. The reason she was ordered not to be on deck before noon because the crew were working on the project. The tools had been put away and although some wood still sat in a pile, the majority of the work was covered with a large tarp to protect it or perhaps protect the wandering girls from what was underneath.

She was surprised that none of the girls were out for a stroll on deck and couldn't understand how they could be happy to be cooped up below. Still, she was content that the deck was so quiet, she was enjoying the peace and leisurely squatted herself down opposite the tarp where she started to eagerly eat her salad.

It didn't take long for the salad to be finished and taking a quick look around to make sure no-one was watching she stuck her tongue into the bowl and licked all of the delicious dressing from it. Her head sprang up quickly when she heard a muffled laugh. Turning her head from side to side she looked from one end of the deck to the other but she saw no one. There was only one other place for her eyes to rest upon and that was the huge tarp.

Her instincts told her someone was beneath it. Now she had to decide whether it was worth taking a risk for her curiosity or whether she should leave and be safe. She leaned her head slightly to one side as she continued to gaze at the tarp. There were no more noises and she was close to convincing herself that she hadn't heard the laugh but she dispelled the thought. She was not one to imagine anything, her senses were good, they were quick and they were accurate. Someone was under the tarp and her curiosity would not let her walk away, she had to find out who and why.

Quietly placing the bowl onto the floor beside her, she cautiously rose and moved toward the tarp. She needed to place herself in a position where if the person under the tarp tried to grab her and pull her in she would have a chance of getting out of their grasp and running away. She noticed one side was blocked with wood and the tarp was well secured so she ruled that area out, but the other corner was free of objects, and it was not tied down and could give her an escape. Her heartbeat had increased as she concluded what she was going to do and realized the risk she was taking. Who knew who was beneath, perhaps some burly crazy boy? These boys were strong and she would only be able to escape through trickery. The risk excited her and for a few seconds she was almost angry with herself, but it was immediately gone when she thought she heard the soft sound of shuffling.

Carefully approaching and going down on her haunches she grasped the edge of the tarp, then with a quick movement she leaped to her feet pulling the tarp up. She was not expecting the even quicker hands to grasp her waist and pull her in. She was suddenly spun around, a hand placed over her mouth as she was pulled toward a solid chest and both her arms caught within the grasping arm. There was no time for reprimand, no time for telling herself she was foolish. The arms that held her were strong and she knew she must be quick to retaliate whilst the person was still high on the glory of his success.

She stamped with her feet to try and stomp the foot of her attacker but couldn't find one. So she flung her head back to try and hit a chin or nose but only connected with a firm, unmoving chest. She tried to kick her foot up behind her to hit a thigh or genitals but instead was swept off her feet by her assailant taking out her other foot. Falling forward, already beaten in the game, she realized the extent of the trouble she was in.

Denver had gone over his notes again and again. His conclusions were always the same. Kisin wanted them all, the Citans, Woodlanders, Aviatilians and the following Lakellers. Flint told him of the ship that followed and that knowledge had merely founded his own theory to be correct. They were all on a journey to Kisin; this was what Kisin wanted to happen.

He was curious as to why the Lakellers were following the airship. When the conclusion (which was so very obvious) came to him he laughed out loud and the group in the lounge turned to look at him with querulous eyes. He smiled back and nodded at them, telling them to get on with their business. Saying that he himself had had an enlightening moment, to which they all visibly brightened at the thought that perhaps their leader had a plan to bring them all through this alive.

Looking out of the window at the following ship, her sails billowing in the wind as she ploughed through the water, he realized that their speed and urgency was to catch them up. They themselves, high up in the sky were gradually heading toward the distant land. How would the Lakellers follow them then? There must be a route they could take by water. Kisin had planned all this; he wanted them too, just as much as he wanted the Woodlander defenders that were on board the ship, following so they could save their leader.

Oak was special to these people, they wouldn't let go of him without a fight. They were too proud, they had their beliefs, their bonds to their own to protect or rescue. He had seen the bond between Oak and Blackthorn. Oak would not give up on Blackthorn even when his wounds were dire and many would have thought terminal. Not Oak, he had fought for the boy's life all the way, practically carrying him on their journey through the forest. He was tenacious and Denver had no doubt so were the rest of his clan.

His eyes rested once more upon the grey ship that followed them. His talks with Captain Rumello although pleasant and positive hadn't helped them to plan nor know where they were going. Just as Denver thought, only Rancor held that knowledge and gave it only in bits. Perhaps, even Rancor had no knowledge of how they were to get where they were heading. He knew what their final destination was but Denver believed he didn't know which route they were to take. Kisin gave Rancor only as much knowledge as he needed, again, Kisin held all the control, only he knew how they were to get to him.

Denver had carefully checked out Rancor to find the screen that he used to communicate with Kisin, the screen he kept hidden so well. He had purposefully bumped into him in the hope that he might be able to pick pocket the screen but couldn't find it upon Rancor's person. They needed the screen; it held the answers to help them. It was Kisin's power over them all.

He looked about the lounge. Only a few of his band were there and a few Aviatilians, it was noon and they were sharing a few beers with their lunches. Most of the others were in their rooms trying to catch up on rest and ease their own troubled minds with thoughts of home and the loved ones they'd left behind; the loved ones they were fighting to save from the threats of Kisin and the Lavats. The people of fire he thought. Why fire? Why did they want to be known as such? Was Kisin the name he'd been born with or had he changed his name just as the Citans and Woodlanders had when they'd been reborn to their new life after the Devastation?

He looked at the water below them. The Lakellers were the people of the water; they lived on the lakes on their ship, landing for supplies. The Aviatilians lived in the air, they too landed for supplies but the Avila Rose was their home. The Woodlanders lived in Elanclose, having returned to self-sustainable living and being one with the forest. The Citans were from the city and surrounding land, re-introducing electricity and some of the things that had been lost. They all lived different lives, which meant they all brought skills that were unique to them, and also their own ideas. This was what Kisin

wanted for some reason; he needed all of these skills, which meant he would be only using those with the knowledge he was looking for. Everyone else would be dispensable.

He ran his hands through his hair, feeling its smoothness from the wash he'd taken pleasure in earlier. It had felt good to get rid of the dirt that was in his hair from sleeping in Elanclouse Forest. He'd also enjoyed scrubbing off the sweat and the bitter tang that had been left upon his skin from it. If he could clean his mind of all the troubles and concerns that were bubbling inside him he would feel even better.

Slowly shaking his head to impress upon himself that it was time to change his thoughts, he let his hands fall to the table and looked at them. They were calloused and rough from the work he did in the city. He liked the physical labour even though Washington often suggested he leave it to the others and he should just use his intellect instead, by only writing projects and plans. He preferred to be there at the start of his projects. He had to anyway to make sure things were followed through correctly, but he enjoyed the toil and camaraderie with the boys that he worked with. He knew that they admired him the more for getting his own hands dirty.

After the Devastation, the Citans had cleared the rubble and through years of work they had turned it back into a city with small buildings. Wind turbines had been re-erected for electricity and the land had been tilled to produce fruit and vegetables. Instead of scavenging through the remains of buildings for food from their prior life or eating the mutant vegetation that had grown in abundance, they'd been able to bring back many comforts that they had once had, plus a more free and joyous life.

His thoughts wandered to his home and he realized he'd been lonely, that he'd had more companionship on this journey than ever before. His days in the city were spent training the protectors, planning improvements, toiling physically until he'd trudge back to his house exhausted, and collapse onto his bed only to awake early and continue with the same.

He enjoyed his friendship with Oak, teasing him and talking of the girls he loved. Girls! Oak had two girls in love with him—Willow and Fern. He'd seen them in Oak's mind, both beautiful; Willow, petite, curvy and blond and Fern, lithe, determined with thick red hair. Yet he himself had no one. No, that wasn't true he was sure Boston loved him but he didn't love her.

Why didn't he have a loving girl at his side? He knew the answer. He and Flint had had relationships with girls but neither committed to be bonded to them. They'd both grown reputations for girls to avoid. Many had sobbed to their friends of their broken hearts. Both he and Flint had been shunned and tutted at, and now neither of them bothered with relationships. Since Flint worked as hard as Denver he knew that the physical exhaustion stopped him from feeling want or need.

The Devastation had left them less fertile and consequently only a few girls had babies from the committed relationships that had been formed by the elders. Out of the three hundred living in the city only ten babies had been born. It was something they tried not to reflect over too much. They concluded that they were young and had many years ahead of them, that things would change and babies would eventually be born to perpetuate their people. Even so, it didn't stop them all from worrying though no one talked of it.

He had no children and he was glad of it. He knew what he wanted and he hadn't met anyone that could fulfill his ideals. He wanted someone who could make his skin rise into goose bumps or his breath become faster, or the heat travel to the surface of his skin. He thought of Boston, her pale controlled face, her dark tightly swept back hair. If only she could make him feel like that. Not that he'd tried to seduce her, he knew the consequences, and he worked too closely with Boston to see her pout at him every day because he'd abandoned her. No, if she'd incited his energy and desire he would have made her happy and been the boy for her. She didn't excite him though and he wanted more from a

relationship than she could give him. He wanted the thrill, the almost overwhelming emotions of love. The feeling that he would sacrifice his life for her, that he would try to be superhuman just for her, be enlivened when he was with her, he wanted all of that not just the friendship.

He was content with hard work and labour during the day, but he didn't want to return home to just a conversation. He wanted ardent, uncontrollable feelings as well, the wanting, the heat, the texture, the smell, the sound of heavy drawn in breaths, the huge releases of air as their pent up desire became more satisfied. Who was this girl he had in mind and where was she in his city? He didn't know.

Still pondering his dilemma he noticed Flint enter the room. He indicated to him that he should come over and sit down with him. His friend looked drawn and pensive and Denver smiled at him knowing that was his way. He vowed that one day he would get this boy laughing, an uproarious laugh that would shock everyone including Flint himself. Yes, one day, he thought, he would make it happen.

“How goes your day Flint?” He watched Flint give a small frown at the question. He was not inclined to make long conversations; a few words were good enough but such a question would always be drawn out, since a simple *good* never sufficed.

“My morning has gone well. I've eaten a good meal and I slept well last night.” The brown eyes held the blue amused ones and the frown deepened a little more.

“Since your day is going so well will you join me in a beer?”

He watched Flint's lip curl a little and then a conceding nod with the frown. Denver gave a short laugh and got to his feet.

“I'll fetch them. You stay here and make sure that ship doesn't veer from her path!” He laughed again as another small scowl crossed Flint's face and went to draw two beers from one of the barrels at the side of the room.

Flint wasn't keen on beer, he found the bubbles too gassy and disliked the bloating sensation they sometimes left him with. Denver had told him to drink it slower but Flint was always in a hurry with his food and drink as if he had too much to do, and Denver knew it was Flint's way of coping with living with a people so unlike himself that his time alone was what he sought. He knew Flint prayed to be with his father and people once more and prayed that he would have an honourable death to favour him well in the after world.

Denver respected Flint; he was loyal, brave and a great addition to the Citan people. His senses were quick, he was agile, strong and a force both physically and mentally that was a challenge to anyone. His group feared fighting Flint, his cool, calm exterior made them uncertain and afraid. He gave the appearance of no appeasing, no forgiveness, no release from your fate, no sympathy. They believed he would kill without regret or remorse; you would be a momentary memory and nothing more. No one dared challenge him in any way, verbal or physical; they all stayed away from him except Denver who was his only friend.

Denver placed the beer before Flint whose frown still sat upon his face as he stared at it and waited for Denver to take his seat opposite. Denver raised his glass.

“To all of us, everyone who's been commanded or drawn by Kisin may most of us come through this alive.”

The brown eyes darkened slightly and Flint nodded his head in agreement. Flint took a huge draw of the drink to finish half of it to Denver's quarter. Denver stared at the much reduced liquid and smiled at the loud burp that suddenly erupted from Flint as he thumped his chest in annoyance. He eyed the glass in front of him with distaste and Denver laughed even more. Looking upon the face before him Denver suddenly became serious.

“What do you think of this boy Kisin?”

The brown eyes remained quiet for a while until a swirl of knowledge rose within them.

“Once as a boy I questioned our Chief; why, since he was leader, did he meet with others to make final decisions on matters regarding our people. He told me an old saying—*you can fool all of the people some of the time, and some of the people all of the time, but you can't fool all of the people all of the time.* I believe it was a quote by Abraham Lincoln.

“What our Chief meant is that without the input and approval of others, you are trying to fool people into believing that only what *you* say is important. Eventually they will *stop* believing you.

“Kisin believes he can fool us into thinking he can control us all and so far he has, but he cannot keep control over *all* of us forever.”

Denver solemnly nodded back and dropped his eyes to the drink in front of him.

“Let's hope Flint that he can hold all of us for only a very brief period of time.”

He sensed Flint nod his head even though he was still staring at the amber fluid before him, watching the misted glass turn into trickles of water on the outside base.

“My hope is that Kisin has missed a loophole that we can get through to destroy his intentions. However, he seems to be cunning and structured with his plan and I'm afraid that we might not have that luck.”

He looked up now at Flint for a reply but only saw a face that was still set with the same taunted grimace. He waited patiently and saw a momentary fog appear making his eyes opaque. Suddenly they brightened and the tense face became iron clad with determination.

“Then we shall die fighting for our beliefs.” Flint's eyes held Denver's as an imaginary battle took place behind them. “We will die knowing we have not given in to corruption.”

Denver looked at the blazing fire as Flint's soul sped somewhere else, to a land of glory, righteousness and spiritual contentment. There were flames in him as the protector sparked forth and his eyes shone with intensity, iridescent and invincible. The image was brief as the eyes faded from enlightenment and his face once more became the usual stern emotionless visage of Flint. Denver took hold of his glass once more raising it toward him.

“To a glorious death my friend.”

Flint raised his and repeated the same words, immediately downing the rest of the beer. Pushing back his chair he bowed his head slightly to Denver.

“I will go to my cabin to spiritually prepare myself for what lies ahead.”

Denver nodded as Flint turned, leaving him to dwell within himself in meditation, reliving the beliefs he'd grown up with in the silence of his own room.

Still holding his drink on the table he looked at his own half full glass of beer, staring at the wet pool of water beneath it. Lifting the glass again he looked at the circle of trapped water that lay where the glass had been. If trapped water couldn't escape the weight of a glass, how were they to escape Kisin? A boy whose strength didn't lie in the physical but with a mental strength that knew about technology and science, subjects that they only understood from books but hadn't yet fully developed in practice. Their concerns had been with surviving, yet Kisin had been able to go beyond that and become what they had thought was gone forever. Denver had no doubt that Kisin was a scientist that performed experiments and they were all to be a part of Kisin's final test. He had the strength of the Regime and they were to be captives once more within a corrupt system with Kisin at the head of it.

The Woodlanders wouldn't stand for that, nor would the Citans, but would the Aviatilians and Lakellers? Would they go along with Kisin's requests and allow him to have power over them? To control their lives and everything they did? Would they concede to the Lavats or unite as allies to save themselves?

Chapter 28

Upon the frigid steel floor the strong arms had locked around Fern. The body pressed down upon her encapsulated arms as she struggled to get free from the vice like grip. She was furious! She'd managed to abate the Captain's lust just to be taken by one of his crew, this couldn't happen. No, she wouldn't allow it. She'd do everything she could to get out of this situation until she had no energy, no breath left within her. She was a defender, she would fight.

Fern was ready to bite, spit, and perform whatever she had to do to protect herself. Her pent up anger that had been kept buried for the last few days was smoldering. The flames progressively awakening from their slumber were quickly rising through her body. She gritted her teeth, feeling the cold metal floor sticking to her cheek as she forced her eyes to their outermost corner to look at the face above her own.

Her ire was suddenly stifled as in the faint light she recognized the person that held her. She stopped struggling and felt herself being released, enabling her to turn over and stare. Widening her eyes to take in every bit of his appearance, her jaw unwillingly dropped. She knew his smell, so familiar, so like home, the welcoming grin upon his face sealed it all and she almost screamed out in joy.

"Elm!" she cried, her eyes full of happiness at the sight of him.

His grin became even broader and his eyes sparkled with joy themselves as he jumped to his feet. She continued to lie on her back looking up stunned and wordless, until he grabbed her arms and pulled her up too.

She doubted she'd ever felt such elation before in her life. Her mind was singing and dancing in delirious delight. She flung her arms around his neck and buried her face into his chest, breathing in the smell of moss and vegetation as she hugged him. The sinewy arms became gentle as they slid around and held her; a light kiss was dropped upon her head. She could feel his breath softly moving her hair, sending goose bumps along her body as she quivered in ecstasy.

Looking up, smiling as if no other occasion could make her so happy, she stumbled out words. "How? When? Why?"

Elm laughed at her as he looked down into the bewildered eyes that shone through the dim light of the covered gazebo. His face was filled with warmth and indelible love, his eyes glistened, the pupils black pearls as he looked at her in adoration.

"We traded goods for transportation on this ship. We arrived late last night to search for Oak." His face briefly changed at the last comment but he quickly smiled once more as he refocused upon her. "I didn't expect to find another traveller on board from our camp."

"I am not a traveller I am a captive! Kidnapped by the Captain's crew for his pleasure and forced to be on the ship to entertain him."

Elm's eyes darkened and his face grew tight with anger. "He's forced himself on you. I'll kill him!"

His eyes were already tearing apart the gazebo as she could see him mentally go through his actions to destroy the Captain.

"No, no! He hasn't touched me yet. He's respected my request to become more used to him and my new surroundings. Don't even think of killing him or we'll all be dead and Oak will never be saved."

In the dim light Fern could see Elm's face twitch and was unsure if the anger was for the Captain or of her concern for Oak.

"How many defenders are on board?"

"Twenty." His reply was brief but she could feel his body vibrate slightly from his emotion.

“And your plan to save Oak, when is that to happen?”

She looked eagerly into his face and saw it was now strained further, his jaw raised a little higher so she couldn't see his eyes. Without warning she was pushed away; quickly she regained her balance but was surprised by the immediacy of the gesture. Stunned, she stood still wanting to pout, to cry and ask him why he no longer wanted her in his arms. She didn't sense the irony of the situation.

Elm turned away from her, her fingers itched to touch him, she wanted to smell him; it was as if he brought with him all the comforts of home. Staring at the rigid back she rooted herself and suppressed her want and waited for his response.

“Pine leads us in pursuit of an airship that carries Oak but as yet there is no plan.”

Her heart almost jumped. Oak was on the airship and they were following it. Luck was with her, she would see him again. Elm turned back to her so quickly she staggered backward a little. In the shaded light she saw his blatant anger and she knew she was the reason why.

“I must return downstairs. We're not allowed onto the deck after noon.”

Her body felt wrenched. The question she'd asked herself many times before, whether Elm truly loved her, was answered, she no longer doubted it. His jealousy was apparent. His hatred for Oak she realized wasn't only because he'd become leader but because she loved Oak and not Elm. With distress she knew she couldn't correct the wrong. She couldn't transfer the love she felt, it would only be displaced affection and Elm wouldn't accept that. Could she love Elm anyway, when she knew he wanted to destroy Oak, the one she really loved?

Closing her eyes she dispelled the thoughts.

“I'm not allowed on the deck before noon,” she told him, opening her eyes wide at the realization of how manipulative the Captain had been.

His prize was not to be taken from him, especially not by her people. Yet, he couldn't give up the chance of a trade with the Woodlanders for goods. It must have caused him some agitation knowing he was risking losing his treasure and angering the passengers he carried.

“I'll talk to Pine and see what arrangements can be made to rescue you from the Captain.”

Grabbing hold of his arm Fern looked up at him with pleading eyes, she didn't care that she was reducing herself to begging, she didn't care about her pride; she wanted to be saved.

“Yes, please, please do Elm. I want to be with my people. I want to be with you.”

She saw the look of hope spark across his face and immediately dropped her hand from his arm knowing the new error she'd made with her final sentence. The reaction was perceived and a cold expression returned to his face as he fathomed his own error of judgement.

“I'll tell Pine and leave the arrangements to him.”

Fern's face saddened at his remark and expression. Elm had always been her friend and now she'd lost him. Was she so self-destructive that she was to lose everyone she cared for? She did care for Elm, she wanted him in her life, she could see that now. Crumpling in distress, with tears perching upon her bottom lashes she saw a look of remorse flash across his face as he turned away.

“You must go before they start to look for you. It won't take them long to figure out you are under the gazebo they are building. Be careful of the tools, go through this way.”

He gently pushed her along and with docility, she obliged. Then with an agile squat he went down to the ground where the tarp fell, listened, and pulled the tarp up.

“Go quickly.” He said as he pushed her out and dropped the tarp before she could say anything else.

She stood confused, her lower lip quivering, she wanted to cry loudly, weep for all of her losses; her home, the ones she loved, her friends, her freedom. She couldn't. She heard movement further

down the deck, so she quickly ran to the fore of the ship. There, she leaned against the rail once more, gazing ahead, out across the water, water that she didn't see because the visions of her home and clan swam before her instead. Her tears bowled their way down her cheeks, rolling across her lips and dropped into the lake below her, awash in the water.

It was only a short period of time when she heard footsteps coming toward her but she didn't turn around. "Ma'am I need to return your bowl to the kitchen. Do you have it here?"

She still looked straight ahead. "I left it near the large tarp. I was sat against the wall there." Her voice quavered as she tried to regain her self control.

"Thank you ma'am." There was silence behind her but no movement. "Is everything alright?" The voice of Ensign Jones held concern. Although she didn't turn she could see his face, the frown, the soft lips wanting to deploy words of kindness and sympathy. It made Fern feel wretched that she caused him to feel that way, but she couldn't face him and allay his fears because her tears were still abundant, and she was sure a huge sob was going to push its way out soon.

"Yes, everything is alright Ensign Jones," she replied more formally than she meant to and softening her voice she continued, "but thank you for your concern. I...I just need to be alone for a while." She heard feet move slightly.

"If ever you need me Miss Fern I am here for you." His words were softly spoken, almost a whisper but her sharp ears heard them and her heart swelled at the thought of this young boy's gallantry. Her tears flowed more knowing she had turned away yet another friend.

Her emotions were brief as she heard Ensign Jones leave and remembered Elm was still under the tarp upon the gazebo that was being built. Had he left yet or was he in the process of leaving? Would Ensign Jones run into him? In which case would Elm get rid of him to protect himself from the Captain's wrath?

Turning quickly she looked to where the boy was. He'd already found the bowl upon the floor but Elm was not in sight, nor was there any movement from the tarp. A huge sigh came from her, followed by a large hiccup and then another. Now she would have to hold her breath to get rid of them. If only she could hold her breath and be rid of the last two days.

Oak had sought to satisfy his concerns about Blackthorn's safety. He noted Blackthorn was constantly watched by one of Denver's group and saw he'd rested well, the result being that he was more cheerful and hungry that morning.

After his discussion with Denver regarding his conclusions about Kisin and Rancor, being with Blackthorn was on a very different level. Blackthorn went into a lengthy soliloquy about the airship and the great height they were at. His enthusiasm about the distance they'd covered and the amazing view they had of the lake, frothed with delight and inquisitiveness. How did the airship work? Why did it just hang in the air? What made it move? Silently Oak listened to the unanswered questions as Blackthorn happily accepted their rhetorical nature and lack of response.

He spent a few hours with him, politely nodding his head and raising an eyebrow to show he was paying attention, even watching the boy devour his lunch as if he would never see food again and needed to stock up. All the while Blackthorn continued his conversation as if Oak was fascinated by everything he said. Oak couldn't help but smile fondly at him in relief that he'd survived such a terrible injury and that Rancor's trap hadn't taken his life. He was surprised at the change in the boy who only

yesterday had tottered on the cliff toward death and yet now was energetically engaging life with new found vigour.

He was relieved to have the opportunity to leave when he saw Blackthorn's body start to droop and the talk that had flowed non-stop since his arrival began to waver and wane. Getting up to his feet he saw the boy's head jerk up in attention at Oak's movement.

"You need more sleep Blackthorn." He realized this was the first time he'd spoken without a rush of vocal thoughts interrupting him since his arrival. He stared at the tired boy and proceeded. "Get the rest you need to repair your body. I'll leave you and visit you later." Blackthorn nodded, stumbled to his feet and willingly dropped upon his bed. Blackthorn was asleep before Oak had even exited through the door.

On entering the lounge he saw Denver sat at the window staring out upon the water below. His face was set in a frown and Oak noted that he held a presence of strength and power without even aiming for it. It fell upon him with ease; it was his demeanour, his stance, his aura. Oak's thoughts drifted to Willow, he missed her calmness, her sweet gentle expression, her guidance and words of softly spoken advice. She was the breeze and he was the leaf floating upon it when he was with her. How would she perceive Denver? He knew she would admire him, tell Oak that he was resilient, fair and intelligent, a good person to be in league with.

Striding toward the tussle haired giant with a small smile upon his own face, he saw the eyes alight upon him. Oak slid onto the bench opposite as the thoughtful eyes smiled back at him.

"How is your charge today?" The words were soaked in amusement and Oak knew Denver was once more teasing him about his fatherly behaviour toward Blackthorn. He'd teased him to such an extent that Oak wondered whether he should show such concern for a defender. What kind of leader was he to play father to all of his clan? They were to be given instruction not advice. Was he over stepping the boundaries of leader? What were the boundaries of a leader? Surely empathy for his clan should be one of them but did that make him weak to their enemies? Was this what Denver was trying to tell him without plain insult?

"You think too much!" Denver gave Oak a wink as he jumped at the words and was shocked at having laid himself out so openly. "Don't over analyze, all it does is complicate things. If you didn't care you wouldn't be a leader. That is why they trust and obey you." Denver's smile was broad but Oak couldn't return it, he felt he'd presented himself as pathetic with his lack of self-assurance.

"Do you really think that no-one questions himself?" The black eyebrows were raised high in surprise as he spoke and scrutinized Oak's face. "Just how perfect do you think a boy is supposed to be?"

"It isn't that I think a boy is supposed to be perfect. It is the fact that as leader, it isn't just your life at risk, but many."

"And so it has been through the years. Many lives have been lost through the mistakes of leaders but who could know that their plan would be the wrong one to take?" The cool blue eyes looked sombrely at Oak as he continued.

"We go to Kisin, we'll make plans along the way but we don't know if the plans will work. We can only guess and hope. Yes, we'll question whether it is the right plan but without acting upon it how can we ever know?"

"There must be a safe guard then." Oak replied as if there could be no other answer.

"A safe guard? How do we create a safe guard with no knowledge? It can only be created if you have an idea of what may happen. Tell me Oak, how do we safe guard a situation we know nothing of? Not even where it will take place!"

“The answer is simple. We must attain the knowledge.”

Denver gave a short laugh and looked at Oak, his black hair was shining in the sunlight but his face was not, it was solemn. Oak could sense that Denver was taking in his own appearance, his tanned skin, sun bleached hair. He sensed that Denver thought he had the expression and look of Peter Pan and it irked Oak. He'd read the story and seen the pictures and found Denver's thoughts insulting but he kept calm and quiet seeking the peace that he would often meditate for.

Denver shook his head and gazed away toward the middle of the room as he spoke.

“We'll do our best to gain as much knowledge as we can but we can't be assured of it.”

He was staring at Detroit downing a large beer, slapping the empty glass upon the table when he'd finished, well pleased with himself.

“Perhaps if we can work betrayal into this we can glean more knowledge than we thought.”

He looked back to Oak upon the last words, as Oak's eyes left the very person Denver meant to turn.

“I won't lower my morals for such an attempt,” Oak replied with contempt.

The perfect teeth before him ground down hard upon one another as the massive body lunged toward him.

“Then your morals are too high! This is life we're playing with here, the existence of all of us. Damn your morals, we need to save people and we'll do it in any way possible!”

Oak didn't move. He made no jolt nor showed any fear from the demanding figure before him but instead viewed him passively as he went over what he'd said.

“I understand what you say.” Oak's gaze casually moved from Denver and rested upon Detroit once more. “Perhaps my morals can be...slightly shifted.”

He turned back and watched the smile spread across Denver's face as the huge boy resumed his previous position and sank a little in height and breadth. Denver was definitely an imposing presence and Oak was glad that he was his ally rather than his foe.

“How will this work? Detroit has betrayed all of us in favour of Rancor and serves him. How will you get him to switch sides again? And even if he does how can you trust him? It would give him more credit in Rancor's eyes to feed us false information.”

Denver remained quiet and gave a brief glance to Detroit, dismissed him, and played his fingers upon the empty glass before him. His eyes quickly, mischievously rose to Oak's and a large smile took over his face, showing his white teeth once more as they glinted in the sunlight. He dropped his hand from the glass as he held Oak in his gaze.

“We have the gift—we read minds. We'll know what Detroit is thinking at all times. We just need to know how to persuade him to seek out the knowledge we want. He won't even have to tell us!”

Oak's own smile spread across his face as he felt his own cheeks raise upward wrinkling his eyes that were locked onto Denver's.

“He wouldn't even know we were using him!”

Denver nodded, self-satisfied and confident. They had a plan of action and neither of them would waste any time to set it in motion.

Chapter 29

Elm could see through the cracked plastic tarp as Fern's shoulders moved up and down where she leaned across the rail. He felt sick at what he'd done. Felt bereaved that he'd made her cry. All he wanted for Fern was to make her laugh, be there to hear the peals of it as it rang out. She hurt him but he didn't want to hurt her. He had to control his jealousy; he'd never win her with it. He knew why she'd run from the tarp, he'd heard the footsteps too and it wasn't long before the boy crossed his line of vision toward her.

He could faintly hear the conversation and even saw the Lakeller raise his hand as if he was going to set it upon Fern's shoulder. He said something that Elm couldn't catch and then he turned and walked back toward Elm. He didn't come near the tarp but went to where Fern had enjoyed her food and licked the bowl clean. He couldn't help but smile at the thought. Fern was so artless at times; it was what he loved about her.

The Lakeller had picked up the bowl and was staring at it. He was probably shocked at how clean it was too but then he turned and looked toward Fern. Elm saw that he was young and everything about the boy's face showed he was unmistakably in love with Fern. He threw his head back for a moment and thought; not another block for him to have to overcome. Why couldn't he have picked someone much easier to possess? Why Fern? —Fern who placed him in constant battle.

The boy was leaving and Elm knew he had to get back below quickly. It could be that he'd already been missed and he didn't want the Captain's wrath coming down upon him when they were so close to land and perhaps the end of this section of the journey. The Captain had threatened them all with being thrown overboard to be eaten by the envillions if they disobeyed his orders.

He checked numerous sides where the cracks in the tarp gave him a fairly clear vision of the deck and quietly slipped underneath it. Fern had turned around and he could see her relief when she saw him moving to the shadows of the ship. Was the relief for him not getting caught or for the boy not finding him? That girl frustrated him beyond belief!

He was sidling up to some heavy chains when he saw the Lakeller. It was not the boy but Gisburn, the burly friend of Madden. His head was down so he wasn't aware of Elm's hiding place as he passed. His heavy expression concerned Elm since it could mean that Madden was not recovering well from his injuries. He'd worked hard to save Madden's life from the potentially mortal wounds he'd received from the creature.

He and the doctor had done everything they could to make sure he'd live. Elm had even had to take a drink with the doctor. It had left him feeling dreadful all morning with a head continually being punched and a mouth dryer than any summer stream. He wondered that the boy could drink such poison and be unharmed by it since he'd seen him happily striding across the deck to talk to the Captain that morning. Dr. Consilla was made of a stronger constitution than himself. He would be much more wary of the amber fluid called "Scotch" in the future.

He'd approached the doorway to the bunks below when he heard voices coming up the stairs toward him. He quickly looked for the nearest cover and found only crates filled with Envillions. He shuddered at the sight of the huge fish. Their masses of teeth protruded at almost 90 degree angles, layers and layers of the sharp serrated edges. Their grey, wet bodies glistened, scales reflecting hues of green and blue. Just in time he wedged himself between the three crates. He had a slight view of two boys as they stepped through the door onto the deck.

"Ensign, I don't care if she is Cleopatra I am not making a vegetable only dish for dinner tonight. The Captain enjoys his fish and he'll be livid if he doesn't get it." The boy, who was obviously the cook,

dressed in a white tunic with his sleeves rolled up and towered over the younger. His chest was enormous; he arms twice the size of the other boy's, his huge head crammed into a tall white hat.

"Please Cook! Fern doesn't like fish. She's vegetarian; could you make something special for her, for me, please?"

"What foolishness are you getting yourself into? She's the Captain's; don't be daft enough to fall in love with her!" He looked down at the boy and grunted in disgust at the sappy look that was returned.

"Too late!" he continued to grind out as he ignored the forlorn face beside him. "Don't be an idiot, keep away from her, she's not worth it! No one is worth it!"

"But if you saw her Dagleish! Her hair is red, the colour of burnished copper flecked with gold. She's so beautiful; she should be called *the goddess of the forest*. If you saw her you would understand and she's so kind, not haughty and uppity like some of the other girls on board. She's a friend, on our level; all she wants is to be welcomed."

The great arm raised as the Cook lay his hand upon the boy's shoulder, the bicep ballooning broadly. The eyes held the younger, serious with concern.

"Jones...you're a good sailor and I like you. You follow orders well and I have nothing to grumble of with regards to your work but of this I must. You have to stop this obsession now."

The boy said nothing but dropped his head in disappointment.

The cook continued. "I will make a concession to you but you must make a concession to me."

At these words the boy's head abruptly raised in anticipation to listen to the Cook, his face bright with hope.

"I will make a delicious meal for this girl, one that she'll never forget. It will be especially for her as a welcome to the Genoa. It will be the only time I cook just for her."

The boy's eyes were bright with joy, his smile wide with gratitude after he heard the Cook's words. The Cook dropped his head slightly now toward the boy as he held his attention.

"As a concession to me, you will ask the Captain to charge someone else to take care of the girl and you will purposefully from this day on avoid having any contact with her."

The devastation upon the boy's face was obvious even to Elm from his occluded view.

"No, I can't! She needs someone to watch over her. She's lonely, upset, she needs me there. She has no one."

"Believe me Jones, she doesn't need you there. She'll be fine without you. However, you will not be fine if you continue this fantasy you're living in!"

The cook's face was set in a firm determined scowl between anger and ridicule. The boy started to stammer but the Cook raised his hand from his shoulder, palm facing him to stop him.

"What is your answer? Do I cook her vegetarian meal and you relinquish your adoration? Or do I go back to my kitchen and cook what I'd originally intended whilst you put yourself at risk and probably her at the same time. You know what the Captain did to those other girls—is that what you want to happen to her?"

The face that looked back at him was white with fear and emotion.

"That was just hearsay; no-one really knows what happened. Madden and Gisburn had something to do with it didn't they?"

His eyes were enlarged as he stood staring at the large boy; his voice trembled, he now looked back and forth across the deck looking for an invisible Captain that he expected to nab him.

"As you said no one really knows but who's to say that the hearsay isn't the truth? Leave her alone. Don't place the Captain's jealousy upon a hot stove, it will boil in very little time and she'll suffer from the consequences."

The boy's eyes were bulging and Elm had to wonder at what tragedy had supposedly happened to the other girls.

“I agree to your terms. Prepare the meal and I'll make sure I'm no longer the one to inform Miss Fern of her daily activities.”

The boy's head dropped and the beefy cook patted his shoulder in sympathy.

“It's the right choice Jones. You know it just as well as I do. It will keep the girl safer.”

“Aye!” replied the boy as he moved away, dragging his heavy feet along the deck, along with his heavy heart.

The Cook watched the boy for a while and then turned to the crates.

“Aye, it may keep her safer for a while at least, but not forever.”

The Cook's words were spoken to himself whilst he shook his huge hatted head and followed them with a loud sigh. He grabbed a large crate of envillions pulling it toward his chest and turned to the door.

“Poor thing!” he muttered as he moved away.

He pushed his way through the door with the crate to the kitchens below. Exposed and disturbed Elm still crouched next to the other two crates. What was going to happen to Fern? Thoughts went through his head that he wanted to dispel due to their distressing nature. Hearing movement further down the deck Elm decided that it was the boy returning and quickly got to his feet. He was through the door and down the stairs in seconds, making sure that no one caught a glimpse of him. Like a feline he slunk through the corridor. Quiet, his actions lithe and precise, he crossed the metal floors making no sound

He knew that Dr. Consilla was in a meeting with the Captain as he promptly went through the door of his quarters and leaned his back against the cold metal to catch his breath. His heart was beating faster than normal and he knew why. It wasn't because he had been stealthy and at risk of being caught on deck. It was because he knew bad things were going to happen and he had to stop it. For once he wasn't the one planning the mishap.

Flint sat cross legged on the floor. His thoughts were of the Ojibwa people. Everyone he'd loved, his nation, had all been killed by the Devastation. His meditation was taking him through the reservation, returning his memories, his happy recollections of a people free of the Regime, the Regime that had died on the day of the Devastation.

The Chief had gathered them all together and was telling them they were to pray to Nanabush, who had come to them in the spirit of a grizzly bear to remind them of their beliefs. The bear had walked through the reservation touching nothing until it had found the Chief's home, where it had stood on its hind legs and hammered upon its chest until he came out. The bear had continued to stand on its hind legs and the Chief had gone back into his home to return with dried deer meat. The bear had taken the meat, devoured it, and satisfied with the gift, had left the reservation.

The Chief requested that they should go to the river and return with many fish to be left as an offering to Nanabush. He'd made his request to the Regime soldiers who remained on guard outside the reservation and only let them leave the reservation for such tasks. They agreed he could take five men and the Chief had gathered his best fishermen. To the rest of the people he told them to set up an area

outside of the reservation to make offerings to Nanabush. Leaving with his fishermen he'd ordered everyone to make haste to find offerings and pray.

Flint asked his father how the bear could be Nanabush when Nanabush was depicted in the form of a rabbit. Smiling down at him his father explained that Nanabush has the ability to transform itself into anything it wants to be; however, it has to accept the limitations of that particular form. Since the Chief wanted to please Nanabush and bears enjoyed eating fish, this was to be their gift to Nanabush in thanks that he had originally taught them how to fish. Flint, excited by the events, rushed to his lodging with the others to collect offerings.

Inside his home he'd gathered his collection of feathers, shells and stones, taking them to his father with some regret that he was to lose his treasures. His father's smile had been so proud and joyous that he'd forgotten his loss as his heart filled with pleasure at pleasing his father so much. His father had collected tobacco, telling Heath that tobacco was the first plant given to his people by the Creator and was used as a means of communication. He also had a bag of cedar, explaining that it was used for cleansing and purifying the body, and a bag of sweetgrass that he said represented Mother Earth's hair. Heath nodded in enthusiasm at the knowledge.

The soldiers allowed them outside the reservation but they lingered around watching them constantly. The feathers, shells and stones were placed at what his father termed special places; others from the reservation were performing likewise ceremonies, praying over the offerings. The cedar, tobacco and sweetgrass were formed into braids and burnt whilst prayers were muttered over the smoldering braids. His father was telling him that the smoke from them would promote positive energy and good thoughts.

An old woman was smudging sage as she whispered her own prayers, leaving sprigs as an offering. As Heath watched he was overcome with emotion listening to the soft chant. His heart filled with feelings of hope and joy that the apparition of Nanabush had visited them. He fell into easy prayer beside his father and the armed soldiers were forgotten as everything around him was dispelled and only the spirit world became real.

Sitting in his small cabin on board the Avila Rose once more his surroundings were forgotten.

He was no longer on the airship but travelling in a large birch bark canoe. He was sat next to a shaman as he chanted to take them to the different world levels. A five foot crane stood in the shallow water where the boat stopped and the shaman picked up the crane carefully lifting it and taking it to the head of the boat. The crane was no longer a crane but became one of them, a speaker who talked of the spirits and the journey they were taking to them. A large turtle swam beside the boat and the speaker informed the people in the canoe that he was offering his back as a place for a new world to be built. Flint was looking at the turtle and on looking up saw that the speaker was looking at him expectantly. Knowing the turtle was a symbol of patience, longevity and fertility, Flint was curious as to why the speaker was only looking at him. Looking at the other hazy faces he saw that they too were staring at him, waiting.

Flint arose, confused but obedient to his people; he stepped out of the boat onto the turtle's back and sunk into the depths of the translucent water. There he espied a snake, weaving toward them. They were close to the banks and he noticed bubbles forming from a gap in the rocks, floating slowly to the surface. It was an underground stream. The snake and stream were symbols of renewal and regeneration but the snakes were also creatures that live in the underworld. The snake disappeared into the cracks of the rock.

Thunder rumbled overhead and echoed through the water as Flint looked up to see the thunderbird, the protector of people. Its eyes flashed as it looked down upon him and a loud clap of thunder rolled as it flapped its wings.

The sound became even louder and Flint was rocked out of his reverie as lightening flashed across the window of his cabin. He sat calmly but his heart was not; it beat rapidly, his body was tingling with an excitement he didn't understand. What did his vision mean? Everything he had seen were symbols of his beliefs, symbols that represented life anew and yet he believed he was going to his death to be with his people. Were the spirits trying to tell him that he was to survive; he was to procreate and continue the life they had once had? Where was he to find the girl he was to bond with? They were to go into battle against evil, to fight and die so that others would live, yet his vision suggested he was not to die, he was to build anew. Through the flickering shadows in his room he realized he would no longer be a Citan.

Chapter 30

Fern watched Elm exit from under the tarp relieved that he hadn't revealed himself to Ensign Jones. His face was still scowling as he briefly looked at her and an involuntary sob emitted itself in a guttural sound as she tried to suppress her emotions. She told herself that her feelings were wrong, they were out of place. As a defender she should feel nothing but she did feel and she hurt intolerably, inconsolably inside. She knew Elm could sooth her but he wouldn't and she would now have to suffer through another evening with the Captain, and hope that he wouldn't make advances toward her later tonight.

Leaving the scene of her distress she went through the doorway and along the corridor to the Captain's Quarters. She hoped he wouldn't be there but forced a smile for in case he was. To her relief when she entered the large room it was empty. The chair had been pushed back from the desk and papers still lay cluttered across the expanse of it, so he probably hadn't left long ago. Quickly she went to the bathroom and locked herself inside.

Looking into the mirror she saw her eyes were red and puffy, a definite give away that she'd been crying. Looking under the sink in the cabinet she found a face cloth and wet it with cold water. Placing the cloth over her eyes she felt eased by the cooling sensation on her face as she continued to think of what was going to happen. Elm would tell Pine she was here and they would get her away from the Captain, but she was unsure how they could accomplish this without an all out battle with the Lakellers. She had read about Helen of Troy, *the face that launched a thousand ships*. She didn't want to be the face that destroyed a ship.

Taking the cloth from her face she rinsed it through with cold water once more, then turning around she flipped down the toilet seat lid and took to her throne of despair as she laid the cold damp cloth over her face. Elm's face was before her closed eyes and she tried to dispel the image with thoughts of the Elanclose camp, of the clan moving about, taking care of their daily duties. The picture didn't alleviate her distress, only heightened it, knowing that they continued with their lives oblivious to the pain she was enduring because of the hapless situation she was in.

She heard a door open and close, listened to footsteps cross the room; a chair scraped the floor as it was pulled in toward the desk. She heard the shuffle of papers and boots being kicked off. Quietly she sat, waiting. What for, her inflamed eyes to lessen? She noted that she didn't care about her appearance but she did care that the Captain was clever enough to figure out something was going on. She had the feeling that if anyone else was to covet her, his life would be worthless, and he would be dispensed with immediately.

She heard the chair scrape backward, heard a couple of thuds and footsteps. She felt her heart give a start as the beat quickened like a rhythmic drum speeding up to the climax of a performance. How could he know she was in here? If he knew she was in the bathroom, had he known what had occurred outside on the deck? Fern was filled with paranoid fear. Her mind was out of control as she filled her head with frightening questions that all resulted in death. She was in such turmoil that she hardly noticed the opening of a door; only the closing and she knew it was the one leading to the corridor.

Leaning forward she placed her head in her hands and thought of Oak and the meditations he'd taught her. Raising her head resolutely she focused upon the door. Keeping her back straight but not rigid she softened her eyes to take in the whole room. The images became vague as she started to breathe. A deep breath in through the nose and out through the mouth, again she breathed deeply, and then once more, letting the last of the air flow out taking her paranoia with it.

A plan of action formed in her mind. She would play the inquisitive captive, asking the Captain what she was to wear for the evening. She would wander over to his desk as she asked the question leaning over it to be level with his eyes. Whilst his attention was diverted to the boxes of clothes, she would quickly scan the papers on his desk in the hope of finding out where they were and maybe even where they were going. If caught she would have to play with the papers on his desk, telling him she was bored since she was used to physical activity during the day from running through the forest. Hopefully he would not suggest a physical interaction that involved him. She shuddered at the thought and looked at the connecting door to his bedroom. She would have to be careful with her behaviour and words.

She felt the weight of distress lifted from having a plan and once more her spirits rose. Members from her clan were on board, they would keep her safe. Getting up from her seat, no longer the Spartan Queen abducted by the Prince of Troy she placed the facecloth upon the edge of the sink. Quickly checking her eyes and happy that they no longer looked like puffballs she strode back into the large room.

Since the Captain was not there she didn't have to attempt subterfuge. She strode over to the desk and gave it a quick glance over. The papers in front of his chair were arranged in a line. She could see they were maps but couldn't see what they were of, so she moved to the Captain's chair and perused them more carefully. One map was marked at the north peninsula, the area they had sailed from. A route was drawn through the lake to its southernmost point where it joined something else. She bent over to take a closer look to see what the connection was and read *Aqueous Passage*.

There was little known about the Aqueous Passage other than it was the longest and largest canal in the world. It spanned the Mississippi River which was a feat in itself. It had been built for large ships coming through the lakes to travel directly west, crossing many states.

Slipping away from the desk she made herself comfortable on the couch, her legs crossed, elbows leaning upon them, her head in her hands as she thought about the route the Captain was planning on taking. She wondered whether the passage was safe. Surely it would have been damaged at the time of the Devastation? If the Captain thought to travel on it he was placing them all at risk. Why would he continue so far? Surely, his plan had only been to take the Woodlander defenders to the southernmost point of the lake and drop them off on land there. Why would he want to go further?

She was pondering the question when the Captain walked in. His face became a smile as he looked at her position upon the couch.

“There you are Fern! I was beginning to wonder where you had hidden yourself.”

Fern smiled back looking up from her cupped hands but not moving.

“I had lunch upon the deck and stood at the rail for a while looking across the water. I noticed that there is land in the distance will we be landing tonight?”

The Captain tilted his head slightly as he studied her thoughtfully for a moment. He seemed disinclined to want to make any comment but eventually he gave a sigh and replied.

“We will stay out upon the lake for tonight. Tomorrow we will go toward land.”

His evasive remark brought a sparkle to her eyes. He didn't say they would land but go toward land.

“What happens when we reach land Captain?” She gave what she hoped was a childlike smile to cover her inquisitive question as nothing more than innocent.

His eyes raked over her momentarily.

“We'll be leaving the lake and travelling through a water system.”

He turned away and walked toward his desk. As he grabbed hold of the chair he looked at her once more.

“Fern, what do you plan to wear to dinner tonight?”

He'd carefully shifted the conversation but she'd gained the knowledge she wanted. He was planning to use the Aqueous Passage.

“What would you like me to wear?” she gaily asked.

His tawny eyes became amused.

You choose my dear, something elegant perhaps?”

Fern looked at him as if he'd lost his mind—elegant? What did she know about elegant?

“What kind of elegant?”

She raised her eyebrows with the query and the Captain laughed. He strode toward the book case and looked along the upper shelves. His fingers ran across books until they settled upon what looked like well worn magazines. He pulled one off the shelf; it was ripped at one corner so he carefully turned the pages.

“This is a magazine from 2012; it is called Vogue and was read by girls at that time. I enjoy to look at it because the girls were so beautiful, they were dressed in such ways that very few girls try today, except Simone. I gave her some of these magazines as a gift.”

He was turning the pages, lingering on certain ones as if he had favourites.

“It was kind of you to give Simone such gifts. Did Lieutenant Rostin mind?”

She knew she was being nosey with the question but the Captain was still wistfully browsing through the magazine and didn't seem to notice.

“She wasn't with him at that time.”

He stopped flicking the pages and closed the magazine. Walking toward her, he gave her a look of distrust and a frown that spoke for itself. She'd asked too much and was to stop.

“Here Fern take a look through. These girls are dressed elegantly. See what you can do.”

He turned away to go to his desk but stopped, changing his mind he went back to the door to the corridor.

“You have two hours Fern, to get ready.” And without turning he left the room.

Fern let out a huge breath. She'd pushed his buttons there and she knew it. He'd disclosed information he'd rather she didn't know and he was cross about it. Namely, that Simone had been his lover. It made sense to her now, the hatred Simone had directed toward her last night, her glances of ridicule at her behaviour and dress. How her face held sarcastic amusement at Fern's blatant stares of admiration of her diamond earrings; earrings that the Captain probably gave her. It all fit together now. She frowned as she continued to think about the Captain. Where did the other girls fit in? Were they before, after or was Simone in between and why didn't Simone disappear?

Leaping off the couch she noted she had a job to perform and she needed every minute available to her in order to perfect or even get close to perfecting it. Walking over to the boxes, she pulled off both lids and looked at the contents inside. She still had the magazine in her hand and looked at the clothes inside. They were similar, some possibly from around that time. Checking out the models in the pictures she saw that they had plumed themselves to the point of looking almost silly. Not only that but they were practically strutting in the pictures. She decided she disliked the Captain's taste.

Bending over she started to pull out dresses. Some contained ruffles and she immediately pushed those back into a corner out of the way. There was no way she was going to walk around looking like an upside down tree canopy. To her absolute delight she pulled out a pair of black pants. They had been carefully folded and when she let them hang she saw that they were creased down the

middle of the front and back and went from tapered to flare at the bottom. Excitedly she pulled them on over her own pants. Her pleasure was dampened by the fact that they were too big and slipped down over her slender hips. Disappointed she folded them once more and placed them back in the box.

Her face was somewhat sullen now as she pulled out folded articles of clothing. So far her favourite dress had been the black Lycra one she'd worn the night before but she knew the Captain wouldn't be happy if she wore it again. He wanted a surprise, she was his entertainment and she had to oblige to keep him happy. Dresses became a pile beside her as she went through various colours, some that made her cringe in distaste and shapes that made her laugh out loud. Pulling out a dress in the colours of a variation of gold and yellow she placed it against her. It was very long falling to the floor, too long for her in flat shoes but she'd noticed some high heeled shoes in the boxes that would make her tall enough for it. It floated to the ground just like Willow's dresses and her hopes rose that it would fit since it seemed perfect for the evening ahead. She would play the kidnapped Spartan Queen Helen and wear this beautiful dress that glimmered in the light and felt soft, silky and sensual to the touch.

Going to the bathroom she dampened her hair as she had the previous evening and swept it up, following instructions of demonstration pictures in the magazine on how to make a French twist. With difficulty but being patient and persistent she finally managed to clip it up, and turning her head sideways looked in the mirror satisfied with the effect.

She heard the door open and the Captain stride toward his room and his bedroom door close. She hoped he didn't need the bathroom to prepare himself for dinner. She heard his closet open and the sound of hangers rattling as clothes were pulled from them. Ignoring the noises from next door she took off all her clothes and then realized she needed the special underwear. Quickly pulling her clothes back on she silently snuck back into the room and grabbed the push up bra and panties she had conveniently placed in one corner. Looking through the shoes she matched her own with a high heel sandal and retreated back to the bathroom.

Once more she struggled with the bra and gave a few discontented words as she fiddled with straps and tiny clasps. She heard the Captain leave his room just as she was pulling the dress over her head and noted he'd left his quarters completely. That meant Ensign Jones would be coming to fetch her to dinner. This thought cheered her up as she wondered what his expression would be when in saw her in her new attire. She hoped he would be affected by the sight of her once more and she would give him a friendly smile as she followed him into the corridor.

With the zipper at the side pulled up, she viewed herself in the mirror. Her own jaw dropped at the image before her. She could truly be *the face that launched a thousand ships*, her red hair lay in crinkled waves against her head where it was pulled back into the French braid and her pale skin was porcelain white. The dress made her hair look a deeper red than normal and the fine material clung to her body in sweeping curves as the material formed itself around her hips, the deep V in the neckline showing her cleavage. As much as Fern wanted to be a defender she did enjoy the way she looked in these clothes. It was a transitory thing, not harmful she thought, she would be back to being a Woodlander of the forest soon enough.

Denver was ready. With a quick look at one another Oak and Denver arose from the table simultaneously and languidly strolled over to the group of jovial boys who were enjoying their third and fourth beer.

Denver laughing slapped one of the boys on the back.

“Don't be finishing off all the beer there Jackson!” he suggested, to which the boy grinned back.

“No way! I haven't drunk anywhere near as much as Detroit has, he could drink his way through a brewery if we still had them!”

Laughter thrummed through the small group as Denver and Oak's eyes lit up at the thought of Detroit being inebriated and at his most vulnerable.

Denver moved away from Jackson noting that he was a good trustworthy boy and much cleverer than he made himself out to be. His mind removed Jackson's thoughts and now settled upon Detroit. He was gloating at how he was able to out drink any of the boys in the group, priding himself on being the bigger, better boy. Denver smiled at his naiveté. He looked across to Oak who had also done a quick reconnoitre of Detroit's mind and he nodded back that he too was ready for the experiment.

Denver grabbed hold of Detroit's arm.

“I think Detroit is the one I should be in fear of finishing off all the beer and leaving us with none!”

Detroit grinned stupidly back and Denver realized he was wandering down the road toward needing a nap; they would have to be quick.

“Come with me Detroit! I won't have you finishing the last of the Aviatilian's ales before I can enjoy some myself.”

He pulled Detroit away from the group; Detroit still happily smirking unaware of the careful trap Denver and Oak were about to set.

Denver finally managed to help Detroit traverse the path toward the window seats and tables; Oak was already sat on one of the benches waiting. Detroit's face dropped as he sat opposite to Oak, and as he watched Denver sit beside him confusion replaced his inane expression. Denver leaned forward from his seat across from Detroit and with a hand covering the side of his mouth that was closest to Oak who sat at his side, he whispered.

“Sorry Detroit, we have to keep an eye on this one all the time. There is nothing trustworthy about him other than his intent to escape.”

Detroit nodded knowingly back and gave Oak a sneering glance. Denver hid his amusement at both Detroit's and Oak's expressions. This was turning out to be fun.

Oak leaned slightly toward Detroit who stared back at him in surprise as he warned him in a lowered voice.

“Make no mistake Detroit, I will escape. I know where we're going and how. My plan is already set and neither you nor Denver will be able to stop me.”

Denver watched Detroit's jaw drop and stifled a guffaw as instead he raised his eyebrows in fake surprise.

“It takes a brave boy to so blatantly tell his captors he is planning to escape,” he responded watching Detroit fervently nod his head in agreement as he stared with large eyes at Oak.

Detroit was in a stupor from the alcohol and his glum gullible expression was amusing to both of them as they clearly read his thoughts. Denver stifled his smile and continued with the act.

“Why are you telling us this?” He leaned in to Oak aggressively demanding an explanation.

“Because...” Oak leaned forward now to both Denver and Detroit as if colluding with them, “there will be nothing that you can do to stop me.” He quickly leaned backed against his seat as if satisfied that his last remark was correct and he was indeed invincible.

Denver looked at Detroit who sat perturbed and noted that his mind was on Rancor. Reading his thoughts he gathered that Rancor had told Detroit that Oak had to make the journey all the way to Kisin. That he was very important to the final outcome of Kisin's plans.

Denver, who'd been staring at Detroit, now swung his upper body around to look at Oak, whom he knew had read the same knowledge.

"Where do you plan on making this escape?" he questioned.

He could sense the panic in Detroit; his thoughts were wandering to how irate this would make Rancor after he told him and how he would lash out at him in his anger. Denver smiled inwardly as he noted that Detroit had had enough of Rancor's foul moods.

Oak gave a huge belly laugh as he responded. "Do you think I'm a fool? Do you think I would give away that information?"

Detroit's face was painted in such alarm that it was all Denver could do to keep his own face serious, so he kept his eyes on Oak.

"But you've told us you plan to escape. Why would you do that if you weren't a fool?"

Oak leaned into Detroit ignoring Denver. Grinding his teeth together as he spoke, he insidiously continued with a crooked smile.

"I tell you because I want to disturb you both. I want to make this journey as uncomfortable for you as I can. You have taken me from my clan and I'm going to punish you for it, but first I will let you stew in the juices of ignorance and fear. You will fret at how I will get away, it'll cause you sleepless nights knowing that I will escape and I will get my revenge."

Oak rubbed the bruises on his throat as he glared in loathing at Detroit. Detroit knew exactly what he meant and his face paled as his owl like eyes stared back. Denver had to turn his head away at the exasperated expression upon Detroit's face. He couldn't look Oak in the eye either or he would crack up with laughter. He could sense Oak's serious face, even his mind was serious, his self control was remarkable and Denver admired him all the more for it.

Detroit was staring at Oak in disbelief, his mouth opening and closing as his mind tried and failed to find words. He quickly swivelled his head to Denver who gave his best expression of surprise in return and watched Detroit's head swing back to look at Oak.

"You...you will not!" Detroit tried to splutter out as spittle landed upon the table before him. Denver could sense his befuddled brain breaking into outright distress at wondering what was to be done.

"Oak!" Denver said breaking the tense air between him and Detroit. "I think it is time you went back to your cabin. You have caused enough turmoil for one day. Let me tell you this Woodlander, you will not get the better of Detroit nor I. We'll find out your plans, we'll discover on which part of this journey you are to make your escape!" He glared at Oak his jaw tight and jutting forward in defiance. "We aren't the *fools* you take us for Woodlander, I have my contacts; I'll go over our route and figure out where you plan to leave us!"

Oak threw his head back in a peal of laughter and Detroit slammed his fist upon the table gaining the attention of the others across the room. His drunken head bobbed up and down whilst his slackened muscles did their best at holding it. Denver waved a hand through the air for the other boys to carry on with their business and ignore the disruption.

"You'd best leave now Woodlander whilst you can, for I won't be pulling Detroit off from a fight this time!"

Detroit nodded his head enthusiastically and gave a start as Denver ordered.

"Wait here Detroit, let the Woodlander leave us. You and I need to talk!"

Denver moved from the bench seat to let Oak out. Oak stopped beside Detroit.

"You didn't have the advantage over me in the fight and you won't have the advantage over me any time soon!" Oak rasped out to Detroit.

Denver waved to the other boys.

“Jackson!” He ordered, “Take the Woodlander to his room and stay with him.”

Oak was already striding away as if he had a job that needed to be done in a hurry, making Jackson quickly leap to his feet in order to follow him.

Detroit was mumbling in annoyance, his words incoherent. Denver sat across from him watching the face before him contort and ramble.

“Detroit, take no notice of the jungle boy; he only says these things to wind us up.” Detroit slowly shook his head.

“N...no, he has a plan.”

Detroit said no more as he ended his muffled words but Denver read his thoughts clear enough. Oak was placing Detroit in danger, not just from Rancor but from Kisin's anger. Rancor had told him Kisin's anger was intolerable, not only did he kill but he made sure you suffered greatly in the process. The glazed eyes lifted and settled upon Denver.

“We...we must find out...what path we're on.”

Denver arose from the table and moved to stand beside Detroit where he placed a hand upon his shoulder.

“Detroit I think you take the Woodlander's words too seriously, I personally am not concerned by them.”

He turned on his heel and left Detroit staring at his large hands as they lay upon the table. His thoughts were troubled; he didn't agree with Denver. He was going to find out what their route was and he was going to prevent any escape plan Oak may have. He was going to do it all without Rancor's knowledge, he didn't need Rancor's wrath raining down on him right now. It would be very tricky but he would get the information. Denver was wrong to think that the Woodlander's words were of no concern. All this passed through Denver's head as he moved away.

Smiling Denver left the lounge. The stage had been set and now the true fool was to continue with the performance. Detroit had been easy to play but he was worried that Detroit was not clever enough to outwit Rancor. Still whatever knowledge he could gain before Rancor figured out what was going on would be enough to help them gain a better stronghold on the situation.

Chapter 31

Fern had been sat for a while on the leather couch going over the occurrences of the day, cutting out the bits that still upset her, not visualizing Elm but thinking of him as nothing more than a name. She started out of her reverie when the door opened. To her disappointment it was not Ensign Jones that came through it but Ensign Rogers.

He gave her a quick once over, a look that said *nice* and opening the door wide said. "The Captain requests your presence at dinner ma'am."

Fern couldn't hide her sadness at not seeing Ensign Jones. She'd hoped she could have a brief pleasant conversation with him to learn some more about the ship, about the Lakellers lives.

Ensign Rogers walked out holding the door as he waited for her to pass through. She tottered along, wobbling slightly before stepping through and stopping next to him. He quickly closed the door and with a long stride covered the floor of the corridor. Fern stumbled along in her high heeled sandals following as carefully as she could, trying not to lose her balance and topple over. To her relief she succeeded. The young ensign opened the door to the dining room and as she passed him she gave him a brief smile and a *thank you*.

The room was a hubbub of activity, so much so no-one even noticed her enter. She stood for a while invisible, watching them animatedly talking. She heard a roar of laughter from the Captain as Simone gracefully moved her face away from his ear. Lieutenant Rostin was watching from across the room, his face keeping a smile that didn't belong there. Fern looked back to Simone, she looked beautiful and sensual, and she was using all of her abilities upon the Captain.

Fern was curious as to why she would bother when she was already attached. If the Captain had wanted her, he would have taken her as his forever when they were together. He'd cast her off for some reason and she'd sought companionship elsewhere but here she was flirting as if she had no connection to anyone. The whole thing seemed implausible.

She drew away from her momentary lapse as she noticed Lieutenant Rostin walking toward her, his tight smile still holding although she could see the tinge of sadness in his eyes. Taking her hand in his he gently kissed the top of it and gave her a genuinely glad smile.

"You look gorgeous Fern, an apparition of beauty."

Fern smiled back, amused, knowing that he was going overboard with his comment but appreciating it none the less.

"I felt as if I should play a role," she confided as his head quirked sideways and an eyebrow rose in question and continued. "I am the Spartan Queen, kidnapped by the Prince of Troy."

His smile beamed in amusement, a deep laugh came from his throat and a slight pink tinged his cheeks as he gazed at her in open admiration of her look and her wit.

"You make a perfect Spartan Queen." He leaned forward and whispered in her ear, his face held a comical twisted expression. "When will the Trojan Horse arrive?"

"I believe it is already on board." she whispered back and realized her slip too late as his face became serious.

Grabbing her arm gently he led her to a quiet area of the room.

"Don't let anyone know that you're aware of what is going on," he whispered his face concerned and anxious. "Ignorance is the best act you can take; keep to it for your own sake."

His kind eyes looked upon her in solemn worry as he swept a quick glance toward the Captain.

The Captain's eyes had fallen upon them so Lieutenant Rostin gave out a guffaw of laughter and leaning in toward Fern so that no-one could see his or her expression he continued his warning.

“Fern, you are sweet and innocent so be wary. You could not only put yourself at risk but many others. The Captain doesn't forgive; he expects loyalty, respect and most of all obedience. Don't disobey him Fern, please heed this warning from a friend. Now smile and laugh as if you have no cares in the world.”

Fern gave a tinkle of laughter although to her ears she could hear the falseness of it and Lieutenant Rostin laughed with her. She was glad that she'd changed her expression because when she looked up the Captain was stood beside them.

He looked dismissively at Lieutenant Rostin.

“Thank you Lieutenant Rostin for keeping Fern amused I can take over from here.”

The Lieutenant bowed his head in acknowledgement and moved away as the Captain gave Fern what she now knew to be his guarded look. Looking at his smile it was all contentment but his eyes concealed other thoughts. He was perusing her body, she knew it was to distract him from his tumultuous thinking and Fern once more considered the words that Lieutenant Rostin had said *don't disobey him*. So far, she had disobeyed him, but it had been done by accident.

“You look exquisite tonight Fern. Well done.”

The hazel eyes surveyed her own as she quickly changed her thoughts to her dress and her character acting for the night. Taking hold of the length of the material falling to the ground she gaily stated.

“I thought I would play the Spartan Queen for the night. I believe a fleet of ships were sent to retrieve her from the Prince of Troy.” She could see the Captain's interest spark and with a mischievous smile she leaned toward him. “Do you feel like the Prince of Troy?”

She was rewarded with an amused laugh and his eyes lost their guard and were replaced with genuine humour.

“My dear Fern, I do believe that you look very much like the Spartan Queen. I have seen pictures of her depicted as a feisty red head with wavy hair much as you yourself.

Fern, surprised, did a double take of the Captain to make sure he wasn't leading her on in his humour.

“My clan don't have a thousand ships to launch after me.” She stopped as she realized once more that she had erred in her conversation.

The Captain's laughter stopped and the guard sprang to his eyes as the smile remained.

“Of that I'm glad. I wouldn't want to have to wage a bloody war to keep you.”

The words seemed lightly spoken but there was an inflection behind them that she recognized as a warning. Fear almost sprang to her gay face but she managed to quell it in time. Once more the Captain had set a trap to catch her off guard and find out what she knew. Playing dumb she smiled as if she were enjoying the game.

“Our simple canoes wouldn't get very far!” She continued to laugh pretending to wipe a tear from her eye. “I'm afraid my people are afraid of the envillions they wouldn't even dip a toe in the lake!” She gave a small peal of laughter watching the amber eyes scan her for sincerity. “Thankfully you are not afraid of the envillions and instead of fearing them you have put them to good use by eating them for dinner!”

The Captain laughed once more as placed his hand around her to manoeuvre her across the room.

“Talking of which we should not keep our other companions waiting.” He whispered into her ear, his hot breath burning her lobe like dragons breath, making the heat of warning rise within her.

“Dinner will be served soon.” He said as he guided her gently but forcefully. She moved on the invisible chain he’d attached to her, close to him, unable to break free from the clasps of servitude he’d placed upon her.

As she moved she took a breath, the aching smile left her lips momentarily as she walked closely beside him to the table. He seated himself as he had the night before at the head of the table with Fern on his left and Simone on his right. Simone was already sat and studying her cautiously, so she gave her a brief smile and a smile to Lieutenant Christian who sat beside her. Taking her seat she drew a deep breath to continue with her new act, scene one was over, now to carry on with scene two.

The Captain was surprisingly quiet at the table but he listened with interest to everything that everyone around him had to say, including Simone who held his attention the longest. Fern said very little except some polite replies to Lieutenant Christian as to whether she had had a good day and had enjoyed the journey so far. She took the opportunity to question the journey itself but received only the same answers the Captain had given her. Somewhat frustrated she changed her line of questions.

“Lieutenant Christian I am curious as to what the sails are made of, they seem almost luminescent.”

A smile of satisfaction crossed the hardy face as he gave his reply.

“The sails are photovoltaic solar cells; they are made from polycrystalline-silicon-wafer laminated onto the sails. They pass the sun’s energy to storage where it is then transferred to the different areas of the ship requiring electricity for power. We can sail the ship without the sails if we wish. Everything on board is made to be as efficient as possible, so very little electricity is required. This means we can travel for many days with no sun as we have the stored energy to rely on.”

He finished with a lofty smile and made a sweep of his hand toward his wine, upon grabbing the glass he looked at Fern, presenting the glass high before her, his face expectant. Fern was clueless as to what he wanted; his eyes fell upon her own glass. She picked it up silently questioning him as to what she was to do next, but he just showed his own to her once more, so she lifted hers level with his. She was rather shocked when he hit it with his own, such a strange thing to do she thought but smiled nonetheless.

“To the Genoa!” He said proudly encouraging her to proceed likewise.

“To the Genoa!” she stumbled out, wondering what they were going to do to the Genoa. He knocked his glass back finishing all of it, so she followed suit and coughed a little after.

“I think Fern has heard enough of the ship’s operations for the night Lieutenant.”

Fern started from her chair, she'd completely forgotten the Captain and when she turned her face to him she could see that he'd noticed that too and was not happy about it. She remembered playing with Pine's baby, Savannah, she was small and uncoordinated so there were limited games to play. Her main difficulty had been giving her enough attention, when she stopped entertaining her she would cry. The Captain it seemed was like a child, he wanted all of Fern's attention, and was jealous of anyone taking it away from him.

Smiling consolingly as she would have done to Pine's baby she saw his face give a look of annoyance and immediately changed her approach.

“Does chef make changes to the sauce he puts on the envillion Captain?”

His smile returned and a look of *good girl* crossed his face as he responded.

“The Cook does not just use sauces Fern, he fries them with herbs if he has them available or he bakes them with vegetables. Alas, it is only when we have the produce that he can do that. He has many ways to cook the fish, all ingenious and delicious. He knows the envillions are my favourite entree and tries new methods of cooking them to please me.”

She had no doubt everyone constantly worked hard to please their Captain, he would demand no less.

“He is a talented man.”

She considered whether she should try the fish tonight since she hadn't the night before. Her stomach gave a small gurgle and she knew she would rather not.

The doors opened and in came the ensigns with the food. She was delighted to see Ensign Jones and couldn't prevent her expression of happiness at his presence. He saw her and her joy, his face flushed brightly as he quickly averted his eyes away from her. The Captain saw it too and the cloud that covered his eyes made Fern want to run from the room. It was quickly replaced with the guarded smile as he continued to watch her. Uncomfortable, she shifted in her chair and waited for the food to reach her.

She was approached by an ensign that she didn't know, he came directly to her without going to any of the others first. She was confused and noted that the Captain looked upon the ensign with curious eyes himself.

“With the compliments of the cook ma'am, he has specially created a vegetarian dish for you in welcome to the Genoa.”

Placing the plate down before her the ensign smiled and backed away to the door. She looked down at the wonderful meal before her.

“How honoured you are Fern. Cook has never done such a thing for anyone other than me.”

She met the Captain's eyes with a tear in her own. The thought of an unknown boy creating something for her palate alone made her want to hug him in gratitude. Her glistening eyes caught Ensign Jones looking at her, his smile broad across his young face and she knew it was because of him that she was being treated so well. Unfortunately, the Captain also saw the look and expression from Ensign Jones and his own did not express any happiness at all. Ensign Jones hurriedly made his way out of the room he didn't look at either Fern or the Captain again.

Looking at her meal she overheard the Captain.

“Best to eat it now when it is still at its best, rather than cold. We wouldn't want to show disrespect would we?”

The question was twisted in the way it was said, a double-entendre that sent a cold shiver through her skin.

“I am sure it will be delicious.”

She hastily cut a piece of pepper and stabbed it with her fork placing it into her mouth and making the appropriate noises to show her delight with her meal. She swallowed the food and although it was delicious her senses didn't notice. They were already overwhelmed by the menacing vibrations coming from the Captain's words.

She had no idea how she made it through dinner, she smiled and laughed when required but she said very little and the Captain said even less to her. His eyes watched her and her fear escalated unreasonably, taking her discomfort to a new level, and presenting a Fern to the other members that had never existed before. A Fern so false; whose smile was not a smile, whose laugh was not a laugh and whose retorts to questions were meaningless. She hated this person; she hated what the Captain was doing to her, even more, she hated the Captain.

When the meal was over she was able to talk to Lieutenant Rostin once again. They managed to escape the group unseen to a quiet corner of the room. He made sure they were out of the Captain's sight and he protectively kept her hidden from him by his bulky body.

“How are you Fern?”

She wanted to weep looking up into the kind eyes that questioned her with the anxiety of a friend.

“I have turned into someone I'm not!” she cried, “I hate it; I hate the way I feel, the way I act, I hate this game I have to play!”

Tears escaped her eyes and she quickly brushed them away.

“You must keep playing. I'm sorry to say you have no choice. We'll find some gratification for you, something that will pull you from the nightmare you have become trapped within.”

Her interest was piqued as she looked up at him again.

“What kind of...gratification?”

The last word was querulous; perhaps she had misjudged Lieutenant Rostin's kindness, maybe he was wanting more than friendship from their relationship.

He immediately saw her concern and shook his head to alleviate her fears.

“I mean something only for you, not involving anyone else, something that you can enjoy. Do you like music?”

“Yes, but I don't sing well nor do I play any instruments.”

“We have instruments on board if you would like to try?”

She smiled, “No, I have had opportunities to learn, but my music sounded more like the strangled cries of the night creatures!”

He smiled back enjoying her humour. “Do you paint?”

Shaking her head and scrunching her face she looked back at him.

“I am worse at painting than at music. Once, when I had finished a painting, ants crawled across what I'd done after I placed it down to wash the paint from my hands in a stream. When I returned the picture was magnificent compared to what had been there before. I concluded that I was best to leave art to the talents of others or the ants.”

He gave a small laugh his eyes shining as he took in her exasperated face.

“Then I will work hard to come up with something to entertain you. Perhaps I need to look into more unconventional methods.”

His smile widened and she gave him a smile back that said she appreciated his interest in making her happy.

“Lieutenant Rostin!” Fern jumped at the sound of the Captain's voice. “Could you escort Miss Fern to the deck where I will join her shortly? I find I have a few matters to take care of before our evening stroll.”

The sinister look upon his face was not lost upon Fern or on Lieutenant Rostin who bowed his head and confirmed *he would take good care* of her. The Lieutenant and Captain's eyes locked briefly in what seemed to be a millisecond battle until the Captain turned and walked away escorting Simone from the room.

Lieutenant Rostin's skin was dark red when Fern turned back to him. She wondered if she should ask for a glass of water for him, perhaps he was choking but the look in his eyes told her exactly what was going on. His rage was evident and it was directed at both the Captain and Simone. Taking her arm a little more roughly than she thought he normally would, he led her to the deck. They walked to the fore of the ship; she could feel the ruffle of air from all sides. His skin colour was now pink but his lips were clamped shut and his eyes had narrowed even more.

Standing, looking out into the black of night Fern could think of nothing to say. She empathized with Lieutenant Rostin but she didn't know how to put it into words. They both stood silent until he turned away from her.

"I must leave you. I have matters to take care of."

Fern grabbed his arm. "I think you should let matters take care of themselves." She stared deep into his eyes to completely catch his attention. "What use is it to attack without a plan? You put yourself at risk and your opportunity to win is greatly reduced. What good would it do, Rostin? It wouldn't win her back to you." Fern lowered her voice to a softer tone. "Was she ever really yours?"

The eyes staring back at her flashed with hurt and Fern for the second time that week found herself comforting another and repeating soothing words over and over again. She was small compared to the broad shouldered Rostin but she placed her arms on his and pulled him into a sympathetic hug, she felt his vibrations of anger and sorrows gradually lessen. When his head and body abruptly came away from her his eyes flashed in retaliation.

"You're right Fern. I do need to plan. I can rid myself of the two most hated people in my life."

"Yes, you hate them but you're not cruel and inconsiderate as they are. Neither of them is worth you even making a plan for. Plan for you Rostin, get away from them and their appalling behaviour. You deserve more, you deserve better. Take your leave and course your own life without them."

"Yes, why would I want that poisonous girl in my life? She makes me miserable and a fool for having become her companion, a relationship that the Captain was happy to see take place and pushed with enthusiasm after he'd rejected her from his life. How could I not see that she wanted to stay on the ship to be near him and this was her way to get back with him? Perhaps that way she thought she would continue to receive the generous trinkets he'd often given her."

Fern rested her hand upon his arm looking at the sad defeated face before her.

"You're better than them, you're a good person don't let them reduce you to less."

His eyebrows rose as he looked down at her and she knew he saw her as a wisp of a girl.

"You're innocent and ignorant of these vile things but you're wiser than any of us thought you to be."

"No, I'm learning that's all, I will continue to do foolish things but I learn from them. I'm thankful that I can meet people like you in whom I can trust. The Captain almost had me fooled but no more."

"I'm glad to hear that Fern; continue to be wary of him and as much as you hate what he demands of you, you must obey him. Wear the dresses and the shoes; it will keep you in his favour."

Fern nodded. "I understand."

Both held each other with sad eyes, silently acknowledging one another's entrapment. Lieutenant Rostin leaned forward and placed a gentle kiss upon Fern's cheek.

"Goodnight young Helen. I hope Achilles saves you soon."

With a small smile he spun around and left her. Her eyes followed him as he walked down the deck until he was claimed by the night shadows and vanished. She gave a shudder as a feeling of dread rose within her, an unwelcome paranoid fear that she didn't understand and wanted to shake off. Turning back to the lake and taking in deep breaths of the welcoming evening air the fear dissipated and her mind became blank as she performed a meditation.

"Is it safe to meditate when there are so many dangerous Lakellers around?"

"Elm!" Her arms flew around him as she hugged him to her in an embrace that she gained comfort from and lifted her spirits. They quietly held each other; no words were said as their bodies soothed their troubled thoughts.

"Is Pine going to save me?" she mumbled into his chest.

She felt Elm stiffen and quickly pulled back to look at him.

"Pine is going to save me?" she insisted louder.

“No.” Elm turned away from her and leaned against the railing.

Tears were already flowing down her face. Her own clan was abandoning her.

“Why?”

Elm didn't turn around but continued to look across the mass of black water before him.

“He believes trying to save you puts us all at risk and it isn't worthwhile to place members of the clan in a situation where they could be killed for someone who is only at risk of violation.”

He spun around to her, the anguish showed in his eyes. Self defeat washed through her as her body swayed and she felt herself crumble before him. She would have fallen to the ground but Elm caught her and held her protectively against his chest. He leaned back against the rail holding her carefully as if she were so fragile that she might disintegrate to nothing should he squeeze too hard.

“I'm so sorry Fern.” He was saying his words were heartfelt laced with anger and frustration. “What can I do? I'll do anything you ask of me.”

Her sobs throbbed against him as she realized this was the boy she had always distrusted and yet he was putting his life at risk to protect her. She gave no reply just leaned closer into him and he patiently waited for her sobs to subside.

She felt the soft kiss upon her head, the gentle rub of hands upon her bare arms. Her emotions of defeat and despair weighted her down as she felt her body become heavy. Forcing her head up, she stared into the sorrowful face before her. She realized that he would try to save her no matter what the consequences and that she should be thankful. Their eyes held a while longer until she flung her arms up around him pulling him into her as she thrust her lips upon his.

Elm didn't respond for a moment. He was in a state of shock but soon cause and effect swung into motion and he wrapped his own arms around her to kiss her back. She was unaware of anything but his presence, his arms, his lips and her mind crashing in waves of various emotions all struggling for identity in her befuddled brain.

The strong grasp that sent her sprawling across the deck caught them both off guard. As she slid to a halt she saw the Captain's fist hit Elm full in the face sending Elm almost over the railing. Blood flooded from his mouth and nose as she stared horrified at its misshapen form. Elm regained his balance just as the Captain's fist once more ploughed its way toward him.

“No Captain,” she cried but she was already too late.

The fist caught Elm in the side of his jaw as Elm managed to move his head away. He was thrown backward but was still grasping hold of the rail that he precariously lent over. The next forceful blow sent him back further and he toppled over the railing.

Fern was quickly on her feet. She rushed at the Captain hitting him in the belly with her lowered head. The impact was not what she had hoped for. Her floundering dress inhibited the rate of motion she sought and her wobbling feet did little for her balance. The Captain moved only slightly and grabbed hold of her hair as he dragged her to the side of the ship away from Elm, who hung by one hand above the sinister waters below.

“I should have known you would be a whore like the others. How often has Simone warned me of your type? You would do anything to get your way. When did you give yourself to Ensign Jones? You have indeed been busy Fern. Trying to fit in your Woodlander friend here in between the others were you?”

The words came from a twisted face of anger, disgust and cruel intolerance. His nose was red and bulbous with rage, his cheeks rose and fell like a blacksmiths bellows. Fern's fear was at its peak, this boy was insane, he believed everything he said and nothing she could say would change it. Her

only escape was to fight and get free. Punching with her fisted hands she managed to pound his stomach only to cause an uproarious maniacal laugh.

“You think you can hurt me? You are one of the puniest girls I've ever seen!”

His laughter continued until she managed to get her high heeled shoe onto his booted left toes. His yell was a wonderful reward and she couldn't hide the satisfied smile smothering her face.

The pins in her hair had scattered long ago as he continued to drag her to the railing. His adrenaline had peaked and no matter how she fought and struggled her own strength betrayed her as it ebbed. His hands were on her arms gripping relentlessly, stopping her punches. Her feet hit his shins with multiple kicks but he showed no weakening in his grasp of her.

Before she could realize what was going on, she was lifted into the air her hands trying to grab at whatever she could, but only rewarded with nothing more than a handful of his hair. Her last image was of the Captain being pulled back as Elm placed a choke hold upon his neck. Far away she heard Elm's cries as he repeated her name, becoming fainter whilst she dropped to the dank dark deadly water below.

Chapter 32

For the first time in the last few days Oak found himself smiling. He was walking away from where he had left Denver fighting to maintain his composure and not laugh at the somewhat inebriated Detroit, who was struggling to figure out how he was going to get information from Rancor without him knowing. Detroit's biggest concern was how he was going to prevent Oak's supposed escape and not be subjected to Rancor's wrath. Everything had worked out better than he thought it would and for once he had found a situation humorous.

Detroit would sweat out what he was to do and hopefully succeed at getting the information they needed. Oak would have to keep up the pretence in front of Detroit by joining heads with Blackthorn and casting surreptitious glances around him as he whispered their imaginary plot of escape. The boy would be up for it, his health was improved as were his spirits and he would enjoy tormenting his tormentor.

He approached Blackthorn's room, gave a short tap on the door and walked in. Blackthorn was out of bed. Jackson followed him into the room, he hadn't said a word after they left the lounge and he quietly took a chair opposite Blackthorn. The boy smiled brightly at Oak and Blackthorn, Oak smiled back understanding that Jackson's good humour was because of how he'd helped Denver prey upon Detroit in the lounge, it seemed Detroit was disliked by many in his own group. Jackson had heard all of the conversation and Oak sensed many questions going through his head, especially about his relationship with his leader.

"I'm interested in this plan of escape that you have. Will you sprout wings or will you just float down to earth?" The smile broadened upon Jackson's face as Oak took a seat beside a puzzled Blackthorn before responding to the question.

"Ah! Jackson you should know that neither will be necessary as we will be landing soon enough and merely a step from the ship will do!"

The black eyes cross examined him to see how serious he was and then the immense boy chortled with laughter. "I believe that would be impossible with Denver at your heels!" With a grin that set deep lines on either side of his face he continued. "Detroit never was the brightest; I think that is why Washington placed him third in command because he knew he could squash him like a bug whenever he needed." He moved his eyes to Blackthorn and then back to Oak keeping the attention of both.

"Washington doesn't like to have too many powerful people around him. He fears Denver and his popularity. His safety from being usurped is helped by the fact that Detroit has never liked Denver. He is respected and the protectors would die for him if he told them to." He leaned conspiratorially forward as he sat in between both boys, his action beckoning them to lean in as well. "Washington used Detroit just as Rancor does and now as you and Denver are! Detroit is a puppet, nothing more than a marionette that can be controlled."

Oak was impressed by this Citan.

"You are insightful! I'm impressed by your reasoning. Where do you stand in all of this?"

"I am faithful to Denver as are all the others. He treats us well, gives us a free rein to think for ourselves and listens to our ideas with interest. He has at many times brought about changes to the Citan city that his protectors have suggested and always credits them for the accolades."

"The Citan city is controlled by Washington alone?"

Jackson gave a small crooked smile. "You may pry some information from me but this is the last. I only gave my opinion so you would place your trust in Denver. He is an honourable person."

He hadn't answered the question but he didn't need to as Oak had already gleaned from him that when Denver was in the City all looked to him, and an aggrieved Washington watched on in fear of displacement.

Oak gave a small smile back as Jackson attempted to change the topic.

"Have no worries I'm not planning on using any information against you or the other Citans in the city. I've faith in Denver too. He is a good respectable person most of the time!"

The latter remark was spoken tongue in cheek as he gave a slight wink to Jackson and watched the boy rock back in laughter.

"He was known to be a bit of a heel but his thoughts lately have only been about making improvements to the city. He has had no female encounters for a long time. I think if he were to meet with an Aviatilian girl, if we were allowed to meet them, he might become interested once more!"

Oak laughed. "I'm sure Denver's celibacy will not lose control over the appearance of one girl?"

Jackson leaned in to Oak. "It depends on just how hot that girl is!"

"Hot?" queried Oak.

"Fiery, passionate! That is the kind of girl he wants!"

Oak's face dropped. He'd thought of those very words to describe Fern, Fern captive on the ship that followed them. His mind and body ached at the thought of her but he pushed the red haired vision away and concentrated on the questioning smile on the quizzical face before him.

"Let's hope he doesn't meet such a girl on our journey or none of us will make it back alive!"

Jackson cracked up once more and Blackthorn even though he was somewhat bewildered, joined in with the laughter.

Oak raised himself from his seat; resting a hand upon Blackthorn's shoulder he gave him a glance over.

You seem to be in much better spirits, I'm glad that you're recovering well."

Blackthorn nodded enthusiastically. "I feel much better. Maybe we could talk of what preparations we need to make for our appearance before Kisin?"

Oak casually nodded. "Yes, we will eventually. I do want to discuss our journey on board the Avila Rose but it can wait. It's close to dinner time, eat and we'll talk later."

Blackthorn moved his head briefly up and down whilst Oak directed his gaze at Jackson.

"Jackson, I'd like to converse more with you tonight. I think you can put a twist onto a plan I have in mind."

"I believe I could add a twist to anything Oak!" Jackson confidently replied and both of them laughed once more as Oak headed toward the door.

"Until later." Oak nodded his head and watched both boys nod back.

Oak left the room still smiling, his unsettled emotions were getting back to normal and the comfort of having a plan was raising his confidence and feeling of control. He calmly made his way back to his own cabin, scanning the ship with his mind for any stray snippets of thoughts that he might benefit from; nothing of importance was retrieved as he approached his door. He opened the door to find a smug Denver sat at the table with his feet upon the opposite chair. Swinging them to the floor he swung his arm toward the same chair.

"Sit down Oak. I think we've a lot to discuss. Our preparations went very well; I believe the response will be what we're after."

Oak gave a satisfied smile back. "I think our seed will sprout in a very short time."

Denver leaned back and laughed. "I must commend your self control and acting, it came in very useful!"

“Ah! Now you believe my self control to be a good thing.”

“I have never said otherwise, only perhaps that it could be tweaked a little. Self control is good but sometimes losing it can add some excitement to your life and not necessarily be a bad thing.” His eyes twinkled and Oak immediately saw an unwelcome vision of Fern in his head. His face hardened as he watched Denver laugh at him, he wasn't sure he liked the games Denver played with his mind.

“I assure you I have all the excitement I need when I am in Elanclose.”

“I'm sure you do and she presents herself as a very pretty redhead!”

Oak stopped at the chair he was about to take and slowly turned to Denver. His eyes fell upon Denver's own chortling eyes.

“I will not discuss Fern with you Denver; please don't bring her up again.”

Denver perked up an eyebrow as he stared back.

“I'm sorry if mentioning her upsets you but I think there is something you need to realize and I will not let it be pushed away.”

Oak took the chair offered and placed his hands upon the table to keep his self control. He noticed his breathing had quickened slightly and felt agitated by it. He put it down to being tired and hungry but he knew it was anger at Denver's obsession with making Oak believe he was in love with Fern. Taking a laborious breath he decided it was best to ignore what Denver was saying.

“Will dinner be here soon? I'm extremely hungry.”

Denver leaned back in his chair knowing that hunger was not Oak's problem but being sensible he knew not to push him further.

“It'll be here shortly, if you're that hungry we can eat in the lounge where they're serving now.”

“No, I can wait.”

Oak fell silent and Denver followed suit. Oak's mind was flashing images; pictures that he didn't want to see but wouldn't fade. Taking a deep breath and clearing his mind of every vision of Fern in his head he went into a meditation.

When he came out of his reverie he found Denver quietly sat smiling at him and scolded himself for once more laying himself open and letting Denver invade his mind.

“Don't be angry! I'm only envious of the emotions you feel for this girl. She seems to be a dream come true.”

“A dream come true; she's anything but! I don't want her, nor do I want her in my mind. If I could dispel her image forever I would be a much happier person!” Oak's face vibrated from his words and Denver continued to smile causing Oak to become even more annoyed. “If you had to deal with such a girl everyday you would soon change your mind about her!”

Denver laughed softly, his voice was warm as he replied. “If I had such a girl my world would be rocked and I would no longer be the lonely boy that I am.”

Oak glared back at him. “You don't know what you would be dealing with! You think it would be all excitement, thrilling, stimulating until you realized you were exhausted just from talking to her.”

“I don't believe there would be much talking going on.”

A mischievous grin crossed Denver's face and Oak felt a burning anger over the very thought of Fern in a passionate embrace with anyone. He'd taken care of her from when she was little, lonely, lost in the world of destruction and despair. She'd grown into a perfect symbol of survival and strength of will; intelligent, athletic and full of energy. To think of her energy being used in any other way than for supporting the clan was difficult for him to adjust to, yet he knew he would have to. There must be a meditation that he could perform to help him for that.

“I doubt it!” Came Denver's reply to his thoughts. He caught Oak's cold stare and added a hasty. “I'm sorry, I forgot I'm not to discuss her anymore but you did bring her back into the conversation.”

Oak moved his attention to the window and stared at the darkening sky and the approach of evening as it glided through the atmosphere down to the quiet waters below. There was a short rap on the door and in walked an Aviatilian bearing a tray. He smiled pleasantly at them as he placed their plates before them.

“I'm sorry to say it's not much. We are short on supplies but I understand we'll be landing tomorrow to gather more goods.” He gave a small apologetic smile. “We also need to do some repairs to the photovoltaic cells. It seems that on one of our past landings we brushed against a tree and some damage was done but nothing that will hinder our travel. Captain Rumello likes to have everything in top notch condition that's all.”

With a brief bow of his head he wished them a pleasant evening and hoped they would enjoy their meagre meal. Both Denver and Oak nodded back their thanks and assured him they would enjoy whatever food they got. When he'd left they both looked down at their plates. He'd been correct there was not much there, in fact if both plates had been put together for one of them it would have still run short of completely satisfying. They laughed at their mutual thoughts and tucked into the meal hoping that there would perhaps be a later supper before bed. They both knew there wouldn't be.

After their meal was done they sat and discussed possible plans of action. Now that they knew they were to land their manipulation of Detroit could go even further. If they could travel only a few days and then need to replenish supplies they would be landing regularly depending on how far they were to go. Both Oak and Denver agreed that from the bits of clear information from Rancor's thoughts that they would be travelling for a fairly long period of time.

Evening had closed in on them and the window showed nothing but black and sometimes a bit of a reflection on the lake below. Denver was stretching more in his chair, complaining that for such a well equipped airship it could have at least been furnished with some nice large comfortable chairs. Oak smiled back saying that in Elanclose the bare minimum of furniture was used. Denver responded by suggesting that Oak never invite him to visit and Oak laughed heartily at his words, knowing that this was one boy he would allow to visit.

Leaning forward with a threatening expression he said he'd invite him just to see how uncomfortable and fidgety he would be. He told him he would enjoy seeing him writhe in one of their bilubous chairs until it crumbled underneath him from his great weight. To which Denver retorted that he would sit on the floor instead. Oak nodded that it was a good way to sit and their gatherings were often performed in such a position. Denver looked at him as if he were talking to a tree monkey and sent the vision to Oak who roared with laughter and sent him a vision of a large gangling giraffe trying to bend over to drink water, to which Denver gave a guffaw in return.

When Oak suddenly went rigid and wrenched his head toward the window Denver jumped to his feet.

“What's wrong Oak?”

Oak was trembling, his eyes were glazed and his heart was roaring through his chest. “It's Fern, she's in grave danger!” The light blue eyes flashed with distress and consternation, Oak's face becoming a mangled contortion of sorrowful lines.

Denver was beside him his hand upon his shoulder and Oak knew he could see what he saw in the distant, despairing, darkness of night.

Chapter 33

Fern thought she had her body relaxed enough for the impact of hitting the water but she hadn't accounted for how cold it would be. Below the water her body screamed at the drastically reduced temperature. Flailing her arms in an attempt to get back to the surface, she felt the long dress pulling against her and feared that her poor swimming capabilities would be her demise. Shooting for the air again, with sheer determination that the Captain would not get rid of her that easily, she kicked with her legs as best she could beneath the restrictions of the dress, aiming for the surface.

Like a spurting geyser she pushed her way up through onto the top of the lake, coughing up the unwanted water she had gathered on her way up. Although her time underwater had been brief, she'd already seen visions in her head of the other girls suffering the same fate. All wearing beautiful dresses, doused, drenched, tangling between their legs, impeding their frantic kicks to stay afloat. Unprepared, their screams breaking the quiet of the night as they were swallowed into the lakes depths. Anger swelled within her. That he'd probably unjustly thrown them overboard as he had herself irked her and all because Simone had worked upon his jealous ego. She would get Simone back for this.

Floating on the surface she was kicking her legs to stay beside the ship. Thankfully the ship was anchored for the night so she didn't need to swim after it. However, from the ripples and vibrations in the water below she knew something or things were swimming toward her. She swam to the side of the ship but there was nothing to grab hold of so she floated back a little to look up toward the deck. Thuds and groans came from above her, then a crash and a few words of obscenities from the Captain. She heard Elm's laugh in response and a resounding thud, followed by another curse from the Captain.

She had to get Elm's attention; the movement below her was becoming more violent. She could feel the vibrations quivering through her legs, making her tremble at knowing huge silver bodies armed with multiple vicious teeth were making their way toward her. If he continued to fight the Captain she'd no longer be worth saving.

"Elm!" She cried and heard a halt in the fight and a thunk followed by the Captain's cries of triumph. Above came the sound of bodies crashing against a wall and below the tremors became greater. In rising panic she scrambled through her mind at what she could do. She could kick them with her feet but from what she understood the envillions swarmed their prey in numbers, she wouldn't be able to kick them all.

In her horror and confusion, a thought sprang to her mind that the Captain loved to eat envillion and so could very well have eaten a fish that had devoured one of his past lovers! The image was so sickening that she screamed at the top of her lungs, the sound echoing across the water to the land. The sound was as blood curdling as the very thought of the Captain being a cannibal. She was crying in absolute terror, scolding herself once more for ever leaving the camp and disobeying Oak. Oak, whom she would never see again unless she came back as a spirit.

Continuing to swim along the side of the ship she looked for anything that she could grab hold of to pull herself up out of the water. Her body no longer felt like her own, it was starting to become numb and her heart, even though it was filled with fear, was starting to slow. Her mind felt like sludge. Death was imminent and yet her senses weren't responding to survive, they were starting to slow. She forced herself to move along a short way beside the ship but still with no success of finding anything to hold.

She was about to stop and debate what to do next when a rope suddenly flopped in front of her. With eagerness to live suddenly erupting plus a quivering determination which she wasn't sure was her trembling from the cold or her happiness at having an escape, she grabbed hold. Her tug on the rope was felt and she was slowly pulled out of the water.

Thank you, thank you, she repeated through her head. Whoever you are I will be indebted to you forever. Sliding upwards against the ship her breasts crushed against the cold hard steel, warmth was flowing through her but she didn't know if she was imagining it from her elevated state of anticipation at being safe. She looked at her bare arms; they were almost blue, her hands felt cramped as she struggled to keep hold of the rope.

She was crying in her mind *I'm going to live, I'm going to live* when she was suddenly jolted. Her locked fingers parted and she lost hold of the rope. Her eyes felt like they were leaping from their sockets to grasp outward as she watched the rope leave her sight and she plummeted back down to the water. Her disbelief was unparalleled as fell, she screamed with every bit of energy in her lungs, watching the grey metal sides of the ship flash past her in a slow motion real as she dropped down, down, down.

Fern's scream ran through Elm like a spear, stalling his movement and allowing the Captain to swing him around against the barrier and sink a punch deep into his lower ribs. His head dropped at the blow and he grimaced with pain, the pain subsided to anger. It rose like a lava fountain from the fissure of emotions that sat below the lithosphere of self-control, like tectonic plates separating intense hatred spewed forth. Throwing his head up his eyes leveled with the Captain as the Captain's fist swung toward his abdomen. It hit the hardened muscles and Elm watched the surprised Captain wince from the discomfort of his bruised knuckles. His contact with bone earlier had hurt and he hadn't expected the pain he felt from Elm's abdominal muscles, he stumbled back in surprise. Elm was feeling nothing, everything had numbed with the volcanic eruption of extreme hostility.

Fern had been so close to safety, he had hauled her up and his relief had made him feel like he was floating, until the Captain had grabbed him once more. Why couldn't he have stayed down where he'd fallen? Elm hadn't expected him to get up again, he was sure he'd left him unconscious, but instead the Captain had yanked him backward, jarring the rope in his hand and sending Fern back down to her death in the fish filled water below.

If Elm had the devil within him, he felt his presence now. Grabbing the Captain by the throat with a movement so quick and unexpected that it left the Captain staring with bulging shocked eyes, he crushed with both hands upon the cricoid cartilage willing for it to collapse. He felt the air expel under his hands, felt the bristled skin beneath his fingers as the sharp shards of unshaven hair sank into his hands and fingers. The feeling felt good, not like pain even though it was his pain sensory response, it was more like a return of his senses from the numbness he was feeling everywhere else and with it came a sadistic pleasure. He could feel everything that was happening beneath his palms and fingers, the closure of the Captain's windpipe, the struggle of air trying to be sucked in, his fingers blocking access, the tightened muscles fighting then starting to relax, giving way to their inability to succeed.

He'd never taken a human life and the moral thoughts hiding themselves away nagged softly in the back of his mind, telling him he was doing wrong. He couldn't stop himself as his hands pressed harder pushing upon the oesophagus with cruel unfailing brutality. The Captain still gasped, his hands had been hitting out at Elm like they were from a flopping doll as they received no reaction and brought no aid to the Captain in his fight for life. The Captain's body started to become heavy in Elm's hands, his final gasps were barely audible now, the flailing hands had slowed from waving limbs to limp appendages at his side.

Elm didn't sense the boys at either side of him, not until they had grabbed his arms and pulled them away from the silent form before him. As soon as he was wrenched away the Captain fell and another body immediately dropped toward him, hastily pushing upon the Captain's chest with as much force as it could. Elm knew it was Dr. Consilla. Elm looked on as if from a distance until he felt a fist hit his side and he folded over slightly. He felt almost unconscious to what was going on as Fern's screams repeatedly echoed through his ears and he realized it was because she was still in the water crying. He felt some relief, at least she was alive.

He knew he was being hauled along by two others, his feet dragging upon the metal deck but he felt more as if he were watching rather than being a part of what was happening. He was no longer inside his body but outside away from everything, just hovering.

It was then that he heard the difference in sound, an intense scream of horror and fear that came from the water and he spun around dragging the two boys with him. One of them pulled back a closed fist ready to immobilize him once more, but the fist never came forward as the boy was grabbed and pulled back. With surprised eyes Elm watched Hemlock sweep his foot under his unsuspecting victim and watched him fall, heard the thunk as he landed, continued to watch in thankfulness as Hemlock grasped the arm of his other captor, and spun him around twisting it behind his back, wrenching it upward into a painful lock causing the boy to cry out in agony.

The other Lakeller boy was up again and moved to grab Hemlock who dodged out of the way pushing his victim in front of him into his attacker and momentarily unbalancing both. Elm sprang into action grabbing hold of one fighter from behind as he linked his arms through both of his opponent's and with his foot swept against his foes outside leg. In so doing he knocked it into the other leg. Falling like dominoes Elm felt the weight of his opponent dropping to the floor as he went down with him, falling upon his victim, winding him; Elm listened to his panicked gasps but remained on top of him.

He looked up to see Hemlock take his elbow to the back of the other Lakeller, hitting the base of his head and watched him fold like a crashing branch broken in a storm. He fell heavily the thud ringing in Elm's ears long after Hemlock had run off to throw himself into a band of fighting Lakellers.

Around him was havoc, it was a battle of Woodlanders and Lakellers, bodies were flung across the deck, the fists of Lakellers were pummeling into Woodlander jawbones, he could hear the crack of bone on bone, could sense the pain of bruising to flesh and bone. He saw Pine lifting Lieutenant Christian from the ground and almost gasped at the strength and determination of him as the similar sized Lakeller looked aghast and uselessly punched at the solid chest before him. Pine merely laughed and threw him against a metal wall, the sound vibrated through to the floor toward Elm who still lay upon his passed out victim. He cranked his head back to see everything that was happening. Pine was bending over the fallen body of the Lakeller, his fist hitting into his jaw until he finally stopped and dropped the now quiet body to the ground.

Pine didn't get the chance to stand upright, he was suddenly kicked in the stomach and he rolled onto his back where he was able to see his attacker. Gisburn stood over him, large and strong, knowing he was slow in his movement he made sure Pine had no time to regroup but sent his foot into the side of Pine's ribs, whilst he reeled from it and rolled once more. Repeatedly Pine was sent into throes of pain as Gisburn pursued him relentlessly. Elm watched him slowly follow Pine's movements but this time he bent down and grabbed Pine's chest to pull him up as he lined his fist to punch him. It was a mistake he could not recover from as Pine's knee rose to hit his genitals, Gisburn's face creased in anguish at the blow that sent the breath out of him. Pine pulled him down toward him, his fist ploughing into the side of his face, the force causing his cheek to sink like a filled sail; it wobbled depressed as air escaped along with splatters of blood and saliva. With unusual strength Pine threw him away from him, Gisburn

fell heavily, his head hitting the metal floor hard knocking him unconscious. Pine slowly arose to his feet and stood over him, then with a careful step and a hand at his ribs he moved to aid his fellow Woodlanders.

A slow movement caught Elm's eye and he noticed that Dr. Consilla had the Captain on his feet, he was gasping for breath beside him. Like a feeble old man he gained fortitude from the Doctor who resiliently held him and encouraged him to move away from the raging battlefield around them.

To his right he noticed a large Lakeller swinging a heavy chain at Cedar's head. He watched Cedar deftly lean back as the chain passed by no more than an inch above his face, the force moving the hair on his forehead. The Lakeller looked unperturbed as he swung the chain behind him and brought it around for a second chance at a blow, this time taking the chain lower.

Cedar aware of the danger in his predicament quickly dropped his hands to the floor, where he pushed off and with a levelled head charged at the Lakeller's stomach. The Lakeller too late, dropped the still swinging chain, its force pulled back his arm dragging it behind him as it fell to the ground, simultaneously he crashed backwards as Cedar's head pummelled into his stomach and they both fell to the floor.

Cedar lost no time, he sat upon the confused Lakeller, grabbed both his arms pinning them to the floor and with a quick thrust of his head butted him on the bridge of his nose. After which Cedar quickly rose to his feet not even bothering to see if there was any movement below him and ran toward a group of burly Lakellers that were getting the better of two Woodlanders. Cedar's opponent remained immobile on the spot that he had fallen.

Elm continued to watch as Cedar pulled a Lakeller off of Hemlock who'd been caught between two Lakellers that were throwing punches at him simultaneously. He grasped one by his pony tail and yanked him backwards making his arms fly forward as if pleading to Hemlock. The sight amused Elm for some reason and he heard a cynical laugh come from his throat and wondered where it had come from. His head felt like a heavy boulder, his face thrummed like a constant bad tune, putting his teeth on edge as they grimly ground together.

He saw Cedar pummel his fist into the back of the flailing Lakeller watching in unwilling morbid fascination. The Lakeller let out a huge bellow of air as spittle sprayed forth toward the battling Hemlock and his opponent. Elm was surprised how merciless Cedar was, as the body of the Lakeller began to crumble to his knees where it met with Cedars fist once more, as it still sought the soft side area of his lower back. Cedar's hand held him up by his hair; it was now pulled taught like he was controlling a marionette, as the wobbling body struggled underneath.

He could see the bicep in Cedar's arm bulging from the heavy weight until finally with a disgusted *humph* he unceremoniously dropped him, leaving without a second glance as he leapt into another group of battling bodies. Elm was surprised at the brutality that was erupting from his clan and it made him question whether his were a gentle people after all.

Thuds and groans went on around him, he knew he had to get up but his body seemed locked into rigidity. The body below his was still and his own screamed to do the same but he forced himself onto his knees and slowly got up. He was staring at the chaos when he saw Ensign Jones near the barrier of the ship, saw him hesitate for a moment as he swept his eyes across the deck and the carnage that was going on. It was then Elm heard the voice of Lieutenant Rostin and turned to him. He was barely audible over the yells and cries of the brawling boys. He studied him carefully and found he was shouting for everyone to stop but his voice was drowned out by the noise going on around him. The explosion and sound of a whizzing bullet brought everyone's attention to Lieutenant Rostin as they all stopped their motion.

“Enough!” His strained face looked around at the bloody hands and faces before him. “There is no reason to die for a Captain who has been a fool!”

All eyes looked at him, some surprised, others with interest at his accusation.

“We all know this is not the first time our Captain has killed innocents!” His voice quavered on the last word but his falter was brief as he grimly resumed his speech. “We have followed him and listened to him, all the while knowing his weakness, his weakness of jealousy! How can we trust a Captain who does not have control of his emotions, whose rage is a rage over nothing? Whatever he imagines in his mind takes over and instead of keeping his ship and crew safe.” He paused for a moment and then dramatically continued, “A crew that is faithful, that serves him well and deserves to be treated likewise, a crew that should be respected, that should not be put in danger because of an envious insanity!” He looked around him at the boys listening. “Instead he throws his captive overboard knowing that her clan reside below the decks. Knowing they will hear and respond to save their own as anyone of honour should. It is insanity, as only insanity would make anyone do such a thing! Can our Captain be considered logical and in control of his senses?”

The Lakellers shook their heads in answer *no* and Lieutenant Rostin continued triumphant that his case was won.

“I say that he is incapable of being our Captain that he is mentally insane and should be locked up for murder. That another Captain should be voted upon, a Captain that has morals, honour, resilience and most of all the sensibility to know that the ship and crew always come first!”

The cheers were of no surprise, the Lakellers had been behind him from the beginning of his soliloquy. The crew slowly moved away from the Woodlanders they’d been fighting and went to stand beside Lieutenant Rostin. Stares of admiration and camaraderie were given to the Lieutenant as members of the crew shook his hand in absolute agreement of the words he’d just said. The actions left Elm with no doubt that he was to be their new Captain.

“Woodlanders let us try to resume our friendship and continue to aid you in your journey to find your leader. Let us agree to a truce.”

Pine nodded his head. “I agree there is no disagreement between us, only with the boy that was once your Captain.”

Lieutenant Rostin nodded back in response.

The Woodlanders slowly moved together, gathering in silence, but Elm didn’t join them instead he ran to the barrier where he’d last seen Fern alive.

Fern hit the water, the splash sending spray upwards as she sunk into the lakes depths yet again. In the water she scrambled through vibrating waves to the surface. It was then she realized that the fish were coming toward her. That they had searched for the cause of the vibrations they’d originally felt, found nothing because she’d been pulled away and had left, now to return to search once more for their prey.

Spinning her head rapidly around her she could see movement in all directions. What was she to do? She kept asking herself over and over, her fear escalating at the lack of reply. She was crying out, her words inaudible yet their meaning was understandable. Something tugged at her and she realized one of the massive fish had hold of the bottom of her dress. It was pulling it down into the depths and she went along with it. Its teeth clamped tight upon the silken cloth as it shredded it, tearing it in frustration from its realization that it was not flesh, giving her a chance to resurface and catch a breath.

Gulping air, she looked down. The nearness of the creature sent her into cataclysmic panic. She flung her arms and legs everywhere, trying to strike at the envillions that she couldn't see in her fear, but could feel swarming around her. Waves rippled as her dress was ripped even more. All she could think was that it was not her flesh; it was only material and not what the envillions intended to grab hold of. She felt something grab at her long trailing hair; her scream was high, shrieking. This wasn't how she'd expected to die.

An envillion leapt out of the water, she stared at the layers of frightening teeth as the moonlight gave them lustre, giving the fish a clown like grin. Water glistened upon its silver back as its emotionless eyes plunged back into the water. She was screaming again, even though she knew it was a waste of energy. Tails lashed out upon the surface of the water as she quickly spun around to see where the fish were. Relentlessly they circled her, gauging how to kill without danger to themselves. It didn't take them long to realize that the feeble being splashing in the water posed no threat and they darted toward her mouths open.

Fern needed a weapon; all she had were her sandals. She fumbled grasping them as she sank into the water, her open eyes could see the fish coming toward her but she had one sandal and was quickly pulling off the other. Feebly armed with a sandal in each hand she spun around striking the approaching fish with the pointed heels of each.

Crazy with fear like a spinning top she twirled and struck out trying to hit all the fish that were darting toward her. Her eyes stung from being below the water as she kept them open to see the fish. Rapidly moving her body she caused the water to eddy and swirl as it broke upon the fish distracting them further. It was only the surprise of her attack that saved her, the strike and sudden intense movement in the water caught them unaware. The fish swam away to reassess the situation.

Kicking strongly she emerged to the surface and gasped for air. She knew they were still close by but the vibrations were less, so she was safe for a short while. It didn't take long before the ripples once more increased; she could feel the motion of water grow stronger against her body. This was her last stand, she had gained more time but now the clock was chiming the hour for the last swarm. She stared watching the mass of bodies sliding and slithering through the water. She could sense their determination, they would not be thwarted this time, they were hungry and they would not give up on their meal. *Help me! Help me!* Her mind was crying but no words were said as she waited to be pulled down into the depths of the lake and torn to death.

The large splash beside her brought her to her senses and she saw Ensign Jones holding the rope. He swam toward her and shoved it into her hands; he held her own hands briefly, his still warm, hers cold welcoming the heat.

She could see his face clearly, the sadness upon it, the eyes that took their last stare into her own as he whispered. "Bye Fern." The light blue eyes said more, that his sacrifice was for her only.

"No!" she said but the stare told her otherwise. She couldn't let him do this, so she tried to grab hold of his hand once more. Her movement was clumsy and uncoordinated as she missed his hand and his eyes turned to the rapidly approaching fish.

"I love you!" his voice said softly. She couldn't believe she heard it above the sound of waves relentlessly thrown against the sides of the ship by the disruption of water, as the silver bodies headed toward them.

Her heart screamed loudly and her head swirled in deep distress as she watched him curve his body, watched him as he curled into the water, kicking his legs rapidly as he swam toward the swarming fish below, drawing them away from her.

“No!” the word barely left her lips as she stared in shock at the rippling water, still holding the rope that he'd forced into her hand.

A gunshot startled her and she looked up to where the sound had occurred, there was no one there for her to see. Her eyes went to the limp rope in her hand and then returned to scan for where Ensign Jones had disappeared. She was distressed further because she had lost him to the deep already. In the corner of her eye she saw a commotion to her right, energetic ripples sending quivers to the surface, indicating multiple body movements below.

She was crying, lost and bewildered, what was to happen now? Was she to wait until the envillion were finished with him and wait for them to pull her down too? Should she try to climb the rope? How could she when her cold slow body told her it wouldn't be possible. It was then she realized all she could do was wrap the rope around her hand. She wrapped it as best she could. Now she had to wait, wait as she slowly treaded water, trying to control her shivering and quell the feeling of exhaustion. She was crying heart wrenching sobs as she mourned the loss of Ensign Jones, mourned whilst she still could.

The rope suddenly tugged her hand and she instinctively grabbed it with her other free one, clasping it with every bit of strength she had left. It became taught as she found her hands pulled up out of the water and her arms wrenched almost from their sockets. She slowly moved upwards, her arms taught whilst she hung in midair. She scoured the rippled water that Ensign Jones had vanished into. Her body hung limp, all strength vanquished to the one place that needed it her cramped fingers and ice cold palms. With hollow eyes her head hung down onto her chest ignoring the passing metal sides of the ship, only focused on the swirling water below as once more she was hauled up toward the distant dim deck.

Still staring below she frantically searched for the young ensign but all she could see were the grey tails of the fish slapping violently under the surface of the water as they bore down upon something below, that something being Ensign Jones. Even in the dark the moonlight gave stage lighting to the events below as she saw the air bubbles rising, knew they were the last of his breath, saw the twirling shapes tearing him apart, and saw the flood of blood as it rose to the surface. She knew that his pain was now over, that the floating pieces of blood covered cloth were all that was left of his uniform. She didn't want to think of what the pink pieces floating to the surface were as the weaker of the fish quickly scavenged and picked them off.

Her wet face held both lake water and salted tears as she clung to the rope, the rope Ensign Jones had held in his own hands merely minutes, perhaps even just seconds ago. A time mentally drawn out so long that it would be embedded in her mind forever.

She knew she was crying, wailing, her lungs were raw with it but she couldn't stop. Her heart was trying to force its way through her ribcage, hammering with such force that she shook throughout her whole being. The shuddering movement caused her to lose her grip on the rope and it unwrapped by one loop causing her to slip slightly lower, making her scream all the more.

“Ensign Jones!” she cried, “Ensign Jones!” The words were on her tongue but they couldn't escape, nothing escaped but the massive sobs and her woeful cries.

She hated herself, she hated that she'd killed Ensign Jones and it made her want to let go of the rope but that would be wrong. It would be disrespectful to the boy that had given his life for hers. She didn't deserve it. Why had he done that? She asked herself over and over but she knew the answer and it hurt her all the more.

With one last mournful cry she hit the railing and her great sorrow was thrust out of her as she gasped for air at its force. She tried to draw in a breath but couldn't, she tried again, felt her eyes

popping at not being able to pull in oxygen until finally her muscles relaxed and her lungs pulled a breath in.

It was Elm that pulled her over the side, Elm that held her as she slid down onto the floor of the deck. He held her securely in his arms, held her collapsed trembling body, but her eyes didn't see him nor did her arms hold him back.

She lay stupefied, her eyes were elsewhere watching repeatedly the form of Ensign Jones diving into the water toward the swarming fish, his feet determinedly kicking taking him closer. The successful fish catching hold of their prey, their layers of teeth sinking into his young vibrant body, his subdued screams coursing unheard through the water. His pain and fear smothered as the relentless bodies pulled at him and dragged him down further away from any chance of escape.

Her screams of absolute horror subdued to shaking, shuddering seismic waves. Her arms and legs were no longer her own as she went into spasm after spasm at each wrenching cry, until her throat was so hoarse that there was no longer any sound able to evacuate her voice box, just huge shakes of uncontrolled movement. Her mouth opened to silent screams from a heart and soul so torn and dismembered that she wondered if she would ever stop feeling the pain. She didn't know if she should live or fade away from the heartache and extreme torment that she was suffering knowing that Ensign Jones had died for her.

She dispelled the image of death and remembered his face, so kind and gentle, so loving. He'd been her friend even though it had been a short friendship. He'd died for her. Did she deserve it? She didn't think so.

With all the will in the world she wished that it hadn't happened, that she hadn't let go of the rope, that the envillion hadn't pulled her back in, that she'd had more strength. She was a defender, why hadn't she kept hold of the rope? If she had he would be alive now. He would have been the one holding her in his arms as her saviour but he wasn't. His bones were now sinking through the lake waters, a body that would be forgotten. No! She vowed to herself that she wouldn't forget him. She would never forget him!

A blanket was placed over her and she felt herself being lifted. Through her now quieted sobs against Elm's chest she knew she was moving. Turning her head she saw Pine with a sword at the Captain's throat, Lieutenant Rostin was beside him tying the Captain's arms behind his back. A distraught Dr. Consilla looked to be pleading against what they were doing. Pine's angry face was taught as he spoke and the Captain's eyes were fearful at the words she couldn't hear, but Pine's face told them. She wanted to leap to the floor, grasp the sword out of Pine's hand and slit the Captain's throat from ear to ear.

She could see a glimpse of herself standing above him, his blood pouring over her blade as she laughed hysterically, watching the Captain in his dying throes and cursing him to walk the earth in misery for all eternity.

The vision was dashed; she could feel the air passing over her as her body moved further, could sense strong arms holding her close to a warm chest. There was no light, there was no colour as her surroundings started to fade, all she could see was grey, and then blackness overwhelmed her.

Elm's face was covered in tears as he carried the now quiet Fern in his arms, blindly taking her down the stairs to the cabin he'd been given to share with Hemlock. He hadn't realized that Hemlock was following him until he passed through the door and Hemlock flicked the switch for the light. He

turned briefly to him before turning back and gently placing the unconscious Fern upon his cot. He knelt beside her, taking hold of her hand. Raising it to his lips he planted a light kiss upon it, feeling the coldness of it.

“She'll recover Elm.” Hemlock encouraged softly, his words filled with empathy and sadness.

“Yes, she will! She's strong, she's a fighter!” His heart wondered though, if she'd ever be the same carefree spirit. Would she still be the fiery wood nymph that he loved so much? He knew it didn't matter; he'd love her no matter what her character became. He could love Fern subdued or feisty it didn't matter. He kissed her hand again and once more was aware of how cold it was.

He pulled back the blanket that was upon her. Her body was shivering violently and his words of confidence at her recovery faltered, her skin was cold to touch, she was seriously hypothermic.

“We must take off these wet clothes”

Hemlock stepped back. “I think one of us can manage that alone,” he replied. “I'll return later. I'm sure Pine can give me leave to let you take care of Fern. After all, where are you going to escape to when all the defenders are on deck?”

Elm nodded his head gratified that he wouldn't have another boy looking upon Fern's body. He appreciated that his jailer was giving him some liberty.

“I'll remain nearby Hemlock, but in case she needs a warm broth, then I'll be no further than the kitchen.”

“Keep to that!” Hemlock retorted softly trying to joke in the dark situation, knowing nothing could lighten the turn of events as he spun around and left them alone.

Fern was still unaware of her surroundings, her teeth chattered and her eyelids fluttered constantly as if there were a whole new world under them that she was living in. With shaking hands Elm pulled away the torn wet fabric of the dress, tearing it further the sound filled the room in a hollow reverberation off the walls. He hoped the movement and noise would wake her and she'd be able to undress herself but she continued to slumber.

Looking the dress over and moving her arms to see how he could dismantle her clothing, he noticed the zipper on the side. He soon had the dress opened down to her hips. At the sight of her naked flesh and black clinging underwear he stopped. The black bra and panties were alluring to him and he was sure he could feel steam coming off his flesh. It disturbed him at how wrong it was to feel this way at such an inappropriate time.

Shaking his head to regain control and sobriety he pulled the top of one strap on the unzipped side of the dress up over her head to the other strap pulling the cloth completely off her breasts. Gently pulling both straps over her arm he managed to get the dress to her waist before his eyes were completely absorbed by the effects of the push up bra. His surprise made him step back because he'd never thought that Fern could have breasts that looked like that. They were beautiful; pale and shimmering in the light of the cabin.

He pulled himself further away. He couldn't do this. It felt wrong, all these feeling he was having with Fern disabled. Her mind destroyed by the events that had taken place, shut down from the horrific world that had presented itself.

He turned away trying to collect himself into some semblance of chivalry instead of the overheated male that he was. His sexual urges were already pressing through his groin in automatic response to the half naked girl he loved that lay upon the bed before him. He turned, taking deep breaths. She would die from hypothermia if he didn't do this. Desire or not, he must ignore it and continue with the job he'd taken on by being her saviour.

With one more deep breath he swung himself around and went back to the silent sensual being before him. Kneeling, he avoided looking at her body and concentrated upon the wet dress, pulling it harshly down over her hips in an effort to quickly finish the task. He was rewarded with the whole thing sliding roughly down her legs and no longer sticking to her wet skin in resistance.

Once he had removed it he threw it across the room as if it was something disgusting and hastily covered her with the blanket. He didn't miss however, the long slim legs and flat stomach, nor the tiny black panties. Curse desire he thought, how could he think or move with such feelings spanning throughout his body.

Staggering backwards in physical frustration and mental torture he flung himself at the door almost tearing it from its hinges as he opened it. He slammed it shut behind him and almost ran down the corridor. He wasn't aware of anyone being in the corridor but then his brain held only alluring thoughts of Fern's skin and her naked appendages. He wouldn't have noticed people anyway. Falling through the kitchen door he ran into the Cook's back.

"What the!" he cried as he spun around to take in Elm. The Cook's face was wet with tears and his bulking shoulders were hanging forward in grief.

Elm could say nothing; he was so surprised to see the huge boy in such a way that he could only stare. Until a gruff sniff brought him around and he quickly asked. "Can I have some warm broth? I'm afraid that Fern may have hypothermia."

The Cook's eyes darkened upon him and Elm was almost inclined to take a step back.

"I told him to stay away from her!" The Cook yelled, his lips bulging red as he bit down upon them. "I told him she'd be dangerous to him and what does that fool do but jump in to give himself up as fodder for the fish. Fodder for the fish that's what the boy's become! He had potential to be an officer but now his bones sit on the lake floor. Why did he have to sacrifice himself for her? Why?"

Elm was at a loss at what to say and simply shook his head as he tried to find words of consolation for the burly boy who was becoming more aggressive the longer Elm stood there.

"Don't tell me you don't know! You were the one that fought the Captain in an attempt to save her. Look at your face! Your nose is broken, your lips are bloody and swollen and your jaw is bruised on the left side. The only things not swollen are your eyes but they may as well be because you can't see anything with them! If you could you wouldn't have made such a damn fool mistake in the first place!"

Elm brought his hand to his face feeling the displaced nose that he now realized hurt.

"Aye you couldn't see any better than he could what the consequences would be! Come here and I'll fix your nose!"

Elm had to force himself to stay put as the massive boy came at him and grabbed hold of his body with one hand and with his other hand grasped his nose. In a barrage upon Elm he pulled his nose forward and then back in a swift motion. As he released it Elm yelled at the intensity of the pain. He reeled backward, staggering, his hand automatically grabbing the nose that had been manhandled.

The Cook quickly moved away and from a nearby freezer withdrew a handful of ice which he slapped into a tea towel that lay folded nearby. Handing it to Elm he told him, "Put this over it!"

Elm looked at the towel and shook his head, his eyes still watering.

The Cook leaned into him, "If you don't it will swell up and you'll have a nose that will look like one of the squash vegetables over there! Plus you won't be able to breath and will be living through your mouth only. You'll have two black eyes anyway, so don't worry about your pretty face, it won't be pretty anymore!"

Elm grabbed the towel and ice and quickly placed it over his nose.

“Good lad! There, that feels better doesn't it?” He stepped back looking satisfied at Elm, as Elm carefully nodded his head up and down, grimacing at the pain the slight motion caused.

Moving toward the pots and pans the Cook continued, “I'll make your girl some broth. Come back in five minutes and it'll be ready for you.” He didn't turn around as Elm said his thanks.

Elm hesitated before leaving with his ice pack as an unanticipated rush of exhaustion swept over him. His pause was brief as immediacy to help Fern came back to him and he stumbled his way out grasping the wall with one hand as he walked down the corridor, afraid that he was going to pass out, and not be of any further use to Fern. Ungainly and wobbling he could see the cabin door before him as he traversed the never ending corridor.

When he reached the cabin he fumbled for the door handle but his legs were buckling. Falling, he felt a hand grab him. Another hand caught hold of him as the other moved to steady his shaking body. He was aided and kept in a standing position by a familiar figure that supported him.

Hemlock opened the door and helped Elm through. “I wondered when the adrenaline rush would finally end and you'd succumb to your injuries and fatigue.”

“Thankfully, longer than I would have expected had I known how injured I was!”

Hemlock gave a laugh and helped Elm to his cot. “It looks like I'll have to find somewhere else to sleep!” he said as he sat down beside Elm to make sure he was not going to pass out.

“I'm sorry Hemlock but I think you're right. I can't share a bed with Fern. Not even injured and exhausted could I share a bed with Fern!” he emphasized.

Hemlock gave him a grin. “I guess she looks even better naked than I thought she would.”

Elm gave a harsh look at Hemlock but couldn't keep it as he too smiled at the weakness of the male race.

Hemlock got up to go, “I'll leave you to rest Elm. I'll be back in the morning.”

“Hemlock, before you go.” Elm wrenched his body forward and felt a rush of nausea force him to lean back again as Hemlock turned to him with a slight widening of an eye in curiosity.

“Yes?”

“Could you put some more blankets on Fern and could you go to the kitchen and bring back some of the broth that Cook has made for her?”

Both eyes widened now. “Is there anything else? Perhaps I could pick up an arrangement of vegetables as a light supper? Maybe fetch you a bottle of wine too?” He was smiling kindly as he said the words and Elm simply shook his head, smiling.

“Thank you Hemlock! I appreciate your help!” He gave him a slight wave and cautiously laid himself down upon Hemlock's cot still holding the melting ice upon his throbbing nose.

When Hemlock returned Elm was almost asleep. He'd tried to stay awake but he kept drifting, as if he were gliding on the waves to the shoreline, almost there and then back out again, almost there and then back out again, until he felt stillness. Hemlock was looking down at him as Elm struggled to open his eyes.

“I have what they call a comforter here for Fern. Apparently, they are very warm. I also have the broth Cook made”; he turned to the open door where the bowl lay upon the ground and turned back to Fern. “He says he hopes she'll be okay.” Walking over to Fern he threw the comforter over her leaving only her pale face visible. Going back to the door he picked up the bowl of soup and placed it upon a small table, turning he went to the door and quietly closed it. Still standing at the door he looked first at Fern and then Elm.

Elm moved his hand and ice from his face knowing Hemlock was waiting for his lead. He noticed that his hand was wet from the melting ice but he didn't care. Placing the towel of ice on the floor he struggled to get up. Hemlock was soon beside him and laid a hand upon his shoulder.

"Why not just rest?" he entreated him.

"She needs to have warmth in her stomach or she may never awake."

Hemlock helped him to his feet and grabbing a chair from the table dragged it over for Elm to sit upon beside Fern. Aiding Elm to sit down he looked at him with concerned eyes.

"How will you get her to sit up?"

"We must prop her up with pillows!"

Hemlock gave a sigh and moved to the opposite cot where he pulled the pillow off the bed. Once beside Fern he placed it under her head but all this achieved was that Fern's chin now sat upon her chest.

"Hemlock I don't think that will work." Elm offered, amused.

Hemlock turned to look at him. "Would you like to try?"

Elm got up and grasping hold of Fern he slid the pillow under her shoulders. He stepped back to check what he'd done. It was somewhat better but they still needed another pillow. He looked quizzically at Hemlock who immediately understood and went to the cot to grab the blanket there.

"Good idea Hemlock!" he said as Hemlock rolled the blanket up to make another pillow.

Handing it to Elm he carefully placed it underneath the limp body of Fern. He placed his hand upon the side of her face and looked back at Hemlock with fear in his eyes.

"What's wrong?"

"She's so cold!"

"But she was already, wasn't she?"

"Yes, but now she isn't shivering and that's really bad, I don't know if I can help her pull through."

For the first time both of them looked at each other with doubts as to whether Fern would live or not. It seemed so wrong for her to survive the entrapment of the envillions to now die of hypothermia. Elm couldn't believe how things could twist and turn so rapidly and conclusions be changed in an instant.

"I think you can save her Elm, she means too much to you to just let her go, especially after she fought so hard to live, you won't let her stop now."

If Hemlock had only been helpful to Elm in the past because he was blackmailing him, Elm realized now, that these were words from a friend not someone looking out for themselves. His opinion of Hemlock heightened, he'd always known he had a good heart and Elm had preyed upon that, now he was thankful of that heart and the encouragement he was sending his way.

"All I can do is my best."

Hemlock patted his shoulder in a good boy response and Elm laughed briefly until he looked at Fern's still form before him.

"I'm not sure what to do Hemlock. Maybe you could rub her arms to get some circulation going. I'm going to try to get her to wake so I can get the broth into her."

Hemlock busied himself rubbing her arms, carefully wrapping the blanket around the rest of her body to keep her warm, whilst Elm gently rubbed and shook her shoulders.

"Fern! Fern! Wake up! Come on Fern, wake up! You have to wake up!" Elm's voice was heightened with desperation.

He bravely continued, trying to keep up his façade of believing she would wake, but his heart was faltering and his soul was already starting to mourn her loss. He pulled back angry with himself. How could he give up hope so easily? After all the hopes and dreams he had had for the two of them. He hadn't thought she would truly be involved in them since she loved Oak but she'd always been there in the picture somewhere beside him. He wasn't going to let her exit that scene without a fight to keep her. Her life was too precious to him and if it meant loving her from afar, so be it, but he would still love her and she would still be there on the edge of his life, hovering in the distance in true form rather than as a spirit.

"Fern!" it came out as a yell as he quickly arose and stood over her, even Hemlock stopped in shock, and briefly looked at him before continuing with his task at hand.

"Fern you have to wake up!" Elm's hand was moving briskly across her chest as if he hoped to stimulate her heart to beat faster, to increase her neurological stimulation, to heighten the electrical impulses to her brain, her whole being. Could she even hear him? It made him want to scream just as she had earlier to see if her ears were auditorially responding.

His movements were more aggressive now and he noticed Hemlock had stood back as Elm briskly moved his hands over Fern, all the while talking loudly to her, encouraging her to wake up. He was so engrossed in his efforts that he barely felt Hemlock's hand until it grasped him and pulled him away.

"She's waking Elm!"

They both looked down at the small face and slowly moving lids that were opening and closing. Elm let out a huge breathe and gave a triumphant smile to Hemlock who smiled back, giving him another good boy pat. Elm gave a short laugh and immediately became active in his next job as he took the chair closer to her face.

Hemlock picked up the soup and gave it and the spoon to Elm, who looked dubiously at it wondering just how hot it would be after all the time that had passed. He gave it a brief stir, dipped in a finger, and noted that it was warm and warm was good enough. He carefully scooped some up and raised it to Fern's lips. Sliding it back and forth he was rewarded with her lips opening slightly and he poured a little into her mouth. The splutter shocked him as much as it did Hemlock and Elm was almost ready to hand the job over to Hemlock and sleep in another room, but for Fern's now open eyes looking pleadingly into his for help. They were so soulful and sad that he almost put the soup and spoon down to pull her into his arms and hug her to give her solace. Instead he leaned forward and stroked her face with a gentle caress.

"You must have some broth Fern. I'm afraid that you may have hypothermia and need some warmth in your stomach."

Her eyes gave their assent even if her head didn't move and once more Elm gave her a small spoonful of broth. Again she choked a little and he pulled back in despair. With a tiny shake of her head from side to side he understood that she wanted him to continue. With great care and gentleness he fed the broth to her. Elm sat like a doting mother beside her child, affectionately feeding, stroking her hair aside after spooning broth into her mouth and all the while telling her how well she was doing. He kept taking small amounts of broth onto the spoon, slowly placing it at Fern's lips, watching until she swallowed, and then retrieving another spoonful to continue the whole process once more. He was so absorbed in his actions that he didn't even notice Hemlock leave the room.

When all the broth was gone he saw that she was shivering once more. Her eyes showed such helplessness that even though he didn't want to get into the bed to warm her, he could do nothing else. Climbing in he wrapped his arms around her and pulled the cold figure of Fern to his chest. How ironic

he thought that his flaming haired, fiery spirited Fern lay here as cold as any of the envillion swimming in the depths below them.

He was reminded of the boy who had died and he closed his eyes to the image. He knew someone good was gone because of a person's selfish ego and it made him angry to think someone thought themselves more important than anyone else; he failed to see the irony of this.

He reflected on the Woodlander laws and applauded them. As he went through each and every one of them, he realized how wise they were and how important his clan were to him. The thoughts wafted through his mind until the bulb of light above them blurred into an orange glow and vanished in the diminishing sunset of his mind.

Chapter 34

Denver could see the same images as Oak did; he was amazed at how clear they were knowing this was taking place a long way below them. He'd never been able to read a mind from such a great distance and he knew it was only because of Oak's close bond with the girl that he was living what she was going through. The intensity of emotions shocked him; his body reeled from the exhausting terror and then horror, until finally the vexing vision vanished.

Openly they both stared at one another stupefied and perplexed by what they'd seen. Oak was shaking before him; his self control was diminishing as he picked up a glass from the table and hurled it across the room where it shattered the silence of the room.

Denver was at a loss of words to say, as he stumbled through platitudes in his mind knowing Oak was receiving them, but they were doing little to help him. Looking like he would explode Oak arose thumping his fists upon the table; it rocked slightly within its well attached brackets on the wall. With one final screech of air from his lungs he dropped back into his chair.

Denver hadn't even noticed that he himself was standing, originally they'd both been sat talking when the image burst forth into Oak's mind. They were both subjected to the screams and cries in their heads, the sight of gnashing teeth and wet scales.

Denver sat himself down looking at Oak's hunched shoulders as the broken boy looked down at his hands. He jolted in surprise when Oak's soft voice spoke to him.

"He had to save her. It couldn't have been me. It had to be my worst enemy." His eyes looked at Denver; they were filled with distress and despair. "He holds her in his arms and she clings to him... her saviour!" Anger sprang forth from the light blue eyes whose whites flared red at the rage within him. "I should have killed him long ago!" The growl he emitted was so unlike Oak that Denver's face must have shown his astonishment. At this Oak gave a humourless laugh.

His head had dropped to stare at his hands once more. "What do you think of the out of control Oak, Denver? Not a person you want to be with?" His head came up as he cross examined Denver's reaction.

"I see a boy before me distressed because someone he loves was near to death. Being out of control is of no concern in this. This is humanity! You're being human!"

Oak gave a disgusted tut and arose from his chair. "So you say *she* makes me human?"

"What I'm saying is that your reaction is normal, so why do you make it out to be wrong?"

The eyes looking at Denver fired once more as Denver slowly pushed himself out of his chair.

Oak followed his movement as he retorted, "So, you're saying you would stand beside me even when my concentration and reasoning are gone? You're saying that you would risk your life knowing that my falling apart would possibly bring about your own demise."

He was glaring as he made the last remark. Denver knew the disgust and ire were not directed at him but at Oak, himself.

"Oak, you have not let yourself or anyone else down by this behaviour. You were outside of this situation, had you been present your reactions would have been different." Denver gave an empathetic gaze. "This is you and I alone, restricted by our location; you would have acted had you been there and you would have been the one to pull Fern from the water."

Oak's eyes softened slightly, simmering over Denver's words.

"However, I wasn't."

Oak turned away to look out of the window. Not knowing what else to say Denver stared blankly into the night sky too. He could feel Oak; his emotions were so strong that he wondered that the whole cabin wasn't shaking.

In the distance the moon was making her full appearance from the obscurity of the clouds, making her late entrance to the theatrics below.

Denver was tired from his thoughts, he'd been rocked by the vision, but Oak's intense vehemence for what he'd seen happen and his feelings for Fern left Denver envious. He subconsciously shook his head at the ridiculousness of the thought. Oak loved this girl with his very being and his hatred for this other boy was not through him being an enemy but because he'd become her hero. He was still pulsating from his passionate spirit, still stirring the air with his thoughts and Denver was unwillingly caught up in the electricity.

They stood for a while, neither of them talking, until Denver moved away. When he approached the door he turned to see Oak still hadn't moved. He was staring at nothing, but his body continued to gently quiver.

"I'll see you tomorrow my *friend*. Don't concern yourself with what is now the past. She's safe, so be thankful. The boy didn't fare as well. She still lives; let's hope that she will remain safe tomorrow when the Lakellers decide what is to be done."

He watched Oak ponder for a while as he blinked his eyes quickly before replying. Denver could sense he was losing his composure again.

"Goodnight Denver. Let your thoughts be free of what goes on in my head, so your sleep will not be as tumultuous as mine promises to be."

Denver gave a sigh as he replied, "Only if you choose to make it that way Oak."

Oak nodded and resumed his sightless vision of the night, so Denver quietly closed the door behind him and made his way to his cabin next door.

"May the spirits lay quiet your troubles Oak," he said to himself as he opened the door and flicked the switch from dark to light.

Making his way to his bed he threw himself down upon it, letting his legs hang off the end because of its short length for a body of his size. Surprising himself he started to hum. He wasn't sure what the tune was, just one his father had hummed when he was a child, and just as when his father had hummed to him in the past, Denver soon fell asleep.

Oak felt the stinging in his eyes, they burned from the flood of tears that commenced once Denver left the room. He felt he should be embarrassed by them but he wasn't. They spoke of his internal frustrations, his wish to protect Fern, to keep her safe, to give her an environment that would make her happy. Was Elm to give her that?

Oak had made his pledge to Willow, he'd become her partner and they would rule Elanclouse as it should be ruled, with patience and calm. Perhaps he'd misjudged Elm, maybe he was the boy to stifle Fern's wild spirit and bring her in line with the rest of the clan. Why was he so outraged when this could be the answer to his problems?

His breathing was shallow but he was starting to take deeper draws of air. Only two people caused him irritation in Elanclouse; Elm with his desire to become leader and his wish to oust Oak, and Fern and her outrageous ideas, rebellious nature and different approach to life.

Fern wanted him to love her but he couldn't, she wasn't a good choice and he'd already declared to Willow that on his return they would be together. He knew it would distress Fern to be rejected. He'd been in her life for all these years and of great importance to her.

Maybe if Elm and Fern were together they would stop their previous behaviour? Perhaps, in one another's arms they would find what they wanted. Elm would accept he couldn't be leader and Fern would accept that she couldn't have Oak and stop rebelling against everything he put into place.

The thoughts appealed to him but they did not assuage the pain he felt. Gently rolling his head from side to side he attempted to regain his composure. Shrugging his shoulders and then rolling them forward and backward he managed to alleviate some of his tension. Placing himself into a place of meditation he closed his mind and relaxed his body. The procedure worked, as soon as he reopened his eyes he felt better.

Moving away from the window he went to his bed and sat down. He needed to concentrate on getting the information of what route they were to travel. He needed to formulate plans on how they were to stop Kisin from whatever diabolical trap he had concocted. The safety of his whole clan rested upon what he was to do. He'd have to make sure they'd all be safe, that they would continue to live and prosper in a way that they were meant to. Fern was of less importance than his clan, she could not occlude his mind from his task at hand any further and *he* would not allow it.

Chapter 35

Elm awoke with Fern ensconced in his arms, her half naked body was warm and it made a shiver run through him from its pleasantness. She gave a muffled noise into his shoulder as she slept, moving a little, producing even more sensations within him. He could smell her hair, it still held the musty smell of the lake water, and he was surprised how sensual the mixed aroma of the lake and her body was. His hand was on her back, he could feel the texture of her, how soft and smooth she was. He moved his hand slightly to relish how she felt, then lay still staring up at the ceiling, painfully aware of every nuance of the girl snuggled into him.

His body jumped when he heard someone clearing their throat to get his attention and he spun his head around to see Hemlock standing above him, a half smirk upon his face. Although Elm wanted to jump out of the cot and rapidly explain his predicament he didn't. Instead he carefully disentangled Fern and slid his body away until there was no cot left for him to be on and with a thud hit the floor.

His eyes looked up once more at the definite grin upon Hemlock's face.

"Not quite what I expected to find Elm." He said looking at Fern's calm expression as she continued to sleep, then dropping his gaze back to Elm.

Elm abruptly jumped up onto his feet. "She had hypothermia; it was the only option I had available to me to save her life." Running a hand through his hair he looked Hemlock in the eye. "I was honourable."

He turned away so Hemlock couldn't see the burning rush that was forming in his face after he said the words. His thoughts hadn't been. The memory of her was still quick to his mind, her silkiness, scent, soft murmurs, but mostly the warmth that emitted from her body, the sensations it sent through him had surprised him.

He walked toward the door beckoning that Hemlock go with him. Taking a breath he gathered himself hoping the flush of blood in his face was no longer evident. He turned to Hemlock.

"Let's leave. I'll get her some food later, she still needs to rest. We can talk whilst eating."

Hemlock was scanning his face as he talked. It made Elm feel all the more uncomfortable and it irked him that he was giving his feelings away.

"You look terrible!" Hemlock pulled a face to show just how awful he looked, scrunching his nose, mouth and eyes in distaste at the abused face before him.

Elm grabbed his arm and opened the door, relief running through him that he probably hadn't betrayed himself. Pulling Hemlock out with him into the corridor, he shut the door behind them.

"At least I can breathe. Cook said I might have problems with the swelling."

"Well he was right. Your face looks like an over ripe tomato."

Elm let go of his pent up breath. If his face was that red then the flush hadn't been noticeable. Still holding Hemlock's arm he pulled him down the corridor for a few strides and let go once Hemlock had fallen into step beside him. He knew Hemlock was still scrutinizing him but he continued looking ahead as he walked.

"She still has her virtue. I'm not such a cad that I would take advantage of an exhausted girl."

"I wasn't thinking that." Came Hemlocks reply and for some reason this disconcerted Elm even more.

"Then what were you thinking?"

"It isn't important," Hemlock replied but Elm knew it was. He knew that whatever was going through Hemlock's mind would affect Elm in a very fundamental way.

They entered a large room where many boys were sat chewing handfuls of fresh bread and spooning huge globs of porridge into their mouths. Elm looked at them with distaste; porridge was his least favourite meal. He looked at the side of the room where large bowls were laid out on sideboards for the boys to help themselves. His mood became lighter when he saw the bowls of fruit and moved toward them. He knew Hemlock was still beside him and sensed that he was just as relieved to see the fruit too.

Some of the things that Elm missed the most from when he was a child were butter, cheese and eggs. He missed the dairy products that they'd once had. He could almost remember what they tasted like but mostly he remembered how butter would melt on freshly baked bread and how good it had been to eat it, feeling it drip upon your chin. He stared at the choice before him and picked up a large apple. Hemlock did the same and sat down beside him at one of the benches separate from the robust Lakellers that were scraping the bottom of their bowls.

They gave Elm and Hemlock a quick perfunctory glance and continued with their own conversations.

“Why aren't they angry with me? I fought their Captain, shouldn't I be in chains?” Elm looked around the room as he said the words and turned his attention back to Hemlock.

“The Captain was in the wrong. There'd been rumours that he'd killed the other girls that Madden and Gisburn had brought on board but no one could prove it. Now those rumours have been proven to be true and the crew have thrown him in the brig, charging him with murder. They are still contemplating whether Gisburn will join him and Madden too when he's fully recovered, but I don't think they were involved in the deaths of the girls.”

“But Fern's still alive, it was attempted murder.”

“Yes, but the other girls aren't.”

Elm nodded back to Hemlock in understanding. “So what happens now? Who'll lead the crew and what'll happen to the Captain?”

“Lieutenant Rostin has been promoted to Captain. I'm not sure what'll happen to the Captain himself. I do know that Cook would happily throw him to the envillions so he could experience what Ensign Jones and those other girls went through.”

Elm gazed around the room once more. It seemed Captain Laroche was not as clever as he thought he was. He was obviously disliked enough to be quickly replaced when the opportunity presented itself. There was something to be learned about how you wield power. If Captain Laroche had treated his crew differently he wouldn't have been in the situation he was in.

“Then our presence here is safe? There won't be any changes?”

“There is one.” Hemlock replied, taking in Elm's swollen nose, cheeks and chin. “We can now go on deck at any time we like.”

Elm stared at him in surprise and gave a short laugh. He couldn't believe that things had improved for them. The change in their situation presented a change in him. He didn't understand it but the discontentment that he'd felt for a long while was gone. A strange realization passed over him. He no longer cared about being leader, he no longer held on to his hatred of Oak.

Even though his close proximity to Fern during their chats on board had been brief, these, and his fight against the Captain to save her, a Captain who'd been determined no one would give her help, plus his plight to keep her alive, had left an indelible mark on him. The original writing had been struck through and new words had taken their place. It was as if his whole book of life had been re-written.

He was staring at the apple in his hand as this enlightenment passed through him. He quickly looked up at Hemlock who was slightly taken aback, then smiled at him. Elm returned the smile. A

quiet understanding passed between them. Hemlock knew he was no longer under Elm's blackmail threat and Elm knew he would never give away Hemlock's secret.

Flint had noticed changes in everyone that morning. His time spent watching over Blackthorn had been exhausting. The boy had talked incessantly and Flint had felt his head would explode with the barrage of words that were pounding constantly at both of his ears. When his shift was over he retreated to the silence of his room, after briefly talking with Denver and Oak to find out the plans for the day. He was encouraged by the fact that Oak said nothing and Denver made his request and information short, covering everything that needed to be said in less than five minutes.

He left them knowing something had happened and that it concerned Oak. Denver had shown a protective gaze toward the Woodlander and Flint had thought their relationship was too close to a friendship for his comfort. He went over everything in his mind more thoroughly as he reached his cabin door. Stopping, he browsed through the occurrences and decided that Denver knew what was best, and if he trusted Oak then Flint would too.

He opened the door and stepped into his solitude, closing the door behind him with a thankful sigh at escaping the excessive noise everyone else on board the ship seemed determined to make. Once in the middle of the room he silently dropped down to the floor, where he sat cross legged, closed his eyes and started into a low thrummed chant.

The visions that had so easily appeared the day before eluded him. He felt frustration run through him and shook it off. Once more he concentrated on breathing, slowing his heart, feeling the blood passing through his veins. A calm set upon him again and he exalted in the feeling of rising above his body and floating toward the ceiling.

With the sensation still within him, he once more tried to tap into his spiritual connection. He began to struggle to make things happen and with a deep sigh gave up; knowing that today was not going to be the one to connect with the spirit world.

He rose slowly; his body was folded toward his legs and he carefully unwrapped his spine, vertebrae by vertebrae. Stretching his arms forward and above his head, he swept them outward and let them glide to his sides. Turning he looked at the wall clock, noticing that he'd been meditating for ten minutes, it had seemed like seconds.

Moving to the window he pulled out the chair and sat at the table. He sat tall but relaxed as he took in the new landscape below them. The lake had turned to land. Not a land like they were used to, the giant forest of Elanclose and its unusual vegetation, this land was more barren. There were no trees only gnarly looking shrubs and scraps of grass that looked as if life was a great struggle. He found it an unwelcoming land and was surprised that he missed Elanclose. He'd enjoyed traversing her complex and difficult pathways; he'd enjoyed her massive canopies above him, huge umbrellas preventing the sun from overheating anything on the ground.

They were to land soon and he wondered what food supplies could be brought on board from a place where life barely continued. The Citans were lucky that the land around them supplied so much. He knew it had to do with the scientists that had been in the area and although it bothered him that their lives were indebted to the people who brought life to monsters, he was glad of the life he had been able to enjoy so far.

So far? What was to happen from here? His vision had told him he would not go back to the Citan City, his route lay elsewhere but he was confused as to where. Shrugging his shoulders he knew it wasn't for him to worry about. The spirits would guide him when the time came.

His thoughts were broken by a sudden descent toward the land. After a while the ship leveled off and lowered once more at a slower pace. He looked toward the approaching ground and saw the perfect gap in the bushes; they were now aligned perfectly to land upon it.

Denver was staring at Oak in concern. The boy was different from the one he'd planned with yesterday. He was barely interested in the plans they were setting into motion, his thoughts would wander and Denver caught glimpses of visions of Fern.

Fern pulling herself off a cot and looking down at her own half naked body, turning and grasping the blanket, throwing it over her shoulders to regain her dignity. The heat that rose within him at the vision shocked him and he had to turn away to look across the room at the group of boys that were conversing about their landing and search for food.

He turned back when he felt he'd regained his composure to look into Oak's cold blue eyes. He knew what he'd seen and he could see that his intrusion had placed more stress on their friendship.

"I'm sorry!" He was looking sincerely at Oak. "It's so natural to pick up thoughts and for some reason your thoughts are the strongest I've ever had. He saw the disgust and anger drive across Oak's face, moving down his whole body as tension overtook it.

Denver was surprised at how Oak was losing his self-control. He knew Oak was just as appalled and hated himself for it. He could sense that he doubted his skills as a leader, that the good sense and abilities he'd built were being destroyed by the rage he felt at knowing Fern had lain in the arms of Elm and that she'd enjoyed it. He knew his defenders were on board the ship, determined to find him and take him back to the clan. They would never stop searching until he was once more amongst them, leading them. Denver pulled himself away from Oak's mind. He needed to sort his thoughts out by himself not with Denver wandering around within them.

"I'm not sure what we'll find for food down there." Denver was looking at the uninviting landscape. "But at least we will have the chance to walk on land. That is if Rancor lets us off the ship."

Oak gave no reply just an empty stare and turned back to the window. Denver was finding this wallowing annoying and although he liked Oak and admired him, he felt he'd had enough of the downer trip that Oak was on.

"I'm going to find Detroit and see if I can find out what is to happen. Perhaps I can work something out to allow us to place our feet on the ground. I miss the feel of solidity beneath my toes." He looked Oak over but received no reciprocal glance, nod, or confirmation that the conversation was directed to him, so he arose from the bench and moved across the room to the group of boys.

Detroit was boldly talking about the landing party and how he would be heading it. He was looking at the others with deliberation as he waveringly decided whom he would be taking with him. The boys eagerly crowded him, keen to set foot off the ship. He looked from one to another as they smiled willing him to pick them. Slowly he named five of them and the others dropped to their chairs, their faces falling with their decent.

"Detroit! Can I have a word with you?" Denver gave Detroit an ingratiating smile in apology at drawing him away from the important task he had ahead of him. Detroit unwillingly moved toward him.

"I'm glad it is you that has the job of taking out a search party for food." The tawny eyebrows went up at his words as a flash of confusion passed momentarily, until a spark of recognition registered.

"I have picked the boys that will go with me," replied Detroit, looking huffily back. "I have no need of you to join me." The rude inflection didn't go unnoticed but Denver kept the smile plastered to his face to mask the sensation of annoyance behind it.

"Yes, you're too well organized for me to get a foot in Detroit. I understand that everything is already set into motion but..." He leaned in toward Detroit in a conspiratorial manner and Detroit unwillingly leaned toward him too. "But I am concerned about Oak."

Detroit gave a swift glance over to the morose Oak, whose head hadn't turned away from the window since Denver had left.

"Huh! He doesn't look to be of concern to me!"

"True! True! But I think this is a cover. This silence is Oak planning. He's planning his escape."

"Hah! How can he escape from here, with so many boys to stop him?"

"Did you know he followed us in the forest? Did you know where he hid? Did you know that he was that close when he arose to help Blackthorn?"

Worry drenched Detroit's face. He'd decided that his drunken stupor had sent him into a path of needlessness and that Oak's confession to planning an escape was just the same as the hot air in the giant balloon. He stared over to Oak and his face wrinkled with thought at perhaps misjudging him.

"You believe him?"

"I believe that he will do whatever he can to escape. Blackthorn has been in high spirits, he laughs and jokes. Doesn't that make you think that he knows Oak has a plan and will be away from this airship soon?"

Detroit's look of panic was almost comical, if it weren't for the fact that Denver was worrying himself about Oak's plans, he would have wanted to laugh. What were Oak's plans now?

"You're right. I think he does plan to escape," answered Detroit not taking his eyes from the planning escapee. His eyes shot back to Denver. "What should I do Denver? I can't tell Rancor, he'll go into a rage at having another problem to deal with."

Denver looked thoughtfully over at Oak; he took in the rigid stance, the hands tightly drawn into fists. Oak needed to be off the ship.

"You must take Oak with you; he will prove helpful finding food but keep him busy. Let him know that Blackthorn is never left alone on board this ship and should Oak disappear Blackthorn will do the same in the clouds we will be travelling through."

Detroit gave a smirk of gratitude. Denver knew this course of action would appeal to him. To have control over Oak and have him do his bidding, plus have the power to get rid of Blackthorn were rapturous to Detroit.

"But the Captain said..." Detroit returned, "We're not to hurt Blackthorn!"

"Accidents happen. Especially when a person tries to escape, how can anyone else take the blame for their mistakes?"

Detroit smiled, nodding his head in satisfaction. Denver had secured Oak's exit to land. He smiled back at Detroit, gave him a wink, turned and with huge steps walked out of the room.

Chapter 36

Fern had pulled her tired body out of bed and stood looking about the room. Feeling goose bumps rising on her skins she looked down at her body. All she had on were the black underwear. Her breasts plumped up like rising bread out of the confines of the black bra and the tiny panties covered very little, a thread of material over each hip. She quickly grabbed the blanket and threw it over her shoulders feeling indecent even though she was alone.

Her stomach was grumbling wildly and she looked to the small table and the empty bowl that had contained the broth Elm had fed to her the night before. Her face flushed at the thought of the night. She'd slept in Elms arms and she'd enjoyed every moment of it! Shamefully, she pulled the blanket tighter around her.

A light tap intruded her thoughts and she stared at the door for a moment wondering who it could be. She said nothing, she knew who it was and he'd enter without her words.

The door quietly opened and Elm stepped through toward her. His face showed surprise at her standing silently in the middle of the room. He scanned her face and body. He took in the large blanket that draped down to the floor and the hand that held it tightly underneath her chin presenting a floating head and nothing more.

"How are you Fern?" He asked with gentle, loving eyes that brought tears to her own as she remembered the love that had stared at her in Ensign Jones's eyes too.

She dropped her head in shame. "I'm fine. I'm the one that lived."

Elm was across the room before she knew it, his arms wrapped around her as she fell onto his chest and let her tears fall quietly upon him. He gently stroked her hair bringing back memories of the Captain and his own ploy of gaining her trust by gently moving pieces of it from her face. This was not the same; this was Elm, genuine, true and caring. Elm with a face that was so ugly it was laughable. His boyish features contorted into a goblin but not his eyes, his eyes were beautiful, soft, generous and comforting. She was staring at them now, surprised by how they made her feel and she could feel Elm stiffen and move away from her slightly. She was confused as to why for a moment but then it dawned on her and her face flushed to the deep red of the setting sun.

He moved away to a chair at the table and directed her to join him. She obliged pulling the wool blanket even closer to her body as she did. She sat down heavily and almost laughed that she was still ungainly Fern who managed to break the more delicate chairs they owned in their camp in Elanclose. She looked up to see Elm's puzzled face looking back at her.

"What happens now Elm?" His face became more awash with confusion and she realized what thoughts were going through his mind as his eyes raked over the grey blanket.

"Does the Captain now kill us both?" She asked and saw the relief that flooded Elm's face almost making her laugh. He'd wanted her for so long and now the thought that she might think they were joined as partners was terrifying to him.

"No one dies," he replied. "We're both to live. The Captain is in the brig and Lieutenant Rostin now takes on his role."

Fern could feel her eyes go wide and a smile move her taught skin upward.

"I'm so glad!" She cried, whilst Elm looked back at her once more confused, obviously wondering if she had become deranged from her horrific experience.

"He's a wonderful boy, Lieutenant Rostin." She blurted out and noticed a slight shadow pass over Elm's face but she ploughed on. "He knew that I knew the defenders were on board. He was concerned and advised me to be careful, warned me of the Captain and how dangerous he could be."

Elm remained quiet and Fern wondered if her words were badly said. Did they say that he was enamoured with her and she him? Elm said nothing so Fern went on.

“He and Ensign Jones were my only friends.” Still, there was no response. She realized Elm wasn’t saying anything because of the emotions that were going through him and she knew what they were. Ensign Jones had given up his life for her and Lieutenant Rostin had looked out for her. Now Rostin was Captain and in control.

“If you think there’s something between us you’re wrong. He’s in a relationship already with a horrible girl called Simone. She’s very beautiful and very cruel.”

Elm looked interested. “Perhaps the new Captain will choose to discard her. They’re not like us, they don’t hold to the bond that is formed between a girl and boy as a relationship forever. The Captain proved that by tossing his own girls aside in a very unorthodox and nasty manner.”

Fern cringed at his words, remembering what could have happened to her and did happen to the unfortunate girls before her.

“Lieu...Captain Rostin is a good person. He will not get rid of Simone, he’s too honourable.” She watched Elm relax at the word *honourable*.

She suddenly became aware that all she felt about Oak and Willow and their feelings toward one another, the anguish that it caused her, was probably close to what Elm felt about her and any boy that might have an interest in her. She felt sorry, sorry that she was causing him distress. She was sorry that she’d caused anyone distress and she came to the realization that that was all she’d done to Oak over the past year and he was quite right to be disenchanted with her.

There was a knock on the door and in walked Pine, her clan clothes in his hands.

“Pine!” She cried as she leapt to her feet and threw her arms around the broad shoulders. She heard a small laugh and looked up into the eyes that looked fatherly down upon her.

“You look well recovered Fern.” He said holding her away from him so he could cast his eyes over her and confirm his statement.

“I am,” she replied dropping her head slightly in thought. She turned briefly to Elm and then back to Pine, she knew her own eyes had become colder and more serious.

“It’s all thanks to Elm that I am here today.” The grey blue eyes bored into hers. She saw various thoughts flash through them.

“If Elm had not been on the deck the Captain’s anger might not have flared up!” He retorted his body stiffening as his eyes bored into Elm.

“What? I should have waited until it flared up another day! Is that what you mean? A day when there would have been no one there to save me?”

Pine’s eyes spiked with ire as he looked down at her. He’d been willing to leave her to the Captain for his pleasure; she had every right to be angry with him now. He should realize that.

Elm’s voice behind her surprised her in its calmness. It was so unlike him that she had to turn to make sure the words had actually come from his mouth.

“Why go over what has passed and what could have been? What is the use? We’re on a journey, we’re all safe and we have a goal to attain. Let’s keep to that and leave the terrible experiences behind us.”

Her mouth dropped as she stared at the serene face before her, she turned to Pine who also looked confused for a moment. His stare suddenly became cold with distrust and dislike.

“Just what goal is it that you’re out to attain Elm?” The name was spat from his lips and Fern was shocked at the intensity of hate behind it. She stared at Pine, trying to understand. He caught her stare and dropped his own to regain composure. A voice floated over them.

“There is only one goal for all of us, to find Oak and Blackthorn and bring them both back to Elanclouse.”

The surprised look on Pine’s face flashed briefly as he asked. “Then Blackthorn is still alive? You lied about his death!”

Elm dropped his eyes to the table as he stared at the open palms that lay before him.

“Barely alive,” he softly replied.

“What do you mean?” retorted Pine.

“After the Citans trapped Blackthorn they made him walk without rest. He wasn’t fairing too well when I saw him. Oak was almost carrying him.”

Pine pushed the clothes he had in his hand to Fern. Elm was dismissed from further inquiry as he strode to the door. He stopped with his hand upon the knob and slowly turned his head, his face tight, almost cruel as he took in Elm and ignored Fern’s presence.

“Should you ever cause me doubt or concern for our safety, anyone’s safety,” he emphasized. “You *will* not have the comfort of the brig but *will* bring comfort to the stomachs of the envillions *or* feel the discomfort of my sword. Don’t doubt me on that!”

Fern stared at Pine in horror, kind Pine, who so lovingly played with little Savannah and kissed Lily with such gentleness was unknown to her now, as he stared with unhidden hatred at Elm. She looked over to Elm, his face was quiet; there was no movement upon it, no retaliation. Quickly she took her gaze back to Pine but he was gone, the door was shut hard behind him. She felt herself shivering but she didn’t understand why.

Oak knew Denver had left the room without needing to turn and look. He’d been aware of everything that went on between him and Detroit and he knew why Denver had done it. Oak was to gain information, he was a seasoned traveller of the forest and difficult terrain; he could judge what the lay of the land was and consider how it may change on the journey ahead. Any kind of knowledge would help them to plan.

He saw the shape of Detroit moving toward him in his mind, his body was lumbering, he was apprehensive. He slowly turned his eyes to the large ignorant boy, taking in the worried look and distrust.

“You’re coming with me!” he exclaimed thumping a finger to his own chest.

“Where?” asked Oak even though he knew every detail.

“To the ground, we’re to fetch food. You’re a gatherer; you can help us find edible food.”

Detroit gave his shoulders a shrug, uncomfortable and unsure. Oak sensed he wished Denver was going with him and regretted not asking him. All of a sudden his thoughts swung differently as he remembered his uncertainty of Denver and how little he and Rancor could trust him. Oak almost smiled at the confusion that went on in Detroit’s head.

“When do we leave?”

“As soon as we set down. You’ll stay with me until we disembark.”

Oak looked out at the approaching land. It’d be good to feel earth beneath him again. He slowly stood up and noticed that Detroit almost jumped back a little. He was looking at him with a bit of a panicked look so Oak smiled. It didn’t alleviate Detroit’s fears just heightened them.

He stepped out from the bench and indicated that Detroit lead the way. He sensed Detroit was apprehensive about turning his back but he did so anyway. He called to the other boys that were to be in

the group to join them and they eagerly leapt up from their seats and stepped alongside with excitement upon their faces. He felt a smugness run through Detroit at leading the party and his concern over Oak trying to escape was dispelled momentarily.

They were through the corridors and into the hold before Oak could consider anything else. He didn't want to consider anything else anymore; he'd had enough of the visions of Fern. They were stronger now and it bothered him. Her feelings toward Elm were evident in them, his own feelings about the visions he didn't understand. If someone had taken a club to him and beaten him the night before he would have understood how he felt, but this tired, pained body of his, the turmoil that swirled like an eddy in his head, he didn't think he could handle much longer.

In the hold they were tussled and jostled by the descending airship, they grabbed hold of the securing ropes and tethers to keep their balance. The last jolt sent them all off balance except Oak, who remained upright and ready to leave the ship. The ramp opened slowly and seemed to take a painfully long time to touch the ground. Where had his patience gone? Where was the calm that was always so readily at his fingertips?

Detroit grabbed hold of his arm and pulled him down the ramp that they both had nearly fallen from into the evening sky only a short time ago. It felt like many days had passed and once again Oak wondered at his disjointed reaction to everything. Once on the ground Detroit let Oak's arm drop from his higher elevation and Oak gave it a bit of a twist to bring the blood flow back. Detroit looked down at him sternly and Oak smothered a smile at the bossy face that was staring at him. He could see that Detroit still held concerns at letting him off the ship even though he had warned him that Blackthorn would die should he escape.

"You go and look for the food; we'll follow you and make sure there is nothing around that will harm you."

Oak wanted to laugh at the very idea of Detroit protecting him. He'd know long before Detroit if there was any danger out there. Instead he nodded his head and scanned the brush before him.

It was a sad looking land, devoid of the bright green that Elanclose held. A little green tried to raise its troubled head but mostly the bushes and grass were yellow and brown. He had to pick a direction but they all seemed to hold the same sparse vegetation. His senses were pulled west, so he followed them and the Citans followed him.

They were all carrying large bags which at present were empty. The boys behind him gave sighs of disappointment as they looked around and one commented that there wasn't enough food to feed ants. He went abruptly quiet when Oak sensed Detroit spin around on him and he saw Detroit's flash of anger go through his head toward the boy. The other boys kept quiet, deciding that Detroit's wrath wasn't worth causing.

Oak's nose twitched as he smelled something different in the air, he picked up his step to find out what it was and the boys following did the same, their excitement spiking a little at not knowing what they were going toward.

They were all clambering up a hill, it wasn't very high but it was enough to cause several of the boys to be slightly out of breath. Oak's breathing remained even as he reached the crest and stayed regular even at the sight in front of him.

The boys behind him were making noises of surprise; their heartbeats had even risen by the sight. Oak knew they had good reason to.

Before them lay edible vegetation, rows of food carefully planted and walking through them were girls gathering fruit and vegetables in baskets. They looked up at them and stopped what they were doing, then without a word they all moved away in the same direction leaving the crops behind them.

“Quick let’s get down there and grab some food,” yelled Detroit as he rapidly scrambled down the hillside with the other boys in pursuit. Oak stayed where he was scanning the land and then he followed too.

By the time they reached the crops they were not alone. Oak placed a hand on Detroit to make him stop and he in turn slung his own expansive arm out to the stop the other boys.

“Wait or else you’ll be in danger.” Oak said as Detroit widened his eyes in fear of what was to happen. He quickly looked around him and caught sight of the boys that were approaching rapidly toward them.

“You can’t take from them. If you do they’ll fight but you can offer an exchange.”

“An exchange of what?” grumbled Detroit under his breath as he scanned their numbers and went through his head as to how many he himself could take down.

“Tell them that we need food and if they come back with you to the airship they will be rewarded with other goods that they may be in need of. The hold is full of items that could be useful to them.”

Detroit gave a snort but he dropped his body in a submissive manner anyway.

There were ten boys, smaller than the Citans but armed with pitch forks and shovels.

“What do you want here?” asked a curly haired boy who was looking them over carefully to see if they were armed.

“We need food,” answered Detroit. “We can trade goods for vegetables, something that you may need.”

The boy was inquisitive; he looked Detroit up and down. “What kind of goods?”

Detroit was stumped; he hadn’t paid attention to what was in the hold.

“In the ships hold there are many items, blankets, flashlights, pots, pans, I’m sure there are many things there that you will find useful.”

The boy booked Oak over as he talked, he looked puzzled. He turned his attention to Detroit, who had the look of a person in charge.

“He’s not like you, where’s he from?”

“He’s no concern of yours,” said Detroit, to which the boy swung upon him lifting his pitchfork in threat.

“He is if he’s on our land!”

Oak stepped forward. “I’m Oak of Elanclose forest. These boys are from the Citan city. We travel with the Aviatilians and find we have run out of food supplies, we would make the exchange well worth your while.” He gave him a non aggressive look and detected that the boy judged him as not being a threat. He did however, consider Detroit a huge threat.

“My name is Richie. We’ve lived in this area since the Devastation. It’s been difficult cultivating the land but we’ve received some good harvests these last few years.” He gave them all a glance over and decided that courtesy wasn’t required any further. “Come with us and take what you need. We’ll escort you back to your airship but one of you will stay here until the rest of my own return.” He looked at Oak. “He’ll do! That way we can be sure of a safe exchange.”

“He will not stay!” roared Detroit, outraged that this curly haired boy was calling the shots.

“If you want food, yes he will!”

Oak put a hand upon Detroit’s arm. “I’ll be safe.” He heard a ridiculed laugh run through Detroit’s head at not caring then the concern at what Rancor would say if he didn’t return with him.

“I have nowhere to go. Blackthorn is on board and I’ll return for him.”

Detroit’s mind flashed with *yes, but when?*

“As soon as these people are satisfied with the exchange I’ll be back on board the Avila Rose.”

He saw Detroit's look of surprise at his answer to his thoughts and then his assent to give up arguing as he motioned to Richie and the other boys that they go ahead with gathering the food.

It didn't take long for the hungry boys to fill their bags. Their faces were bright at the thought of a good meal tonight, making them eager to return to the ship. Only Detroit was dragging his feet.

"Don't worry," Richie offered. "He won't be harmed."

Another snort was returned as Detroit stomped away with the rest, leaving Oak with a long haired boy bearing a three tined pitchfork, the prongs looked sharp even with the dirt that lay upon them.

"May I take a walk?" Oak asked catching the boy's eyes as he looked from the retreating boys to himself to the retreating figures again.

"Where do you want to go?" he replied startled.

"Just over there." Oak pointed to another hill. "I know it's high but I think we can get to the top and back in time for their return. I'm curious to see what is on the other side."

The boy gave him a sideways glance in assessment. He wasn't as easy to read as Detroit but it seemed Oak was correct there was something of great interest on the other side of the hill. With a fake bow he let Oak pass him and picked up his stride beside him. They were both quiet as they climbed the base of the hill. Oak looked up and wondered whether he was right that they could make it up and back down in time.

As they walked the uneven terrain Oak sensed the boy studying him but Oak didn't pay attention. His own thoughts were busy elsewhere and unfortunately for Oak, Fern was in them. Fern with her red hair cascading onto a grey blanket, making her look more vibrant against the drab material. He could see clearly her pale face blushing red and his heart rate increased at the knowledge of why. His hands were clenched, his fingers locked close together, his body muscles tight as he automatically moved upward, one foot in front of the other but he didn't see the land before him. He had a brief glimpse in his vision of Pine before he realized where he was and that they were approaching the crest of the hill. Dispelling the images and increasing his speed he strode on, keen to see what lay on the land below. His companion was still quietly watching him; he was waiting to see his reaction. Oak threw his head up to see what he was to react to.

They topped the brink of the hill and Oak halted, his eyes widened and his brain faulted his eyes for not working properly. He stood in disbelief aghast, amazed, and abhorrent. The Aqueous Passage stood before him. The massive span of concrete reached up on thick legs to the gigantic chute. The grey crane concrete legs repeated again and again, never ending. The depth of the chute above, standing high almost toward the sky was horrific in size and to Oak's eyes it was repugnant. He'd never seen anything so ugly, so obtrusive and decidedly wrong for the landscape around it. He couldn't break his focus upon it, couldn't stop staring at the object before him, he felt sickened.

He'd heard of the Aqueous Passage as a child. The long years that it had taken to build, the deaths that it had caused and the land it had obliterated with its presence. So many had opposed it and they'd all failed. When the Regime had wanted to do wrong they'd done it to the extreme.

The boy was looking at him in surprise.

"I thought you knew it was here and that was why you wanted to climb the hill. But I can see you didn't know." He scanned Oak's face and Oak stared back still in shock.

"No, I didn't know." He moved his eyes to the Aqueous Passage and back to the boy. "I'd heard of it. I didn't know that this was where it was."

"Horrible isn't it?" He looked Oak over again as Oak gave a slight nod in agreement. "But it is good for us," continued the boy.

Oak gave him an incredulous look, thinking he must be insane.

“As ugly as she is when we don’t have rain we’re thankful for what she can do for us.” He looked up at the monstrosity like it was a friend and Oak could feel himself cringing inside at the very idea that anyone could be indebted to this terrible feature.

The boy was looking back down the hill and gave Oak a nudge to get his attention.

“We have to go.” He started to move away. “They’re coming back.”

Oak looked over his shoulder and saw Richie and the other boys moving down the other hill. He gave one last look at the Aqueous Passage and descended toward the crops once more.

He returned to the angry glare of Detroit who didn’t like the fact that he had wandered away. Oak ignored him and gave his thanks to Richie and the others, including the long haired boy who was still staring at him with a querulous expression. He turned to Detroit who was already leaving, he was angry at once more being usurped in the conversation, and Oak couldn’t help smiling as he followed him away. Oak sensed he wanted to get back as soon as possible because Rancor had been on the rampage at his having taken Oak off the airship. Oak’s smile broadened enjoying Detroit’s discomfort and he purposefully walked slowly to cause him more anxiety.

They approached the ship to find Rancor, Captain Rumello and Denver at the base of the ramp. Rancor was stomping around like a toddler that had had his toys taken away from him. When he saw Detroit Rancor’s mind became ablaze with thoughts. Oak pushed the nasty evil visions that pervaded Rancor’s mind from his own head. He’d let Denver deal with what Rancor was thinking instead. He’d had enough horrific scenes to last him for a long, long time.

Denver nodded to him in understanding as he passed and they all followed him up the ramp. He felt like the pied piper as Rancor and Detroit filed in behind him, two rats that deserved the confines of the underground.

Once inside, with the ramp closing everyone dispersed to the corridors of the ship. Captain Rumello hung back grabbing Oak and Denver by their arms. They stopped to give him their full attention, as he gazed around the empty hold giving it a brief scan before he returned his eyes to theirs.

“I know along which route we are to travel,” he said his eyes swinging from Denver to Oak and back to Denver again. They both silently waited for him to continue.

“We are to follow the Aqueous Passage.”

Oak’s gaze flew to Denver as he moved his own from Captain Rumello to Oak. Oak knew Denver could see everything that he’d seen. The Aqueous Passage was just as clear in his mind as it had been in Oak’s.

Chapter 37

Fern felt much more comfortable in her own clothes again. Her breasts didn't protrude in an outrageous manner and although her panties were huge she was thankful for them and how much of her backside they covered underneath her pants.

Wandering about the deck she gazed upon Captain Rostin and Pine in deep conversation. Elm was with Hemlock confined to the gazebo that was now almost finished. The other girls were wandering the deck and she'd had the pleasure of talking with Alicia for a while. Alicia had joked about her clothing and asked her to stand like a tree but Fern hadn't minded it had all been in good humour.

Captain Rostin was taking his new role very seriously and although he gave Fern a smile, it was more of a cursory glance than the friendly ones she'd received from him before. She felt a little put out by it but her spirits lifted when she realized that Simone received no attention from him at all. He gazed past her as if she were an invisible spectre and Fern took pleasure in the distress and anger that it caused Simone. After all she well deserved it.

The anchor had been pulled a while ago and the ship was slowly moving along following the landscape that she viewed with wanting. How she would love to curl her toes up in the grass again. Arrangements had been made between Pine and Captain Rostin and she knew that their goal was to find Oak and Blackthorn, not get ready for a picnic. She was sorry that the land was so close and they couldn't take advantage of it.

A course had been set and they were heading to it. She felt disgruntled at not being part of it but then she noted, neither were Hemlock and Elm. She gave a small laugh at their appearance under the gazebo. They looked like they'd been sent to a birdcage as a prison. She was still going over her own inane thoughts when she heard a cry from one of the crew. She quickly turned to see who it was. It was Gisburn, the big oaf that had brought her on board. He was pointing and yelling, she swivelled to look where his finger outstretched.

Her heart fell at the sight of humungous wall; its span looked to be hundreds of feet in height. It arose cold and bleak out of the water, frightening as it occluded the mystery that was on the other side. Her shock doubled when she realized that adjacent to it was another enormous caisson that hung high up in the air, hovering like a trapeze artist in a circus. Its massive hydraulic system stretched out below the caisson, diving down to the water below. She had read about the caissons and how they worked by gravity, one moving down to take the other one up. The mouth to the caisson they were approaching was already lowered, its jaw dropped below the surface of the water.

Surely they wouldn't work anymore, she hoped. After so long they couldn't possibly... Please, she prayed don't let them work. A small rowboat was being launched from the ship with two excited boys in it. Her eyes followed them as they gradually pulled away dipping their oars gleefully in the water as if they were going on a pleasant little trip.

The Captain gave last minute orders to those around him and she watched them scatter to prepare for what he expected of them. The ship slowly made its way to the giant wall before it, seeking entrance to the caisson and sleeping gate below. It seemed like a lifetime for the small boat to reach its destination. She saw the two boys clamber out and disappear into the lone building that stood there, a relic that had survived the Devastation, another anomaly to wonder at.

For what seemed to be an eternity nothing happened. The ship was now facing the monstrous wall, its height even more overwhelming to their tiny figures now they were closer to it. Her eyes were wide trying to take in the expanse and height of it. Her heart flipped again and again as she stared at the overwhelming sight before her.

As she stood looking at the wall ahead she felt movement and swiftly turned to see that the massive gate had lifted and closed behind them. In quiet surprise she pushed her trembling back against the railing. With large eyes she stared at the gate that had so silently risen and locked them in like a patient predator carefully trapping its prey. Slowly the giant caisson creaked into motion, gradually lifting them, making a churning noise like the pit of her stomach was. The caisson had them, all they could face now was the colossal concrete wall as they travelled upward, engulfed in the hydraulic lift's cloying compartment.

Whilst they moved she closed her eyes and thought of Elanclose; the trees, streams and leafy foliage, trying to obliterate the gray that was overwhelming her senses. She heard further creaking beside them and looked to see the descending caisson pass them. She stared at it in surprise until it vanished making its way down to the depths they had left behind.

Everything that was happening both startled and enthralled her. The ship was moving up; again and again she creaked higher in the cell that held them captive, their entrapment unrecognized by everyone except Fern. Higher and higher they rose, rising up to be with the clouds and the beckoning blue sky. Gazing across the lake she thought she could see everything. The day was clear and with it her spirits soared up to it. She could see the lake rippling gently, expanding her fingers of waves for miles.

In the distance far away she saw land and her heart swelled with sorrow. It was land that held Elanclose, the forest she loved. She had a sad thought that it would perhaps be her last view of it; her last view of the place that contained the Woodlander camp and the clan she loved.

She was brought out of her reverie by being jolted and staggered a little as the caisson stopped. Turning she saw the great gate ahead open. Her eyes stared at the sight as a wave of incoming water swept toward them whilst the jaw opened to release them into the channel ahead. The wave became calm; no longer separate but now one expanse of water. The lowering jaw had vanished into the depths of the water below.

The ship slowly moved ahead, seeming to rumble from her stagnation in the isolation tank that had held her. Gingerly she inched her way out of the compartment that had briefly entrapped her. Their travel slowed to a halt and Fern wondered if the Captain had changed his mind. A vision at the corner of her eye told her what was really going on, they were waiting for the crew of two to drop their small boat into the water far away at the other side of the adjacent closed gate.

Watching them as they inched their way back to the patiently waiting ship she willed them to be quicker. She wasn't sure why, she was uncomfortable and felt the need to be moving. Eventually they pulled alongside and chains were thrown down to hook onto their boat, wheels turned as they were pulled back up onto the ship.

Huffing and puffing the two animatedly told the Captain of the building they were in. Talked of how amazing it was and how it had functioned to perfection. Fern stared at them as they passed her still excitedly chatting to each other about the brilliance of engineering.

When the ship began to slowly move again, Fern leaned over the railing once more, and gazed at the view ahead. Concrete walls enclosed them on both sides. Her eyes slid along them as they continued ahead for miles and miles, their distance immeasurable, seeming to go on forever and ever. To her it was infinity, a time continuum that she was now trapped in to repeat its sickening familiarity again and again. This was the Aqueous Passage. With a weighty heart she knew they were about to embark on the second phase of their journey.

Biography

Krystyna was raised in a city of many cultures. She had a fascination for all the different forms of practises and festivals from everyone's heritage. Luckily she had many friends with differing activities in their lives and from their backgrounds she was able to learn the ways and thoughts of different nationalities, especially how they were guided by their elders. She realized that even with their differences everyone sought to get along. They were willing to let those outside of their heritage and culture into their lives with a warmth and friendship that she would always remember.

Krystyna found it interesting how even with their differences they interacted well. Concessions were made to understand the reasons behind set protocols and people were given respect for them. The language barriers that could present so much difficulty were overcome and tolerance and understanding learned dispelling ignorance all round.

Even as individuals we are a unique culture, our minds often perceive things in contrast to others; taste, desire, choices and goals. We live in a fascinating world, with fascinating people; all we need to do is communicate. It is then that we open new worlds to ourselves, just as Elanclouse opens a new world to those that read it.

Always concerned with the trends toward money rather than ethics, Elanclouse presented a world that escaped such ideals. Co-operation to survive in a world devoid of any easy conclusions brought about heroes and heroines whose characters are admirable in their tenacity and morality. The one thing they have in common—ignorance. Learning together was to open up the culture and heritage they had built for themselves, sharing—was to leave everyone wiser.