

THE TYMOREAN TRUST
BOOK 2

GREAT ONES

By
MARGARET GREGORY

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales are purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the author's imagination and used fictitiously.

PLEASE NOTE

I use Australian spelling throughout. You will see ou's (colour) and 'ise' not 'ize' (realise) as well as a few other differences to American spelling.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1 - Under Attack
Chapter 2 - Mutant Friend
Chapter 3 - Meeting
Chapter 4 - Making Allies
Chapter 5 - Mountain Trap
Chapter 6 - Challenge
Chapter 7 - Alien Spy
Chapter 8 - Firestorm
Chapter 9 - Alien Ally
Chapter 10 - Unseen Ambush
Chapter 11 - Back Home
Chapter 12 - Learning about the Enemy
Chapter 13 - Subtle Treachery
Chapter 14 - Unwitting Traitor
Chapter 15 - The Face of the Enemy
Chapter 16 - The War Begins
Chapter 17 - Meeting of the Warlords
Chapter 18 - Infiltration
Chapter 19 - Protecting the Estate
Chapter 20 - Pyr
Chapter 21 - Attack on the Estate
Chapter 22 - Kin Fighting Kin
Chapter 23 - Aftermath
Chapter 24 - The Real Enemy
Chapter 25 - Second Attack on the Estate
Chapter 26 - Tymos Heals the Injured
Chapter 27 - Tymoros Returns
Chapter 28 - Questions
Chapter 29 - The plans of the Enemy
Chapter 30 - Devastation Spreads
Chapter 31 - Dead City
Chapter 32 - Nemesis Unleashed
Chapter 33 - Confounding the Enemy
Chapter 34 - Tymos rescues the Defenceless
Chapter 35 - Llaimos Spies on the Ciriote
Chapter 36 - Kryslie Seals the Cities
Chapter 37 - Scouting the Second Continent
Chapter 38 - Enemies and Allies
Chapter 39 - Reclaiming Kin
Chapter 40 - Warlords in the temple
Chapter 41 - Ciriote in Control
Chapter 42 - Confronting the Ciriote
Chapter 43 - Intruders in the Temple
Chapter 44 - The temple destroyed
Chapter 45 - Power Unleashed
Chapter 46 - Great Ones
Epilogue

Great Ones

Chapter 1 - Under Attack

The two red headed figures in dull brown travelling robes, crouched behind a clump of bushes and drew their capes around them. They were at the base of a steep uphill path, and scanning back along the narrow valley towards the open plain beyond. With their vision adjusted to see into the far distance, they could make out the farmers driving bullocks in straight rows, ploughing new fields. Further away, there were fields already sprouting with the new season's crops.

"There is nothing following us," Kryslie commented quietly, and added mentally, "Except Frest, of course." She brought her focus closer, and scanned the steep sides of the hills that enclosed the valley. Her eyes flicked to where their guard was trying to blend into the rock face - and failing.

Her brother Tymos concurred, also in a quiet voice. "There is nothing out of place, but I'm uneasy."

"Mithas says that the aliens don't know of this valley," Kryslie commented.

"I wouldn't assume that," Tymos warned. "I even doubt if our elders know all that the aliens' technology is capable of."

"True. Their aircraft move around undetected by our ground radar or the satellites. They could have flown over this area."

Instinctively, she glanced skyward. Nothing marred the azure blue of the sky, no clouds, and no shadows as cloaked planes flew over. However, a spy plane could be so high as to be only a pinpoint, and still able to see clearly, a lone person on the ground.

Tymos caught his sister's mental image and replied silently, "And two red heads would stand out like a forest fire. Could that be what we sense?"

Kryslie shrugged. Their unease was too nebulous even to be a premonition of trouble. However, it was the reason why they had not argued with Allyn, another of their guards, when he insisted on scouting ahead up the trail. Even while trying to be unobtrusive, Allyn, Juan and Drake, stood out like guards on parade. If someone or something was aware of their presence, she and Tymos hoped the watcher would reveal its presence. Nothing had.

Without waiting further, Kryslie secured her travelling cape behind her, covered her head with the hood, and began to climb. The first part of the uphill trail was more like rock climbing, but there were plenty of places for toes to rest and hands to grip.

Tymos waited until she was twice his height above him before starting after her. Frest would watch their backs until they reached the actual zigzag trail, and then follow. Up higher, still a length or two above Kryslie, an actual path was cut out of the rock face and it led to the cave that was their immediate destination.

Mithas, leader of one of the reclusive mutant tribes, called it his 'back door', though it was only one of many entrances to the maze of tunnels used by his people. When he had agreed to let them return and talk to him, he had warned them that the 'front' entrance was being watched.

As if aware of his thoughts, Kryslie's mind voice asked, "Why do you think the aliens are watching the other cave? Surely they don't expect us to go back to a place where we were captured."

Communicating that way meant that when Tymos answered, the open communicator did not relay his answer to their guards.

"It doesn't seem logical," Tymos agreed. "Perhaps they are waiting to see if the Governors send a punitive force there."

“Which Kellex would expect if, after we escaped from his men again, we found our way back to the Estate,” Kryslie proposed. “Let’s assume that Kellex thinks we are still alive and didn’t crash with the plane...we are a long way from home, he would expect us to have no way to communicate ...”

“He’ll be looking to find us again before Father does,” Tymos interrupted her. “I am going to assume that Kellex knows we are still alive and is doing everything he can think of to find us.”

Kryslie did not pause in her climb, it was child’s play to her, but Tymos paused to glance each way along the narrow valley, before taking his next upward step. He hadn’t gone very far when he sensed his sister had stopped climbing.

“Bro?”

“What?”

“Something is wrong.”

“Wrong how?”

Kryslie didn’t answer, but now he shared her nebulous feeling through the deep twin bond. In moments, the feeling spread to become a feeling of pressure in his gut. That feeling he knew well. It meant a ground tremor was coming. He had felt it all too often before, but this was the first time since he had left the Royal Estate. He sensed Kryslie begin to climb faster. She wanted to be off the rock face before the pressure built to an uncomfortable level, and before the tremors began.

He shared the sentiment, even though the pressure usually eased when the tremors began. He too began to climb faster, and without losing concentration on the climb, he sought to distract himself and let his tense abdominal muscles relax.

He felt this way whenever there was a ground tremor, and in many cases, the tremors were too slight to be felt by other people. The Tymorean Elders called it ‘planet sense’ and it was one of the rarer abilities of those endowed with the Guardians’ mystical power. It was the ability to feel the insults done to the planet as a physical sensation.

Tymos wondered what possible use it was. However, apart from his sister, the Elders could not recall anyone in recent history that had also had the odd gift. The only reference they found to it was in mentions of the Great Ones of legend and that was nearly a thousand years ago.

The ability to see in the dark and to use UV and IR light to see, another gift he and his sister shared, was much more useful.

As he reached for the next handhold, Tymos had to stop. He suddenly wanted to double over, as pain blossomed in his gut. Instead, he gripped the jutting rock as hard as he could. He dared not let go when he was twenty feet up a near sheer rock face, and whilst he knew his stomach was not expanding like a giant balloon, it did feel like it was about to explode.

He felt the first faint tremors and anticipated the exquisite relief, but the tremors grew stronger and the pain remained.

“This can’t be natural,” Kryslie thought at him. “It must be the aliens doing this.”

Tymos felt the effort it had taken to form the thought. He sent his agreement as a feeling, and not in words. They had suggested to the Elders that the tremors were the covert work of the subversive invading aliens. Moreover, many of the tremors had caused cracks in the vital water storage basins but although their idea was taken seriously, no evidence had been found to prove it. Nevertheless, it fit with the other guerrilla tactics the aliens were using to demoralize the population of Tymorea. Hit and run, Tymos thought to himself, refusing to show themselves and fight.

The tremors were increasing, and the rain of coarse sand hitting his head was feeling like grit and small stones.

“Prince Tymos!” The voice was Allyn’s coming over the comm. unit, but Tymos ignored it. He didn’t have the energy to speak, even if he could formulate an answer. It was all he could currently do to hold on when the whole mountain seemed to be bucking and heaving like an unbroken stallion.

The pain in his gut surged, shooting pain to all parts of him, making his mind black out for an instant. He became aware of Frest's horrified exclamation over the comm. as the rock face slid past him, less than an inch from his nose. Instinctively, he let his legs collapse when his feet hit the valley floor.

Seconds later, he felt Kryslie thud down beside him and glimpsed her curling into a ball, to hold herself tightly. Her muscles were twitching spasmodically, like his own were. He copied her posture and tried to relax.

"Prince Tymos, are you alright?"

Frest sounded frantic, as he ran out of cover to kneel beside him.

"Watch our back trail!" Tymos forced out through gritted teeth. Even the ground seemed to be heaving, but now the pressure in his gut was easing. If Frest would let him concentrate, he could start the biofeedback pain-relief technique. "Is Mithas alright?" he thought at his sister.

Kryslie didn't respond immediately, but Tymos knew she was reaching out to find the mutant's mind. This common ability had brought Mithas to trust them, and sever his allegiance to the aliens.

"Shaken," she thought finally. "I don't think he felt it so much inside the mountain. He says he will wait until we reach the cave before appearing. He tells me he has a boulder blocking the back of the cave, and Allyn and the others didn't notice there was a tunnel there."

Kryslie uncurled, but stayed lying on her side on the ground. Her pain had eased to acute nausea, and she could still feel faint tremors.

Tymos whistled softly, just enough to get Frest's attention. He hadn't gone far, just to where the rock face had a natural man sized concavity. It had some boulders and scrubby bushes providing cover for his lower half, but the rest of him, clad in the dark brown of the palace guards' uniform, was a distinct contrast to the light brown rock and the grey green of the spiky leaved bushes.

Kryslie caught her brother's eye and then looked skywards. In the twin bond, he sensed, "He's going to have to learn."

Frest was hurrying towards them, flicking his gaze from them, back to the view to the farmlands. He was twitching with worry, and Kryslie had the distinct feeling that he was holding himself back from wringing his hands.

"We should go back to the palace. This is a bad idea," he blurted. "Look at your hands, your clothes, your face..."

"Frest! We're fine," Kryslie insisted. She forced herself to her feet, although she was not yet feeling ready to stand. She couldn't help wincing when she straightened.

"But you fell nearly thirty feet...and you are hurt!"

"Nothing worse than what we've been after some of our lessons with President Reslic or his brothers," Tymos insisted. He was also talking to Allyn via the communicator. "No. Stay up there. We will be up shortly. This mission is too important to abandon."

"What do you think you can do, Prince Tymos? Make all the mutants suddenly like us? They are in league with the aliens, we can't trust them," Frest said. "They have never listened to your elders, what makes you think they will listen to you?"

Tymos stood, keeping his face from betraying the lingering soreness in his muscles. "We have already made friends with Mithas, who we will be meeting today. He has invited others to listen to us. If you are afraid of mutants, you may stay down here and guard our travel packs."

Frest's mouth dropped open, and then snapped shut. Finally, after several attempts to speak, he said, "My duty is to guard you and Princess Kryslie."

"Guard then, but don't interfere," Kryslie snapped.

In the three days of travelling with the four guardsmen, neither Tymos, nor Kryslie had succeeded in convincing the older men that a close guard was not necessary. To the guards, they were the Heir Designates of High King Tymoros, and it just wasn't done to let them have no

guard at all. Indeed, if they were back at the Royal Estate, there would be guards, or teachers or attendants always near them.

However, away from the palace, Frest, Allyn, Drake and Juan, were out of their usual environment. They were highly experienced guards, but they were unused to open country and being away from instant back up.

Their attention was chafing, but they had agreed to an escort for the sake of their Father. They did not want to add to his fear for them - that they might be caught and turned into enemies, as three of their sibs had been. For escorts, the only option had been palace guards, for the units of the Tymorean Peace Corps were stretched thin dealing with alien sabotage, and tracking down the perpetrators who were as hard to see as ghosts or wisps of smoke.

Tymos leant back against the rock wall and closed his eyes. He simply wished they would ditch the uniforms and dress like commoners. Anyone seeing them would know instantly that some member of one of the three ruling families was nearby. However, so far, the four guards had resisted the idea.

“Can you get us a drink, Frest?” Kryslie asked. “I need something to get the rock dust out of my mouth.”

Once he had moved off to where the packs were hidden, Kryslie said softly, “It was only the surface layer that was affected.”

Tymos realised that she was right, and the giddiness he was feeling was from the roiling, unseen energies of the planet. When he sought deeper into the ground, the aura was calm, like a still lake.

He reached out for Kryslie’s hand and together, they drew on the calm energy and felt themselves recover their own energies.

Deep within the twin bond, they shared the sense that this was one of the advantages of the planet sense.

“Prince Tymos, are you sure it is safe to climb up,” Frest blurted, as he handed a drink flask to each of them. “The rock could be loose.”

Tymos looked skyward as if counting to ten before speaking. In fact, he was sensing the feel of the mountain.

“We will take it slowly and carefully. I think all the loose rock fell down. Once we reach the trail we will be fine.”

It wasn’t quite that simple, but the fading tremors and the residual strangeness in his gut wouldn’t hinder him. He hoped to be up past the initial climb before any aftershocks manifested.

Tymos capped the drink flask and handed it back to Frest to hang on his utility harness. “We’ll get started. I’ll go first; Kryslie will be next, then you.”

After another careful scrutiny of the area around them, with the only movement being Frest’s jerkiness, and the only smells on the breeze being from the sun heated rock, the soil, and the spiky mint smelling bushes, Tymos began his climb. Kryslie followed more closely than before.

The mountain on this side of the ridge was formed of steeply rising rock, as the valley was carved out by an ancient, long vanished glacier. The track above was formed partly from natural erosion, and partly from someone chipping rock out of the way. It was left looking as natural as possible, with small rocks littering the ground.

This time they made it to the trail, and gave Frest the okay to come up. He took longer to make the climb and needed help to clamber onto the ledge. Although breathing more heavily than usual, he assured his charges that he was ready to continue.

With a natural sense of balance, honed by the physical training given to all the Royal children, Tymos and Kryslie kept up a fast pace. Frest, no longer used to the extra stamina needed for the steep climb, soon dropped behind.

The trail zigzagged up the rock face and for the most part, someone walking up it was exposed. There were sections where outcropping boulders screened the trail, or where the scrubby bushes found root space in cracks, but these were few and far between. Tymos wanted to reach the cave as quickly as possible.

They paused at the second abrupt change in the path, to check how far back their guard was, and were about to start up the next section when Kryslie asked, "Do you hear something?"

Feeling a shiver of warning, they both crouched down, and drew their capes around them, so they might seem like boulders from a distance. Frest, breathing heavily and making enough noise to startle roosting birds into flight, finally caught up to them. He was about to speak, but Tymos used the Guards' hand gesture for 'silence'.

"Listen," Tymos directed, in a quiet voice.

Frest made a visible effort to quieten his laboured breathing.

"Can you hear that high pitched sound?" Kryslie asked her brother.

She saw him go still, and then remove the communicator earpiece.

"Yes, but I thought it was some kind of feedback from the communicator," Tymos admitted.

"I can't hear anything," Frest stated. "What are you talking about?"

Kryslie ignored the question and continued exchanging ideas with her brother. "The mutants wouldn't be causing it; they don't have the technology, or the learning."

Tymos flicked his sister a mental image of Mithas's mutant kin, as they had appeared the previous week, toting alien weapons.

Mentally Kryslie countered, "Old, worn out, power drained and only useful as clubs." Then she spoke aloud. "It has to be something the aliens are doing. And I bet they don't realise anyone can hear it."

"Hear what?" Frest demanded. He was starting to look around, glance everywhere, as if beginning to sense danger.

Relenting, Kryslie explained. "I am hearing a very high pitched noise."

Frest stifled his disbelief and tried to sound decisive.

"Princess Kryslie, Prince Tymos, we need to keep moving, we are too exposed here."

"They can't possibly know that we are here," Kryslie said aloud as she scanned the area below them and looked at the sky. The volume of the high-pitched noise was increasing as if the cause was getting closer.

Tymos abruptly turned his head as he smelt a whiff of hot metal. "Down!" he told Frest.

A light shower of gravel began to rain down on them, and more tremors rocked the mountain. Frest's face bleached to white.

"Allyn," Tymos spoke sharply into the communicator. "Use the signal boost, call the Estate, have Xyron or Reslic check for unsanctioned satellites or drone probes in this area. Something is emitting a very high frequency sonic signal...Allyn, do it now!"

Mentally, Tymos told his sister, "He wanted to argue with me."

"Idiot," she responded the same way. She was instinctively estimating how long it would take the request to be acted on and the source to be located and destroyed. The tremors were increasing in strength, but this time they hadn't felt the inner pressure.

"Shouldn't we keep moving upwards," Frest suggested.

"No," Kryslie overruled him. "There is something close that is targeting this area. I can hear it, hovering. If we move, it might come at us."

That silenced Frest. He squatted down next to his charges and allowed Tymos and Kryslie to concentrate on senses, or instincts, other than the normal five and listen for inner prompting from the mystical, god-like Guardians of Peace.

The ancient beings who had bestowed the 'Royal Power' on the first Triumvirate Governors in Tymorea's earliest history were the source of great wisdom. Their presence was very real to

those whose power was strongest. Tymos and Kryslie let the subliminal messages coming to all their senses form into a need to act. Tymos suddenly grabbed Frest, and pulled him up the track. Kryslie followed closely behind him.

Frest had no breath to protest or demand a reason for the sudden movement, and when they stopped again, he was too surprised to speak when Tymos pushed him hard against the rock wall, in a position where there was a slight rock ledge above them.

A very loud ominous, “CRACK”, followed by several more, had both Tymos and Kryslie looking up as if seeing through the ledge and up the face of the mountain.

Frest heard the sound of rocks sliding, and tried to struggle free.

“Keep still,” Tymos ordered, but it was absently, for his face showed signs of concentration.

Frest saw the first of the stones, gravel and loose rock sliding over the ledge, and knew bigger stuff was coming. “We can’t stay here.”

He wasn’t answered, but he began to become aware of a purple glow around him. The rocks that seemed to want to bounce into their shelter touched the glow and rebounded - continuing to bounce down to the valley below.

The heavy stuff, a mess of cracked-off rock, finally finished falling past them. Tymos eased his weight off Frest, and gave him shivers by turning to glance down at the trail on the level below.

“The trail is still okay, just a little of the light stuff is there.”

Frest found his voice, “It was fortunate that you had a protective force screen on, Prince Tymos. I didn’t know you had one.”

“When we left Dira, to start the tour, Father gave us one of the ones taken from the aliens that infiltrated the Estate,” Kryslie admitted. She watched Frest straighten and was aware that he was relieved to have figured out what Tymos had done. The she added, “But, that stopped working when they turned an EM pulse on us.”

“How...” Frest started to ask, how they had created the protective effect, but an explosive blast, deafened him, drowning his voice. At the same instant, his eyes were blinded by the brilliance of a fireball. He changed his question to, “What was that?”

Echoes of the explosion were reverberating between the rock faces of the two mountain ridges. Then a faint shadow passed over them, accompanied by the faintest smell of burnt jet fuel. Frest turned his head in the direction the cloaked jet had gone.

“That was whatever had been causing that sonic barrage - being blown up,” Kryslie said calmly.

“Something flew over,” Frest insisted.

“Yes,” Tymos agreed. Then to distract the Guardsman, he said, “Come on, let’s go.”

Into the communicator, he spoke a short sharp command, “Allyn, be quiet. We’re fine.”

This time, Tymos kept his pace to one that Frest could match, but only because he was aware that the sonic barrage may have caused more fractures.

Frest was quiet until they were three quarters of the way up. “How did you do that? It felt like a force shield.”

“Think about who we are Frest,” Kryslie suggested. “We are not Father’s Heir Designates for nothing. Our power is a lot stronger than yours is, and are sensitive to the aura. We have found we can actively draw on it, and feel when there is a disturbance in the ambient energy field.”

“Oh!” was all Frest could think of to say. He was embarrassed now, because it was his job to protect them, not the reverse.

Kryslie swore deliberately, startling Frest because she shouldn’t have known those particular curses. She finished with, “We have been trying to tell you we can look after ourselves.”

To end the subject, Tymos and Kryslie increased their speed. However, they continued to discuss the events with each other using their telepathy.

“It probably wasn’t us, specifically, that they were after,” Tymos proposed. “It might be some other type of intended sabotage.”

“True, but that thing didn’t cause the first quake. More likely it was to make the cracked surface rock break off,” Kryslie proposed.

“To try to block the mutant’s ways in and out? How could they expect to block them all? Bring the mountain down?”

“The aliens in their infinite arrogance may not have thought of multiple exits. It might be spite if they had the idea that the mutants helped us,” Kryslie suggested.

“How could they think that? We were far away from here when Jon helped get us off their ship,” her brother disagreed. “And they left the mutants incapable of helping us.” He gave a mental shrug. “The reason isn’t the issue right now. My concern is that, whoever sent that drone, will probably know it was destroyed. We don’t know if it had sensor capability and saw us or not. Either way, the aliens will probably come to investigate. Those in the next valley are nearest. It will take them at least a day to get here so we have to finish here before then.”

“I’ve warned Mithas,” Kryslie said a few moments later. “He will have a lookout in case the aliens try to find a way through the tunnels.”

Chapter 2 - Mutant Friend

Allyn, Juan and Drake, the other three Guard escorts, were arrayed around the entrance of the head-high cave, guarding it and kicking some of the rubble from around the entrance. Tymos was two paces ahead of his sister when he reached the level section of the trail. The path continued further up the hill.

“Have you checked further up?” Tymos asked before Allyn or the others could speak. He held his tongue about the foolishness of kicking rocks off the ledge. Not only might they hit someone below, but if the aliens came up, or flew over, the clear area would betray the fact that someone had been there recently.

“Of course, Prince Tymos,” Allyn seemed offended. “It dead ends at a dried up water basin.”

“Fine, let’s get inside,” Tymos directed, walking between the guardsmen and going in. Allyn made to follow immediately and then stopped, realising that etiquette required him to allow Kryslie to precede him. She in turn, while aware of his embarrassment, gave no sign and simply followed her brother.

The interior of the cave was dark, once the rock overhang blocked the sun. Allyn activated a hand light and shone it around. “This cave has been used before, quite recently. There are places for rush-lights. Those remains over there still smell of burnt oil.”

“Why don’t you relight the rushes,” Tymos suggested mildly. “And sit them in the holders?”

Frest, following them inside, moved to obey. He could only make two of them burn, but that gave enough light. The rushes smoked a bit at first, but the smoke seemed to be drawn out of the cave entrance.

Kryslie automatically studied the cave. She saw that the walls of the cave had been smoothed, and alcoves had been excavated all around. It made it hard to pick where the tunnel leading into the mountain began. She moved and let senses other than the common five, search for a place of difference. As she succeeded, she sensed Mithas waiting for her mind touch, and invited him to join her.

As if unaware of his approach, Tymos gave directions to the guards. “Three of you, go and find positions where you can observe the approaches from the east, north and west.”

“Prince Tymos, with respect, we have orders to guard...”

Kryslie decided to forego tact. “If you were not two hundred percent sure that this cave was safe, you would not have let us in,” she pointed out. “We will be out of sight while we wait for Mithas. He has sent messages to the tribes that are within a days travel from here. Representatives are on their way. You are to watch for them, report, and stay out of sight. Understood?”

Allyn tensed with disapproval. “Yes, Princess Kryslie,” he said stiffly. His mind was betraying his belief that she should have gone back to the Royal Estate with her father. His mind was practically shouting it.

Keeping her voice even, Kryslie told him, “Allyn, we may be the Heir Designates of His Majesty, but we are neither brainless nor untrained. No matter what you think.”

His mind shouted, “But you’ve only been on Tymorea for a year.” His face went red.

“Yes, we were quite old when we arrived. Yes, we had all sorts of odd human notions. However, President Reslic has been our personal trainer since then. I expect you know what that means.”

He did, and mentally winced as Kryslie went on, “Governor Xyron has personally overseen our learning program and Father has made sure we know how to behave. Everything he knows about diplomacy, negotiation, and leadership, he has shared with us. We are the best people for

this task. We have already befriended Mithas, and he will listen to us more readily than to any other official envoy.”

“But you are still children...”

“Allyn, we are not children!” Kryslie said sharply.

Allyn swallowed anything else he wanted to say. He directed Frest to remain in the cave and went with Drake and Juan to observe the approaches.

Frest looked uncomfortable, as he stood watching the High King’s heirs. Tymos turned and spoke to him.

“Relax, won’t you,” Tymos invited.

The younger Guardsman began to obey, but then yelped and quickly drew his stunner. Without looking around, Tymos pushed his arm down.

Eyes wide with fright at seeing the newcomer, Frest tried to protest, “Prince Tymos there is...”

Kryslie had seen Mithas emerge from the hidden tunnel and greeted him warmly. “Mithas, thank you for your offer of help.”

Once Frest seemed ready to trust the stranger, Tymos turned his attention to Mithas, but spoke to explain to Frest. “When we escaped from Warlord Kellex, one of the Aeronite commanders, Mithas helped us get a message to Father.”

“Little Royals helped us first,” Mithas announced. “Prove they more friend than dark eyes.”

Frest opened his mouth as if he wanted to speak, and then shut it. His mind revealed that he did not want to offend the apparition that had appeared from solid rock. However, the mention of ‘dark-eyes’ had reminded him of the aliens that had infiltrated the Royal Estate and attacked the guards in an attempt to abduct the High Kings heirs.

Tymos sensed the worry and decided to explain further. “Mithas may not look like the common conception of a mutant, but I can assure you that he is no longer in league with the aliens. His mutation is not obvious. He is a telepath.”

Frest stiffened again, his apprehension growing.

“Tark and Gorren look like mutants,” Mithas said blandly as two more figures emerged from the hidden tunnel. Frest’s hand jerked back up to aim his stunner at the figures.

“Put it down, Frest!” Tymos ordered. “When Kellex sent his warriors to get us back, he proved how little he regarded his allies. Mithas offered to assist us to make contact with other mutant tribes. We must work to get them all on our side.”

Mithas spat a glob of saliva at Frest’s feet. “More than then. False friends don’t care if us dead. Little Royals did care. Protected us, treat us as people. Help them I will. Promised. Old allies, liars are.”

Slowly, Frest lowered his weapon. The three mutants did not make a threatening move, and he saw that both Prince Tymos and Princess Kryslie were relaxed. He still wasn’t completely convinced because he was swallowing convulsively. Though that might have been because both Tark and Gorren did look like the stereotype of a mutant - both were short, heavily muscled in a craggy way and their facial features were twisted and distorted.

The lack of trust did not anger Mithas. He was used to that reaction from Tymorean commoners. He took amusement from saying, “Tark has pretty daughter. Not like him.”

Instead of reassuring Frest, it made him swallow harder. It made him even more nauseous to think that some woman had mated to this...this gargoyle, and that the mutants were so unstable, physically, that they couldn’t breed ‘true’, or consistently.

Kryslie took pity on the young guardsman. She was empathically aware of how he was feeling. “Why don’t you keep watch from the cave entrance? You will have better radio reception from there.”

“Yes. Yes, mam,” he agreed whole-heartedly. He gave the three mutants a long searching look and turned to obey.

Mithas chuckled quietly. "Others not far. We get place ready. Tark and Gorren move rocks for seats. They strong."

His mind implied, "Not the brightest."

Tymos watched as the two mutants hefted boulder sized rocks from within the alcoves. He decided not to help. He was a guest. Mithas nodded with satisfaction, and amusement.

"This our greeting place. Leave it rough we do."

Kryslie watched Tark flip the boulder he was lifting, and place it in the centre of the cave. Gorren did the same with his burden. Now the rough looking boulders proved to have smooth bases, roughly concave. When there was a loose circle of five stone seats, each with a small rock table between them, Mithas remarked, "We not uncivilised savages. We bring guesting stuff too. Expected it is."

"I am suitably educated," Kryslie admitted dryly. "Our studies did not tell us much about your lifestyle."

"Big Royals don't visit and you little Royals not sweep us under mat," Mithas said.

"No, we won't ignore the mutants," Tymos promised. "You are Tymoreans, and we must all act together to remove the alien infiltrators."

"You not like big Royals. Good it is that the king whelped two smart ones and kept you hid."

"Indeed," Kryslie agreed, sensing that Mithas was blocking some of his memories. She wondered why but it wasn't time to push the issue. She asked instead, "Tell us about the leaders you invited."

The shrill squawk of feedback from a handheld radio drew all eyes Guardsman Frest. He blushed as he fiddled with the control pad.

Seeing no immediate threat, and identifying the cause of the noise, Prince Tymos turned back to his conversation with Mithas. The mutant dropped his hands from his tormented ears and glanced over his shoulder at his two fellow tribesmen.

"Women you are! Noise is only," he growled at his tribesmen who still had fingers jammed into their ears.

Princess Kryslie stepped away from her brother and walked to Frest. "I assume Allyn has returned. Go and tell him to come here to report."

Frest seemed eager to comply. He nodded his head and turned abruptly, not quite running out of the entrance of the cave.

"Like us little, that one," Mithas murmured to Tymos.

Kryslie heard the remark and added a comment of her own. "As much as they like being ordered around by children." She waited by the opening for Frest and Allyn to return.

Mithas chuckled. "Like you, me, they not. See they do, outside only."

Tymos grinned wryly. Mithas had sent that comment mentally.

The mutant went on, "Pity it is, too weak to think distant, need squawk box to talk it."

"Our way is more discreet," Tymos agreed, feeling a shiver of premonition. He heard Kryslie add her own comment, as booted feet trotted up the rocky path to the cave. "If they are not careful, the aliens will triangulate our position. If any of them happen to be nearby, they will have heard that squawk."

Guardsman Allyn came to a halt at the cave door.

"Come in, Allyn," Kryslie invited, walking without concern to stand next to her brother. She watched Allyn glancing around as he tentatively moved forward. Frest would have reported the unexpected arrival of the mutants.

"For the Guardian's sake, Allyn, will you stop acting like Mithas has invited a dozen enemies in here since you went out? Give us your report before we die of boredom," she continued.

Allyn jerked as if he had been insulted, but he covered his reaction by bowing to the two Royals.

“Prince Tymos, Princess Kryslie, Drake and Juan have seen mutants, er, people, approaching from north and north east. There is a third group coming from the west.”

“Numbers?” Tymos barked the question in a tone he copied from the Tymorean President, Jono Reslic.

Allyn reacted to it. “Five or six in each group,” he reported.

“ETA?” Kryslie asked, copying her brother’s tone. Allyn twitched again.

“An hour or an hour and a half.”

Tymos gave the next direction. “Tell Drake and Juan to scout the back trail of the groups they are watching. Have Frest do the same for the third group. Tell them to keep all transmissions as brief as possible and to keep out of sight. We do not want to scare off our guests. When they return, after our guests have arrived, they are to find observation points outside of the cave.”

“Yes, Sir,” Allyn managed to give the accepted response.

“And you,” Kryslie added, “Will return in here and wait in the small side cavern off this one.”

Mithas, aware of the thoughts that Kryslie had kept to herself, added, “Mutants see fancy clothes and run back away.”

Allyn kept his face impassive. He had, during the past two days, refused the suggestion that he exchange his Palace Guard uniform for dull coloured travelling clothes and cloaks like the Tymos and Kryslie had adopted, though his companions had muddy brown coloured cloaks to put over their uniforms.

His acknowledgement came through clenched teeth. “Yes, Sir.”

Without requesting permission to depart, he turned abruptly and left the cave.

“Let’s deal with Allyn after this meeting,” Tymos proposed. “I estimate that the visitors will arrive sooner than he allowed.”

Mithas chuckled again. “Mutants run fast.” He then ordered his hovering tribesmen to, “Get guesting drink ready and bring two long, hooded capes for the little Royals.”

He grinned at Kryslie and explained, “Little Royals don’t scare mutants, only big ones. But you not short little and fire hair give you away.”

Kryslie gave a wry grin. “You are right, Mithas,” she admitted aloud.

Allyn returned to the cave, firmly controlling his instinct to glance around, but his jerky movements and rapid eye motion betrayed him. He spotted two more figures in grey hooded capes and almost drew his hand weapon.

Only when one of the figures lowered their hood and turned so the torch light glinted off red hair, did he realise who the figures were. He bowed stiffly and reported. “The groups are moving faster than we estimated. They will arrive in half an hour.”

Tymos nodded. “Wait in the inner cave.”

Kryslie deliberately stressed, “You will not interfere, and you will need neither sword nor stunner.” She met the guardsman’s eyes until he nodded stiffly and retreated to the inner cave. He paused but did not acknowledge when Mithas said, “Big Royals wouldn’t send little Royals if they not able to talk right.”

“A point Allyn had better think on while he is waiting,” Kryslie thought at her brother. “He is a palace guard, and not of high enough rank to second guess President Reslic.”

His real problem was that he was that he was twice the age of the ‘children’ he was guarding, and had children of his own.

Chapter 3 - Meeting

When Mithas sent messages to the tribes within a days travel from his stronghold, all he said was that he needed to discuss matters of grave importance to all mutants.

Such meetings were rare, as the tribal leaders had the responsibility to protect their tribes. For safety, larger groups of mutants seldom came together. Curiosity, along with the need to discuss concerns of their own, caused the leaders to agree to meet with Mithas.

Each brought along one or more of their elder advisors, and were not perturbed when they arrived at the cave and were greeted by Mithas, flanked by two silent figures. The anonymous figures clad in grey rough spun fabric robes, with their faces hidden by the hoods, served refreshments to each guest on their arrival.

When all the expected leaders had arrived, Mithas began speaking to the standing guests.

“Know I do, your tribes need you. For coming, my thanks. Need I have, our allies to discuss.”

“Imply you do, them you trust not,” one of the newly arrived leaders challenged, as he picked a place to sit. The other visiting leaders copied the action, keeping their advisers standing behind them.

“Say as I do,” Mithas confirmed. “Seventeen years I lead tribe, and my father before. Allies claim, our saviours to be. Serve them I have.”

“Claim, Mithas?” came an instant challenge.

“Yes, Dormar,” Mithas confirmed. “Have they done for you more than make promises?”

“Weapons we have,” Dormar countered.

Mithas snorted. “Discards only. Good as club, is all. No protection from other weapons.”

“You slow then Mithas. Just run faster,” Dormar chuckled at his own wit.

“If rubbish make you happy, no use talk,” Mithas retorted.

“What concerns you, Mithas,” a different leader, the oldest, asked.

Mithas turned away from Dormar and addressed the others. “Ambush we did, troop of guards. Allies pleased, but not care that many of tribe killed or hurt. Royals hunt us, catch some. Catch me and elders. Our saviours care not. Only when my tribe don’t obey without us, forced allies were, to help.”

“So help they did,” Dormar stated boldly. “Why you grumble?”

“Why? Sent they did, little, little commander. My son have more sense. Lucky he was, to get me free. Orders he had, to leave others to rot and torture. Care not for them. We only free when baby prince announced. When guards distracted.”

“Warlord Zorrec say, baby no threat for years,” the youngest leader offered. His name was Faush.

Mithas smiled grimly and did not react to the comment. “Read mind of little commander, I did. He think we only good as sword food. Us ugly, good riddance.”

Dormar drawled, “War it is. Dying happens.”

“Rather live for promised reward,” the elder leader responded.

“As do I, Jenmar,” Mithas said.

Dormar grunted, “What your point, Mithas?”

“Point is, Warlord Kellex claim he take every prince from tyrant king. He couldn’t get new babe. His warriors caught by Royals, so my tribe people freed to be caught or killed instead.”

Growls came from several throats as the leaders took in the insult to Mithas.

“Say you do, allies just use us. How you know?” the remaining leader demanded.

“Little commander tell me, Gors. He assume we keen to die for Warlord. Mind say we not important. They wanted babe and the kings other get.”

“Babe no threat. What others,” Dormar demanded.

“Tell later, point is, not allies who took other princes.”

Mithas heard two mental exclamations of “What!” and his back began to prickle, though he did not turn to glance at his presumed guards.

“Who then?” Gors demanded.

“Brother of father,” Mithas said.

There was a bark of laughter from several of the advisors.

“Clown one? Keep changing his face?” one asked.

Mithas glared in the direction of the speaker. His anger at the memory he was going to share was only apparent to the two figures standing behind him. Keeping that anger hidden, with difficulty, Mithas slipped out of the common mutant dialect and used the dialect of the Tymorean commoners. “Allies sent uncle to get first two. Boy and girl. The ones about ready now to lead our saviours. Allies challenge him to change into two bodies, to look like little Royals. He wasn’t very smart. Uncle died. Allies say he was too damaged to live. Now I know he died so Royals think children dead, not taken by allies.”

“Clever that was. So what the others,” Dormar asked, fascinated.

“Father sent after oldest two. He only look little strange. Went to spaceport where King was on tour. He got near Princes, with thing allies give him. Then trader shuttle crash on him, kill princes too and lots of commoners.”

Dormar shrugged. “People die. Common, Royal, no loss. Father die hero.”

Mithas growled, angry at Dormar’s reaction. He continued doggedly. “Other one, eleven years ago. They took my younger son, a baby of three days - because he look normal.”

Dormar suddenly stopped grinning.

Mithas went on, “Told I was, honoured. I would give up my son, and for that sacrifice, I would be rewarded with a prince to raise as our ally. While our tormentors would raise mutant to destroy them.”

“I do that easy,” Dormar claimed. “Sons only fight and drink.” Then he suddenly stared at Mithas. “What they do? You only one son.”

“They switched children. Their medicine doer went to town where Royal Consort in labour. She was birthing too early. My child, a healthy boy, died three days later. Because he died, allies did not give me other. My son’s inner organs shrivelled because of some foul brew our allies gave him. When I protested, they warn me to keep helping or tribe would die.” Mithas’s voice was unsteady, but he went on. “I stay quiet until now, because my tribe is family. Too precious to risk. Until now, I think only allies can help us get better life. But it’s been twenty years and we still scratch dirt to exist. We are not equals of allies but slaves of no importance.”

Mithas spat into the centre of the circle of seats to make his point.

“Nothing ever given us,” Dormar said. “Earn it we must. What other get of king is there? We find them and keep ourselves. Heard of babe, not others.”

“Soon to kill the accursed ones anyway,” Faush claimed brashly. “Be in front of allies I’ll be. Honour that is.”

“How will you be honoured, if die you do?” Mithas countered.

“Okay, inflated brain, what think you we do?” Dormar asked.

“Think we must, best for tribe,” Jenmar proposed.

“My point exactly,” Mithas nodded. “But we must think if our best interests still lie in serving these allies of us. Or if we can do better in our own way.”

“Nowhere we got before allies.” Faush said. “Tormentors die now.”

“More of family die now too,” Jenmar retorted as he moved stiffly on his seat. His face contorted as if with pain.

“Weapons we have, spears less better,” Dormar said.

“Purpose we have,” Gors added. “Allies know much we don’t. Ideas good.”

“Good ideas,” Mithas echoed. “Have you stopped to think, that before we met allies, before we began to kill and capture for them, peace we had? Now, we are hunted like criminals, by the guards from the palace, feared and hated by the common people. We fear for our tribes – afraid of reprisal. Afraid of failing our allies – because of their anger.”

“Soft you got, Mithas,” Gors accused. “I send strong son to take your tribe. Heard grumbles that you let Royal brats escape. You lost chance to bargain.”

Mithas shook his head, aware of the presence of those “brats” behind him. “They were the kings get, ones Kellex only just learnt of. We caught them when the allies could not keep them. Felt their minds I did. Trust them I do.”

“Traitor!” Gors and Dormar yelled in unison, rising to their feet. Their so far silent elders growled their agreement.

Mithas raised his voice. “When I felt their mind, I knew I could no longer serve the allies. I agreed to serve them instead. When they knew that we would be killed if we let them escape – they allowed themselves to be captured. We were treated with gas, then paralysed by our allies so we had no chance to bargain - even had I wanted to – and just so they could get children. They did not trust us, and they feared the power of the children. Children! Our allies are scared of the Governors, scared of their children. They went and left us helpless. The kin of the children helped me, one of the Governors – cured the paralysis, so I could guard my tribesmen until they recovered. They helped me, even though I had captured their children, and they still did not know if those children were alive or dead.”

“Governor, scum, how did they know you got brats?” Dormar demanded.

“I sent message. Allowed two commoners to go free – one had been tortured by allies to near death.”

“Commoners! No waste.” Gors shrugged. “Brats gone, even better. Allies won’t fail twice. But you! You break covenant of mutants. You deal with tormentors....such treason.”

Jenmar looked at Mithas, his face having gone pale and damp. He tried to stand and speak, but only a hiss escaped his lips.

Without a word, one of the grey hooded figures moved from behind Mithas, and went to Jenmar. He began massage the older mutant’s shoulders. Jenmar slumped on his seat, but colour began to return to his face.

“Touch him not, traitor scum!” Jenmar’s fellow tribesman tried to drag the hooded figure away, but succeeded only in removing the hood to reveal brilliant red hair and a face with out any distortions. “Kill him not!” the man began to pound on Tymos’s back.

Recognition of the lineage of the revealed person brought instant bedlam. Gors and Dormar leapt for Mithas, still seated on his seat, but the second grey grey-hooded figure moved faster and stood between them and the target of their wrath. Faush skittered nearer the way out.

Then Kryslie removed her hood.

“Be seated again!”

“Obey you! We NOT!” Gors roared.

“Very well, stay as you are then. However, I will not let you harm Mithas.”

“He is traitor to us! Dealing with you scum.” Gors told her, inching forward, hand on a hidden weapon.

“Hides behind girl child!” Dormar taunted, doing the same. He watched for Kryslie to start to react.

The two mutants, both hefty and ready for a fight, were within inches of Kryslie when a new voice stopped them. They turned and stared in surprise.

“Fools you be. Mithas has chosen right.” Jenmar was on his feet, standing straight, and looking as vigorous as he had ten years before. Tymos moved away, waiting.

“Minds I can’t read, but acts speak to me more than fancy words. Allies laughed at me. Asked my son if they should kill me so a stronger man could rule. My son is loyal, so I live and my mind is not feeble. When the pain came just then, and chest was on fire – I thought that the

allies would have their way. Then I felt the hands and the pain began to go, and the other pain, that bends my joints and aches all day and all night.”

“They trick you!” Gors snarled.

“Why will an enemy of us, choose to help me – an old dying man – and give me years more of life? Like you said of commoners – mutants, no waste.”

Faush edged back to the table.

“If they wanted to trick me into helping them, enough it would be to help me a little - long enough to get home. To die there. Our allies would not even do that much for me. Instead, I will be leading tribe for years yet.”

“Listen more, I won’t,” Dormar said, turning to walk out of the cavern.

“Two tribes no more are friends,” Gors added, turning to follow. Faush looked undecided, but he was the youngest leader.

Just as they reached the opening, Tymos spoke, thoughtfully, as if he didn’t understand something.

“Your allies. Do you really know what they are?”

“Care not!” Gors replied. “Hate you they do, and kin of yours.”

“Since allies, we strong. Weapons given. Land we will have, lots and lots, then grow much we can. Rich we get, telling of you.”

“I suppose you would be very rich, if you could keep your life,” Kryslie said gently. “Didn’t you listen? Mithas captured us – you heard how they treated him. Your allies treated us worse, by drugging us as well. But we escaped and now they are trying to blame him for their mistakes. The soldiers of your allies took us away, while Mithas and his family were helpless. So they could not have helped us escape from their flying ship. So when you go and tell your allies where we are – and get to keep the richness of your life, what do you think will happen?”

“Rich we get!” Dormar repeated.

“Is that all? Suppose they don’t find us – these infallible allies of yours?”

Dormar shrugged. “Care not.”

“You should,” Kryslie said. “First, they will kill Mithas and his tribe for harbouring us. Then, when they can’t find us, they will take their anger out on you and your tribe. They will not reward you for worthless information.”

“Mithas tribe – traitors – no waste. As for rest – believe you not. Tell we will.”

Dormar and Gors began to stride to the door. When Tymos spoke again, they paused, but did not look at the speaker.

“One thing that I learnt talking to Mithas was how much he, as the leader of his tribe, cared for them,” Tymos said evenly. “He was greatly concerned for all the tribes when he had proof of your allies’ duplicity. I am sorry that you care so little for your own people. My sister and I have no wish for innocents to be killed.”

Dormar snorted. “You not prove to us, allies not friends. My own mind, I follow.”

“We do not mindlessly obey our elders, though many think we should. We were taught to see facts and see truth. We give you that same right. We will not force you to believe us.”

Dormar’s second snort was less forceful. Before he began to move on, Kryslie asked, “Who did your allies say they were?”

“Friends,” Gors said loudly, “Outcastes like us. Hated by you – for darkness of eyes.”

“Where did they come from?” Kryslie asked again.

“From far away, to help us, and us help them.”

“I assume that as concerned friends who know their tribal area better than the newcomers, you have watched over them and helped them when they were in trouble?”

“Help they don’t want,” Dormar muttered. He didn’t deny that he watched their activities.

“Government scientists have proven that your allies, who we were unaware of until some months ago when a space craft landed, are sneaking around our world, playing games with our weather, performing acts of sabotage that cause tremors in the ground and cracks in our water

storage basins. You may have noticed that our moisture reserves are much lower than normal for this season. Yes, this will be harming those people that you resent, but it is hurting you and your people as well. Even the storage basin near here is dry.”

From the lack of an immediate retort, Tymos felt that his message had begun to filter through to the two belligerent mutants. He did not attempt to touch their minds to find out.

“What else you ask?” Dorman growled. “Think, we may.”

Kryslie asked several questions with a pause between them.

“Do they treat you with the respect you deserve? Have your allies ever offered to share a meal with you – as friends do? Do they offer to teach you what they know so that you may improve your lives and your knowledge and be even more useful to them?”

“What you ever done for us?” Dorman countered.

“We gave you refreshment when you arrived,” Kryslie said simply.

“That was proper, expected.” Gors told her.

“Of tribesmen or Royals?”

“Perhaps you alright, children, not like Governors. What else you say,” Dorman asked.

Tymos sighed.

“I am concerned for you. We know what your allies are. They look much like us, but they come from another world.”

“What is world?” Dorman asked.

“The world is everywhere where people live. You were born on this one. Your allies were not born here. They came from another world which they destroyed and now they are trying to take ours from us so their people can take it over.”

“No one take my place!” Gors growled.

“They have no right to,” Tymos said with more force. “To take over our world means they will take your homes, take all the homes in the cities, take the palaces for their people, and kill or enslave ours to look after them.”

“Not what they promised.” Jenmar inserted pointedly.

“No, but words are attractive when you are promised what you want. War is coming. The Elders have foreseen it, and are preparing to defend our people.”

“Why would the Governors bother with us?” Jenmar asked. “What care have they done in past?”

Tymos spoke again. “They care because you are Tymoreans. They would help you if you allowed it.”

Dorman’s advisor spoke out suddenly, causing Dorman to glare at him.

“Don’t believe – our allies came from this ‘world’ – said they did.”

Kryslie answered, “Thousands of years ago their ancestors left here, because they would not accept the tenets laid upon them by the Guardians of Peace. Then as now, those people were greedy, taking what they wanted, not caring the cost to others. They have not changed. If their leaders had asked ours for help to save their world, help would have been given...”

“They think they can come here and rule, but if we accept that, then your tribes have an even greater right,” Tymos said. “In spite of the hatred, misunderstanding and lack of trust your tribes have towards us, I recognise that you act according to honour. I can see how your leaders have fought to keep your dignity and respect. You would never have stolen the children of your allies in other tribes and taught them to hate their own kin. My father would never do that to any of you, no matter what you think of him. Yet your allies did that to him.”

Kryslie did not try to hide the tears that came into her eyes. “Our father lost five children. It is bad enough that he mourned them as dead, but to find out that two of them have been trained to hate him, and a third will become like them...”

“You alive. How so?”

“Because,” snapped Tymos, “We grew up on yet another distant world. Away from our kin. We came here less than a cycle of seasons ago.”

“Perhaps that’s why you think different.” Gors said, thoughtfully. “Answer this. Allies say that your power make mutants. That why you no good.”

Kryslie and Tymos felt a flood of information come into their mind, for a moment they were unable to answer. Everything the three Governors knew about the power of the Royal Tymoreans, surfaced in their minds - the result of a deep mind meld. Kryslie quickly sorted the information and began to explain.

“In the history of Tymorea, our world, there have been four types of people. All were descendents of those upon whom the Guardians of Peace bestowed their power.”

“Those like us,” Tymos took over the explanation, “Can sense and use the power and are not harmed by it. We are compelled to do no harm to innocents and use it to bring peace, to help others. The commoners have no trace of this power and cannot sense it or use it and are not affected by it.”

“We not commoners, we mutants,” Dormar crowed. “Allies right, power cause mutants. Royals do it to us.” He smirked at the other mutant leaders.

Kryslie spoke softly. “Dormar, you are right, but you are also wrong.”

“Right I am! Royals...”

“No!” Kryslie interrupted his claim. “We do no harm to innocents. Royal we may be, but Royals have not gone out and turned people into mutants.”

“Huh! Then how it happen?” Dormar insisted.

“The Guardians’ power is the ability to sense and use the power of the planet, this world,” Kryslie explained. “The power is all around us; everywhere. It affects your genetic make up - making you unstable. It gives us abilities and strengths that are greater than the commoners. Two extremes. For those considered Royal, comes the responsibility to use it to help, to heal, to bring peace. We can help stabilise you if you wish.”

“No!” Dormar refused with a visible shudder.

Kryslie shrugged and continued. “The fourth type of people were the ancestors of your allies. The power affected them in a more subtle way. It warped their minds, making them greedy and power hungry. Some of them could use the power to a small degree and did so to influence others, make them obedient slaves.”

Tymos added, “They use the power, but they do not control it. In close proximity to those with already unstable genes, they would make the mutations increase. So that the children don’t turn out like their parents.”

“How prove it?”

Jenmar spoke again, “Even you must have noticed the increase in variations in our children, Gors. And the trickle of strangers from amongst the normal folk, whose children are like us, not them?”

“Could be Royals, doing it, admit it not.”

“Only if our power were not controlled,” Kryslie reiterated. “And only if we deliberately set out to cause harm. We are trained to work for peace, and if we were to be like those who left thousands of years ago, we would have our power removed.”

“If believe you we decide – what promises you make?” Dormar asked suspiciously.

“We can promise help for your tribes. The same power that warps you can be used to stabilise you. It cannot change how you look, but it will give your future children a chance to be more like the norm.” Tymos said immediately.

Dormar sniffed.

“If you come to us for help, we would not turn you down,” Kryslie added. “The Governors have sent healers and teachers to you in the past, only to have them turned away.”

“We would have them send more,” Tymos said. “So you may learn through your own efforts, to improve your life – if that is what you wish. There are metal ores amongst these hills,

which with the right knowledge, you could mine, refine and use to trade for goods you don't have. There are even plants growing in the hills and mountains that are prized for their healing properties – also valuable for trade. Your women could grow these and add to the value of your tribes.”

“What if we stay work with allies?” Gors asked, watching Tymos and Kryslie intently for an answer.

“Then that is your choice. But if some of your tribe do not want to keep doing that, you should let them relocate, allowing them their free choice,” Kryslie accepted.

“Though, in the conflict to come,” Tymos interrupted, “We will protect first those who fight with us, and we will do no harm to those who do not harm us.”

“Your elders, agree they do?”

“They taught us to be what we are. What you want for your tribes, they want for all citizens.”

Dormar and Gors turned and walked back to their seats.

“Think we will. For children of power, not elders.” Dormar agreed.

“Troubles us though, what allies do, if serve them not.” Gors admitted.

“We don't want to put your tribes in danger,” Kryslie said at once. “If you promised to help them, and feel that you still must, there may be a compromise.”

She had the attention of all five mutant leaders. “Was it only the men of your tribe that promised, or you on behalf of all?”

“We help what they want. We hunt, give food, clean, keep people away or catch them, we tend their creatures.”

“Then those of you not needed by allies can choose what they do with their time?”

The mutants nodded thoughtfully, catching onto her idea. Mithas sent a mental comment. “Sly you are.”

“Then, while helping them, you can help us. All we ask for you to do is note what they do and where they go, day by day. You are better hunters and woodsman than they are. I think if you wished to be unseen by them you would be. If you send such information to Mithas, he will get it to us. This will help counter their treachery and when they realise that our spirit won't be broken and attack, we will know where they are and go to remove them.”

Dormar and Gors stared at Mithas and nodded suddenly. They both stood and stalked from the room.

“Do as you ask, they will,” Jenmar assured them. “Pride they have. Test words they will. Tribe of Mithas should leave.”

Mithas sighed. “Already we have. This path has danger. Tell if you would, that tribe of Gors and Dormar should hide before they try to tell on children of Tymoros, High King.”

“Tell I will. Listen they might.”

“One last thing, Leader Jenmar, Leader Faush,” Tymos stated. “We have said to Mithas, and now to all. If you need help from us, send word. If you ask in our name, our kin will help – unconditionally. It is yours by right as Tymorean citizens.”

“If you need help from us, Royal ones, we give – unconditional,” promised, Jenmar's son, one of his advisors.

Kryslie smiled at him. “Then would you guide us to the village of the next tribe beyond yours?”

A new gleam appeared in the deep-set eyes of the scarred craggy face. “Gragin great tracker and scout – honour I will have. Vouch for you I will.”

Kryslie grinned wider. “And you might even teach our guards a thing or two.”

Chapter 4 - Making Allies

“That was a masterful piece of work, Prince Tymos, Princess Kryslie. You convinced the hostile ones to listen and I doubt your father could have done better,” Guardsman Allyn commented when he emerged from the back cave. “But will they really do what you asked?”

“They will, Allyn,” Kryslie told him, meeting his eyes. “And Gragin will lead us to the next group of villages.”

Allyn drew a breath, feeling he needed to speak up. “Your Highnesses, how can they understand what is at stake here? I’m sure those first two who left are going to tell the aliens.”

“You and the others had better get over your prejudice about these people, Allyn. They are uneducated, true, but they are not stupid or simple. I would suggest that they have a better sense of self-preservation than you do. For the tribes to have survived as long as they have – leaders like Dormar and Gors must be good at what they do.” Tymos spoke sharply. “As for telling about us, I have no doubt that they will. However, I bet they didn’t need to be told to send their families away first. I just hope they aren’t killed in the process. Now, when the others return, you may report that our first meeting was a success and we will be proceeding onto the next group of tribes. I assume you will advise us if there were others following the departing mutants?”

“Yes, Prince Tymos.”

“Do you have the maps we requested?” Kryslie asked.

“Yes, Princess. The maps, supplies, radios and satellite phones, the extra clothes and other items are with the horses at the agreed supply point, waiting for your instructions for delivery.”

“Horses! Whose idea was that? We told you that we would be travelling on foot!”

“Captain Vrass suggested that we would travel faster with horses,” Allyn said defensively.

Tymos remarked acidly, “Six mounted travellers are hardly an inconspicuous party, and where will we leave the horses when we need to climb steep trails to get to the mutants’ villages? You were listening when Mithas told us how to get to Krast’s village...”

Allyn reddened. Tymos shook his head in disgust.

“We will wait here for the others. You go and get the maps, and while you are getting them, request six backpacks from Captain Vrass. Then have him report our success to the President.”

“What about the horses?” Allyn asked.

“They will need to be returned to the horse farm, but not immediately,” Kryslie told him, trying to keep sarcasm out of her tone. “We might as well use them to provide some misdirection - just in case we have been spotted by alien scouts.”

“May I ask what you intend, Princess?”

“We will study the maps you bring back here and plan our route,” Kryslie stared at Allyn. “You can return and help look after the horses, and redistribute the supplies and equipment amongst the six packs. Check that Captain Vrass has sent common travelling clothes for us - all of us. If he hasn’t, you will request them. Before we leave, you, Drake, Frest and Juan will lose your uniforms.”

“But...”

“What are you waiting for? We intend to leave as soon as it is dark, with or without you,” Tymos added.

Allyn, still flushed, muttered, “Yes Prince Tymos,” and turned to leave the cave.

“I don’t know why we agreed to have guards,” Kryslie muttered.

“We didn’t exactly agree,” Tymos reminded her. “We just didn’t argue with Father about it. It was an acceptable compromise.”

"I would rather be leaving now," Kryslie admitted. "Dormar will be back at his tribe by evening, and if he gets his tribe moving right away, he'll probably send a message to the aliens first thing in the morning."

"So that was why you had the idea about the horses?"

"I thought if we sent two of our guards, hooded and caped to look anonymous, in the direction of Mount Lorno - anyone who hears what we are up to will assume we are the riders and we have sent the guards out to scout on foot. Like Allyn, they will assume that high-ranking Royals would ride rather than walk. They can send the horses back before they get out of range of the transmitter beam from the farmlands. When we get the map, we can make a rendezvous point and they can return by long-range beam to meet us."

"Mt Lorno is west of here, a good day's ride, and we have to go north to get to Klast's village. That will take us a day and a half on foot," Tymos said thoughtfully. "It should be safe enough to use the trade road tonight - it will be easier going than the back trails Mithas mentioned. We can stop in the clearing where Gragin told us to meet him and wait for the others there. Once we get the map, we can locate it and get the coordinates for the beam."

They stopped talking when they heard Mithas returning.

"Map I have, shows trails and springs," he said, grinning. "Six water skins here, son bringing more. Idea good, they not clink like metal ones."

The pale-skinned boy they had seen when Mithas's tribe had confronted them a week ago, trotted into the cave from the directions of the cavern system.

"Morin he is," Mithas announced. His mind was full of pride for his son. "Too smart for own good too."

The last remark was prompted by the boy giving Tymos, and then Kryslie an insouciant bow.

"How is friend who talks to hoppers?" Morin dared to ask.

"He has recovered," Kryslie assured him. "Where did you see him doing that?"

"When I made Governors help us," he claimed.

"Cheeky whelp," Mithas said, giving his son a pretend cuff to the head.

"And brave to have faced down the fearsome Governors," Kryslie said with a grin. "But I have not forgotten that you made your tribe-kin listen to us."

The boys, pale face flushed, with pleased embarrassment. Then he heard the sounds of three pairs of booted feet coming up the outside path and he moved behind his father. His mind, for he too was telepathic like Mithas, betrayed his dislike of the approaching guards. It also revealed that he had been listening to the discussions that had occurred in the greeting cave.

Tymos relieved Morin of his burden of water skins. "Thank you for your help."

Kryslie took the map from Mithas, glanced at it and then tucked it into an inner pocket of the tunic she wore. Then she took the water skins and passed them to Drake to carry.

Allyn arrived, a little breathless, with the map made by the cartographers at the Royal Estate. "The backpacks should arrive by the time I get back to the supply point," he stated. "The Captain will retrieve the horses and saddle packs after we leave."

Kryslie met her brother's glance, and mentally swore. She caught Morin's cheeky grin, when his head peeked back around Mithas. Tymos took the map and began opening it.

Allyn was already turning around to go back to the supply point, a cul-de-sac further along the valley from the cave.

"Not so fast, Allyn," Kryslie said. "Slight change of plans."

The guardsman turned without making a comment, but his mind was saying, "What stupid idea have they had now?"

"Two of you will take the horses towards Mt Lorno..." Kryslie repeated what she had discussed with her brother.

Tymos gestured for him to look at the map, and he pointed out their intended rendezvous point - letting him read the coordinates for himself. "We should be there by morning. It is where we are meeting Gragin."

Allyn opened his mouth to protest, but Kryslie spoke first.

"We will all go to the supply point. You and the others can change out of your uniforms. The two riders can go off first, and the rest of us will wait an hour before heading for the north trail."

Drake, Frest and Juan were looking at Allyn with varying degrees of unease. It seemed that they considered Allyn their unofficial leader.

Tymos didn't allow them to work up the courage to make an objection. He turned and walked out of the cave, and Kryslie followed a step behind. Mentally, they were thanking Mithas for his help and expressing the hope to meet again. They received in turn amusement at the disgruntlement of the four Guardsmen.

At the bottom of the trail, Tymos retrieved his and his sister's field kit from where they had hidden it earlier in the day. The four guards retrieved their own and followed the High King's heirs in not quite sullen silence. They belatedly recalled that they were meant to be guarding them, and resumed the watchful scanning of their surroundings.

When they arrived at the supply point, two servants came out to meet them, bowing correctly to Tymos and Kryslie.

"Where are the clothes?" Kryslie asked immediately. She was keen to change since she had lived in the current set of clothes for almost a week. The fresh ones she had requested were of a sturdier fabric, and dyed in mottled shades of green and brown. When the servant gave her the feminine form of the camouflage suit, she went behind a screen of scrubby bushes to change. Tymos took his and merely moved behind the horses to do the same. He glanced over the horses' backs, and checked to see that the guardsmen were intending to replace their uniforms. He returned when they were clad in the mottled all-in-one suits and were quietly grumbling. He said nothing, knowing that Kryslie had decided she had had enough of their attitude. She returned carrying a bundle of dirty clothes.

"In case you are too dense to see it - travelling as an anonymous family group is preferable to four splendid guardsmen acting as arrows to point at two juicy targets," she said pointedly. "That being said, I want to show you something."

She took out the map Mithas had given her and spread it out on top of the nearest backpack. "Look at this and tell me if you still think the mutants are ignorant savages. Whoever drew these maps, freehand, without your fancy plotting machines, is a talented person. Look at the detail - every encampment of aliens, mutants, and every place where they have seen aliens 'working'. With information like this, the Governors can plan a strategy to neutralise the aliens and their plots. This is one hundred percent more information than three scout parties got for us."

"And it shows that the aliens have been moving freely all through these mountains," Tymos warned them.

"The aliens won't still be in those places," Drake pointed out.

"Probably not," Tymos agreed. "But it is something we need to keep in mind. It is my contention that few of the alien scouts made it back to their baseship before its emergency blast off. I assume that they will have received orders to rendezvous at some fallback location. That place may be in these hills - we will have to be alert."

"I don't want to become a juicy target," Kryslie reiterated. "With the knowledge of the local mutant tribes, we should be able to avoid any likely places that the aliens might camp."

"The mutants probably helped capture the third party. And you know what happened to them," Allyn stated.

“That was before they learnt the truth about their allies,” Kryslie countered. “So what would you prefer, having all mutants killed on principle, just to deny the aliens their allies? Or to turn the mutants to our side, rid the aliens of allies, without them knowing, and use the mutants’ skills for our purposes?”

Allyn dropped his eyes to the ground.

“Frest, do you agree?” Kryslie insisted. Frest nodded.

“Juan?”

“Well...”

“Weren’t you paying attention to what you were transcribing earlier?”

Juan glanced up in confusion.

“Gragin told you” Kryslie repeated, without needing to refer to the notes, a detailed description of what he had seen an alien doing. “What do you think that alien was up to?”

Juan’s eyes widened, “Why – the bastard was setting explosives at the base of the water storage basin.”

“Exactly,” Kryslie agreed. “So do you agree too, Guardsman Drake?”

He nodded firmly.

“Very good,” Kryslie said quietly. “Now, which of you are going with the horses?”

Kryslie looked at the dead hoppers left by Gragin, and wondered how to cook them. The longer she looked, the less she wanted to eat them. She had never had an aversion to eating meat before, and tonight, if they were to eat at all, it was cooked hopper or dry trail rations. The latter was all she had eaten the previous night as they had travelled, and she preferred something else.

“Frest, you are in charge of the cooking tonight,” Kryslie instructed.

“Princess, I am doing guard duty,” Frest objected. “My duty is to protect you.”

“Well, protect me from my own cooking,” Kryslie said. “Tymos is not exactly useless as a fighter – I bet he could beat you if he tried. He is no more helpless than I am. So give him your weapon, since you didn’t think to request any for us, and cook our meal. I will be looking around here for edible plants and some of that bark that makes a good brew.”

“Please stay in sight, Princess,” Frest begged.

“There was no need for Drake and Juan to be sent after Gragin,” Kryslie admonished.

“Anyway, I have the fire going and a pot of water on to boil. The cups are ready to offer refreshment to our guest or guests.”

“What if this mutant leader sends back a team to capture you?” Frest said.

“Then I will challenge the leader and if I win, he will have to listen to me.”

“What if he wins? You are just in level delta.”

“And you got to what? Beta?” Kryslie asked. “Well, Tymos is already well on the way to being as good a fighter as President Governor Reslic, and I have managed to hold my own with the Governor for over half an hour.”

Frest stared at the slight figure of Kryslie who remarked wryly, “We had him as our personal trainer, remember? Since we came from Earth less than a year ago, we had no choice. Governor Reslic would not let us stay untrained for an instant longer than necessary.”

Kryslie was aware that Guardsman Allyn was listening to the conversation, and ready to try to catch her off guard. She didn’t need to turn to watch his stealthy approach, but as he leapt at her, she turned and deflected his attack. Then before he could roll to his feet, she had disabled him.

Lying on the hard ground with stones poking into his back, Allyn muttered, “I yield,” and Kryslie released the pressure on his arm.

“Now are you convinced? In spite of just reaching level delta, Governor Reslic had me training level alpha students in self-defence before we left the palace. So now, if you don’t mind, I am going to look for edible plants and I will return shortly. I will remain within earshot of the camp.”

Night was well advanced when Gragin returned with another mutant. The stranger was tall and thin. The fire gave enough light to show that his head was completely bald, and that he had a rough trimmed beard growing from his chin. Gragin stopped next to Juan, while his companion kept walking, striding past Tymos and approaching Allyn who stood by the fire. A group of ten other mutants formed a circle around the group.

“I am Krast,” he announced, nodding at Allyn and looking around. The fire glinted off Tymos’s hair and he tensed as Kryslie moved to join him. He saw the reddish glints of light on her hair too.

“You girl. Why you here?” Krast challenged. “This no place for girl.”

Kryslie glided two steps forward and bowed. “Leader Krast, I am Kryslie. May I introduce my brother Tymos?”

Krast reacted to the civility. She was following the mutant’s customs, by which the eldest woman greeted the guests and introduced the men. That she only mentioned Tymos, was a tacit means of revealing his importance over the other men present.

Tymos continued the ritual by offering, “We have prepared some chava. Would you share it with us?”

Kryslie added, “Your attendants may come closer if they wish. There is enough chava for all.”

Krast scrutinised the four Royal guards standing watchful and alert. Their sideways glances proved they were aware of the encircling mutants. As they did not seem to intend making a hostile move, the newcomer turned his attention to his young hosts. Their hair identified them as Royal; only the family of the High King Governor had hair like fire. Yet they were dressed like common travellers, not self important, high status Royals. He himself, had dressed in his newest trousers and tunic of rough-spun hopper fur fabric, and with his vest of tanned hide, trimmed in fur.

“Drink I’ll have. See I do, your guards, disarmed.”

“I know, and they don’t like it,” Kryslie grinned, but warned, “However, they are as dangerous without weapons as they are with.”

Krast grinned. “Gragin say you good. Gragin say you heal father. You healer?”

Tymos answered, “I have some healing skill. Have you someone who is ill or injured?”

Krast grunted. “Gragin say you not like elders. Trust you we can. Tell me why?”

Kryslie caught Allyn’s eye and he began to pour the hot beverage into cups.

Tymos gestured to the clear space around the fire, and sat himself - still facing Krast. He deliberately put himself in the inferior position and waited for Krast to sit before he spoke. Kryslie fetched two cups of chava from Allyn and offered one to Krast and the other to Tymos. She then took a third for herself.

Krast listened, but his eyes darted from Tymos, to Kryslie and to those of his tribesmen that he could see. He stayed silent, and made no move to drink. Kryslie let her brother explain their mission, and gently blew on the surface of her drink to cool it. She sensed that Krast was still not convinced to trust them.

Making more noise than necessary, Kryslie sipped her drink, and Tymos, picking up her reason, paused to take a gulp of his own. With that wordless demonstration, Krast drank his chava in one long swig. When Tymos attempted to finish his in the same manner, he ended up spluttering. Kryslie laughed softly, grinning at her brother, and beside her, Krast chuckled and relaxed.

Tymos grinned and shrugged. “I need practice.”

“Yes, you Royals good. Come to camp of Krast. Come now, sleep with tribe. Never have I had Royal sleep in camp.”

“Will you invite others so we can talk?” Tymos asked.

“I will ask. They can choose.”

“That is acceptable,” Tymos agreed. He stood and gave quiet orders to the four guards. “Finish repacking the gear and douse the fire. Leave no trace of our presence.”

Krast looked satisfied, as he watched the guards obeying their orders. He said nothing until the job was finished. “We check tomorrow,” he promised.

“And tell me if you find a trace,” Tymos asked. “We have no wish to be found by your allies.”

Tymos and Kryslie each took their own travelling packs, thanked Gragin for his help and waited for Krast lead the way to the campsite of his tribe. He had already sent half of his escort ahead.

Krast shrugged a shoulder at Gragin, and the younger man grinned and trotted off into the darkness.

“Good that one gone, daughter kept looking at him. Warn her I will that you not for her.”

Tymos chuckled. “Good. I’m not ready for girls yet. I haven’t finished learning other things.”

Krast chuckled. “Is sister ready for boys? Plenty here.”

“Um, I doubt they’re ready for her,” Tymos said, hearing a scathing comment from Kryslie in his mind. Then at her prompting, asked. “Did you have sickness here?”

Krast turned serious. “How you know?”

“I thought, since you asked if I was healer, that there might be.”

“Yes, sickness there is. Fever. Very hot. But you boy. Can’t go near girls.”

Kryslie spoke up again. “My ability is different to my brothers, but I may be able to tell what to do.”

“You care enough to do for us?”

“Yes. If we want you to think on our words, you will think better without worry about loved ones.”

Krast grunted. “Smart you are. We hurry back to tribe. Will get wife. She take you to girls.”

Krast set a fast pace back to his camp. At first, they followed the wide trail used by traders and their wagons. This was the flattened gravel-paved way they had followed so far. It dipped and rose over the slowly rising hills, and run straight for long stretches. When the road curved around the base of a steeper hill, Krast stopped.

Kryslie and Tymos saw his grin, even though it was dark. They were able to adjust their eyes to see him. They both sensed his approval, for being able to match his pace without being greatly out of breath, and saw his grin widen further when the four guardsmen panted into sight. They were flushed with exertion. To Tymos, with his eyes adjusted, they were man shaped areas of glowing heat.

“Camp not far now. Up hill though. We have drink,” Krast suggested.

Allyn spoke a soft agreement and took his flask from the side of his backpack. Tymos and Kryslie followed suit, noting that Krast and the five other visible mutants did not. Instead, he seemed to be considering the four guardsmen, and waiting for their breathing to return to normal. He glanced approvingly at the two young Royals, as if he had been testing them.

When they set off again, it was at a slower pace, for the hidden side trail led up a steep slope and wound between trees and more undergrowth. Tymos and Kryslie managed it easily, even with their packs. Allyn, Frest, Juan and Drake, found it heavy going. It was not that they were unfit, no palace guard had a chance to become out of condition, but they were not used to climbing hills. Added to that, their packs were bigger since they contained more than just their personal gear. The guards shared the cooking equipment, the emergency rations, the aid kits, and radio communication devices, having refused to let their charges help to spread the extra load.

During the climb, Kryslie sensed the little flashes of life energy that were hoppers cowering from the passing humans. Further away were bigger flashes, probably some of the roaming felines, who would also be avoiding them.

The sense of other people grew stronger and Kryslie knew they were approaching the mutant's village. Yet when they emerged into an open area, it was devoid of structures and populated only by the five mutants who had been their forward scouts. Krast waited for the five rear guards to follow the palace guardsmen into the clearing.

Tymos had time to study the area and share with his sister, the awareness of many more mutants, just out of sight, hidden beyond a thick cluster of trees.

"This is just a meeting place," Kryslie thought at him. "Not all the tribe are convinced yet."

Her thought was prophetic, their group was soon surrounded by men wielding a wicked selection of weapons - some native, some alien and some obviously stolen from Tymorean guards. She heard Allyn suppress an exclamation, but knew he was not going to challenge them.

Krast spoke to one of the circle. "Sel, fetch wife of mine. Guests know healing. Help daughters of Klit."

The atmosphere in the clearing relaxed, as the armed mutants lowered their motley weapons.

"We honoured. We have Royal guests here to help us."

The announcement was received with rough amusement, quiet guffaws, and grunts. The mutants came closer, trying to see what the Royals looked like.

"Move off louts," Krast directed. "We go to village. Awky, Joce, Ferd, go guard the way in."

A small woman, scuttled into the clearing, followed by the mutant who had fetched her. Kryslie was instantly aware of her worry, and went over to her.

"Elder Mother, I am Kryslie. I am not a healer, as such, but I may be able to learn what is causing the girls to be ill."

"I am Bethy, Princess Kryslie, and if you can help we will be in your debt. Come with me."

Kryslie followed the small woman along a path leading into the trees. A short distance further on, the trees thinned to reveal a clearing containing several rough wooden huts. Bethy went directly to the centre one and led the way in. The light was very dim, coming from a travel lamp turned down to just above off. Kryslie could see the two sick girls by the heat radiating from them.

"Light hurts them," the Bethy said, as both apology and warning.

"I can see well enough. How are you treating them?"

"Willowwort and water washes."

Kryslie knew that with the water so scarce, the washes would do little to ease the temperature. She knelt by the nearest girl and placed a hand on her forehead. Her other hand moved over the girl, as if she had one of Xyron's medical scanners in it. Apart from the fever, she sensed nothing. When she repeated the process with the other girl, the cause of her fever was apparent. She sat back on her heels and considered what she had sensed.

"Have you heard of an appendix?" Kryslie asked the woman.

In the darkness, the woman shook her head. "Is it bad?"

"Yes, it is. Are the girls related?"

"Yes, sisters. Born together."

"This one needs a healer and I wish you would let me get her to the palace. Our healers could make her better. However, I can help her sister. She is so close to her twin that she is sharing her fever and pain."

"No leave here," Bethy insisted.

"Okay then, my brother may be able to help, if you let him come. With you and I here, the girls are chaperoned. And there is not enough light to see anything in here and Tymos will not need a light."

"Please, make better. I bring brother."

Kryslie left her hand on the sickest girl, who was very weak and in pain, which was only bearable because of the willowwort. Kryslie noticed a faint improvement, as she continued to touch the girl.

Tymos came quickly. "I don't know what I can do," he thought at Kryslie. "She needs a surgeon."

"We must try," Kryslie murmured. "Just now, the poisons from the appendix are the problem. If you can ease that, I will try to get them to agree to let someone come here."

Kryslie sensed her brother nod.

"Are you their mother?" Kryslie asked Bethy.

"Aunt. Can your brother save her?"

"He is going to do what he can. However, I think at the moment, all he can do is ease the problem and give us time. I know what they usually do in such cases, but I don't know if you will allow it, or trust me enough to arrange it. It will mean bringing a stranger here."

"Stranger perhaps. What he do?"

"He would give girl something to make her sleep. Then he has to cut a slit where her stomach hurts and take out a small thing called the appendix, which is poisoned. They tie off any blood vessels, and then stitch the skin back up. The girl will recover quickly and the stitches come out in a week."

"Boy do what?"

"My brother is not a surgeon. He can help remove poisons, but when he stops, they will come back."

"And her sister?"

"For now, she is not in danger. She is feeling her sister's pain and I can see if the other is better by how she is. Later, I will free her mind from her sister's."

"I want her well. But man, you say, he is Royal? We don't want Royal here."

"I am Royal," Kryslie admitted softly.

"You okay. Krast bring you. Other Royals hunt us."

"Yes, I understand. Stay with niece. I will speak to Klast," Kryslie proposed.

"No! Trust that much, I do not yet," Klast didn't shout, but his mental tone was adamant.

Kryslie looked away from him. She had used every scrap of logic she could think of. What else could she say?

"Klast, what do your people do when they have to remove arrows from their flesh?"

"Pull out, cut out, bandage tight."

"What do you do to clean wound?"

"Pour fermented drink on."

Kryslie sighed, "If you will not accept a man, I know of an excellent woman healer. She is a cousin to Governor Xyron. She could do the operation and your daughter will barely have a scar. It would be better to take your daughter to the palace, but I understand why you don't want that. If I could get this healer to come here, would you let her?"

"Why she come?"

"She would come, because I asked her. Klast, I will tell you what I told Mithas, Jenmar and Faush. As Tymorean citizens, you have the right to ask for help. I know you don't want to ask my elders, but I told those other tribal leaders, that if they need help – they can ask my kin, using my name. Help will be given. Unconditional. Please let me help."

"Woman can come. Not here. Move girl to other place. Niece better not die."

"That is what I want – to save her. I'll send a message."

"Allyn, I want the satellite phone."

"What for, Princess Kryslie? It is late."

“You are not my father, Allyn. I am not trying to call a beau, dammit. If you obstruct our mission one more time – I will send you back to Captain Vrass.”

The phone appeared in Allyn’s hand. Kryslie mentally sighed, and added, “You might as well call the palace for me. I want to speak to Governor Xyron.”

Allyn nodded and made the call. He was relieved when the Governor did not comment on the late hour, though he hoped he would berate Kryslie.

As Kryslie explained her problem, Allyn began to appreciate her strategy. It was a way to prove their promise of help. The tribe would feel the risk was minor. He already suspected that Klast did not expect trouble from a woman.

“Guardsmen, Doctor Thea will be coming here. I need your communicator, so I can transmit the coordinates for the beam. You may have to stay here. Tymos and I will go with the girl. And don’t start protesting.”

Klast allowed two of the guardsmen to accompany the group to the tribe’s special place. He did not say why the place was special, and Allyn was wise enough to warn Juan to ask no questions. Instead, Allyn was answering Klast’s questions about the proposed treatment.

“Usually operations are done in a sterile, that is a germ free, environment. Because we are out in the open here, they came with a tent to keep out things blown by the wind, and they have sterilised it with gamma radiation. All of the people in the tent must wear sterile gowns and gloves. They do not want germs from their hands and clothes to get near the open cut.”

Klast whistled softly. “Would you let this done to your daughter?”

Allyn looked surprised. “Sir, without delay. If appendix burst – you have very little time to get help. I love my daughter.”

Klast nodded, and settled to wait with stoic silence.

Finally, the woman doctor walked from the tent. “Sir, the girl will recover fully. Kryslie brought me here just in time. Tymos was managing to keep the appendix from bursting, but it was all he could do. We can move her back to your village if you are careful not to jolt her.”

“Tymos can help her heal faster,” Kryslie told Thea. She had followed the doctor out and had been assisting her, even without previous experience.

“Prince Tymos needs to recover his strength before he tries any more healing.”

Kryslie felt for her brother’s mind and sensed he was asleep.

“You must leave?” Kryslie asked.

“Yes, my presence is barely tolerated. I know that. Can you look after her? Take the stitches out in five days. Call me if there are problems?”

“Of course, though if Tymos does his bit, the stitches won’t need five days. Thank you for coming. I think you have convinced Klast that we mean what we say, and that Royals are not abominations.”

Thea chuckled. “And I can report that the two of you are disgustingly well – or will be when rested.”

When all signs of the visitor were removed and taken away, Kryslie walked beside the stretcher, her hand just touching the girl. Already she was much better.

Allyn was half supporting a stumbling Tymos, but Kryslie was not concerned about her brother. He had been depleted, but now he was mainly acting. His power levels had come up quickly while he was lying on the ground as the tent was being packed up. Somehow, she guessed the act was for Klast’s benefit. The mutant leader would have no idea of how much energy healing used. It had only seemed that Tymos was sitting and staring. She hoped that Klast understood Thea’s statement. Tymos had saved his daughter’s life, as much as she had.

Kryslie remembered that she had to check on the girl’s twin when she returned. The other should have no fever now, and no pain, but if the two girls were still linked, Kryslie would have

to break it. Still, that could wait until morning. She needed rest too, and though they wouldn't admit it, so did the four guardsmen.

Chapter 5 - Mountain Trap

Tymos stretched his stride to move ahead of the guards. Their presence was a mixed blessing. Yes, they helped with the camp chores, and so did he and Kryslie now they had learnt what to do, but they acted like old women.

Even after four successful meetings, they still distrusted the mutants. He supposed that it was an ingrained problem, and it was a symptom of the whole of the population. It would need massive subtle teaching to change such attitudes, and yet he had no idea how to do it.

Still, he didn't have to deal with that problem; he could broach it to the Governor's for consideration.

As for the guards, they had taught him many practical skills that had not been part of the curriculum to level delta or in the memories they had shared with the Governors. More to the point, their mutant guides had honed those skills.

"Thinking hard, Bro," Kryslie asked softly, catching up to her twin. "Or getting away from the mother hens."

Tymos grinned. "I have been thinking. You know how we wrestled all those would be heroes back at the last camp..."

"And how whacked out we felt later..."

"Yes, though why you prolonged the agony so much I don't know..."

"Yes you do, they don't expect a woman to be as good as a man, so I made myself just good enough to beat them. What's your point?"

"I was expecting to need all night to recover, but I was back at full strength two hours later when those felines attacked the camp."

Kryslie shrugged, "So was I. Come to think of it, you recovered from that healing session quite fast. Thea, who should know such things, thought it would take all night."

"That's what I mean. I didn't notice it last night, but back at Klast's camp, I felt the power flowing into me from the ground."

"I have never heard of that," Kryslie said thoughtfully. "I know we have drawn on the aura before – but we had to initiate it. Nothing else comes to mind right now – that seems to mean that Father and the other Governor's don't know such a thing was possible."

"That's what I thought too," Tymos replied. "They knew enough to recognise that we were planet-sensitive, I think this may be part of that."

"I will think about it," Kryslie said. "The idea has many possible advantages. I think if we can draw such power and feed it to Allyn and the others we could move much faster. The mutants are holding back their speed to theirs."

"And if we have to stop and fight, we won't be so depleted."

"Well, we hope to avoid that..." Kryslie shivered.

Their guide dropped back to speak to them. "Signal point soon. Stop in trees. You come?"

"I'll come," Tymos agreed. "I'll tell our guards."

Their mutant guide flashed a piece of shiny metal across the hill behind them. The signal was answered immediately, and a series of rapid flashes followed. Tymos read the message and mentally translated it from the mutants' shortened version of an old signalling code. Kryslie was aware of its import as soon as he was. She was lower down the hill with the four guards.

"We are being followed," Kryslie said aloud. "Two squads - twenty mounted aliens."

The stiffening of the guards' stance betrayed their increased alertness. They finished their rations and water and stood facing outwards from where Kryslie stood.

She smothered a sigh. Did they still think that she was helpless? No Royal child was helpless by the time their training was finished – but then, technically, she hadn't.

Allyn, moved towards the guard on his right.

"I knew those mutants would tell the aliens about us..." Allyn whispered, not intending for Kryslie to hear.

"That they did, Allyn, is not relevant," Kryslie spoke loud enough to be heard by all the guards. She could see enough of the back of Allyn's neck to know he had blushed scarlet.

His back became rigid.

"The aliens want us back. Quite obviously, they started back where we were last seen. Mithas had gone by then, of course. That trail you left taking the horses towards Mount Lorno, gave us a head start. They wasted three days trying to pick up the trail again. Then, when they backtracked and met Gors and Dormar - they wasted more time searching for their tribes to take vengeance on them. Those two leaders managed to escape and are now fully allied with us."

"Then how did the aliens find us again?" Allyn's voice had a touch of sarcasm. When he turned, his face had returned to its normal hue.

Tymos returned to the group in time to hear the question and added, "Gors and Dormar could not have told where we were headed, and by then, it would be an obvious assumption that we were heading to talk to other tribes. Mithas lived closest to the lowlands, and so if Mount Lorno was a false trail, there is really only one other direction we could have gone - north."

Allyn opened his mouth to retort then closed it. Instead, he spoke formally. "Have you any idea how they found our trail, Prince Tymos?"

"They are still two days behind us," Tymos told him. "They did not go near Klast's tribe or Wiggan's. Can I see the map again?"

Tymos didn't need the map; the terrain shown on it was a vivid picture in his mind. Allyn, however, would probably need it to follow his logic.

With the map opened on the ground, Tymos outlined his theory. The other three guards moved closer to hear and sneak glances at the map.

"Mithas's camp, Klast's, Wiggan's, Lexin's, we are about here. Mount Lorno is here. For the aliens to get here," Tymos pointed to where the aliens were last seen, "from Dormar's land, without passing the other two tribes ..."

"It is a straight line - did one of that last group call them?"

"Unlikely - the mutants don't have long distance communicators, and there are no tribes along that trail - that section is too well used. As you should have noticed, the tribes tend to camp well off the main trails," Kryslie reminded the guards. She saw two of them grimace; no doubt recalling having to crawl to traverse a tunnel path to one camp.

"The aliens may have given them communicators..." Allyn suggested.

"No," Kryslie shook her head. "They may give them their oldest and least useful weapons, but not a means that could unite the scattered and separate tribes. When they work out what we are doing, they will do everything to stop us. A divided society is easier to control than a united one. Come on - we must get moving. We can talk on the way."

Tymos thought at Kryslie, "Will Allyn figure out what else might have given the aliens a fix on where we are?"

Kryslie pictured herself shrugging.

Allyn, running ahead of them stopped, he moved aside and let Tymos draw level with him.

"It couldn't be our communications back to the palace - they are encrypted. No one can break that code."

"If they can or not is not relevant. You are missing a fundamental point ..."

Kryslie moved closer to Allyn. "You are thinking that the aliens are no smarter than the mutants, but they have been observing us, moving amongst us and meddling with our world - all without our knowledge - for twenty years."

"Well the sat-phone signal doesn't always go direct to the satellite. It often has to bounce off the relay points to reach it..." Allyn thought aloud.

“What about the time when the solar panels didn’t recharge the phone batteries ...” Tymos prompted.

“They triangulated the radio signal,” Allyn realised. “So they intercepted sat-phone signal and watched out for other signs. Of course – no commoner uses sat-phones – and very few use radio. They must have realised that someone high ranking was active ...”

“Right! So we have to keep communication to a minimum. When you report next, be very brief. Tell them that we won’t call unless imperative, and get them to look for how the aliens are communicating – they might be tapping into our satellites. They can’t have missed seeing them in orbit.”

Allyn nodded and put on a burst of speed to catch up to the lead guard.

“Word is spreading,” Tymos whispered to Kryslie. “Vik, our guide, told me that the mutants behind us, even those we didn’t speak to directly, are so very innocently misdirecting the aliens. They know we have mutant guides, and are using mutant tricks to hide our trail – but the aliens don’t. Therefore, when the mutants say we are acting like the usual commoners and Royal troops by keeping to main trails – the aliens think it is logical. The mutants send the aliens off to the next tribe – in case we went there – because they quite truthfully hadn’t seen us. The aliens waste time hacking a trail into the camp of a non-existent tribe, or one that had moved away a few days before ... and then can’t find the first tribe again ... while we run quickly along the mutant’s ways, and climb cliffs where the aliens can’t take their horses...”

“Yet they still keep finding us – it can’t be just the radio,” Kryslie expressed her concern. “I’d like to stop all communication for a day or more.”

“It may not be enough. They are two days behind us, and we have to stay at least a day and a half in each village...” Tymos pointed out.

“We need to travel day and night between villages,” Kryslie stated the only option. “If you are right and we can take power from the planet – and can pass it to the others...”

“It should be like healing...” Tymos continued the thought.

“And I should be able to do it too.” Kryslie finished.

“I’ll propose it to Allyn, next rest break,” Tymos offered.

“I have never heard of any such thing, Prince Tymos,” Allyn tried to hide his scepticism. He glanced at the other three guards, but they only shrugged and left him to decide.

“Give us five minutes,” Kryslie requested. “We can sit in a circle...”

Allyn grimaced. “We have no time for childish games, Princess Kryslie.”

“We are NOT children,” Kryslie snapped. Allyn’s expression changed. It was as if he now saw someone else standing in her place.

“We are representatives of the Governor’s,” Tymos said in a tone that Allyn dared not challenge. “We have an imperative mission. And no matter what you think we look like – it is a mission that no one else can do...”

“And the urgency we face now, transcends your feeling of self-importance,” Kryslie’s tone matched her brother’s. “So to keep ahead of the aliens, we need to travel – night and day.”

“We need to sleep!”

“You need to sleep to remove fatigue poisons from your system and regain energy,” Kryslie told him. “What Tymos proposed is a variation of healing – you’ll find you won’t need sleep.”

“What about our guide,” Allyn asked, noting that the slender, dark-skinned man was returning from scouting ahead.

“Our guides can travel much faster than they are. We could keep up with them, but they are holding their pace to yours.”

“We’ll try it,” Guardsman Frest answered for Allyn who seemed to want to keep arguing. “If it doesn’t work, we won’t have lost anything. Besides, Allyn, you’ve said often enough at the end

of the day, that you wished you had some of the spare energy of our guides and the “children” – well, they are offering that to you!”

“Very well, then,” Allyn growled.

If he had never heard of such a thing, Allyn had never felt anything like it either. Even before the five minutes were up, he felt he could run for the rest of the day. His face betrayed his thoughts. Initially, his mouth had dropped open as he felt a cool breeze blowing right into him, then his breathing returned to normal and the twinge in his left leg vanished. He stared in amazement at the young red headed prince. Tymos had his eyes closed, but said, “Shut your mouth, Allyn.”

Kryslie felt him tense. In the circle, sitting with hands joined, Allyn was next to her. She released the hands she was holding and stood up.

“I think we can pick up the pace, Margin,” Kryslie told their guide. The dark man grinned, showing a mouth full of bunched up white teeth.

“Next village, now half day away.”

Deep in the forest, the young alien Commander, Xan, stopped his horse and looked about in frustration. The path onto which the mutants had directed him looked as if it would go no further. Trees had closed in on the path, and others now blocked it. In fact, for the last few miles it had hardly seemed like a path at all. He swore in his native tongue for several minutes and was glad he had told the soldiers to wait for him in the last village. The other times could have been because the mutant camps were so well hidden. But this time ...

“No wonder the Royal Brats are gaining on us so fast!” he thought viciously to himself. “The idiots must be sending us on the wrong trail!”

Xan turned his mount with difficulty and retraced his path, firmly resolved to take his anger out on whichever of the ugly ones that he next encountered. As soon as the path was wide enough, he spurred his mount to a fast trot ducking occasionally to avoid low branches. He pondered as he rode; he had successfully tracked the brats to the city and again while they toured with the High King. Then he had been recalled. Warlord Kellex had sent a squad of soldiers to capture them and he had no longer been needed. Then the brats had escaped with another prisoner, one that had to be a peasant because he had been unaffected by the force field that weakened those with Royal Power. The leader had mentioned a traitor dressed in Aeronite uniform, likely the other of the two peasants that had been travelling with the brats in the latter part of the tour.

The question was - how they got from the Royal camp to the big ship? The peasants had been left behind and there had been nothing faster than horses for transport. Well they had done it somehow and now the Royal brats were moving incredibly fast even without the ugly ones directing him on false trails.

Xan finally returned to where his men were camped. A vague idea was forming in his mind after concluding that there was little chance of catching their quarry from behind. He called a conference of his sub-officers and sent for the aerial maps that his leader had provided. He studied them for a long moment and then summoned one of the junior officers.

“Junok, you have kept a record of our travels, show me on this map where we have been.”

The junior officer in question was older than Xan and he looked embarrassed. He had been laughed at many times for keeping travel records but he sensed no malice in Xan’s eyes and obeyed. Xan may have been promoted rapidly but he was no tyrant.

Marked on Xan’s map were the locations of where the ugly ones were known to congregate. Junok traced with his finger the route they had followed. The brats were systematically visiting villages in a long curving circle.

“In every village they stay a day and a half and somehow they travel incredibly fast, perhaps by air car although I have seen no sign of such. They are keeping ahead of us even with us travelling both night and day and only having two three hour breaks,” Xan stated baldly the facts as he saw them. “We will never catch them from behind. Instead, we will travel to here, where there is a main trail down to the flatlands. We can travel much faster out of the mountains and aim to get here as fast as possible. We will take this other main trail and wait outside of this village. We should reach it a day before the Tymorean brats do. When they arrive, we will attack the village and capture them.”

The experienced soldiers nodded. They could see no flaw with this plan but one of them pointed out what Xan already suspected.

“You are implying that we can no longer trust the ugly ones.”

Xan answered, “I doubt if our superiors ever did fully trust them.”

The soldiers had already rested and were soon ready to ride; Xan did not feel the need for rest, spurred instead by the fear of failing his first command mission.

Tymos and Kryslie approached the northernmost mutant village. Their current guide, Vedric, stopped them with an outstretched arm.

“Wary be,” he said quietly. “Minds of Abbas and Cal, no longer hear.”

“They told you we were expected?” Allyn stated, as he watched Tymos’s face become blank of expression. He was used to that now; the Prince was trying to mindspeak, or listen.

“Told leader Horst, they did,” Vedric confirmed. “Said safe to come on.”

“Everything seems normal,” Tymos mused quietly, but he was frowning. “Krys? Can you pick up anything?”

It was Kryslie’s turn to go blank-faced. She was concentrating on the ambient emotions.

“We are expected,” she confirmed. “Some hostility, but that is understandable.” She too was frowning.

“When did you last reach Abbas or Cal?” Tymos asked Vedric.

“Before last bit of hill.”

Five to ten minutes, Tymos estimated. “How much further to the village?”

“Path in, not far. See bent tree?”

“Is there a way to flank the town?” Tymos proposed, but seeing Vedric’s quizzical look, explained, “Go around it? So we can approach from the opposite direction?”

Vedric merely shook his head.

“Surely they have another way in and out?” Kryslie suggested.

“Do, but from low land. Not from here. This path open right near village.”

Drake, Frest, Juan approached from behind. They had been checking their back trail. Now they waited for Tymos to give directions.

Tymos shared mild unease with Kryslie through the twin bond. Mentally he asked her, “Any sense of aliens or their warped power?” He appeared to be staring at the trail ahead.

She replied the same way, “No, but if they had none, I could not tell them from commoners.”

Of the three rear guards, Tymos asked, “No sign of followers?”

“No, Prince Tymos,” was the confirmation.

There hadn’t been any sign of large numbers of travellers on this trail either.

“Is something wrong?” Allyn asked with concern.

Tymos shrugged off his pack. “Nothing I can point to. Just a feeling.”

He could see Allyn pushing that thought aside.

“Vedric, try reaching your friends again.”

After a long moment, Vedric shrugged.

“I don’t like this sudden silence by our contacts,” Tymos admitted. “So we will leave our packs here for now, out of sight. If all is okay, we can retrieve them later. Take only weapons, and the four of you, activate your personal force screens in stealth mode.”

Vedric drew in a sudden breath as the four guardsmen disappeared from sight, and four packs looked to be being searched, closed up again and moved up behind a rock outcrop.

Allyn’s voice came out of the air. “Will you be armed, Prince Tymos?”

“No, we want to win their trust. We can’t be armed. My fears might be nothing.”

Kryslie had turned her PFS on and now she asked, “What is the layout of this village?”

They all listened intently, well used to translating the odd dialect the mutants used.

Making a decision, which really was the only one to make, Tymos directed, “Frest, Juan, Allyn, go ahead. When the trail opens up, work your way around the outermost edge of the village. Don’t use radios. Just keep note of anything odd that you see in your head.

“You think this is a trap,” Allyn’s disembodied voice stated flatly.

“Treat it like one,” Tymos directed. “I haven’t sensed any aliens, just mutants.”

Kryslie spoke softly, adding a warning. “The aliens have been very tenacious in following us - up until a week ago. Surely, they have figured out what we are doing, and there are very few possible trails to use up here. They might have arranged for reinforcements ahead of us. Assume the worst, and remember that the aliens have stealth capabilities too.”

“Perhaps we should turn back,” Allyn suggested. “We have the majority of the mutant tribes on our side.”

“Are you questioning us again?” Kryslie asked. “We have to do this. We must talk to Horst; try to warn him that his supposed allies are aliens.”

“At least have a weapon on you,” Allyn insisted. “If you think there is danger here...”

“We appreciate that you have orders to keep us safe,” Tymos said evenly. “But you must not forget that we are as capable, or more so, than you are. Approaching without weapons is a strong sign of trust. You and the others are our secret defence. If this is a trap, those who attack will not know our strength. Allyn, you go first and find a place to watch the central open space. See if you spot any dark eyed types. Frest, Juan, you circle the town and do likewise. We will follow in ten minutes.”

The three guards moved off, their passage evident only by where they brushed the leaves of the scrubby trees.

“Vedric, it might be wiser if you stay here,” Kryslie suggested.

“I come,” the guide insisted. “Cal is cousin. Married to tribe of Horst. And weapon I have...”

He pulled out a snub-nosed weapon and showed it to his companions. Tymos reached out his hand, and Vedric passed it over with a feeling of apprehension. He knew that he wasn’t meant to have such things.

Tymos examined the weapon, fiddled with the switches on the side. “It is a stun weapon, but it is low on charge. There is one, possibly two discharges left. And I doubt that any aliens will be affected by it.” He handed the weapon back. “Personally, I think your hunting knife would be of better use.”

When they walked openly and slowly into the village, Tymos and Kryslie saw at once the line of armed mutants blocking their way. Each of the five were solid, misshapen individuals, none of them resembled any of the others, and none of them had even a spark of telepathy.

In each, their stance and body language indicated a readiness to fight.

“We are definitely expected,” Tymos said mentally. “And this is not a friendly welcoming committee. Where are all the other tribes people I sensed before?”

While Tymos concentrated his attention on the five mutants ahead, Kryslie used her mind to search the stone and wood buildings edging the open space.

“There are people in all the buildings - watching from the windows,” she told her brother. “Wondering why they were sent away.”

“Greetings Leader Horst,” Tymos spoke clearly. “We have come to speak with you.”

“Told we were, coming you. Why you come?” The central mutant glared at them as if they were extremely unwelcome.

“Who spoke of us?” Tymos asked. The telepathic mutants, if they had spoken to Horst, would have told him why they were coming.

“Mind you not,” Horst snarled.

One of the others called out, “Royal filth! Torturers, murderers.” The motley collection of weapons took a more deadly looking aim.

Neither Tymos nor Kryslie allowed their neutral expressions to change. They studied the weapons, most were beam projectors that would not harm them through their personal force screen, even if they were fully charged. Several were projectile weapons, but none looked to have been properly maintained.

In part of their minds, they knew where their guards were, and that the guards had weapons aimed at these five mutants.

“We are not armed,” Kryslie spoke quietly, showing them that her hands were empty, by moving them away from her side, palms facing the mutants. “We came on a mission of peace. We ask only that you listen to what we say.”

The mutant in the centre, who was most certainly Horst, since his clothing was less ragged than that of the other four, spat a glob of saliva towards them and stared at Tymos. “Speak then.”

It was obvious by the stand off, that they were not going to be invited into the leader’s hut for this talk and equally obvious that they had already decided against anything that might be said. Still, Tymos knew he had to try to convince them of the dangers of helping the aliens, and the benefits of changing their allegiance. He began the speech he had used at each village, but the mutants merely stared without reaction.

While the mutants were ignoring her as unimportant, Kryslie tried to send a message to the missing Cal and Abbas. She hoped that they had simply been knocked unconscious, and were perhaps waking up again.

Vedric, hovering behind them, began to walk aside.

“You stop!” he was told, and a weapon was aimed at him.

“Me you know! Visit Cal, I will,” Vedric protested, but he stopped and glared at the wielder. “Why you look to shoot me, Waggy?”

“You friend of traitor. You no better than Royal filth. You stay,” Waggy insisted.

In that moment, while Tymos had paused his speech, he and Kryslie both felt a cold breeze - like a single chilly gust. They both instinctively glanced around, saw that Drake was now visible, and saw the beam that felled him.

They knew at once that their force screens were now useless, and drew in energy from the aura, simultaneously sending a warning to Allyn, Frest and Juan and moving closer to Vedric.

“I cannot sense the other guards,” Kryslie thought at her brother.

“Nor I,” Tymos agreed grimly, knowing they were in a perilous position. “It is a trap but where are the aliens?” He adjusted his eyes and looked around. “Ah...their force screens were not affected.”

Kryslie shared the image of orange glowing figures moving closer, moving from between the huts, firing indiscriminately into them as they passed.

To the mutant leader, Horst, Tymos said, “Did your so called allies say they would kill your tribe if you captured us?”

He spoke just as screams and wails began to be heard from the nearby huts, and the thatch of the rooves erupted into flame.

The five mutants reacted to the screams; four of them began to move to the source, two were struck by deadly beams. More mutants began to appear from hiding, completely unaware of the invisible aliens, and thrown into a panic as they watched their kin being mown down by beams of energy that appeared from the air.

For a moment, Tymos reached for his sister’s hand, to join their power. He yelled, in a mental command to the aliens, “Make yourselves seen!”

He forced the command on the otherwise head-blind alien warriors, and they thought they had heard their commander give the order. Over a dozen aliens appeared, having switched off the stealth function of their armour.

Now the mutants were aware of the other intruders, and began to fight back.

Horst saw the carnage, and anger fuelled his bellow. “Power over our enemies promised us, promise broken. Village protect!”

The aliens reacted and began firing beams towards the group in the open centre area. Mutants, having heard their leader, dropped below the line of the alien’s fire and began scrambling away and into cover. A few, already in cover fired their weapons at the aliens, only to see that the beams did not touch the target. Throwing the useless weapons aside, the mutants drew their hunting knives, and picked up anything they might use as a club.

The aliens, confident of the protection of their force shields, advanced in lines, ignoring the mutants, except to fire on any who got in their way.

Tymos, Kryslie, Vedric and the two remaining mutant greeters, had nowhere to run or hide. They were surrounded by aliens.

Kryslie advised, “Inch closer to us and then stay very still. They want my brother and me alive, so they are not aiming at us to kill. We will protect you, but when we tell you to run, run fast!”

“Called Abbas a traitor, I did,” Horst muttered. “Believe I didn’t. But how you protect Horst without weapons?”

“We are not completely helpless,” Kryslie told him, and proof of her statement came within moments. Five of the advancing aliens fired at the group. They meant to kill the mutants, for three beams should have killed them immediately. The other two were aimed to injure the red headed targets.

The aliens flung themselves sideways in disbelief when all five beams were reflected back at them. They switched to projectile weapons and the effect was the same.

Horst and Vedric, and the other two mutants exclaimed in shock and terror both at the ferocity of the attack and the inexplicable defence. Horst then looked at his tribes folk, saw them coming up behind aliens and the aliens going down. However, the deaths were soon noticed and the aliens turned to retaliate.

“We got to hide,” Horst groaned in despair. He yelled a command to his people and was relieved when they began to slip out of sight.

It was stalemate. Aliens now ringed the group in the centre of the village. Half looking at the prisoners, half watching for attacks from behind, since they now knew their fancy force screened armour was not protection against sharp solid metal knives.

“You let them catch you?” Horst asked. “They take you, we safe?”

“Not this time,” Tymos told him. “Take us or not, they will not care to leave your people behind them.”

Vedric confirmed this, by telling of the actions of other aliens towards tribes further south. Horst growled angrily. "Fool I am. Why you try to help us?"

"Because you are Tymorean citizens," Kryslie told him.

"Then what you wait for? Weapons not harm you."

"If we move, you will be unprotected," Kryslie warned them. "When their leader comes, we will keep his attention and you will have a chance to slip away."

Finally, three more aliens approached, the circle of alien armoured figures parted to let them through. Kryslie immediately recognised the central figure, the one in the superior position. He was shorter than his two subordinates were, but seen close up in daylight, he was not the child she had taken him for during her father's Royal Tour. Daringly, she touched his mind lightly.

His thoughts were guarded, but his emotions were not. He was elated at his success in capturing his targets when others had failed, but with it were a mixture of ambivalence and disgust, bordering on nausea.

Tymos as usual, shared what his sister had sensed and spoke aloud as if making an idle comment to her. "With these people, the leaders lead from the rear - last into danger, first into safety."

Chapter 6 - Challenge

From all three of the newcomers, Tymos sensed anger at the insult. The anger was hotter from the two subordinates than from the young commander. The latter spoke haltingly in the main Tymorean dialect.

“It is you we want! If you come with us we will kill no more!”

“What if we don’t come with you?” Kryslie taunted him softly. She had sensed the cause of the nausea. He loathed the killing that had been done by his soldiers. “Do you think that killing more of the ugly ones will make us? It will save us the trouble! All the ugly ones know that we kill their kind!”

To the alien, she seemed utterly serious. He felt that she would as readily kill his warriors as she had implied she would allow mutants to die.

“I am to take you prisoner. If you escape, I am to kill you!” Xan stated his mind full of conflicting thoughts. He was thinking, “They are ruthless, like they want me to be. I cannot be like that.”

Kryslie held the eyes of the alien. Tymos sensed that the leader’s companions were not willing to maintain the deadlock. If their leader did not act decisively now, they would act against him.

Behind him, one of his two lieutenants was muttering. “Cocky whelps, I’d like to show them how an Aeronite fights and teach them to respect their elders.”

Xan knew some of the men in his command resented him for his youth and his promotion to command this mission. He had to end this stalemate. He spoke softly to the men behind him. “Take them.”

The two warriors, fired weapons at Kryslie and Tymos; the beams were reflected back at the weapons, fusing them into a useless lumps of alloy. The aliens dropped the glowing hot metal that must have been felt through their insulated gauntlets. They continued moving forward, convinced by the lack of movement that the captives were too frightened to move.

“You cannot kill us with those weapons,” Kryslie said bluntly.

“Your protections should have been neutralised,” one of the lieutenants swore at her.

“Guess what? They weren’t,” Kryslie warned them.

The two mutants behind her were backing away, glancing left and right for somewhere to go, but the ring of aliens were still between them and freedom. Still, they drew their knives and prepared to fight - almost challenging the aliens that were behind the two Royals.

“We’re going to teach you little runts to respect your elders. And don’t expect any help from those mutant vermin. They’d be wise to keep out of it.”

Neither Tymos nor Kryslie needed to put up a show of preparing to defend themselves. With a quick jerk, they each ripped off their travelling cloak, lest that be used to incapacitate them.

Then they instinctively relaxed their stance to be ready when the Aeronite warriors attacked. In instants, they had evaluated their opponents’ strengths and weaknesses, knew they were overconfident and hindered by their armour. Against that, these two aliens had years of experience, as well as greater weight and reach.

Thinking their targets were unprepared, the Aeronites attacked. They laughed as their quarry moved back two steps, and then roared as the children suddenly sprinted towards them, used their reaching arms as a step to catapult them over their heads and to remove their armour

headpieces on the way. The watchers were enraged at the insult to their superiors and stared intently, hoping to see the Tymorean whelps pulverised.

Tymos and Kryslie were able to turn quickly; their opponents were more cumbersome and turned to find their helmets flying at their faces. The incredible momentum of the heavy helmets was too great to be avoided. The warriors went down, unconscious, with bleeding faces.

While Kryslie checked that the aliens were in fact unconscious, Tymos walked back towards the young leader and faced him squarely.

“Order you remaining warriors to leave the town,” Tymos insisted. “Before more of them die.”

“You are in no position to make demands,” the alien commander countered. “You are surrounded. You have no weapons and the mutants can’t and won’t help you. If you surrender now, I will treat you fairly.”

“Oh no,” Kryslie countered. “You, personally, might mean what you say, but I have no intention of becoming a guest of your Warlord again.”

“You have little time to change your mind. I have summoned reinforcements. They will come and level this village and kill all those who foolishly sided with you.”

“That won’t make you look so good will it?” Tymos suggested. “Having to yell for help.”

He heard Kryslie’s mental voice saying, “He truly doesn’t want to kill us, but he won’t stop his warriors killing here either. It would brand him weak. We have to end this. The mutants here are only safe while all attention is on us. We could fight our way free, but we can’t kill all the aliens before any more mutants are killed.”

Tymos glanced around, Vedric and Horst had moved close again, for the circle of aliens was getting restless. He spoke aloud, but only so Kryslie and the two mutants heard. “The force-screens of the aliens do not protect them from knives if you aim for the joints in the armour.”

Horst chuckled. “What you planning?”

“It’s what I am planning - an offer that this alien won’t dare refuse,” Kryslie said in a low voice. “If you see a chance to run for it - take it.”

“Want knife,” Horst offered. “Give you spare.”

“Give it to Tymos. I won’t need one.”

Horst passed the knife over, so that not even the circle of watchers would realise he had. Then he moved away a pace.

Kryslie made a show of looking the alien leader up and down, as if sizing him up. She stepped away from her brother, glanced at the circle of watchers and spoke to the alien.

“Your subordinates are losing faith in you,” she greeted and from the tensing of the alien’s stance, she knew he was aware of it. “You have to do something. We too have reinforcements coming. That is why we have been playing with you, keeping the attention on us. Most of the mutants have gone, and you will never find them.”

It was a lie, but the alien didn’t know it. “We don’t have to stay now. We could fight our way free, but that would mean a lot more of your warriors will die. Do you want that?”

The low, one-sided conversation Kryslie was having with the alien was having a result. She knew what his superior was like and was predicting his reaction to this situation.

“I’ll offer you a compromise,” Kryslie taunted. “I have no weapon but I will fight you hand to hand. If I win, you will let us go and you will leave the town of the ugly ones.”

Kryslie’s proposal seemed like the chance he desperately needed to end the farce.

“If you lose, you will come with me,” the alien insisted in return.

“Hmm, but we won’t promise not to try to escape later! I will even let you keep wearing that little hat pin at your side.”

Xan felt at his waist for the ornamental dagger that all soldiers of his race wore. He had never used it as a weapon. He considered the proposal.

If he didn't accept the challenge, would his warriors think him a coward? Was it honourable to fight children? He could easily overcome her, didn't she realise that? Those Royals lived a sheltered life until they were adult. There was no way she could have learnt the type of survival fighting that he had.

Yet he had a moment of unease. He had seen what these children had done to his lieutenants. He heard the murmuring of the circle of watchers. He could order them to rush these two children, but he doubted that would do more than give them a chance to run away.

No, he decided, to fail to accept their challenge would mean an end to his career. He must fight and win to retain the loyalty of his remaining men.

He saw his two lieutenants beginning to rouse, and the boy with his back to them. He hoped they would grab the boy, while he fought the girl. The two mutants were too frightened to do anything that might rouse his ire.

Kryslie took a step forward, while Tymos moved the mutants out of the way. She wondered if it had occurred to this young alien commander to wonder why she had proposed the challenge not her brother. Probably not, since he had grasped the seemingly foolish offer. No doubt, he believed he could take her down.

Tymos hid his smile, aware of his sister's musings. He would not make the same mistake in being arrogantly confident, but he knew how well his sister fought, especially unarmed. He had another plan. He saw how intent the watchers were when their superiors were fighting, and they were no less intent now as Kryslie began to circle her opponent. They were waiting to see her get beaten and would never expect his mental attack. Unlike his earlier use of a mental command, when they turned off the stealth function of their armour, this time he was more subtle. He focussed on two watchers and encouraged their minds to be engrossed in the fight. He told the two mutants to escape by running between them. The next nearest watchers saw them coming, and began to move, but they seemed to hear in their minds, "Let them go, they have served their purpose."

Tymos widened his focus to four aliens. He waited until they had returned to watching their leader and gave a subtle signal to Horst and Vedric. They had only run as far as the nearest hut and now come creeping back - right up to two oblivious watchers, and those watchers went down, bleeding from a perfectly aimed knife wounds. The mutants dropped to the ground and began to creep to the next alien watchers, who were also oblivious.

Six aliens died before Tymos sensed the other watchers about to react. He warned the mutants to flee.

Tymos turned his attention back to his sister, seeming to be unaware of the two lieutenants, who were returning to consciousness.

The alien commander had tried to grab Kryslie in his first abrupt rush, and had found himself swung around and sent reeling off-balance. He considered that an amateur's trick, and quickly regained his stability. He knew how easy it was to handle a heavier opponent if the leverage was right. However, he now knew that Kryslie was fast.

They went back to circling, and swaying from side to side, ready to make a rush when they saw an advantage. Tymos knew Kryslie was merely defending herself as she studied her opponent's moves.

With a fierce yell, the alien launched himself at her again, fuelling his anger with the memory of how they had tricked him, and the desperate need to prove his fitness to command this mission. He saw Kryslie begin to edge aside, and rapidly redirected his lunge, expecting to knock her down, or at least off balance. Instead, at the very last instant, she ducked, and he flew over her shoulder. He impacted the ground hard, but rolled immediately and regained his feet.

The look on his face became more set, he would be expecting that trick, and he had plenty of his own from his days as a street brat in one of Aerdna's major cities.

Thinking to mislead his opponent, he dropped into the fighter's crouch again, and began to sway, then when he began to lunge at her again, and he saw her ready to duck, he leapt and kicked out with both feet.

His feet hit something that gave under him, but before he could twist to regain his feet, he felt a firm grip on his ankles and he was swung around like he was a clay disc about to be thrown. His arms flailed out, trying to grab hold of something, but he was just out of reach of the other child and the boy was grinning.

His ankles were released and seconds later, he landed heavily on the ground. Anger forced him up, and adrenalin deadened the pain. He gave up any idea of fighting fairly. The slight red headed girl was stronger than she looked, and someone had trained her well. He rushed at her again, and drove his head into her stomach. He heard her breath forced out as he landed on her. He grabbed her face and intended to bang it on the ground, but he couldn't move it. He raised a fist to strike her unconscious, but his arm was grabbed and held rigidly. Blue eyes stared into his face; brought to his mind all his fears and the sure knowledge that Warlord Kellex would have him whipped, if not killed for failing.

Then before he realised what was happening, the girl tossed him off her, and twisted his arm up behind his back to the point of agony. He lost his footing and found himself face to the dirt, gripped by hands that might have been bands of iron. He could not struggle, or the pain would escalate.

He heard the soft voice next to his ear. "Now, my alien non-friend, will you admit that I beat you? Or do you want to see how you fare when I am not merely defending myself?"

The alien struggled to free his face. "I will kill you!"

Kryslie raised a fist to knock him out, but held the blow.

"Finish him," Tymos told her. "He is no better than these others, who should have stayed unconscious."

"No, bro," Kryslie thought back at her twin. "He hasn't a choice. He has to keep trying but his heart isn't in it."

While her attention seemed to be off him, the alien gave a convulsive heave, and he rolled so the pressure was off his arm. With his other, he tried to draw the deadly sharp ornamental dagger, only to feel the sheath was empty. He looked desperately around, and tried to get free of the girl's grip. He saw his lieutenants, with blood soaking their uniforms, and knew they were dead. He expected to die next, but his captor released him and stood up.

"Looking for this?" Kryslie asked, holding the dagger away from him. She saw he opponent slump back onto the ground, his face seemed to be resigned to imminent death. His mind almost welcomed it. She made no move to use it, but pushed it behind her belt. He dared to begin to sit up. She watched him, but stayed where she was.

The other one, the boy was firing at his men, using weapons he must have taken from his lieutenants. He must have found the EM pulsar too, for his men were going down. Some were running. He made one final desperate grab for his dagger, felt something as hard as steel strike his neck and he welcomed oblivion.

Tymos put his commandeered weapons down. The last of the subordinate aliens had gone beyond the ring of huts.

Kryslie finished frisking her opponent for other weapons, and straightened.

"What should we do with this one?" she asked her brother. "From his uniform, he is a Commander. Though he looks to be little older than we are."

"Tie him up, and leave him. We need to make sure the tribes folk here get away safely. I don't know if he was telling the truth about reinforcements, but I don't want to risk being here if they come. We couldn't survive a bomb dropped on us. The other aliens are fleeing to the north.

They may know of another baselike up there - or that might be where Kellex went. If he landed without being seen the first time, he might have done so again.”

“We need to find it,” Kryslie stated, but she sensed Tymos didn’t agree.

“There is work here for us first. Our coming caused many deaths.”

Horst was running back towards them with a coil of rope. “Many injured non-friends. We guard. What you do? Hang them like they hung Cal and Abbas? And killed your guards?”

Tymos shook his head. “There has been enough death. Tie them up. They can be a message to their kind. Lay the dead non-friends out neatly. What will you do with those of the tribe who died?”

“We dig in forest. It is our way. Kin of dead, already said good-bye. Women and children leaving for Vedric’s village. We take all we can from here.”

“I would question the alien captives, but I do not think there is time for that,” Kryslie said. “Horst, the rest of your people must leave quickly.” She took the rope from Horst and used it to bind the alien commander. She left him where he had finally fallen.

“I’ll look for Allyn, Juan and Frest,” Tymos said quietly. “Can you see to Drake?”

Kryslie nodded, and went over to where Drake lay. Any hope that he may have survived was instantly dashed. There was a hole in his chest that went halfway through him. He had been hit by a disintegrator beam. He had bled very little, for the searing beam had cauterised the flesh. Grief rose within her, but she pushed it deeper into her mind. She needed to find cloth to wrap him in. With this in mind, she went to wards the ring of huts.

Someone else’s grief impinged on her thoughts. She was drawn to the source, and found, in one of the outer ring of huts, a woman kneeling beside a young boy, rocking with silent sobs. The woman was not attractive, nor was the child, but Kryslie saw only the grief. She knelt on the other side of the boy, and felt for a pulse. It was there, but weak. Looking at the boy’s clothes, it was obvious that he had bled a lot. His face was white, clammy and cold. Without asking what had happened, Kryslie drew the aura to her and sent it into the child. She watched as the face regained some colour, and the pulse grew stronger. Then she ran one hand over the child and sensed the head trauma, and sent power to help it reverse. She took a moment to sense what Tymos was doing, knowing he could help more, but he was dealing with Allyn, and the view through his mind showed how he had died. Part of his mind was aware of more aliens approaching.

She considered the boy’s condition. The bleeding wound had closed; the concussion would heal with rest.

“You have to leave here,” Kryslie told the woman. “I have managed to help your child a little. He has a chance now to recover, but you have to leave. More of the aliens will come here and deal harshly with anyone they find.”

The woman realised the improvement in the boy’s condition. He was no longer deathly white.

“You helped him!” she said aloud. “You didn’t kill him. You are Royal, but...”

“Royal, yes, but we are not torturers of murderers,” Kryslie insisted. “No matter what those aliens said.”

“Thanks to you,” the woman said, lifting the boy.

“I am glad to help, but I have dead of my own to tend. Have you spare blankets?”

“There. What you need, take. I will go.”

Kryslie found some coarsely woven blankets and began to return to Drake. Vedric found her.

“I tend Drake. You find other.”

Knowing that Tymos was still busy with Frest, she went to where she had last sensed Juan. She knew what to expect. The back of his head was missing, disintegrated. He would have had no chance of giving a warning. She lifted Juan’s body and carried him to where her brother was.

As she walked, she sent a prayer to the Guardians of Peace, to take the spirits of the dead into their keeping.

Vedric relieved her of her burden and began to wrap him. Tymos stopped him briefly and removed something from around his neck.

Horst stood in the forest where a dozen long holes had been dug between the low trees. Some were being filled in; four were waiting for the bodies of the dead guardsmen.

“Only twelve mutants dead. Many more hurt, but will live. Lots more of unfriends dead. They wait for crows,” Horst told them. “Be worse if not for you. Vedric tell what unfriends do when angry.”

Tymos lay the body of each of their guards in a hole, and the two remaining mutants began to fill it in. Kryslie shared his memories of the four men, and the knowledge that they would have to get word of the deaths back to the palace.

She was aware of Horst trying to get her attention. She glanced at him and saw he carried two saplings. She realised that the other filled holes had newly planted trees.

“They gave life for us. Now they give life to forest.”

As she re-planted the trees, with Tymos planting two more, Kryslie felt tears filling her eyes at the realisation of the beautiful simplicity of the ritual.

Tymos rose from the last planting and spoke to Horst. “Thank you, my friend. I wish we could do more to help you, but we must leave here.”

Horst nodded. “No ill I mean, but rather you hunted away from here.”

“I take no offense,” Tymos assured him. “Please remember what I said. You and your tribe have the same rights as Royals and commoners. If you need help, you just need to ask.”

“Remember I will, Royal as friend,” Horst agreed. “But where must you go? Home?”

“Not yet. If there is another alien base further north, we need to find it.”

“Unfriends come from north, most times. Not safe to go. You alone.”

Kryslie thought at him, “It might be wise to be seen to have gone south. I trust Horst, but if any of his are caught, they might not be able to help telling what they know.”

“Perhaps you are right,” Tymos agreed. “We will go back to where our packs are and head back south. Where is Vedric?”

“Need guide? Vedric think sun shines out of you. But he went back for stuff of cousin. He taking Cal’s wife back to tribe of Keltin. I send him to you.”

Horst walked away, and Tymos looked at his sister. He didn’t need to verbalise his thoughts, or even try to sort them mentally.

“We could not have fought them all,” Kryslie said, wiping her eyes, and sending grief to be put aside for another time. “We are not gods, and this is war even if it has not been declared. All we can do is see what more we can learn about the aliens. If we find this other base, we can send word home.”

“How? The radios and sat phone were destroyed, and I do not think we have the mind-range to contact father from here,” Tymos revealed. “And I think that if we were able to report, we would be ordered back home. No, Reslic would send more guards to bring us back. I am not ready to return yet.”

Kryslie felt the same reluctance. “Lets sort out the stuff from all the packs, there may be personal stuff that should go back to the guard’s families.”

Vedric found them repacking their backpacks. He had a woman with him, and they both had bundles strapped to their back.

“Horst say you go south. You wise.”

“We want it to appear that way - though we will take a different path to the ones you know,” Tymos told him.

“You not plan to hunt more unfriends?” Vedric asked with concern.

“We must,” Tymos insisted. “There has to be another base up here, and we are the only ones available to look for it. The aliens that attacked here were too numerous to be from the group that was following us.”

“Trust you don’t, all of Horst’s tribe,” Vedric stated.

“We had no chance to talk to them and convince them of the truth. Perhaps they realise it now, but many might blame us for bringing death here. And perhaps they are right, but the aliens had no need to kill to find us. We never hid from them.”

Vedric looked at the woman who was with him, as if concerned about her.

The woman said, “Hated you I did. Cal told me of you, and what you claim. He told Horst, but Horst believed aliens. They gave us weapons and told us that you were liars... called Cal a traitor and silenced him.”

Tymos and Kryslie waited while she controlled her grief.

“Hated you, I did, but you helped Morag’s boy. Those others never help us like that. I would help you if can.”

“There is something you could do,” Tymos suggested, glancing at Kryslie to see her nod. “We must get message to father. Could you take package to Mithas?”

“Far is that,” Vedric said thoughtfully. “I promise to bring Shera to my village.”

“We will do it,” Shera, Cal’s widow, said.

Vedric looked at her, sensed her determination and agreed. “What we take?”

Tymos took a cloth wrapped package from his pocket, while Kryslie bundled up the small pile of personal effects she had taken from the guards’ packs.

“Allyn, one of our guards had a wife and two little daughters. Frest had a girlfriend; Juan was his parent’s only child and Drake had many friends. I have their identidisks, and some of their personal things. I have written a message on the cloth. If you can get these to Mithas, he will see that they get back to the Estate.”

Shera took the bundle from them. “We are, it seems, like. You too, have grief.”

Tymos and Kryslie finished sorting through the packs, as a reason to remain until the last of Horst’s tribe had headed south. Then they hid the remaining gear then moved off the track into the thickly growing trees, and used them to cover their trail north. If the aliens knew of the mutant’s trail, they did not want to meet them. They had taken only the barest minimum of equipment in their packs, one change of clothes, and all the remaining dry trail food and water, plus firestarters and the spare knives. The other weapons were low in power and they did not have the time to set up the solar recharger for them. When the food was gone, they would live on what they could scrounge or hunt. They intended to leave no sign of their passage.

Chapter 7 - Alien Spy

The door of the scanner room closed loudly, startling the security men. Two child-sized figures fled down the corridor, turned a corner and vanished. The two Palace security men wasted no time in beginning the pursuit.

“They’ve gone!” one stated the obvious when they saw the second corridor was empty. “They could be any where now. I didn’t see their faces.”

“Nor I,” the other one admitted. “They could have been any of the children.”

“You go back to our post,” the first instructed. “I’ll report to shift leader Kele.”

All the children knew that certain areas of the Royal Estate were off limits to them unless they were accompanied by an adult authority. Such an incident, even if intended merely as mischief, had never occurred before and it was of sufficient importance to be taken directly to the President Governor. Reslic received Kele and the guard in his personal sanctum and he listened closely to the report.

“Children! Could you identify them?”

“No, Your Excellency,” The guard admitted. “We only caught sight of them as they fled. They transmitted out of the building. All we saw were two boys - one blond, one dark. Both were wearing brown trousers and tunics.”

“This is serious,” Reslic admitted, considering the implications.

Children received their transmitters at about nine or ten, after the onset of their power; from thirteen onwards their power became strongest. The older students would still be occupied with study and under supervision. The younger students still in the small lyceum would have finished for the day. Was the incident simply mischief or some kind of unhealthy influence?

“I will make enquiries,” Reslic told Kele. “Warn your guards to alert for any similar incidents there or anywhere else.”

“Yes, Excellency.” Kele nodded, accepting the instruction.

Sudden loud calls broke the peace of the gardens when the older students were released from their afternoon physical activities.

Zacary watched the stream of students – some walked, some ran and some transmitted away. One of the walkers glanced at him, watched him weeding one of the ornamental flowerbeds, and then continued on as if the weeder was of no importance.

Stenn Reslic’s face had shown no expression, but Zacary scowled. He still detested his distant cousin and the mutual antipathy had not diminished in the months since they had last seen each other.

A part of Zacary’s mind said, “He’s the President’s son,” and memories of their dislike for each other flashed through his mind. Then his mind suggested, “He would know a lot of things.”

Zacary thought back at himself, “So what?”

The idea of, “You want to know all you can learn about the Estate,” returned to him. His mind accepted that, even as a very deeply hidden part of it asked, “Why?”

Without considering why, Zacary placed his hoe and rake neatly on the edge of the garden and began to follow Stenn. The part of him that remembered how his cousin had trounced him, tried to tell him to keep away. The main part of his mind wanted to control his detested cousin.

As he walked nearer the President’s palace, Zacary spotted another of the older students, younger than Stenn, and one he already controlled. A ginger haired girl called Naomi. He had several more like her that he had programmed to work for him. He stopped to watch as he saw two of the younger students approach her. One of those was a dark haired boy, Esker. The other was his blond friend, Nera, a clever boy of twelve.

Those two were his best informants since Nera was interested in everything. Both had been pathetically easy to infect too, because they loved the sweets he gave them.

Since they were chatting to Naomi, he edged closer to hear what they were saying. He heard the Observatory mentioned and hid a grin. He had suggested to the boys that the place would be interesting to visit. Naomi seemed to think so too, since she asked questions that elicited more information from them. Finally though, she snapped her fingers and the two boys ran off. Then she turned as if looking for someone.

Zacary moved into her sight and she trotted over to him and gave him a hug and a not so innocent kiss. Even as he enjoyed his position, he glanced around to see if anyone had noticed. Seeing no one watching, he partially freed himself and spoke a few words in an odd language. Naomi dropped her arms and told him everything she had learnt from the younger children.

When she had nothing more to say, Zacary snapped his fingers and she went off, oblivious to having been with him. He grinned to himself. He liked Naomi kissing him, even if she was only fifteen. He liked being able to manipulate people, and considered the idea of trying for something more – but the memory of Stenn Reslic intruded.

“He can wait!” Zacary thought, annoyed. He didn’t want to be noticed looking for his cousin. He knew that Stenn seemed to disappear between the end of lessons and the evening meal and he had no idea of where, yet. Idly Zacary wondered if his cousin had a girl friend and decided to follow him for a while. However, he saw one of the palace guards looking his way, and he dropped back, pretending to study one of the ornamental trees. Realising that he had work to finish, he walked back to it and imagined himself stealing some unknown girl’s favours from Stenn.

Zacary noticed Tobias and a brown haired stranger waiting near the garden when he returned. He studied the stranger, observed the efficiency of movement, and was reminded of Stenn Reslic.

“He is a fighter,” his mind interpreted. Unconsciously, his hand moved to touch a small pocket hyposprayer.

Tobias, never much of a talker, blithely assumed that Zacary must love gardening, because he was doing that job.

“Zac, this is Jonko – friend of mine,” Tobias introduced. “He helped me learn defence and fighting stuff. Said he would help you get back in shape.”

“Hi,” Jonko said in a friendly tone, as he studied the younger man.

“Hello,” Zacary returned cautiously. “I haven’t seen you around before. Where are you from?”

“Off world,” Jonko shrugged. “Been here half a year, near about.”

“What do you do?” Zacary asked.

“Not much yet. They stuck me in lessons.” Jonko shrugged again.

Zacary and Jonko exchanged information while Tobias beamed, pleased that his two friends seemed to like each other. All he had told Jonko was that Zacary was a member of the Peace Corps, but was on medical leave for an injury. Jonko, however was curious about Zacary. He knew the fate of the rest of the Peace Corpsmen who had been with the third scout party. His Guardian, Governor Xyron, had requested he not speak of that knowledge, and Jonko also refrained from mentioning his recent trip away from the Estate and his close friendship with Tymos and Kryslie.

“Peppermint?” Zacary invited after a while. He drew a small paper wrapped package from his pocket.

Jonko accepted one of the offered sweets. Tobias scrunched up his face and blithely said, “No thanks, don’t like them. I’ll leave you two to work things out.”

When Tobias was out of earshot, Zacary began speaking to his new acquaintance. He was soon aware of the look of increasing confusion on Jonko's face - that was the effect of the drugged peppermint, and the hypnotic trance he had imposed. His mind considered how this older student might be useful; he knew already that this common bred yokel had power and was a ward of Governor Xyron. That could be really useful.

"Do you have access to the computer archives?" Zacary asked.

"Yes."

A feeling of glee filled Zacary, and he began to lay commands onto his helpless toy. The first one was, "Do you know where the Tymoreans hide their aircraft?"

"No."

"Next time you look in the archives you will find out and come and tell me," Zacary instructed.

As more questions occurred to him, he added more commands.

Finally, his mind turned back to an earlier subject. "You're in level delta, right?"

"Yes."

"Do you know Stenn Reslic?"

"Yes."

"Has he mentioned me to you?"

"No."

"What about the Prince and Princess? Do you know them too?"

"Yes."

"Do you know where they are?" That question popped into his mind with a sense of urgency.

"No," Jonko answered literally. He did not know their exact current whereabouts.

Zacary felt let down, without knowing exactly why. He glanced around, saw more people walking through the gardens and decided he had spoken to Jonko long enough. He switched back to the odd language he had used to hypnotise Jonko and finished commanding his 'toy' to forget he had spoken to him when he heard certain words, and to come to find him if he heard word of Tymos or Kryslie. Then he snapped his fingers.

Jonko felt his head clear and was relieved that the younger man had not noticed his rude abstraction. "When do you finish work?" he asked Zacary. "I could give you some practice then."

"I finish an hour before the evening meal," Zacary told him. "And I could meet you after I put my tools away, if that would suit you?"

Jonko nodded and Zacary went on, "I really appreciate your offer. I want to get back to duty as soon as I can."

"I'll see you then," Jonko agreed, and with a smile, he turned to trot back to his apartment and didn't hear Zacary's muttered, "Ignorant yokel!"

The mind controlling Zacary sent him the feeling of pleasure at his success in netting such a high-level student. That and recalling all the younger students he had in his control made his enforced leave from the Peace Corps seem less depressing. That had been the only place where he had seemed to be in control of himself, but this...was much better. Now he was in control of others.

That increased his desire to get control of his hated cousin, Stenn. The idea occupied him until he finished his assigned work. Scenarios flitted through his mind; he considered them in the light of what he knew of his cousin and discarded them in turn until he felt he had one that would work. He had to catch his cousin unawares, and that would not be an easy trick. However, he knew how to annoy him, and get him into fighting a mood. Then if he seemed to yield to Stenn, he could offer a peppermint as a peace offering. He knew Stenn liked them and they would taste sweeter to Stenn if he felt he had won.

Then, once the hypno-gen drug acted...he could make Stenn Reslic get into all sorts of trouble.

Jonko saw the grazes on Stenn's face when he entered the nursery after the evening meal. He said nothing until he had closed the door of the playroom behind him.

"What have you been up to?" he challenged his friend.

Stenn rose from where he had been playing with Llaimos and glanced in a convenient mirror.

"Nothing much," he said tersely, and walking to greet his friend. "Where have you been?"

"Your father had more questions for Kel and me," Jonko explained. "We were excused from lessons today. Had any trouble here?"

"No," Stenn said, and he tried to change the subject. "Are Tymos and Kryslie back yet?"

"No, they are off to doing something. Faced down your father and theirs and my Guardian. I thought they were going to be swatted for defying them," Jonko related.

"What happened?" Stenn asked, interested.

"Later," Jonko suggested. He watched in amazement as Llaimos teetered from the floor to his feet and toddled over to cling to Stenn. "What are you going to say when your father notices the obvious? You have been fighting...who won?" Jonko persisted with the subject of his concern.

"I did!" Stenn growled. He leant over to lift Llaimos, and Jonko had to do a double take. The young Prince looked as if he were over a year old.

"I'll stay here tonight," Stenn decided. "By morning it won't be noticeable."

Jonko refrained from disagreeing. By morning, Stenn was likely to have a shiner of a black eye.

"So what was it about?" Jonko urged.

With a growl, Stenn admitted, "I saw that cretin Zacary, acting oozingly sweet with Senna."

"Oh!" Jonko understood, and then sought confirmation. "Zacary?"

"You won't have met him. He went off to join the Peace Corps just before you came."

"Actually, I think I met him today. Tobias introduced us, thinking I might help him get back to fitness and get his skills back up."

"Do yourself a favour, Jon, and keep clear of him," Stenn advised, and he gave his friend a long list of reasons. He then asked, "Did Tymos tell you about the time he got stuck in the caverns?"

"During his test for level delta?" Jonko asked.

"No, before that."

Seeing Jonko shaking his head, Stenn related that incident, finishing with, "Zacary claimed that voices in his head told him to do it. My father had him checked by all sorts of specialists, and the upshot is, he got his power neutralised and he was allowed to join the Peace Corps as consolation."

"He might have changed," Jonko suggested. "Didn't he just get injured?"

"Injured? That's not half of it. Tortured and probably brainwashed – though no one is sure. That's why he is still here – my father doesn't quite trust him but can't figure out why. Zacary will be here at least until Uncle Ty has time to talk to him. Anyway, you had better tell Keleb to keep clear of him too."

"Was he with that group that went missing? And many were found dead?" Jonko suddenly asked.

"Yes, the only survivor we know of," Stenn confirmed. "How did you know about that?"

"How did you know the stuff you said about him?" Jonko countered.

Stenn's answer was muffled as Llaimos chose to give him a hug. He finally managed to say, "Yeah, well, I know."

Jonko shrugged, but smiled. "Yeah, like that."

Keleb had heard that Jonko was giving someone extra practice, and had Zacary pointed out to him during one of their afternoon exercise sessions. Jonko had admitted he found the young man friendly enough and had no reason to dislike him. Stenn had quickly added his own view, and Keleb chose not to take sides on the subject and to make up his own mind. However, he had not gone out of his way to meet this Zacary.

However, the reverse was not true. Zacary was looking for an opportunity to get Keleb alone, since he had noticed he was a friend of both Stenn and Jonko. To prepare for the meeting, he had learnt a lot from the oblivious Jonko - a lot of stuff that amazed him, and he really didn't believe. Those two yokels, Jonko and the other one, were commoners! They had joined the High King's tour, and rescued Tymos and Kryslie from the aliens. Obviously, they were more than they seemed, but not infallible, since the younger yokel had been captured and tortured - the perfect gambit for an initial conversation.

Zacary contrived the 'accidental meeting' and commented, "You're a friend of Jonko, aren't you? I see he is giving you extra practice too."

"Yes," Keleb agreed, suspecting the meeting was contrived, but not wanting to be rude. "He mentioned you. Something about being on medical leave from the Peace Corps?"

"Yeah, and I need to get back in shape. Came out worst in a run in with some aliens. Peppermint?"

"Ah, no thanks," Keleb refused.

Zacary hid his dismay, and commented. "I heard you had a bad time with those aliens too?" He made his voice sound fearful.

Keleb was immediately on the alert. No one except senior palace personnel should know that.

"Aliens? I thought they were brigands," Keleb lied blatantly. "Or so they said. But I am back here now, where it is safe."

Zacary gave a realistic shiver. "I hope so, but I heard they even came here, didn't they?"

Keleb kept to his fabrication. "Some brigands broke in here, but I know my guardian has strengthened the defences since then."

Zacary pretended that he still didn't feel safe. "They were not brigands, they were aliens and they have weapons like nothing I have seen. They could bomb this place and then what would we do?"

Keleb mentally made a note to mention this conversation with his guardian. "You need not worry. If it got to dangerous here - we would all go to Dira."

"How? They could ambush us on the way?"

Only after he had said, "We'd go by long range beam," did Keleb feel he should not have revealed that detail. It was some subtle sense he felt of Zacary's satisfaction and hearing that information and his facial expression being smug rather than relieved.

He wondered why Zacary had not known that, and if it was only because he had never graduated to the large lyceum.

"Look, Zacary, it has been nice to meet a friend of Jonko's, but he is waiting for me in the armoury," Keleb tried to give the young man a hint.

"Yeah, nice," Zacary agreed sourly, as Keleb walked off.

He scowled, and muttered to himself. "Who is he? He's not one of Xyron's get! He doesn't like peppermints, so I can't use him yet."

Thinking then of his new training partner and latest 'toy', he moved to where he could look out for him and was rewarded by seeing Jonko trotting in his direction.

Jonko hurried in the direction of the armoury. He had agreed to meet Keleb there but was running late. He didn't see Zacary until he stepped unexpectedly out from behind a stand of trees and spoke softly.

“You fool Zacary,” Jonko muttered as he was forced to sidestep, but he stopped suddenly as Zacary completed his greeting.

Since he didn’t have to watch his words with Jonko in the trance state, Zacary came directly out with the question that was of immediate importance to him.

“If the Estate was attacked and everyone went to Dira, would the Estate be unprotected?”

Jonko obligingly assured him, “No, my foster father has been increasing the effectiveness of the defensive screens.”

“What is the long range beam?” Zacary tried.

Again, Jonko explained, “It allows us to travel over long distances. We step into its effect and use our transmitters.”

Inwardly Zacary swore, since he could no longer use a transmitter. Yet his mind seemed to gloat at learning this information. “Are Tymos and his sister back yet?”

“No.”

“When will they be back?” Zacary tried, but Jonko only shrugged.

Someone was approaching, so Zacary spoke a few words and snapped his fingers. Jonko took off again at a trot and had no recollection of the meeting.

Once Keleb had walked out of Zacary’s sight, and he was sure he wasn’t being followed, he stopped, needing time to make sense of his empathic feelings about the meeting with Zacary. Something about that young man made him uneasy. It wasn’t the uncomplimentary things that Stenn had said about him, although Sacul had confirmed a lot of those claims, nor was it the fact that Zacary had no Royal Power now and was effectively a commoner. Keleb had met enough commoners on the King’s tour that he did not consider them inferior or dumb. This was something else.

He retraced his steps and stopped where he could unobtrusively watch Zacary. Jonko would understand if he were late. The temporary gardener had not moved far, and was only pretending to rake over the garden bed. In fact, he was watching the path Keleb had used, as if he was expecting someone. The only other person Keleb expected to use that path at this hour was Jonko, as it led to the armoury and the indoor training hall. Right on cue, he saw Jonko trotting into view, and then he saw Zacary step into his friend’s way. He was too far away to hear what Zacary was saying but Jonko was acting strangely. Keleb decided to walk back as silently as possible, but then Jonko began running towards the armoury again. He let Jonko pass his position and then began to run after him.

“Jon! Wait up!” Keleb called out.

Jonko stopped and smiled at his friend. “I thought I was late,” he commented.

Keleb replied casually, “I was held up by Zacary. I had trouble getting away from his questions!”

“What did he want?” Jonko asked curiously.

“He was afraid the aliens would attack us here!”

“He ought to have faith in the Governors,” Jonko answered dropping the subject. “You haven’t heard anything about Tym and Krys?”

“No,” Keleb replied puzzled. Surely Jonko would have mentioned Zacary stopping him.

“I saw you stop running; I thought he had cornered you too,” Keleb mentioned.

“No, I didn’t see him,” Jonko admitted. “Though he does seem to be appearing in all parts of the Estate, doesn’t he?”

Keleb nodded, puzzling over what he had just seen. He would mention the matter to his foster father after his practice session.

Chapter 8 - Firestorm

A light wind ruffled the needles of the surrounding conifers, and it brought the smell of sun-warmed pinesap. Tymos sat on a rocky outcrop, resting and letting the breeze cool him. Nearby, Kryslie was filling a water sack from the trickle spring and using the water that spilled over her hands to wash her face.

The stunted mountain pines grew thickly around the spring, allowing only intermittent shafts of light to reach the ground, and this meant that the alien aircraft overflying the area, would not spot them. Those aircraft were cloaked, and most of the engine noise was muffled, but still audible when they were very close.

The over-flights had been occurring frequently, ever since first light. It did not take an omnipotent mind to deduce that the aliens that had fled from Horst's village had reported the presence of Royals there. The dark orange clad warriors, the subordinates of a second alien Warlord, had run directly back to their baseship - and made it easy for Tymos and Kryslie to track them and find its location.

Now, Tymos and Kryslie were returning south, intending to travel to the lowlands and the nearest city. From there they could request a long-range beam to take them back to the Royal Estate.

At first, they kept off the trail that they had used to reach the crest of the mountain range, so as not to encounter any of the orange clad aliens. Even when they had again descended past the last alien stragglers, they deemed it prudent to keep making their own trail.

Finding the spring had been fortuitous, for none of the mutants' maps had extended that far up into the mountains.

The muted roar of yet another airship, made them look up automatically. They both felt a shiver like a cold breeze; the passing of a sensor scan. So far, the aliens' instruments had not detected them, for surely, if they had, the aircraft would circle trying to be sure, or would have dropped some kind of bomb down onto them.

Tymos stood up, turning his head to listen to the receding noise. "That was a bigger ship than the others," he said softly. He picked up his pack as he added. "And it came from a different direction. I think it is heading for the village."

Kryslie stopped filling the water-skin, and capped it, even though it wasn't full. She had shared her twin's feeling of disquiet.

The village was still six hours away at a fast trot. As it was, in that untravelled part of the mountains, they would have to make their own trail over rocky and broken ground, and force their way through thick tree growth. Kryslie hooked the water skin into her belt, shrugged her pack back on and followed her brother.

"The village is deserted," Kryslie thought at her twin, saving her breath for running.

"It wasn't," Tymos corrected her. His mind envisioned the bound alien commander.

"Surely his men would have returned to help him?" Kryslie proposed. "Obviously not those orange clad ones, but the ones in dark green - Kellex's warriors."

"There was a distinct sense of resentment for that Commander being in charge," Tymos said. "Those two I killed, wanted him to fail. I would bet that one or more of those who ran off, reported the failure to Kellex."

Disquiet blossomed into a full premonition.

Tymos went on. "If Kellex finds out that his Commander challenged us and lost, and we got away..."

“We will be lucky to find him alive,” Kryslie finished the thought. “Do we dare risk cutting through to the main trail?”

“I think we should,” Tymos agreed. “There is still a fair bit of tree cover, and these camouflage outfits should make us hard to spot.”

It took them an hour to reach the main trail, with its view down into the next valley, and they had not gone far along it when they heard a thunderous explosion and felt the ground tremble. Far to the south, a huge orange glare rose above the trees, the top fraying into thick black smoke.

They stopped running, inexplicably aware of the furnace like heat and the insult to the aura, that had occurred many miles away. Around them, the tiny rustlings of birds and creatures and the chirping of insects was replaced by silence.

The impression of destruction was almost overpowering. Kryslie controlled her anger and asked, “Was that simply to finish off one failed commander or did they think we would still be there?”

“It seems an act of spite and it might also have been intended as a warning to the mutants,” Tymos proposed. “If Kellex sent someone there to question that commander, he’d know the mutants were now siding with us.”

“You know,” Kryslie was thoughtful. “I reckon it was Kellex. I doubt that other Warlord would want to draw attention to this area.”

“Hmm. A fire that big would be apparent from the orbital satellites. Xyron will send in a fire control team, and fire bombers,” Kryslie proposed. “We should try to meet up with them.”

“A good idea, if they are on this side of the fire,” Tymos considered. “But a fire that big will spread, and will come uphill faster than down. Do you think we can do anything about it?”

Kryslie considered the idea. “Air is too dry to form clouds,” she confirmed her brother’s realisation.

In their minds they considered all that they had learnt about fire control in classes and from all of the memories received from Governor Xyron’s mind.

“Can we remove the air from the fire?” Tymos suggested, and he didn’t need his sister to veto that idea. Images and ideas from their mind meld with the Governor’s - of smoke coming to them, and air rushing in from beyond the fire to replace the air they attracted. The fire would be pushed towards them even faster.

No other suggestion came to mind, until they began to hear a rumble like thunder, and more tremors shaking the ground. Unlike thunder, the sound was ongoing, and increasing in intensity. A muffled roar assaulted their ears, and a blast of foul smelling wind buffeted them.

“There!” Kryslie pointed upwards at the underside of a huge ship, rising over the crest of the last ridge. It blocked out the sun, throwing their position into deep shadow for almost a minute before it suddenly increased speed, from vertical antigrav thrusters to atmospheric propulsion. It cloaked as it passed over them and disappeared from sight, but the compression wave from the downward thrusters stripped leaves from trees, and brought down huge branches - the effect apparent in a line going downhill. The flames from the fire seemed to spread abruptly as the craft passed over that area.

“There must be something we can do,” Kryslie spoke aloud. “I don’t like the idea of it spreading down to the next nearest mutant villages.”

“No,” Tymos agreed with a shiver. “If we can’t make it rain and we can’t remove the air or fuel ...”

Kryslie wiped her face where she was sweating from the heat she felt. She suddenly considered the sensation. “Tym, we are too far away to actually feel the fire, but the air here is so hot.”

She saw her brother adjusting his eyes, and through his mind, she saw the lines of energy over-lying the scene they saw.

“Heat is energy,” she realised, and the answer was there. “We remove the energy, not the air.”

“Let’s do this,” Tymos urged. “Like we did with the storm.”

He began the process, closing his eyes and seeing only the energy flows. He felt Kryslie link to his mind, and together they sought for the centre of the fire, where the roiling energies were strongest, and the insult to the aura most pronounced. Then they began drawing energy away from there, bringing it slowly towards them. They let it flow through them, and into the ground. They felt hotter and hotter, and the ground under them began to heat up. After a time, the sense of heat receded and Kryslie opened her eyes.

The orange glow was no longer obvious above the nearer trees, and the black smoke was fading to grey. From the changed position of the sun, several hours had passed.

In the distance, over the fires, several aircraft were circling. From them, a cloud of reddish chemical dropped. Tymos relaxed and said, “The fire chemicals have smothered most of the remaining fire. We should head down and try to meet the mopping up team.”

Kryslie took a drink from her half filled water-skin and passed it to her brother. He took it, with a grin of thanks. They both needed it after handling the heat energy.

“That’s all we have,” she warned him. “When that runs out we’ll have to drink the stuff in the gourd tree leaves. The next nearest spring, other than the one where the village was, is down where Vedric’s tribe is camped.”

She didn’t need her brother to comment, for they had already needed to drink from the gourd tree during their travels. The liquid was refreshing, even if slightly astringent, but they both preferred water.

They chose to continue down the main trail, trotting rather than running, with Tymos leading. After travelling about a mile, he stopped abruptly, and used a hand signal to tell her to do the same. His mind voice explained, “I thought I saw movement ahead - man shaped.”

Kryslie didn’t question his precaution. She used her own senses to try to find any trace of aliens. From a distance, most of them were hard to tell from Tymorean commoners, unless they had a trace of power. She was seeking traces of that warped power when she sensed furious malevolence.

Without consulting each other, they both edged into the low growth beside the trail, slipping their packs off, to minimise the disturbance of the leaves. They edged back to the trail, at ground level, to find a vantage to view the path. They used the aura to cover themselves.

From that low vantage, they waited to see if the figure would climb the hill, and pass them. Just when they began to think the figure had moved down towards the fire zone, Kryslie sensed that the inimical mind was very close. Only by adjusting their eyes as they did to see the energy aura, did they see a faint orange glow walk past them, going up the hill.

“His stealth field is almost perfect,” Tymos thought at his sister. “He must be an important alien, to have such protection.”

“More important than a Warlord? When Kellex snuck onto the Royal Estate, his stealth suit wasn’t that good,” Kryslie disagreed. “And I doubt that another Warlord would be skulking around here.”

“He has good mind shields,” Tymos thought at her.

“They don’t block out his emotions. He has just found our tracks on the main trail. I sense elation, and a malicious pleasure.”

“We need to move - we can’t fight him if we can’t see him.”

“What about our packs?”

“Leave them. We might be able to hide in the aura, but he can still trip over us. While he is up the trail, we need to get away. We can’t assume he will follow the tracks very far. If he finds our packs, he will search around here.”

Kryslie sensed her brother was itching to go, and the feeling infected her. She did a brief inventory of what they were each carrying. They had knives, one empty water skin, no food and no spare clothes. The tech weapons they had taken from dead aliens were low on power, and useless weight. They could manage without food bars and clothes if they were going to meet up with the fire team.

“Krys, can you tell what that creature is doing?”

“He is moving away, following our back trail, I think.”

“Okay, we parallel the trail till we get to one of those rock outcrops that cross the trail,” Tymos decided. “And we minimise tracks on the sandy areas.”

They edged backwards from under the low bushes, and Tymos grinned when he saw his sister tear a flexible small branch from one of the bigger ones lying on the ground. “One advantage of that big ship going over. With all the broken branches, our passage will be less noticeable.”

“Hope it is enough. We need to report to President Reslic about this creature. There might be more of them about.”

Kryslie followed her brother, keeping her mind open to the uncontrolled emotions of the invisible alien. Tymos was watching where he was moving, as well as trying to sense the fire control team.

They knew that the team would have to patrol the perimeter of the fire area, so they had two ways they could go - down the trail towards the village, or cut around above it. Since the alien was on the trail, they decided to make their own way around the top of the fire zone.

Knowing that the alien was probably hunting them, they moved with extreme caution, keeping to rocky places, and when they couldn't, Kryslie used the branch to sweep away their tracks.

From their memories of fire control practices, they expected that the fire control team would want to be sure the fire did not reignite and burn down towards settled areas. They would be busy on that front for some days.

Tymos and Kryslie, due to their sensitivity to the aura, knew that the fire was safe. It would probably smoulder for days, especially in the centre, and it had burnt a very large area.

They were gradually moving down hill towards the fire perimeter, even as they were circling above it. Evidence of the fire was apparent with not only the still thick pall of smoke, but with large flakes of ash and half-burnt leaves drifting down. They saw places where another fire might have started, had they not taken the energy from the fire. The actual edge of the burnt area was still several miles down hill, the edge of the chemical treated area would be closer.

As they neared the fire edge, the vegetation grew dryer, as if the fire had sucked all moisture from the trees and plants, making them tinder dry and ready for a spark.

“This whole mountain could have gone up,” Kryslie thought. “I reckon Kellex didn't care if it did.”

“If he knows the mutants have changed allegiance, this is probably his revenge,” Tymos agreed.

Not far onward, the bushes were coated with orange powder. This rubbed off onto their camouflage overalls, mottling the brown and green with orange. They reeked now of the suppressant chemical, but the smell of scorched and burnt wood was getting stronger. A short distance further on, the orange-coated trees gave way to a landscape of black and orange, with stark black tree skeletons poking up from a dense layer of ash. Faint wisps of smoke rose from ash and blackened wood.

With unspoken agreement, they did not enter the blackened area, but continued circling the edge.

Tymos stopped abruptly. Kryslie was aware that something on the ground had caught his attention. She looked down, once she caught up to him and saw the overlapping paw print tracks of one of the huge felines. It had reached that point and been reluctant to go on.

“Fresh,” Tymos thought. “Made since the chemical drop.”

Kryslie moved to where she had a view across the devastated area. Without the trees to block them, she spotted several of the rock out crop landmarks they had used for navigation, only a few days ago. “Perhaps it has a lair in the caves. Maybe cubs too.”

“If so, I hope the cave protected them. We had better keep moving.”

They pushed onward, stopping twice when they found some gourd leaves that were still slightly bloated. Using their knives, they made a nick in the leaf just near where it had joined to a branch. From there, they sucked the remaining liquid from it. There wasn't much, but it soothed their throats, which were parched from the smoke and the rising heat from the fire zone.

In the late afternoon, when the sun was slanting through the blackened trees, they cut across more tracks made by a feline predator. This time though, the cat was tracking injured prey.

Paw marks overlaid, marks made by a boot and a dragging foot. Rough round marks, paralleling the boot prints, suggested the injured person was using a branch as a crutch.

“Blood too.” Kryslie pointed out several drops in the sand where the cat had sniffed, and other smudges on the desiccated bushes crowding the trail.

Tymos back-tracked the boot prints in the direction of the fire. Kryslie followed a short way in the other direction. She stopped at an area of disturbed ground, where it seemed the cat had attacked the injured person.

Tymos joined her. “Who ever that cat was after, came up the hill. The chemical stuff has settled into his tracks.” He studied the scene that Kryslie had found. “No sign of the cat dragging something away. More like someone crawled away.”

Without discussing it, they began to follow the drag marks and blood. In their mind was the thought that it was more likely that the injured person was an alien, and whilst they abhorred the damage the aliens were doing to Tymorea, and had killed some of them, they could not leave this one to die.

Vague ideas of finding the alien, questioning him and taking him back to the Estate warred with the realisation that the alien might not want their help, if it meant being captured and questioned. However, it was worth trying to win an alien over to the Tymorean point of view, and to provoke questions in him about the rightness of the undeclared war.

They climbed up the hill, noting that the amount of blood was increasing, as if the injured alien was moving more slowly.

“If that cat attacked him, something must have scared it off,” Kryslie surmised.

“The explosion, or maybe the fire coming at it,” Tymos guessed. “This alien had his gods watching over him. He obviously couldn't have outrun the fire if we hadn't quelled it.”

“Then he already has one reason to thank us. He must be desperate though, to keep forcing himself onwards, and upwards.”

“Hmm. However, he is heading into the territory of one of those cats. I can smell the cat musk around here, even over the chemical stink.”

“At least we will not smell like something edible,” Kryslie noted, only half in jest.

As dusk was turning the sky darker, Tymos thought at his sister. “There, just ahead.”

They hurried their pace to reach the alien who was still stubbornly trying to crawl along. Without even thinking about it, they adjusted their eyes so they could see in the deepening dark.

As they reached the injured man, definitely an alien from the tatters of his uniform, he tried to push away from them, but he was too weak. He spoke a few pleading sentences in his native language; it was not too dissimilar to some of the older Tymorean dialects. His terror was evident in the fully dilated eyes and rapid breathing.

“Hush,” Kryslie said softly. “Sound carries once it gets dark, and we are still within the range of the big cat. We are not going to hurt you further. We will help you.”

The alien tried to brush away the hand that Tymos was moving slowly and gently down his prone body.

“Don’t move,” Tymos ordered, unconsciously using ‘command’ voice, as he sensed the extent of the alien’s injuries.

“Why didn’t you kill me,” the alien finally pleaded, speaking in the Tymorean dialect. “You killed Loksoon and Rentin. Why did you let me live? I would have let you be killed if you defeated me.”

“Hush,” Kryslie repeated. “I knew you did not like the orders you were following. You were not like those we killed to save our own lives and those of the mutants.”

In her mind, she heard Tymos say, “We will need to clean his wounds, some are already becoming infected.”

She replied in kind, “We have no water, and we are still in the range of one or more of those cats.”

“Stay here with him. I will look for some of the gourd leaves and somewhere safer.” Tymos moved off silently into the night, and the injured alien tried to see where he had gone.

“He is looking for somewhere safer and something to use on your wounds, to stop them festering.”

Kryslie sensed the alien becoming a little less tense as he realised that he was not about to be tortured. Then they both heard low growling and the sound of something big pushing its way through undergrowth.

Xan heard the cat noise, and his mind recalled, too vividly, the tawny beast that had sprung at him and mauled his leg. Every muscle in his body went tense, sending waves of pain through all his hurts. He should have been dead already, four times over. Right then, anticipating the cat mauling him again, he wished he were.

The girl with the soft, gentle voice was kneeling close to him with her hand resting lightly on his shoulder. Part of his mind was pleading, “Holy Jyx, let the cat take the girl, instead of me. It isn’t fair. If I was meant to die, why did you let me live after Villeni finished with me? He left me for dead, my back like bloody meat, an invitation to the scavengers.”

The scavenging canines in the village had been scared off by the branch he swung at them. They slunk off to find easier meat. The feline had found him after he had left the village, when he thought he was safe. It had started to feed on his leg, but the bomb had dropped. That and the scent of fire had scared it off. Xan knew that the bomb was to destroy the village. It was punishment for the mutants, and to finish him, but he had left there. He had forced himself to move, when he should have just given up. He was nameless, a nobody, a disgrace.

The fire had roared up the hill; he had seen the flames through the trees, had begun to suffocate from the smoke, had seen death racing at him, and his mauled leg made trying to run impossible.

However, there had been cool, fresh air down near the dirt, and he had seen the fire stop moving forward. Against all logic, it had died down, stopped burning - leaving smoking ash and blackened trees, and a sharp delineation between desiccated tinder dry trees and dead, burnt ones. It was a miracle. Then a faint breeze had blown from down the hill, clearing the smoke.

Now there was another feline, perhaps even the same one...

He tried to move, to crawl away, and couldn’t. He could not even lift his cheek from the gravelly ground. His body went into a spasm again, reigniting the pain of all his injuries, and elevating it to a higher level of agony. He moaned, though he tried not to make a noise to bring the cat there faster.

Xan felt a gentle hand on his forehead, and seemed to feel that cool ground breeze again. After a few moments, he felt the agony receding.

“Holy Jyx,” his mind thought in awe. The girl was doing something, he didn’t want her to stop, but why did she care? She knew that there were feline predators around, why didn’t she run, and get away from it?

She was one of the hated Tymorean elite, the ones who had refused to help his people. The ones who lived apart on their lofty Estate, and lorded it over the common people. And hadn’t she and her brother left him tied up, and a disgrace to his warrior’s oath?

Thinking of the words Villeni had spoken to him, the final ignominy before he had delivered the punishment Warlord Kellex had ordered for him - they hurt worse than the punishment. He deserved the punishment - deserved the pain.

“Try not to think of anything,” the girl’s voice seemed to say within his head. The pain that had pulsed back, receded again. “If you must think of anything, recall that you are alive, and all that tried to kill you have failed.”

It was a doubtfully positive thought. He had not wanted to die, but what would his life be like, without identity, without friends, and injured on a world of enemies.

His body went rigid, as he heard the louder growl. The cat had found them. He felt the girl remove her hand, but heard, “If you lie still, and be quiet, you will be safe.”

He could not believe her; the cat was walking directly towards him. The furry face and the protruding front fangs, the eyes fixed on him, the mouth opening to roar in triumph. He smelt its fetid breath, the sickeningly strong musky odour.

Then, unbelievably, the girl walked between him and the beast. He could only see her legs, and her hands were beside her, hanging at her sides, and she had no weapon in them.

The oddest of thoughts came into his mind. He had to be hallucinating. Surely she wasn’t talking to the beast. She should be running. Was she mad?

Chapter 9 - Alien Ally

“Seek elsewhere for your food. This one is not for you.”

With amazement that pushed all other thoughts from his mind, Xan saw the girl place her hand on the beast’s snout, and it didn’t try to bite it. It was growling, but also rubbing its head against her hand. It had to be an hallucination, for there was a faint purple glow around the girl’s hand, and it was spreading around the beast. The sound it was making changed to a low continuous rumbling, and then it turned around and disappeared, glow and all, back into the undergrowth.

Xan swallowed hard, feeling extremely nauseous. He felt he would have been sick if he had anything in his belly. Seeing that girl tame that ferocious beast, was more frightening than when she was fighting him, and he had realised how skilled she was.

This, if nothing else, proved to him that the girl and her brother were not the weak, pampered Royal whelps that Kellex had claimed them to be.

He heard the voice of the boy. “There is a rocky area, not far from here. It will provide us with some protection. I have left some of the gourd leaves there. Any trouble?”

“Nothing I couldn’t handle,” the girl claimed.

The boy’s voice spoke again, from right next to him. “Do you think you can walk?”

Once again, Xan tried to move, and couldn’t. Then he heard the girl say, “You told him to Lie Still.”

Odd, the girl’s voice seemed to echo in his head, as the boy’s had when he spoke first.

“Oh, sorry!” the boy spoke, this time without the echo. “I didn’t realise I had done that. I just needed you to be still while I checked you over. You can get up if you want, or I can carry you - but we have to leave.”

Xan felt the weird paralysis evaporate. He could move again. When he tensed his muscles, to push up, the pain in his back erupted once more.

Without asking, the boy lifted him and set him on his good leg. The feeling of the cool breeze, eased the pain, but he had to accept the boy’s tacit offer of help, just to hobble along.

During that next period of travelling, when he had to be carried up some of the steeper parts of the trail, he continued to feel the cool, soothing breeze - even as he marvelled at the strength of the boy. The girl, he knew, was following him, and very so often, he heard a swishing noise. It was like dragging a branch over the ground. He wondered why, she was bothering to wipe out their tracks - the felines used smell to track their prey, not marks in the dirt.

When they arrived at the proposed shelter, some kind of cave, judging from the way the sounds of boots on the rock floor echoed, Xan had no strength left. The boy lowered him to the ground, just before he blacked out.

Tymos looked around his chosen campsite, with an eye to defence. As far as he could tell, this was not a place used by any of the felines. It wasn’t perfect, too open for a cat to use as a lair, but enough to give them shelter from the night-time chill of the mountains.

He sought for his sister’s mind. She was doing a precautionary scouting foray as well as collecting more bloated gourd leaves and some edible wild tubers. He had things to do too, before he began to tend the alien’s wounds.

First, he released the cape that was part of the camouflage gear. When he didn’t need it, it was kept behind him by his belt. Then he released it from the fixings at his shoulders. The material was not the best thing for washing wounds, since it was meant to be waterproof, but it was all he had. All he had to cover the deepest of the wounds too. It would at least, keep dirt out of them. He hoped to heal the worst of the alien’s injuries before they left this place. While he

waited for Kryslie to return, he used his knife to begin cutting strips from the bottom of the cape.

Kryslie returned and placed her foraging with his. She spoke mentally. "I hoped to find some hoppers around here, but I couldn't sense any at all. And nothing of that freaky other alien either, thank the Guardians. How is he?"

Tymos glanced at the injured alien. "As good as unconscious, thankfully. I think he still expects us to start torturing him for information. Though if he were awake, just having to use the stuff in the leaves to clean his wounds would seem like torture. If we have to pain block for him, that will be less energy we have for healing him."

"While I was scouting, I found a place where I could look down the hill. Even though the fire is out, the heat energy glow is still blindingly bright. We should be able to draw energy from there, to heal him and to heat the air here while we work."

"Can you try feeding energy to me? This will take a lot ..." Tymos paused. "You know, our companion here was right about one thing. He should have died a few times over today. I am amazed that he could even get as far as he did."

"I picked that up too," Kryslie agreed. "I think the Guardians of Peace led us to him, and perhaps even that they protected him."

"Even from that cat? Our companion here was more than impressed by that. You must have picked up a lot from Keleb about handling animals."

"Even though empathy with animals is Keleb's special talent, I don't think that he could have convinced that cat to go away. I think it felt the aura in me, as if I was part of the forest. From my point of view, it took a lot of concentration to convince it that the nice, juicy, and bloody morsel it smelt wasn't there. So shall we make that a fact? No bloody morsel?"

Without further discussion, they began. First, they eased the tattered clothing off the alien, needing to use some of the precious liquid to loosen crusted blood where it stuck cloth to the wound. Then, with Kryslie's eyes adjusted to see in the dark, and Tymos making his able to see the injuries to the alien's flesh, they began the task of healing.

Kryslie drew on the aura, bringing heat energy away from the fire, to take the chill from the ambient air, and to fill her reserves - ready to share it with her twin.

"Kellex must have been livid," Tymos thought at his sister with controlled anger. "Who ever he sent to question this one, must have intended to whip him to death. And for what? Failing to make us docile prisoners? To kill us? Kellex is as guilty of that as this one. There can't be much skin left on his back. Even the mauling that feline gave him is less in terms of damage."

Kryslie sensed the full extent of this alien's injuries, and shared her brother's outrage. This being, who was their enemy, simply because he had been born on a distant world, had done his duty as best he could - despite finding the orders abhorrent, and this was his reward.

She sent energy in a steady stream to her brother, who was willing the wounds to close, and new skin to grow. She did not forget the freaky alien that they had encountered. That one was in the mountains for a reason. It might a saboteur, but she thought that unlikely. An agent, protected that well, would have a more important mission. Perhaps he was a back up, in case this alien had failed. He had certainly been elated by finding their packs. Could he have known they belonged to Tymos and herself, rather than to two fleeing mutants? What would that creature do if he found them with this alien?

What ever it was doing, she would be alert for the feel of that mind. She hadn't heard actual thoughts from him, just the malevolent emotion. That one would kill with out the slightest hint of compunction or regret.

After several hours, Tymos sat back, and eased his stiff muscles. Kryslie took the remains of the cloak and covered the alien's nakedness. She took off her own cloak and made it a second layer.

"The back is a lot better," Tymos said mentally. "The leg has muscle damage. I might be able to do something, but it would take a lot of time and concentration. I have Xyron's memories of how it needs to be treated, and surgery is the best option, but I have no way to do anything helpful, here."

"Let him rest for a bit. His body can continue the healing," Kryslie suggested, and she moved to where she had dumped her foraged roots. She tossed a white one at her brother and began to eat one herself.

As Tymos ate, he thought, "If we had kept our packs, I could have loaned our patient a change of clothes. I wouldn't want to put his back on, but it is all he has."

"He can use my cloak over his tatters," Kryslie suggested. "At least it will help him keep his dignity."

Xan awoke when the darkness in the cave had begun to lighten. He wondered where he was, and without thinking, began to sit up. He realised first, as his covering began to slip, that he was completely undressed. He grabbed the covering and held it around him. As he finished sitting up, he became aware of the hard ground beneath him, the fresh cool air, with only the faintest trace of smoke. His right leg twinged, and he realised that it was firmly bound up. He looked around him, and saw someone lying asleep nearby.

Memories returned with a vengeance, making him tense with fear. He felt twinges of pain in his back, and recalled the agony of the previous day, but that did not return. He jerked around, looking for the other Tymorean, and saw a figure silhouetted in the cave opening. Instead of a return of terror, and the knots in his stomach, he felt and heard his stomach rumble with hunger. He realised then, that his mouth was as dry as the ground he sat on.

The rumble from his belly was enough to get the attention of the figure in the entrance. That one came closer, stopped and picked up something from the ground, and finally crouched a polite distance from him.

"You'll be needing a drink," the boy said, as if stating a fact. "It is a side effect of the healing that I did last night. We don't have water, but we do have some gourd leaves. They contain a liquid that is a bit tart, but which will reduce your thirst."

Xan watched as the boy took out a knife, nicked the leaf near the stem, and passed the leaf carefully to him.

"Suck where I have cut it."

Since to free one hand caused the covering to slip, Xan had to reorganise the makeshift covering. When he took the leaf, the boy helped him position it.

The first suck brought a rush of liquid, and Xan fought the compulsion to spit it out, even though it felt like it was burning his mouth. However, the initial sensation passed, and he greedily sucked all the moisture he could from the leaf. It really did help cure his thirst.

He handed the limp leaf back to the boy, and was offered an odd-looking orange root.

"Wild carrot," the boy said, as he munched on another like it.

Since Xan's gut felt like it was trying to eat itself, he took a bite from the root. It was crisp, juicy, and delicious. The boy passed him a second root when the first was finished, and then walked over to where his sister still slept.

"Wake up lazy bones," he said softly, nudging her with his foot.

Xan saw her wake immediately, heard her growl a rude comment at him, before rising and walking from the cave.

"Are you feeling better now?" Tymos asked.

"Still hungry," Xan dared to admit. He hoped his Tymorean accent was understandable.

“Yeah, I guess you are, and I am pleased to hear it, but we will have to scrounge more as we go on. I meant, how do your injuries feel? We washed all the open wounds, and bandaged your leg to provide some support. Do you want to see if you can walk?”

“Yes, but...”

“Oh! Yes, I guess getting you dressed again would be a good idea. You’ll have to put that apology for a uniform back on, but Kryl says you can keep the cape.”

Xan felt his face heat up with embarrassment. The boy seemed to sense it.

“We needed to treat your wounds, and really, it was better done while you were out to it. It was dark, okay?”

“I...” Xan tried to find the words to apologise.

“Forget it, all right.” Tymos suggested. “Let me help you dress before Kryl comes back.”

Xan tried to stand by himself, while Tymos fetched the discarded Aeronite uniform, but he sank back onto the ground. He did not have the strength and the faintest pressure on the injured leg, made it hurt.

“Let me look at that leg again,” Tymos directed, with a faint sigh. He helped Xan straighten his leg, and once again ran his hand over the area of cat bite.

Xan watched, wondering what this boy was doing, and then he became aware of the odd purple glow about the boy’s hand. It was like the glow about the girl, when she had tamed the cat.

The boy removed his hand and collapsed into a sitting position on the ground.

“You could see that glow?”

“Huh? Yes...”

The boy’s face took on a blank expression for a few moments, and then he said, “Kryslie and I are heading to the nearest city. You can choose to come with us, or you can continue heading wherever you were going.”

Xan’s jaw dropped in astonishment. They were going to let him go? Just like that? The mystery of the odd purple glow went right out of his head. Then reality intruded, and he remembered that he had no weapons, no food, he couldn’t even walk. He would be easy prey for any of the other felines. Were they regretting helping him?

Then his warrior training argued, “It is a warrior’s duty to escape if captured.” Escape? Escape where? If he returned to Kellex’s ship - he would be killed on sight. They called him a traitor.

Perhaps he was - since he could not accept these two young Royals as enemies. They rescued him, treated his wounds, and protected him from wild animals...

Aloud, he asked, when he could find the words, “Why? Why help me, just to let me go...I’m in no condition to protect myself. Are you regretting helping me?”

“No!” Tymos said immediately. “Nor do we consider you, personally, an enemy. We abhor what your superiors are trying to do to Tymorea, and how they are waging an undeclared war with us. We would willingly accuse Warlord Kellex for stealing or killing, our father’s other children. But you, we have no issue with.”

“Surely, you would want to question me...” Xan proposed, but his face paled when he said it. He both feared the idea, because his superiors claimed that Tymoreans tortured their enemies to get information, and wanted a reason to stay protected by these young Royals.

Once again, Tymos stopped his swirling doubts, fears and feelings of low self worth. “Let me help you get dressed. We have to leave here, and keep moving. You are welcome to stay with us, and to leave whenever you wish. I know you have been taught many things about us that are not true, and I don’t have the time or the means to straighten all the misconceptions out.”

Xan was silent, as Tymos helped him to dress in his tattered uniform, and helped to arrange the cape to cover most of the gaping holes. As soon as they finished, Kryslie reappeared, as if she had been keeping tactfully out of the way.

"I will come with you," Xan said softly. His mind was saying, "For now," and part of it was telling him he was indeed a traitor, even though his people had cast him out, and he now owed them nothing. Another part was deeply afraid for all his kin back on Aerdna, and for having no way to help them.

Kryslie approached with one of the bloated gourd leaves, and offered it to him as she said, "My name is Kryslie, and I am sure you know who I am, but you can leave off the title out here. My brother is Tymos. We haven't had a chance until now to ask your name."

"I have no name," Xan said. He saw the girl glance at her brother.

"Why not?" Kryslie asked, quietly, not challengingly, as if she already knew and wanted him to admit it.

"Because my own people cast me out as a traitor. They made me nameless..." There, Xan thought, now they know I cannot call on powerful allies to help me. I have invited them to feel free to torture me.

He looked at the ground, feeling hopeless and worthless. He felt Kryslie's hand take his.

"Before you became a warrior, and a chattel of your Warlord, what did your parents call you?"

He looked up and met eyes of a piercingly clear blue. Without thinking, he said, "Xan."

"Then I give you the name, Xan. I give it to a person of great courage, great determination, and great honour. To someone who did not even consider the easier option of dying, and who remains true to his values, even when his fellows see only failure."

Kryslie took the little warrior's dagger from her belt and presented it hilt first to Xan. "This is yours, I believe?"

Xan stared at the dagger, and thought of all that it had once meant. Finally, he reached out and took it. He couldn't find the words to say thanks, but he saw a warm smile on Kryslie's face, full of welcome and friendship. He had the fleeting thought that she knew exactly what was going through his mind.

"Xan, we need to get going, and you are not going to be able to travel on that leg - would you object to us carrying you?"

His thoughts were jerked from introspection once again. "I'd be too heavy."

Now Tymos grinned. "Friends don't weigh too much."

Xan felt foolish, as he was carried like a young child clinging to a parent's back. Yet he wasn't sorry to be leaving the area where so much pain had been inflicted on him. He was also amazed by how strong the Tymorean boy was, and how fast he moved over the open areas of the trail.

For most of the time, he didn't see the girl. She had set off after her brother, though several times, she had appeared carrying gourd leaves and more of the tasty orange roots. At those times, Tymos had eased him to the ground and helped him to and from the cover of bushes to relieve himself.

At the third break to eat and drink, Xan dared to admit, "I did not realise that Tymoreans were so strong."

Kryslie merely answered with, "There are a lot of things you and the other Aeronites don't know."

"Kellex was surprised when jet aircraft came searching for you," Xan offered unexpectedly. "He didn't admit it, except to say he didn't know where they had come from."

"Is that why he spooked and blasted off so fast, and incinerated the Tymoreans he had prisoner?" Tymos demanded.

Xan saw the implacable look on Tymos's face and wanted to shrink away. "He had made them practically mindless before that, and ordered them dead before dumping them."

Tymos's expression hardened further, until Kryslie said quietly, "He will be judged..."

"Sorry, Xan. I am not angry with you. You are not to blame for Kellex's atrocities."

Having someone apologise to him, was unexpected. The voice of Kellex seemed to whisper in his ear that these Tymoreans were being nice to him, just to tempt him into treason. He still half believed that. He glanced at his companions, trying to sense if this was true, when he became aware that they were not even paying attention to him.

Kryslie was walking around the small clearing, pausing to listen, and then moving again. Tymos, who had been squatting nearby, and eating a root, was now on his feet, also seeming to listen.

An unexpected spasm of terror went through him as Tymos came to him and spoke abruptly. "Come on. Hop up."

"What's the matter?" Xan asked to Tymos's back view, but he got no answer. Tymos began trotting along the barely visible game track, concentrating on where he was going.

In fact, Tymos was also communicating with Kryslie, who was again obscuring their back trail.

"I don't know how he found our trail," Kryslie was thinking at her twin. "And I can't tell you how close he is. He has to be able to travel as fast as we can. If we knew this area better, we could skip ahead using our transmitters."

"I checked his clothing and didn't find any kind of locator," Tymos thought back.

"Maybe that little dagger?" Kryslie proposed the idea.

"Well, it is some kind of ceremonial thing that he got when he graduated as a warrior," Tymos pointed out, having seen a lot of things in Xan's mind while they talked. "Though why would they have a locator in it, and is it specific to Xan if they did?" He sensed his twin's mental shrug.

"I would suggest ditching it, but his self-esteem is so fragile right now. Having me return it to him, was all that stopped him death wishing himself."

"No, let him keep it," Tymos decided. "We ought to be able to keep up the pace longer than any Aeronite. We can draw on the aura, and see well enough in the dark, so I suggest we push on through the night and take a brief rest halt near dawn. We need to get distance from that creature right now, but we also need to find out if Xan knows who it is, and what he can tell us about him."

Kryslie took a turn at carrying Xan during the night, freeing Tymos to scout ahead and behind. He had seen the energy aura of the follower, and would see it clearer in the dark. She was relying on sensing the terrible malevolence of the creature's mind.

Near midnight, she thought at Tymos, "I think he has stopped to rest. I haven't felt that mind for nearly an hour."

"We will keep going. We should be over the next ridge by dawn. When we're closer, I will scout ahead for a cave, and we can hide our trail."

Tymos found a suitable cave as the sun was just rising. He sent an image of the location to his sister, and moments later, she arrived beside him. Xan stirred from sleep as she eased him to the ground.

"We're a couple of miles off the trail," Tymos said quietly.

Kryslie collapsed beside Xan, and let the energy of the aura replace what she had used. "If he finds us again, there must be a locator. I haven't even felt the spy planes going over."

"We'll see, but I'm going to look for edibles, and more gourd leaves. I will try not to be gone long, but I didn't see any on the way here."

"I'll warn you if I sense anything," Kryslie promised. "And I will look to see if I can create a spring. If I have guessed where we are closely enough, it might be possible. We are near one of the storage basins."

Kryslie stood up after a while and began to circle the inner walls of the cave, touching it with her hand. Looking at her from where he had been placed, Xan could not think what she might be doing. His mind was still full of the realisation that it had been a mere girl carrying him while he had slept.

“What are you doing,” Xan finally decided to ask.

“Trying to find if I can make a spring here,” Kryslie answered immediately. “There is a fault line running from here, towards the storage basin. Or it might be a crack caused by sabotage.”

Xan cringed. He knew that the water basins had been targets. He had not understood the logic of it, because if his people had succeeded in gaining control of Tymorea, they would need the reserves.

He heard his thought verbalised by Tymos, returning with some wild roots, and he found himself blurting, “They think our weather control techniques will bring more rainfall here.”

He found two sets of piercing blue eyes, staring at him, then Kryslie turned back to the rock face and Tymos said, “We’ll rest for another hour and go on.”

“Have I said something to anger you?” Xan asked, looking at Kryslie.

“No, we already know that your scientists are playing with the weather, and doing many other nasty things to upset the ecology. It’s just...” Kryslie stopped, and seemed to look with sympathy at Xan. “Surely the Aeronites who are skulking around doing damage, are suffering from the lack of moisture too.”

“And we really need to talk to you. There are probably lots of things you know, that we need to learn.” Tymos said.

Xan felt his stomach churn, there it was - they wanted him to betray his people, tell them all the Aeronite secrets. Tymos’s next words were so unexpected that they caused all colour to drain from his face.

“Someone is following us, wearing a stealth suit that is way better than the one Kellex used when he tried to take us from the Estate. We can only see him when he is close.”

“You should leave me, get away...”

“No way,” Kryslie objected immediately. “It occurred to me that your dagger might have a locator in it. May we look at it?”

Xan felt for where he had tied it by fabric strips to the makeshift belt. The request stopped his spiral of terror and worthlessness. “I have never even heard a suggestion of anything like that.”

He drew it out, studied it, and then put it in Tymos’s outstretched hand.

The action reminded him too vividly, of when Villeni had demanded he surrender it. An order that was the ultimate in humiliation for an Aeronite warrior.

He looked away from the Tymorean as he felt his expression about to betray him, but a flash of light drew his attention back to Tymos. The dagger was between the boy’s palms, and they were once again glowing purple. However, that was not what caught his attention - it was the oddness of the boy’s eyes. He did not have a chance to look closely, for Tymos said, “It seems alright,” and the eyes were normal again.

Xan accepted his knife back, and watched Tymos join his sister in the cave by one particular spot. From the sounds, she was using her knife to dig into a crack in the rock. He heard them speaking in soft whispers, and sighed. It was probably fair for them not to trust him.

“I was right,” Kryslie murmured. “Did you neutralise it?”

“I think so. Need some help?”

“The water is close. I think I only need to make this crack bigger.”

“We don’t want to make it permanent, just to last long enough for us to use,” Tymos suggested, putting his hand where Kryslie had been digging.

Putting her knife away, Kryslie place her hand over her brother's and linked their minds. Slowly at first, and then in a steady trickle, water spurted from the crack. They both cupped their hands to catch enough to drink. When they had drunk their fill, Tymos helped Xan over to have his turn.

When he finished, he hopped around on his good leg, and nearly lost his balance when he saw Kryslie sitting on a nearby rock outcrop, watching him. Tymos had moved quietly away, and so Xan had little choice but to sit on another rock.

"What happened to you? After we left Horst's village?" Kryslie asked.

"Why do you care? You defeated me. You should have killed me."

"We are not the ruthless despots you seem to expect us to be, Xan. We merely tied you up so that we had time to help the villagers tend their dead, and get away. We expected your men to return and help you."

Xan shrugged. "A couple did. We spent the night in an empty hut. Two others went off with the others to report to Kellex."

"Ah," Kryslie sighed as if she had guessed right. "Did he come himself?"

"No, he sent Villeni, his deputy." Xan shuddered at the memory. "Though he wasn't the first to arrive. Warlord Zorrec sent one of his senior commanders to relieve me and take over my mission."

"Which was no doubt to find and capture my brother, and myself," Kryslie nodded, and saw Xan's nod of confirmation. "So Zorrec's men wear those dark orange uniforms. I suppose the Commander of that lot stayed out of the fight?" Another nod. "So, tell me about this senior commander."

"Kek," Xan spat out, as his mind recalled every dreadful thing he had been called. "...incompetent, useless, cowardly, traitorous, failure..."

Kryslie leant over, and took his hand. She felt how the words had been forced into Xan's mind, to lie there and fester. What ever else Kek was, he had a trace of mind gifts.

"He asked me about you. He didn't believe what I told him. He said you could not have won if I had not let you."

"Well, I am glad he did not believe you. He will underestimate us."

"Kek said he knows how you Royal Tymoreans will react," Xan warned.

"Maybe he does," Kryslie agreed amicably. "But Tymos and I are not your regular Royal offspring."

"Is it true that you grew up off-world?" Xan blurted.

"However did you hear that?" Kryslie hid her interest in his answer, by keeping her voice light.

"I heard Kellex talking to one of his pet prisoners. Is it true?"

Kryslie decided it was safe enough to admit the truth of that. "Yes, so we do have some odd human notions, perverse, according to some of our teachers."

Her grin was full of pure malice, and Xan felt himself losing some of his terror.

"So, after being made to feel like a black dung beetle, what happened? That Villeni arrived?"

Xan nodded, swallowing hard.

"I reported everything, but I don't think he wanted to listen to reasons. Kellex was livid, that you escaped again, and that was the only fact that was important. I took the blame, not wanting those who were under me to be punished too."

"So, what he did to you, is that the normal treatment for failure?"

"Kellex believes in pain as an aid to memory and an incentive to succeed, but I think Villeni intended me to die. I tried to... to stand it, but I fainted after eleven strokes."

Kryslie knew that Villeni hadn't stopped at that point. She sent thoughts of peace and tranquility to Xan, along with some healing energy.

"I awoke, and I was alone in the village. Small canine creatures were sniffing around me, but they ran off when I moved. I crawled until I found a stick I could use to help me stand. I just wanted to get out of that village, and hide."

"And then your people fire-bombed the village," Kryslie prompted when Xan seemed unable to go on.

"They tried to burn me - along with all the dead warriors. Villeni promised to see to them."

"Hmmm." Kryslie decided not to comment on that, but wondered if Kellex chose that way to remove all his failures.

"I forced myself to keep going. Something was telling me I had to...a voice in my head. Probably common sense, but I could barely think. Then I began to smell the smoke, and feel the heat, and see the flames. I started having trouble breathing. I stumbled and fell, couldn't get up, but down near the ground there was air I could breathe and it was cool..."

After a moment, Xan went on, "Then that feline attacked me. I couldn't get away; all I could do was try to hit it with the stick. Then it just ran off, and I saw the flames only a few body lengths away. I thought I was going to burn after all, but the flames began to die down. It was uncanny."

As clearly as she had ever felt a premonition, Kryslie was sure that the Guardians of Peace were looking after Xan.

"Then you found me, and I thought you would kill me," Xan finished.

"Haven't we convinced you that we won't?" Kryslie asked.

"I cannot see why you wouldn't, I am your enemy."

"We can have a long talk about that later. What I need to know now, is whether you think that Commander Kek is likely to be following us."

"Yes," Xan admitted, shivering. "I don't know if he knows I am still alive, but he will be after you. He took over my mission, and it is said he has never failed."

"There is always a first time," Kryslie promised. "I have a final question for you and that is - which side of this useless war would you choose to be on?"

Instantly, Kryslie realised that it was not an easy question for him to answer. Recent experience warred with indoctrination.

"Think on it. I don't think you really have a choice. We would welcome your service - and to learn about the troubles on your world and what help is needed. You can help us understand the Aeronite people and learn about us."

"You can't do anything to help us, your Elders will not."

"Our Elders were never asked for help. Your people landed with stealth and are trying to make our world, theirs. Of course we will not give in to them."

That was not the truth that Xan had been taught to believe.

Kryslie sensed his mind rejecting her words. "Think on it," she advised. "Tymos and I hope to reach the edge of the forest by tomorrow morning and then head south until we are at the closest point to the nearest city. I think it is Ghanis. Then when it gets dark, we will make the run to the city. We will need your answer before then."

Chapter 10 - Unseen Ambush

Through the screen of tall conifer trees, Xan could see the city in the distance. As he leant against one of the trees, he figured out why they wanted to make the run in the dark. The land, once they had descended from the last mountain ridge, was flat and open. Miles and miles of grassland. He had already heard the muted roars of fast aircraft passing overhead. He couldn't see them, since they were cloaked, but that identified them in his mind as Aeronite. The Tymorean craft had been flying openly.

He had noticed Tymos and Kryslie going very still every time one flew over, and he had felt a shiver of apprehension each time.

He had not yet been asked for his decision, about whether he would serve the Tymoreans. On one level, it was a logical choice. His own kind had abandoned him, and there was nothing to be gained by holding to an allegiance that had rejected him. Yet he felt if he changed that allegiance, he was spurning the reason he had become a warrior in the first place - to protect his people, and to save them.

His hand went to his warrior's dagger. He realised that he had made his decision already - when he had accepted the dagger back. The young Tymoreans could not possibly have known what it meant - or had they?

He saw Kryslie watching him, from a seated position leaning back against one of the tree. She met his eyes, "Serving us is a two way commitment. It does not mean that you must forget those you promised to care for." She got to her feet, and came to face him.

Xan realised what she meant, and straightened. They were offering to help him to help his people. He drew the dagger and rested it on his palm.

"I made that choice when I accepted this back from you. This symbol is given to each warrior by our Supreme Overlord. We pledge our service to him. You could not have known that and I accepted it as a gesture of friendship realizing what it could be construed to mean. It is against my beliefs and training to betray my people, but what you called honour, they called treason. They betrayed my loyalty and left me to die. I will serve the Royal Line of Tymorea in what ways I can but I will not kill my people."

Summoned back by his sister, Tymos moved into Xan's view. "We welcome your service, and as a symbol of that choice, I give you..."

Tymos was twisting a gold ring off his finger, when there was a fiendish yell and something knocked into him from the side.

Kryslie moved between Xan and her twin. Adjusting her eyes, and calling out. "Behind you and left," and then "from above right."

"Got you, you bastard," Tymos said, with determination in his voice.

Xan had recognised the yell, and tried to edge around the tree out of sight, but then he wondered if there were more invisible attackers around and, decided he preferred a tree behind him. Then Kryslie moved to protect him from the front, and when she spoke, he wondered how she could see the attacker. He leant to one side to watch, as Tymos became a blur in motion. He had a slash on one arm, that was bleeding badly, but he had drawn his own knife and was blocking more slashes - judging from the clash of metal against metal.

He heard Kryslie say, "Get out of the trees," and wondered what she meant. He wondered why she was not helping her brother, since she could see the attacker...somehow. What was she doing? Muttering, and holding one arm high in the air, she had to be doing something. The air was becoming charged, like it felt when a storm was coming. There were no clouds in the sky, no sigh of a storm, but Kryslie was looking skyward now, as if she expected something.

Tymos had moved the fight out beyond the last line of conifers, where the ground was dry and dusty. He was fighting a shadow, and Xan could just make out an outline in the swirling dust.

"Now!" Tymos yelled, and in the microsecond before a painfully brilliant flash, Xan saw Kryslie's hand drop and point - right where the lightning struck.

A drawn out shriek of agony was audible after the deafening crack of thunder. Xan couldn't worry about who it was, he was finding it hard to breathe and his eyes were dazzle blinded. He felt himself lifted, sensed another flash of light that was more like an afterglow, and then he landed hard on the ground.

He could breathe again, and he drew in lung filling gasps of breath. When his eyes cleared of the dazzle, he realised that both Tymos and Kryslie were unconscious nearby.

His first instinct was to look around, to see where Kek was, and if he was dead. He realised with a shock that he was not where he had been. They were near the forest, but the conifers were gone and around him seemed to be woodland. Had he blacked out?

He saw Kryslie move slightly, and was eased of one worry. He crawled to where Tymos lay, and saw the slash wound had bled onto the ground. He put his hand hard on the wound - the only first aid he could do. He wished Kryslie would wake.

After a moment, he saw Tymos's eyes open, felt his body tense, and then relax.

"What did you just do? Where are we? Where is Kek? Is he dead?" Xan knew he was babbling, but he couldn't stop. "You knew that lightning would strike..."

"Easy, Xan. Give me a little while. Look out for trouble," Tymos spoke only in a whisper.

Xan jerked around, hoping he would see trouble if it came. His eyes looked at Kryslie, just sitting up. She, like her brother, looked pale under their weathered tanned skin. What had they done?

Kryslie stood, and teetered over to her brother. She fell, rather than knelt, beside him.

"How is the arm?"

Xan answered for Tymos. "Still bleeding."

Kryslie gently nudged him aside, and put her hand where his had been. Her face showed concentration, she was staring somewhere beyond Tymos, but colour was returning to her face, and Tymos was beginning to look better as well. Then he took on that same, "not here" expression. After a few minutes, he brushed his sister's hand away. "It's well enough for now."

Kryslie sat back on the ground and asked, "You knew who that attacker was, didn't you?"

"Kek," Xan confirmed. He knew that the senior warrior would not have missed seeing him, and had probably heard his pledge to the Tymoreans. "But, how could you fight him. I couldn't even see him."

Tymos gave a wry laugh. "Neither could I. I had thought we had lost him. The Guardians only know how he caught up to us and found us. As for fighting, once I knew he was there, survival is a prime instinct, and invisible, does not mean incorporeal."

Xan recalled what he had seen in that brief moment before the lightning, and accused Kryslie, "You...you... caused the lightning."

"Hmmm," Kryslie murmured in tacit agreement. "It should have shorted out his fancy stealth suit. I wonder how he got one that was better than Kellex's?"

The notion didn't distract Xan. "Is he dead?"

Kryslie sighed, "I don't think so, but I hope he is at least injured enough to leave us alone for a while." She didn't admit to the effluvium of malice and threats being emitted by the alien's mind.

The only reason she wasn't blocking it all out, is so that they might have warning if he received help, or considered himself well enough to keep hunting his prey.

They were not that far away from him, probably only five miles, but it was the furthest place that she could see, and after calling the lightning from the clear sky, it was as far as she could make an unassisted transmission when taking two people with her.

Sensing that Xan was about to ask how they had got there, she announced, "We'd better get back into the cover of the trees, and I am going to see if I can find anything to eat around here. If we are going to do the run to the city tonight, we will need something."

After she had gone, Xan asked the question of Tymos, and he merely shrugged and said, "Kryslie got us here."

"Are we safe here?" he asked.

"As safe as anywhere. We won't be staying long. However, I was about to give you something."

Tymos took the ring off his finger, and passed it to Xan. "Wear it on your left centre finger. The etchings on it attest that the wearer has Royal patronage. It means, that I have granted you the rights of a Tymorean citizen - a friend, rather than an enemy."

When he looked up again, his dark eyes were full of emotion, and the sunlight glistened on excess moisture. His whole manner was more confident.

"I...don't know how to thank you. Perhaps...can I do anything more for your arm?"

"It is fine," Tymos assured him, but he was aware that Xan had no way to believe that. He pushed up his sleeve and examined the wound. If you ignored all the still drying blood, the wound looked to be at least a week healed.

"Close your mouth, my friend," he suggested, seeing Xan's amazement. "You surely already know that we are more than Kellex ever thought we were."

"But, his wards cannot do anything like that."

In contact with him, Tymos was aware of Xan's unguarded thoughts and memories. At first, they amused him faintly, since Kellex was so very wrong about him and Kryslie and some of his proclamations were blatantly ignorant. Then one memory made him tense with the beginnings of a terrible premonition.

"What did Kellex mean? If he can't get us, he'd have to get the babe?"

Xan thought he must have spoken his thought aloud. "Some old prophecy..." he said.

"He mentioned that, but is he going to try again?" Tymos demanded, getting to his feet, and reaching down to help drag Xan up.

"Villeni said about it. I don't know."

Tymos cursed himself, as he thought how long it had been since starting to visit the mutants. He hadn't given his little brother a thought since then. He had promised to keep in touch with Llaimos, and although they had not the mean for voice communication, surely he and Kryslie together could have reached his mind? There had been time enough since the firebombing of the town for Kellex to try to attack the Estate - no matter where he was hiding now.

"We have to get back."

Tymos heard the approach of a cloaked jet, and dragged Xan into the cover of the trees. He heard Xan's stifled grunt of pain. "Sorry," Tymos apologised, just as the cloaked craft flew over them.

Kryslie returned to them at a trot, empty handed. "They are landing para-warriors, groups of two, at intervals up and down the forest verge. We can't wait until dark."

She stared at her brother as if defying him to disagree, but his answer suggested that he and she had been communicating. "It's two hours until dark. If we stay here, they will see us when we move. They won't be expecting us to be in the open..."

Tymos glanced at Xan, who blurted, "If we leave here now, they will see us!"

"There's another way. The means by which Kryslie brought us here. It will mean, that we will need to drop quickly, and stay perfectly still until dark."

They all heard the tinny sounds of transmitted voices. "Whatever," Xan agreed. "So long as we leave here, right now."

Xan watched as the two Tymoreans took a palm-sized device from a pouch in the camouflage suit. He had seen objects just like them. Kellex had taken them from some of his Tymorean prisoners - the ones that succumbed to the green force field - Royals like Tymos and Kryslie. No one on Kellex's staff had been able to make them do anything, even turn on.

He was hearing Aeronite voices now, and the sounds of people thrashing through the low bushes. He knew the technique; they wanted to scare their prey out of hiding. He was their prey, and so were his companions. He wanted to scream at them to hurry up, but they were watching the devices as if waiting for something.

A green flash caught his eye, and the Tymoreans flanked him, less than an inch from touching him.

“Hang onto us,” Tymos said into his ear. “When we arrive, drop to the ground and stay close to us.”

Still nothing seemed to be happening, but then, Xan saw a bright glow, and felt weightless, or about to faint - and then he was in the middle of a wide-open grassy plain, and Tymos was shoving him in the back.

“Down, dammit. And stay perfectly still.”

With his face in the dirt and the Tymoreans half-lying on him, he wanted to protest. Then he too heard the sound of an approaching aircraft, and his body went rigid in anticipation. Surely they would be seen, surely the next thing he would feel would be a burning beam of death energy.

The aircraft passed over, and the noise quickly faded into the distance. He didn’t dare move until Kryslie spoke.

“You can roll over now, if you want. Until the next one.”

Xan, who had been holding his breath, released a sigh and rolled to take in a gulp of fresh air. His mind was too full of relief for him to form words.

“They didn’t see us! We are right out in the open and they didn’t see us. Didn’t sense us, or they would be circling back,” his mind was babbling. He recalled how the Tymoreans were shielding him, and thought, they can’t be wearing stealth suits - not operational ones. After all, he had ordered the mutant’s village to be swept with the EM pulsar beam. It had revealed the guards these Tymoreans had been accompanied by.

Then his mind leapt to the abrupt change from the forest verge to this open grassy plain. How had they done that? Was that what those devices did? Teleported them? Was that myth about the Royal Tymoreans true after all? No, obviously it was...he’d just done it. And if that was true, was the other myth about Tymorean telepathy true? He had wondered about that already. His companions sometimes reacted to things he had thought...did it matter if they could see what he was thinking?

“When we get to Ghamis,” Kryslie spoke quietly, distracting Xan from his thoughts. “As soon as people see your eyes, they will know you are alien.”

Xan’s instinctive reaction was, “What?” Then he considered what he knew of Tymoreans. He had not had much to do with the Tymorean prisoners, and the mutants he’d spoken to all had dark brown eyes, seemingly bigger than normal, bulging, because he’d seen white tissue around them. His current companions had unusually bright blue eyes, but they had been born on some other world if Kellex’s ‘toy’ had been telling the truth. Did all Tymoreans have those oddly coloured eyes? But his people descended from Tymoreans.

He realised that Kryslie was still talking. “We should not get close enough to any Aeronite spies in the city for them to realise what you are.”

His mind was incredulous. They knew of the infiltrators. Then why were the Tymoreans doing nothing about them? Was it true that their troops were spread so thin that they were unable to wage an effective counter action?

“Xan, stop worrying. You will be with us and no one will question our decision.”

Was his expression so obvious or had they read his mind?

“But...” he began to say, then decided to try a test and thought his question.

“Those things you used to move us here - could Kellex’s wards use them?”

“Since those wards of his are our siblings,” Tymos muttered aloud. “I am glad they do not have the knowledge they need.”

Xan switched back to speech, “But if they figure it out...they look like you...people might think they are you...could they get into the Estate? He wants you and the baby and Kellex knows the security...”

“Not all of it,” Kryslie hissed. “He will find some nasty surprises if he tries going there again. Besides, Jordan and Vila are much older than we are.”

“How did you know their names?”

“Kellex needs to tighten his own security,” was all Kryslie told him. The sense of needing to hurry back to the Estate was increasing, and she thought at her brother, “Dare we try another transmission?”

He shared her fear, but sent back, “I don’t know if Kellex will risk sending them in. They do not know enough to pull it off and Llaimos would know the difference. Also, when we return, there will be many questions for us to answer. I don’t think he will attack the Estate again just yet. If he was surprised when they sent fighter jets to find us, enough to blast off in a hurry, I don’t think he will try again until he has some idea of how many more of them we have.”

Kryslie had time to consider those points herself. “He still thinks his, and the other Warlord’s schemes are secret,” she observed mentally. “And with Jonko, Keleb and Stenn helping to protect Llaimos, no substitutes for us would get past them. I trust all three of them with my life.”

Xan guessed his protectors were conversing mind to mind, but he sensed none of it. While he felt himself disregarded, he understood their caution. He was one of their enemies, or had been, and they could not know if he was like Kellex’s toys, or experiments. Were they even aware of that possibility? Kellex himself must have some degree of telepathy, and be able to read minds from a distance, because he knew things that happened on the Royal Estate, and he crowed about how he was manipulating his toys there, and what he made them do.

Hard on finishing that thought, he heard Tymos blurt out an unfamiliar curse. It sounded like “Shit,” but he was not familiar with that Tymorean word.

Then Tymos said, “Xan, you have the most inconvenient talent of provoking truly frightening thoughts.” It was an understatement of the fear that was escalating within him. “We need to get back quickly, but we don’t dare move yet. There is some kind of wide area sensor sweeping out here and our only chance to outfox it, is in the dark.”

“How can you tell?” Xan asked, glancing around the wide-open space. He had felt shivery at irregular intervals...did the sensor sweep cause that sensation?

Kryslie answered his unspoken thought. “Yes, but it cannot find us, because Tymos and I are drawing on the ambient energy and using it to cloak our presence. Mostly, we will seem to be just another patch of ground, or at worst, some creature too small to be important.”

Xan subsided into silence, considering the implications of what he had just learnt, and wondering if all Tymoreans could do what these were doing.

With their companion’s mind fully occupied, Tymos and Kryslie decided to make a long overdue attempt to reach the mind of their little brother. They wanted to be sure, in their own minds, that he was all right.

Although they needed to wait two more hours for full dark, they knew from maps that they had studied, that they were well east of the Royal Estate, where it would be still mid-afternoon. That was a concern, for they could not tell who would be with their brother, and if he would inadvertently reveal the contact.

Working together, Tymos and Kryslie reached out with their linked mind, searching for the sense of their baby brother, Llaimos. His mind, even though he was less than six months old, was more mature than his age suggested. At first, they felt no response, so they drew on the aura, to strengthen their ability.

What they sent were images all relating to the concept of the number three. It was something their brother had understood when they had been with him last. They were also concentrating on how he had looked then.

They felt they were receiving from Llaimos, but that he was concentrating intently on something. After a short time, they felt the young, distant mind become aware of the intruding imagery and react with enthusiasm. They suspected the reaction was vocal as well as mental.

“Calm down little brother,” Kryslie sent with a sense that she was amused. “Who is with you?”

They ‘saw’ a face in their minds and recognised Rowan. They ‘heard’, “He teach me.”

Tymos and Kryslie did not try to hide their surprise and pleasure from him. He had not yet learnt to speak, or to identify basic objects, before they had left. Those were the first words they had heard from him. Before this, he had only been able to communicate emotions and images.

“You have been busy learning, Llaimos,” Tymos sent. “We are so proud of you.”

“Coming home?”

That sounded like a definite demand.

“Soon,” they sent. “Before night tomorrow. But we have much to tell Father. Don’t tell anyone though, please, bro. It’s a secret.”

They received a sense of acceptance, if not of understanding. “Not Stenn?”

“Not yet. We will surprise him later,” Kryslie sent, along with an image of them sneaking up on their friend.

She sensed Llaimos’s amusement at the idea. They heard, “Try first.”

After promising to see him as soon as they could, they felt Llaimos’s turning his attention back to his lesson, and thinking of ambushing Stenn Reslic.

Once it was fully dark and the latest sensor sweep had passed over them, Kryslie helped Xan onto Tymos’s back and they began to run.

Xan felt the sensation of a breeze on his face, felt the muscles moving under him, and realised vaguely that Tymos was running incredibly fast - even faster than he had moved over the mountain trails. In one of the moments in that surreal journey, to distract himself from feeling like an open target, he asked how far it was to the city.

The distance meant nothing to him until it was rephrased as an all day ride on horseback. That it was tacitly implied that they would cover the distance in a night, just running, was difficult for Xan to believe. Then he wondered why Tymos did not just repeat the teleportation trick. He asked the question by speaking near Tymos’s ear.

“We’ve never been to Ghamis. So we can’t picture where we need to go.”

Xan quietened again when he became aware of yet another overflying plane. It was the fourth since they had begun to run, and Tymos had not stopped for any of them.

This time the plane circled and then, far behind them, a small bomb exploded with a flare of light. Xan experienced a moment of satisfaction. The pilots would have no conception of how fast their quarry was moving. No matter how fast they reacted to the sensor reading of a life form, the quarry was well away before they reacted.

Tymos set Xan on his feet when they reached the protective wall of the city. It was just starting to grow light in the east, with the now distant mountains silhouetted against the skyline.

“Keep your eyes open,” Tymos warned Xan before taking on an intent posture and staring at the stone wall.

A short time later, Tymos turned and pointed west. “There is a gate down that way. It will open soon to let the herds out to graze. We will go in there. If we take it slowly, you should be able to walk and keep up. Your limp will give us a reason for coming to the city.”

Kryslie added, “The main city entrance is further away to the north. They have more guards there than they do here, and they will more likely demand identification from us. This will be a more inconspicuous entrance.”

While Xan wondered why two high-ranking Royals would shun attention, he was glad that they were. Attention would bring animosity towards him, whether or not his companions were high ranking and able to demand compliance.

Even while waiting for the gate to open, they drew notice. Xan tried to emulate his companions and appear to be unaware of the eyes that were staring at him. However, he was acutely aware that the cloak covered tatters of his clothes, and the camouflage outfits of his companions were unlike anything worn by the farmers bringing laden carts into the city. The locals favoured loose fitting tunics or jerkins over trousers bound with leather laces at the ankles.

Thankfully, shyness or reticence prevented any of the farmers from demanding to know who they were. The stares were unsettling enough.

Once inside the gate, the herders went about their own business, and Xan was led towards the centre of the city. At first, there were few people about, but more and more came onto the streets, bustling towards the markets. These were probably servants, Xan decided, making the assumption based on his early life on Aerdna. The women were dressed in long colourful skirts and neat blouses, and the men had neat trousers and shirt like tops. It was warm enough that thick overlayers were not needed, though some of the women wore shawls, held by a loop at their neck.

These new type of people gaped in surprise, and their eyes followed them until either reminded of their own duties, or other people impeded their view.

Apart from their obviously different and admittedly filthy clothes, the only other thing that might have drawn attention was the vivid red hair of his companions. Xan recalled, belatedly, that the only redheads he had seen belonged to the ruling elite class. In fact, all of the commoners around him had brown hair, varying only in the intensity of the colour.

Xan glanced sideways at his companions, who had slowed so they flanked him, but not so he seemed to be a prisoner, more as if guarding him. They were keeping their attention ahead of them, as if oblivious to, or used to, the stares. Yet when he glanced at Tymos again, he caught the quick eye flick in his direction, and he turned the same way and saw guards in brown uniforms keeping level with them. The same was true on the other side. Their presence was keeping the curious citizenry away from his small group.

Finally, a higher-ranking guardsman - judging by the fancy braid work on his uniform, approached from ahead of them. He didn't have weapons in his hand, though he would be able to reach them quickly from the side holsters.

Tymos and Kryslie smoothly moved a step ahead of him, and he saw their whole demeanour change.

"Captain," Tymos greeted. "Would you be so kind as to lead us to the City Council building? Also, if it is not too early, would you advise Mayor Tollman that we wish to speak to him."

"At once, Prince Tymos." The Guard Captain then spoke into an almost unnoticeable communications device. It seemed to be no more than a dangling wire.

"Do you wish to freshen up first?" was the next question.

"Thank you for the offer, Captain, but we are on urgent business and need to contact the Royal Estate before all other considerations."

Xan felt the guard's attention and pulled the borrowed cloak closer around himself and kept his eyes downcast.

"This way, Prince Tymos, Princess Kryslie," the Captain directed, after taking his eyes off Xan.

After a while, he commented, "We were not advised of your visit, your Highnesses."

Kryslie answered, using a tone of voice that should have made those of lower rank regret speaking.

"Our business is important and not a matter for open and idle chatter. If you wish to get details, you should submit the reasons for your interest to President Governor Reslic."

Xan hid a smile and marvelled at the change in his companions. These...formal...and regal Tymoreans had never treated him like this. They had been reserved, yes, and kept their own

counsel most of the time, but mostly they had been confidently relaxed with him, and never rank conscious.

In the short time it took to walk to their destination, the city officials must have been roused and urged to dress quickly. Xan saw four men standing outside the two storey white stone building. All wore formal robes - long sleeveless open front tunics over white shirts and dark trousers. The tunics were of richly dyed fabric - two wore shades of blue, one was in red and the last in dark green, and this one had a chain of gold links circling from his neck to his waist.

They all bowed when Tymos and Kryslie stopped two body lengths away. The portly man in the green tunic stepped forward.

“Prince Tymos, Princess Kryslie, the people of Ghamis welcome you...”

“We thank you, Mayor Tollman,” Tymos interrupted what Xan expected would have been a lengthy formal speech. “We wish to keep our business private and would prefer to proceed inside.”

Tymos began to walk around the councillors, to go up the steps into the building. Xan caught the fleeting glimpse of displeasure on the faces of the four men. Each of them was not elderly, but quite old. He felt Kryslie urge him forward with an arm behind him. She also gave him subtle support when his injured leg threatened to collapse as he ascended the stairs.

The Mayor had put on a burst of speed to catch up to Tymos, and to keep pace with him.

Tymos made his next request, “If you would, have someone contact the Royal Estate to request a long range beam to this city.”

“Certainly Prince Tymos. If you would come this way?”

Xan resisted the impulse to ogle like the common Tymoreans. He was seeing things now, that Warlord Kellex would give gold to know. Here was proof that even common Tymoreans had the means for long distance communication. Was that what the long-range beam relay was?

The Mayor chose to make the contact himself, and Xan listened avidly as Prince Tymos’s request was passed on. The response from the receiver, audible in the room, was an initial squeak of surprise, before a not quite successful attempt at formal protocol.

Kryslie spoke softly in Xan’s ear. “The day shift does not start for half an hour. I hoped to return quietly, but I guess that is impossible. Just remember, Xan, you have our patronage. Your right to come to the Estate will not be questioned. You are our guest.”

Xan nodded, still feeling apprehensive, but when he saw Kryslie take out the palm sized device, his mind turned to wondering where they were thinking of teleporting to. A glance at Tymos revealed he too was holding his device, and a green light showed on it.

When the officials suddenly straightened, and became tensely alert, Xan glanced around. He had only just noticed a glowing mauve oval, hanging in the air like a hologram, when a squad of six men emerged out of it. Palace guards, he recognised, and one of high rank, judging from the uniform.

That one walked directly to Prince Tymos, gave him an up and down scrutiny, then turned to give Kryslie a similar look over. The man then fixed his eyes on Xan himself.

“What have you brought here, Prince Tymos?”

Tymos’s manner remained as it had been since entering the city. “This, Jarro Reslic, is Xan and he has our patronage.”

“I can see that, Prince Tymos. I am sure my brother will be impatient to hear your reasoning.”

Xan had seen the man staring at the hand that he was using to hold the cape closed.

“Come on, he wanted you back two weeks ago.”

The guard stepped aside, to let Tymos and Kryslie approach the glowing oval.

Xan felt Kryslie take a grip on his arm and heard her quiet whisper, “The beam allows us to transmit over long distances. You might notice flashes of intermediate places. You just need to stay close to me.”

Chapter 11 - Back Home

When he finally arrived in a wide stone chamber, Xan was feeling decidedly giddy. He was glad of Kryslie's grip, holding him up. He didn't dare move in case his stomach lost its contents. He just had a moment to take in the colourful mural on the floor, when that odd weightless sensation engulfed him again. He concentrated on feeling Kryslie's grip, to stop himself blacking out.

His weight returned, and he dared to open his eyes, and then his mind went into a full-scale panic. The room they were now in, ornate and richly decorated, contained all three of the Tymorean Governors and he was like the mouse in the gaze of three hawks.

He glanced around and saw that the guards he had seen in the city were arrayed behind him. He had nowhere to run. They would be on him before he could hobble two steps.

In the other direction was a large table surrounded by chairs, although a smaller, low table was behind the Governors, with several more seats.

"I believe you have things to tell me, Prince Tymos."

Xan identified the Tymorean President from his likeness to the senior guard behind him.

"Yes Sir," Tymos agreed, bowing to the Governor.

"Well then, let us sit and talk in a civilised manner."

Xan saw Tymos glance his way, and he wondered if he was to go with him.

"Your sister is perfectly capable of assisting your guest. She can join us later."

That relieved Xan of one immediate worry. Right then, he felt ready to collapse, and didn't care when one of the other Governors approached and gave quiet orders to a servant. He heard faint noises behind him, and Kryslie saying, "Aldiv has brought a chair, it is right behind you." She eased him down into it, and he grabbed at the cape again.

He didn't look up, even when Kryslie began to speak.

"Father, this is Xan, a former Aeronite Commander, and once part of Warlord Kellex's command."

"Yes indeed," Tymoros remarked evenly. "I remember your friend from early in our tour. He looks like he is in need of medical attention. I would also suggest that you, Tymos and your friend need time to freshen up. If I am not mistaken, you have been close to some of the large felines. Their scent is unmistakable."

Kryslie felt herself blush. "I'm sorry, Father."

Tymoros smiled faintly, and simply said, "I am relieved that you are back here safely."

"Father, Llaimos is okay, isn't he? No one has tried to get at him, have they?"

"Your brother is perfectly fine," Tymoros assured her. "I was going to suggest taking Xan to the infirmary, but I don't think you should just yet. It seems that transmitting long distances does not agree with him."

"I will get Alexon to come and tend to him," Xyron said decisively. He had been listening to Tymos's report, as well as observing the young alien. "And I will have Thea check your daughter over."

"I'm fine," Kryslie protested. She glanced at her twin, and caught a faint grin on his face.

Mentally she told him, "You will have that request later!"

She turned her attention back to what Xyron was saying.

"You have a significant amount of the fire suppressant chemicals on you. They are not meant to be inhaled, or kept in contact with the skin," Xyron told her sternly. "And what were you doing to get your clothes smelling of cat musk. It must be the only smell stronger than that

of the chemicals. I would have expected, that if you were that close to the fire up in the hills, that you would have rendezvoused with the fire control team”

Xan, feeling better now that he had been sitting a while, was aware of the polite censure in the tone of the third Governor. He felt compelled to say, “They found me, and helped me.”

“Yes, indeed,” Tymoros agreed, neutrally.

“Father,” Kryslie pleaded, glancing at Xan.

“You may accompany Xan to the infirmary, once Alexon has looked him over. Then you will let Thea check you. I can wait to hear about your travels, and Tymos will give us the important points.”

Tymoros moved away, beckoning to his attendant, Aldiv, and speaking to him. Then he went to listen to what Tymos was saying.

Alexon approached with his medical kit and began examining Xan, who gripped the cape firmly.

“Xan, he won’t hurt you. He is a healer,” Kryslie assured her guest. She sensed the cause of his fear.

Although he relaxed, he eyed the device Alexon was using to scan him.

“It is a medical scanner,” Kryslie explained, as Alexon moved to his bag and took out a sachet, and then gestured to Aldiv.

“Can you prepare this?” Alexon asked.

Aldiv nodded, and transmitted away. When he returned, Kryslie took the cup of green restorative drink from him, and knelt next to Xan to hand it to him.

“Try to drink this - it tastes better than the stuff in the gourd leaves, and is designed to restore energy, settle stomachs, and disprove the truism that all medicines taste awful.”

“Princess Kryslie, would you be serious?” Alexon chided. “And tell me what you know of his condition?”

Keeping her recitation to the bare facts, and glancing at Xan when she wanted confirmation of her deductions, Kryslie outlined the injuries Xan had suffered. Alexon listened intently, checked the reading on his medical scanner. Before he could protest that his findings did not match her report, Kryslie explained. “Tymos healed much of the damage.”

“Really,” Alexon said slowly. “And when did he discover that talent?”

“When we were in Reva,” Kryslie told him. “He helped Keleb too, after we escaped from Kellex’s clutches.”

“I was not aware of that,” Alexon admitted. “Is this something you can do too?”

Kryslie considered her answer, glanced at Xan and said, “Not to the same extent. I think I am only able to stabilise injuries, so they can start healing. Tymos can sort of make things heal faster. Except for himself, that is. To heal himself, he needs to work through me.”

“And you can mind heal,” Alexon said neutrally, but Kryslie caught his flick of a glance at Xan, and sensed the question. Had she conditioned Xan’s mind, to make him change allegiance?

“I am still trying to convince him he will be well treated here,” Kryslie stated, returning Alexon’s look. That much was true, but she would discuss what she had sensed of Xan’s state of mind, with the medic in private.

Alexon accepted her statement, and went to talk to Xyron.

“What will they do now?” Xan asked, still fearful.

Kryslie deliberately listened to what Alexon and Xyron were discussing, and then gave him a brief summary. “You get to rest. Alexon will take you to the infirmary, and do a range of physiological tests, but he believes he can fix your leg so you won’t have a painful limp forever, and he will ensure you have no infections from the cat’s bite. If you let him, he can do

something about your back so it won't heal stiff. You can trust him, Xan. He is the top doctor on the Estate. Once he has done what he can for you, you can add what you will to our report."

"And you?" Xan asked.

Kryslie sighed. "I will be relegated back to the position of precocious child, damn it. I have to be checked over too, and then quizzed for my version of our trip through the mountains. Though that might wait until I deodorise myself. I really didn't notice the smell until I was back here. Tomorrow, I will probably be back at lessons, but I will make time to see you."

Even before checking Kryslie over, Thea took a grip on Kryslie's arm and transmitted her to the outer room of her apartment.

"You will get out of those filthy guard overalls and have a ten minute sonic shower," Thea directed. "I will go and find Delia, and have her arrange food for you."

Kryslie watched her transmit away, finding it odd to be back in her own space. As she began to walk into her private area to get some clean clothes ready, she noticed in passing that a couch had been added to the furniture. Before she had left, there had only been the two armchairs and the low table. The new couch was in a matching shade of pale green.

Once in the inner room, she took another look around. Delia had kept the room spotless and dust free. She had also tidied the desk and put all her practice clothes out of sight. All the light panels around the room were curtained off, so the room was only dimly lit. She spoke the voice commands to open the curtains, and immediately the light level rose, and the screens showed the virtual outdoor images she had chosen. It made her feel less confined, even though she knew the views were only images.

Then, she went to her wardrobe, finding as expected that all her clothes were either neatly folded or carefully hung from a rack. With a sigh, she pulled out a set of formal clothes in red and gold, and wished she could choose something more casual. As she laid them on her bed, she felt the impact of her little brother's mind.

He knew they were back, and was impatient to see her and Tymos. A picture formed in her mind of where he was. He was with Tanya, his mother, in the solarium. The need to reassure herself that Llaimos was safe, was an overpowering compulsion. Deciding in that instant, Kryslie transmitted directly there.

She arrived in front of two startled guards, but turned at once to grin at them, as a small figure darted at her. A woman rose quickly from sitting on the floor, to run after him.

The solarium was full of the bright morning sunshine, shining directly through the clear glass panels, onto a lush profusion of fragrant indoor plants. In places, the flowers and leaves were thick enough to seem like a leafy forest glade. The effect was heightened by the polished brown wood floor, and the leaf shaped wool mats in forest colours that dotted the floor. The one where Llaimos had been a moment before was littered with toy animals.

Over by the floor to ceiling window, Tanya was engrossed in playing the great harp, but she stopped when she heard Llaimos squeal in delight. Her attendant spoke quietly, "Your foster daughter is back."

Warned by the squeal, and startled by how much her little brother had grown in the two months she had been away, Kryslie braced herself as Llaimos leapt at her. She caught him instinctively and returned his fierce hug.

"Smell," Llaimos said clearly in her ear.

"Cat," Kryslie told him, as Llaimos's nurse caught up to her charge, and began to smell the odour clinging to Kryslie's clothes.

Though her nose wrinkled at the unpleasant smell, she made no comment except to say, "So, you are the reason for his abstraction. He has been a terror since last evening."

Kryslie shared a sense of mirth with her clinging younger brother.

Tanya had approached and taken the opportunity to examine her foster daughter. "You look fit enough, tanned even," she remarked, tacitly ignoring her dishevelled state. "Have you seen your father yet?"

"Briefly," Kryslie admitted. "Tymos is talking to his Excellency, and I had a guest to tend to first. I am about to see about a sonic shower - but I wanted to see Llaimos - to be sure he was okay. I see he has been growing."

"That he has," Tanya agreed. "Three and a half inches since you have been away."

Kryslie saw the trace of unease on her foster mother's face. It was not as overwhelming as when they had first realised that Llaimos was growing at a much faster rate than normal.

"He has been fine. We feed him a special supplement, and have been maintaining the daily massage. I am told he is thriving. As for the rest, he is learning astoundingly fast. Your friends have been marvellous in helping to keep him amused. In fact, you just missed Stenn. He had to go to lessons."

When she had decided to come to Llaimos, she had known that.

"There has been no attempt to harm him while you were gone," Tanya guessed, shrewdly, what had concerned Kryslie. "Were you expecting trouble?"

A shrug was Kryslie's initial answer. She thought of the need to see Llaimos, it had seemed urgent...

"I can sense no danger here," Kryslie said to reassure Tanya. "Kellex, one of the alien Warlords, tried to take us and failed twice. Since then, we have made a friend of Xan, one of his commanders. He believes Kellex will try for Llaimos."

As she spoke, she shielded her thoughts from her sensitive younger brother. She felt him hug her more firmly.

Just then, a very annoyed looking Thea arrived. She said what Tanya and the nurse had not verbalised.

"Just what were you thinking, Princess Kryslie? Coming here in those disgusting clothes? You have that chemical muck all over your brother. He is going to have to have a bath to get it off him before it irritates his skin."

Thea took Llaimos and passed him back to his nurse.

"I just wanted to reassure him that we were fine," Kryslie told Thea. "I was just about to go back."

The nurse, trying not to smell the odour that had transferred to Llaimos, remarked, "Maybe this little demon will settle now. He hasn't needed you or your brother around to have picked up your heathenish habits."

Thea was tapping her foot in controlled impatience. Kryslie noticed it and returned her attention to Tanya. "I want no one in this room to mention to anyone that I am back."

She made eye contact with her foster mother, and Gisella who was Tanya's attendant, and then the nurse and the two guards. They each nodded in turn, but Tanya asked, "Is there a reason?"

"Discretion," Kryslie said at once, but in fact, it was a shiver of premonition that had caused her to speak the order. She had not seen any specific reason, though when she learnt all that had occurred on the Estate during her absence, the reason might become clear.

Thea cautioned, "Don't think his Excellency won't hear of this."

As a threat, Kryslie ignored it. In her mind, reassuring herself that Llaimos was fine was a priority of equal importance to reporting on her travels. Besides, she knew that Llaimos would not be harmed by the chemicals, any more than she had been. He was giggling in delight at the need to have another bath.

Thea gave Kryslie another stern look, took her arm again and transmitted them both back to Kryslie's apartment.

Delia was in an unnatural dither. She was dressed for cleaning, not as a senior attendant. She had dust streaks on her dark green livery where she had tried to brush the dust off.

"I did not expect you back, my lady," she apologised.

"We didn't send warning," Kryslie apologised in turn, as she shrugged free of Thea. "It was a sudden decision and our return won't be general knowledge just yet, so don't mention it to anyone."

Thea spoke to Delia. "See her Highness gets cleaned up, deodorised, and redressed in something suitable. She will be speaking to his Excellency as soon as I have finished with her."

"I am going to eat, too," Kryslie insisted. The smell of the covered breakfast, waiting on a table in her outer room, was making her stomach growl forcefully. "I haven't since last night, and I want something that isn't raw wild roots or half cooked hopper."

Delia gave her a startled look before saying, "I'll fix the sonic shower..."

"No, I will do that," Thea decided. "I know what fragrances will neutralise the cat musk and the stench of the chemicals."

"Then I will get clothes ready," Delia announced.

Thea intercepted Kryslie as she reappeared dressed in a long fluffy after-bath gown, and directed her towards her bed. "Lie down and let me check you over. Then you can eat and get dressed."

This time, Kryslie knew she was not going to win, and she obeyed without comment, lying on the side away from her clothes. She thought that Thea took her time examining her, but then admitted to herself, that because she was Tymoros's Heir Designate, the check would be more thorough.

Before Thea finished, Kryslie heard the message chime from the communicator panel and automatically tried to get up to answer it.

"Stay put, Delia can answer that," Thea insisted. Kryslie stifled impatience.

Finally, "You are still disgustingly well. Lucky for you those chemicals didn't give you a severe rash."

"Then I can eat now?" Kryslie said, rising quickly. Thea nodded.

Delia added, "You have fifteen minutes before you are required back in the Conference Room for a meeting."

"I am not going to inhale my food! Everyone else who will be at that meeting will have had breakfast, and this meeting is likely to last all day."

"Mistress, ..." Delia chided. "You know not to keep your elders waiting."

Thea added, "And you are not running wild now."

"Tymos will need to eat and clean up too," Kryslie said aloud, aware that her brother was still talking to the Governors. "Has Morov been warned?"

That caused Thea to react and leave Kryslie's apartment, as Delia uncovered the still appetising cooked breakfast.

Kryslie ignored Delia's urging to hurry, even though she was aware of the passing of the minutes. She was forcing her mind back into the mould of dependent Heir Designate, and all the expectations on her relating to that rank. The mould chafed.

At the same time, she was aware that Tymos had only just finished his shower, and had yet to eat. She was too hungry to delay eating any more, but she deliberately ate slowly, not bolting the food. Then, she dressed with obvious care, quoting back to Delia, some of her attendant's usual admonitions about her appearance.

The reminder message chimed before she was half-dressed, and Delia's scolding increased.

"Stop fussing, Delia. Tymos hasn't even eaten yet, and you know I am expected to look like my rank. The meeting can't start until he gets there too."

Tymos arrived in his neat and tidy apartment, called for Morov, but received no answer. Unfussed, he made directly for the inner room and the sonic shower. He hadn't noticed his own odour until he had been in the company of the Governors for a time. By the time they let him have a break, he was wondering how they could have tolerated the smell for so long.

Except for his father's initial comment on his dishevelled appearance and the odour, the Governors had listened intently to his report. He kept the recitation to the most important points, and answered the questions put to him by Reslic and Xyron about his understanding of mutant and alien capabilities.

Even as he spoke, he was aware when Kryslie arrived unannounced to see Llaimos. He approved of his sister's initiative. Llaimos had been increasingly impatient to see them, from the moment they had arrived. Through Kryslie's mind, he 'saw' how his little brother had grown.

When he reached the end of the summary of his two months in the mountains, Tymos knew the Governors were highly concerned by the signs that the aliens were getting bolder, but also gratified that he and Kryslie had succeeded in gaining the mutants trust, and allegiance.

Tymoros finally directed Tymos to go and clean up. "We need to call a meeting of all the senior staff and section heads, to go over all this in detail," he explained. "For that, I want you looking like my Heir Designate, not some scruffy vagabond."

At that moment, Tymos shared his sister's moment of realisation that now they were back, they were no longer only responsible for themselves. He too, felt suddenly closed in.

Morov arrived at Tymos's apartment out of breath. He had raced to answer the summons of the Chief Attendant, been given a terse instruction, before transmitting directly to Prince Tymos's apartment. He was still dressed for working with the potted plants on the terrace, and had dirt on his clothes and his hands. His initial irritation was eased when he arrived in Tymos's entrance room, and heard the sonic shower in operation. As he picked up the trail of filthy and reeking clothes, he was glad he was not wearing his attendant's livery.

He realised that Prince Tymos had heard him, when his name was called, followed by, "And I need food and clean clothes, like ten minutes ago."

Well, the food was on its way, Morov knew, so he went to get suitable clothing out for his charge. A formal outfit, but not his silver and gold 'robes of state'.

Both were ready when Tymos emerged from the shower cubicle wearing a light robe.

"I had no idea you were back," Morov apologised, as he served the food and placed a chair next to the cleared desk he was using as the table.

"No, it was sudden and we won't be making it known," Tymos told him.

"I understand, Prince Tymos, but surely your friends..."

"Not even to them. I am sure they would be discreet, but...not yet."

Tymos sat and took an obvious smell of the aroma of the meal.

"Stenn Reslic keeps asking me if I know when you will be back," Morov explained.

"He will understand," Tymos assured him, speaking with his mouth half full.

"And Zacary too," Morov commented, but this time his voice sounded disapproving.

"Zacary? Why would he...? I thought he would be back off with the Peace Corps somewhere by now."

"He hasn't been given clearance yet, Prince Tymos. He has been assigned duties around the Estate. He was in a terrible state when he returned."

The communicator beeped a message.

Tymos ignored it and commented, "I heard he had been tortured by the aliens, but if he got himself back here, he can't have been too bad. You will have to fill me in later about him. I suspect that message is my time is up reminder. I have to report back to Father."

Morov checked the message and confirmed the contents as Tymos continued to shovel the food into his mouth and eat as fast as he could.

Chapter 12 - Learning about the Enemy

The three Elders who came to the emergency council session, each gave half bows of acknowledgement in the direction of Tymos and Kryslie, where they flanked their father at the head of the oval table. The senior section heads, bowed in the general direction of Tymoros, and looked startled to see Tymoros's heirs, in the positions where Reslic and Xyron usually sat.

Jono Reslic was standing to the right of Tymos, watching as the notified people arrived. When the last appeared, he touched a control pad on his wrist and activated an anti-intrusion field around the Conference Room. He then sat and let his fellow Governor start the meeting.

Tymoros came straight to the point. "For the past two months, Tymos and Kryslie have been negotiating with the mutant tribes in the eastern mountain region. They will be sharing their observations and experiences with you."

Kryslie whispered softly to him, and Tymoros added. "Until further notice, no one in this room will mention that they have returned."

Tymos stood to address the assembled specialists. "What I have to say may not be directly applicable to all of you, but any ideas that occur to you should be aired when Kryslie and I finish."

He saw heads nodding, in tentative agreement. In his mind, he heard, "Most of them are not expecting to hear anything important."

His own reading of the audience agreed with his sister's observation. The three Elders were intent on his words, leaning forward over the table. The section heads were sitting back in their chairs, looking in his direction, but not at him. The eldest sons of Jono Reslic and Xyron, were staring around the room and at the ceiling.

Regardless, Tymos began his report with the visit to Mithas's tribe. He glanced at Kryslie when a murmur of soft voices began at his mention of the mutants. She responded mentally, "They are angry that the mutants have sided with the aliens. They blame them for the deaths of the many scouts, and the third scout party particularly."

With a slight nod, showing he understood, Tymos continued to speak. The eyes of all the listeners gradually turned his way. He paused in his recitation at the point where they were approaching the village led by Horst. He glanced around the seated people, inviting questions.

Kryslie took the moment of contemplative silence to make a statement of her own.

"Two points should be emphasised. First, the mutants are not traitors. They are poorly educated, poorly treated, and what they want is what they should have by right, as citizens of Tymorea. It is not surprising that they were easy victims for the alien infiltrators. To them, the aliens are merely another group of outcasts, like themselves, but more able to fight back."

Murmurings from the audience suggested a level of disagreement with her assessment. Kryslie merely raised the volume of her voice to continue. "The subtle arguments of the aliens have been working on them for the past two decades."

Silence fell in the room. "In all that time, the promises made to them by the aliens were never fulfilled, were always just over the horizon. Yes, they received cast off weapons from their allies, but no way to recharge them. They have been used as battle fodder, throw away soldiers, acceptable losses if they died. It was only the dream of a better life that kept them clinging to those promises."

Tymos jerked all attention back to him. "It was not difficult for us to gain the mutants' trust. I believe they were already coming to realise that the aliens did not mean to make them wealthy or powerful. We learnt that even while they were helping the aliens, they were observing them,

following them, locating their camps, noting what they did. We have maps, hand drawn by the mutants, giving details of their observations..."

Every one was now paying attention. Kryslie spoke again into the silence. "The other fact you are unlikely to know, is that in every place where the mutants have made a village, there is an area where the aura is very strong - where it rises like a spring."

Elder Timenon rose and waited to speak. "We know that some of the aliens have traces of our power. Do you think they are aware of these places?"

Kryslie smiled faintly as she answered. "The mutants themselves sense only that the areas are special, but do not know why. They do not invite outsiders there, and in most cases, the aliens meet the mutants away from their villages. Even were aliens to be in one of these special places, I do not think they would sense the aura. In fact, possibly only myself, and Tymos could. However, we know where all the places are, and when the towns and forests are protected, these areas must be shielded as well."

A break was taken while the mutant's hand drawn maps were scanned and made available to the group via their data pads. Refreshments were brought in by Aldiv and Donni, Tymoros's attendants. They were already sworn to secrecy about the return of Tymos and Kryslie, who would be staying in the High King's suite, rather than their own apartments.

The meeting broke up near the time for the evening meal, after hours of questions, discussions and debates. All possible knowledge, implications, ideas and recommendations were milked from the reports. The attendees knew to return the following day.

Tymoros remained in the conference room with Tymos and Kryslie, but moved them to the more comfortable chairs around the small table near the beam-in point. Aldiv brought their meals there.

Later, Xyron returned and took time to sit with them.

"Xan is resting comfortably," he told Tymos and Kryslie. "His leg has been treated and should heal quickly. The other injuries are already much better. He tentatively trusts us."

"He cannot understand why his enemies saved him, when his own left him for dead," Kryslie told the Governor.

"Do you believe that his people expected him to die?"

Tymos answered that. "I thought that would be obvious from all that was done to him."

"Perhaps, but he did not actually experience..."

A shake of Tymos's head caused Xyron to pause.

"Sir, I think it is nothing short of a miracle that Xan was able to move at all, let alone crawl far enough from that village to be just out of the fire zone. I am convinced that the Guardians kept him alive, and gave us the idea to draw energy from that forest inferno."

Xyron considered Tymos's words, then asked, "Were you aware that he has a low level of Royal Power?"

"Not at first," Kryslie admitted. "I think it was dormant and I roused it."

Tymos added, "I think Kellex knows, and he has a way to determine which of his people do. He collects them - like that group he sent here to try to take us."

"And your analysis of Xan's power, Princess Kryslie?" Xyron asked. She felt it was a test.

"It is pure. Xan is a sensitive and kind person. He disliked the orders he had to obey," Kryslie replied immediately.

"I agree with your thoughts," Xyron said, "However, I have blocked his power. I hope it will make him less susceptible to psychic influences."

Tymoros did not say he disagreed, but offered an example that was contrary to Xyron's statement. "Zacary noticed how the aliens separated those of Royal blood from the commoners in the third scout party. They used that green force field. The commoners were not affected."

He watched as his children glanced at each other in the way he had grown used to. They had both tensed. He waited quietly for them to share their thoughts.

Mentally, and on a mind link so tight that the Governor's could not perceive it, Tymos thought at his twin. "Morov told me that Zacary is noticeably too interested in knowing when we would be back. Stenn was too, but Stenn is a friend."

Kryslie considered possible reasons, but none made sense. Zacary was two years older than they were, and had been stuck in the small lyceum when she and Tymos had first arrived on Tymorea. He had been jealous of them, of their ability to learn, and that they would graduate from the small lyceum, and he likely would not.

Zacary had acted on mind suggestions, and now they believed it was from the alien Warlord Kellex, and taken Tymos to a place where Kellex could have come and taken him.

After that incident, Zacary had been taken out of lessons, examined, and had his power made dormant. He was ineligible to graduate to the large lyceum, but had been allowed to join the Tymorean Peace Corps.

"Jonko mentioned that he had returned here," Tymos spoke aloud, thoughtfully. "Morov told me he was interested in our return. Do you have doubts about him?"

Tymoros admitted, "I am uneasy around him, but I have been unable to detect any signs of mind control. Before we allowed him to join the Corps, we conditioned his mind to protect him from further interference."

"Kellex can influence susceptible minds from some distance away," Kryslie told them. "If Zacary was a prisoner, and Kellex knew who he was, the conditioning you did, might have been overcome."

Xyron spoke up. "We believe that Zacary's brother, Yuri, was also a prisoner of Kellex."

Kryslie felt herself flush hot, and then cold. "There were a few weeks between when Zacary got back, and when Kellex blasted off..." She broke off to decide how to phrase the sudden fear that gripped her. "Father, I know you have the nightly curfew here to keep susceptible minds safer, but that might not be enough. Have you had any odd incidents while we have been gone?"

"There have been incidents," Tymoros admitted carefully. "Children going into places where they had no permission to be. What is it you fear?"

"I don't know if Kellex can work through Zacary to influence vulnerable minds," Kryslie admitted, "But if some other mind is controlling Zacary, it would know when you were around, and hide. Or Zacary might be obeying implanted commands..."

"We are having him watched, discretely," Tymoros assured them.

"And when Zacary was questioned, Jono sensed that there were things in his mind that he could not talk about, and some blank areas in his memory," Xyron revealed.

"Maybe this is why I had the compulsion to keep our return secret," Kryslie said with a shiver. "I will talk to him incognito."

"Later," Tymos advised. "He can wait until we finish here."

Kryslie agreed with a nod.

When Aldiv transmitted Tymoros and his two children to the High King's suite, it was unoccupied.

"Is Llaimos still sleeping in the nursery?" Kryslie asked, as Tymos glanced around.

"No, but he will still be with Tanya. Your friends amuse him between the end of lessons and his bedtime. He will be returning soon, so I suggest that you relax until then."

He gestured towards the two rooms they used when not sleeping in their individual apartments. They took the unspoken suggestion of staying out of sight - in case messengers came for Tymoros.

When the suite door was closed after Tanya and Llaimos arrived, Tymos and Kryslie emerged. They were in time to see an energetic toddler, squirm free of his nurse. This time, his target was Tymos. Pre-warned by Kryslie, he braced himself and was ready to swing the little boy up into the air, before tossing him and catching him with a hug.

Llaimos squealed in delight, and when settled against Tymos, reached out for Kryslie, to delight in a three-way hug.

“Well, he is certainly pleased to have his siblings back,” Tymoros remarked to his consort. “Has he been more settled today?”

“Once he had seen Kryslie this morning,” Tanya said serenely, but her expression revealed a trace of mirth.

With a slight headshake, Tymoros qualified, “Smelling of cat musk and fire chemicals.”

“I am glad they are back safely,” Tanya tactfully agreed.

On the second day, Tymos and Kryslie continued their report of their experiences, telling of the ambush at Horst’s village, the finding of Xan, and all that had happened after that until they returned to the Estate. Every possible aspect was examined in detail. By the end of the day, everyone was grimly aware that the aliens would soon step up their attacks. Stealth would turn into outright war.”

On the third day after their return, Tymos and Kryslie escorted Xan to the Council Room. He was walking on his own, but with his leg in a walking support that took the stress off the healing muscles.

With the High King’s heirs vouching for him, he faced the crowd of powerful Tymoreans calmly.

Tymos introduced him by his Aeronite rank, and announced that he was going to speak about what he knew of the reasons for the invasion.

“I was only a Commander, and new to that rank,” Xan began. “And until I met Tymos and Kryslie, I believed only the worst of the Tymorean people.”

His candid recitation of his former beliefs raised anger in many of those present, and some began to call out accusatory questions. These people quietened in respect when Elder Timenon rose to his feet, requesting to speak.

“This young man is not the cause of that attitude, but its victim. Yet he is showing that he is open-minded enough to change his belief. I respect his wish to help his people, and his courage at being here to speak of them. If we listen, and learn, we may find a way to end this conflict before it becomes a world wide disaster.”

When the voice of reason and wisdom silenced the room, Tymos whispered to Xan, “Tell of things as you know them, but don’t try to justify the actions of your kind. Questions can come later.”

After Xan had finished telling all he could, the questions came at him like bullets. Tymos and Kryslie took turns to indicate which questioner to answer next, thus deflecting the worst of the accusations. However, the questions lasted late into the night, with none of the questioners choosing to stop for the evening meal.

Tymos sensed when Xan’s stamina was ebbing and interrupted the flow of questions.

“I think we all understand why the Aeronites are desperate to return here, and why the mingling of their culture and ours will be disastrous. A war here would send ripples throughout the settled galaxy. Those of you who advocate sending fleet warriors to root out the aliens that are here should remember that Tymorea is a Guardian Planet. We do not wage war on innocents.”

“You call these Aeronites innocent?” Jarro Reslic demanded.

His brother, the President, did not react, instead, he let Tymos answer.

“Sir, we will continue this topic tomorrow. No decision should be made until all the facts are known.”

Xan slumped back into his chair, trembling from a combination of fatigue and from being the focus of so many hostile eyes for the whole day. He could not have lasted, except for the unswerving support of his two patrons. However, his mind was now filled with the enormity of what he had done. He recalled every secret he had revealed about his people and the Aeronite methods, weapons and defences. What if what he was doing was wrong? What if these Tymoreans would use what he told them to destroy his people?

He felt Kryslie touch his shoulder. “Xan, you are doing the right thing. For your people and for ours.”

“I want to believe that, but even I can tell that a lot of those people think I have tricked you, and that I will be spying on you to report to my former superiors.”

Tymos gave a faint snort of amusement. “Like your Warlord, they look at Krys and me and think they see children. You will notice that the Governors, and Elder Timenon did not interrupt us. We will deal with the others in our own way.”

Kryslie glanced quickly to where President Reslic was sitting and listening. She caught a fleeting twitch of a smile. He stirred when Xan said with real despair, “I still don’t know how you can defend against the Aeronite weapons. Kellex says they are so much more advanced than anything he has observed here.”

Reslic stirred, and spoke quietly from his seat, his attention on Xan. “Your Warlords, for all their perceived superiority, do not know everything about us.”

Xan jerked around, and blurted, “Like the jets? Kellex was surprised by them.”

“My point, Commander Xan. Tymorea is a world without great resources and most of our people do not choose a hi-tech life. It does not mean we are ignorant of technology.”

“We can talk more about the alien technology tomorrow,” Xyron proposed.

Kryslie felt compelled to add, “Aeronites have been observing us, unsuspected, for over twenty years without us being the wiser. And just as Xan may not know everything his people are capable of, we cannot assume that all of our secrets, are still secret.”

Tymos added, “Xan has told us that Aeronites have been space going for centuries, that they have fought the inhabitants of nearby worlds, and built colonies on some of them, and some previously uninhabited worlds. They may have made allies with other intelligent races, learnt alien technologies. Some of their space warriors may even have fought units of the Tymorean space fleet.”

In the silence, after Tymos finished speaking, while the Governors considered the implications of his suggestion, Xan turned to stare at him. He suddenly felt as if the air in the room had become charged. What was the Tymorean Space fleet? It opened up a completely new view of the Tymoreans - vistas that Kellex knew nothing about.

When he looked at the Governors, he saw they were all looking intently at Tymos. He glanced at him too, and saw that both Tymos and Kryslie had a very strange look on their faces.

“What have you seen?” Tymos asked, as the strangeness eased. “What wisdom has the Guardians shown you?”

Tymos seemed to need time to find his voice. When he did, it was firm and determined. “You have activated the ground and air forces. You have recalled the space fleet. We must concentrate the rest of our strength...” The pause seemed to last minutes, before Tymos finished. “Recall the missionaries.”

Xan took in the words, though the full meaning eluded him. He expected an angry outburst from the Governors, for the last three words had clearly been an order. However, they accepted it, and Governor Xyron rose at once, "I will send the recall immediately."

It was unbelievable - Warlord Kellex would never accept an order from a subordinate so calmly. Particularly not from a child...

Reslic rose and strode to the beam-in point, as Xan tried to grapple with the ideas that swirled in his mind. Something portentous had just happened, but he couldn't understand what it was.

"What did you mean? Recall the missionaries?"

Tymoros spoke before Kryslie could begin. "Xan, you could not know what is at stake here. It is not just the need for us to protect our people from yours. Tymorea is a Guardian Planet. The people of this world have been given a trust, and when there is peace here, there is peace throughout the universe. We have to consider that before we act."

The concept was foreign to Xan, and his mind could not even begin to understand it. He held onto the part he could comprehend.

"Recall the missionaries," he thought to himself, and he felt again that the words were portentous. "What would that do?"

Kryslie whispered into his mind, "We must maintain peace here. The missionaries are diplomats, scientists, highly trained agents and observers. They will be the backbone of our defending force. They have knowledge gleaned from thousands of worlds."

Xan shook his head as if trying to dislodge the information. But snippets of that knowledge were forming into an almost frightening realisation.

"I should have seen it - back when I was chasing you from village to village - and when I was challenging you...it is so obvious! But I couldn't get over Kellex's conviction that you were only the pampered whelps of a deluded and decadent leader."

"What should you have seen?" Kryslie asked softly.

"That old prophecy that Kellex believes in...it's true! He thought that by having Jordan, and Vila and the other young one, he would control the situation. That he could use them against you."

Tymoros was studying the young Aeronite with an intent expression, but he spoke casually. "What Prophecy?"

Xan didn't seem to hear him. He stared at Tymos and Kryslie, looking horrified. "It was never going to be them. It's you, and Tymos and..."

Wide eyed and terrified, Xan found he couldn't speak. In spite of the new truths he had learnt, old beliefs were still entrenched in his mind. Fear for his people was surging through him, making his body rigid, and his skin sweat.

Kryslie reached out a hand and took Xan's. She sensed the full extent of his terror. She sent him the sense of calm and peace.

"Xan, we are not like that. We are your friends. We are not unprincipled killers, we do not intend to betray your trust and destroy every one of your people. We promised to help them, and we will. But we will protect our world, our people...all life here."

Bile rose in his throat, and Xan swallowed convulsively. He felt the waves of peace coming from Kryslie, and felt she was trying to manipulate him. He believed he had been duped, and all his people were doomed. He had failed to protect them, failed his duty, he should have killed them...should kill them, now...

Kryslie glanced helplessly at Tymos, unsure how to proceed.

Tymoros studied Xan's body language and interpreted the conflict within. He spoke aloud, thoughtfully, and stayed sitting where he was. "For reasons of their own, and from a time before they left to go on tour with me, Tymos and Kryslie were investigating what we could learn of

Aerdna's problems and accumulating useful data. They convinced many of our wisest scientists and philosophers, to work towards a solution."

Slowly, the words penetrated Xan's terrified mind. Tymos and Kryslie had been trying to help, even before they met him. He turned to look at Kryslie. The undisguised hope in his expression was like the sun shining from behind a cloud.

"Xan, you are not a traitor. Forget what Kellex said, what others said. Kellex has been wrong so often about us that I doubt he would recognise the truth if he fell into it. We see you as a visionary, and saviour. You must be special; otherwise the Guardians of Peace would not have protected you, and led us to you."

"But what can you do?" Xan asked passionately?

Tymos spoke then, causing Xan to look at him. "Our solution may not be what you expect. And we will tell you our plan after we are finished here. We cannot evacuate the entire population of Aerdna, but there is a way they can survive. Everyone on Aerdna must work hard to make it possible. However, we must first convince the Warlords to go home, and leave Tymorea alone."

"But what can be done? Our scientists are predicting a cataclysm, that will destroy Aerdna."

He broke off as he saw the faces of Tymos and Kryslie go blank once more, and the air seem charged once again.

Unnerved by the odd behaviour, Xan glanced at Tymoros. The Governor was intent but unruffled.

"A moment, Xan," he said softly. "Other, greater, powers are at work here."

A moment later, both Tymos and Kryslie relaxed and were, once again, aware of their surroundings.

It was obvious that they both had a lot on their minds, but Kryslie only said, "Aerdna will survive. The people there, who do not have the option to flee to the colonies or anywhere else, will survive. This we promise."

"We have a great deal to discuss with Governor Xyron. Xan, you need to rest until tomorrow. Father, will you ask Aldiv to assist Xan back to the infirmary?" Tymos requested.

Waiting only for Tymoros's nod of agreement, Tymos and Kryslie touched their transmitters and disappeared.

When the council met again the following day, and Xan once more joined the group, he looked for Tymos and Kryslie. They both looked alert and smiled when they saw him. He recalled they were going to speak to Governor Xyron the previous night, and looked around for that personage. He had not yet arrived, but when he did, it seemed as if he had not slept.

However, as the day proceeded, Xan realised that the Governor was fully alert, for he asked most of the probing questions about the topic of the day - Aeronite weapons and defences, as well as Xan's scant knowledge of Aeronite science. His deft questioning prompted Xan to recall many details that he hadn't realised might be important.

For a time, the topic was the way the Aeronite Invasion force was organised. Xan told him that the six Warlords were the controlling force, with each responsible for a different aspect of the overall plan. He didn't know, exactly, what the Warlords, other than Kellex, were doing. At best, he had hints gleaned from partly heard conversations. When talking about Kellex, he knew a lot and had no compunction about telling it all. He expected an angry reaction when he mentioned Kellex's 'toys' and 'experiments' and while the Governors looked grim, the rest of the group did not seem surprised.

When he spoke of the drunken road guard that Kellex kept as a prisoner, both Tymos and Kryslie stiffened. That information meant something to his patrons, but rest of the audience did not seem to have made the same connection.

Later, Xan overheard some of the audience agreeing the road guard, must have revealed details of the Estate security. They could not see any other way that Kellex had been able to infiltrate on the night of Llaimos's birth.

Xan had revealed that Kellex himself had led that raid, and had been the only one of the team to escape. Now he blurted, "He had infiltrated here before..."

Several people shot questions at him, one was Jarro Reslic. "When was this?"

"I have no details; it is just something Kellex said about changes in security from the last time."

Xan glanced at the Governors. If this revelation would mean trouble for him, it would come from them. Their faces were expressionless, and Xan guessed that they already knew.

Kryslie murmured reassurance once more. "They know already. We told them of Jordan, Vila and Pyr, and Mithas told us how they had been taken."

When the day finally ended, Xan sat back and asked, "What now?"

Tymos considered before suggesting, "Unless you have more to say, I think perhaps you should work with Xyron's scientists. You can review the data that has been collected to help Aerdna."

"I'm no scientist," Xan protested.

Kryslie gave his arm a gentle squeeze. "If you don't understand something, ask questions. We need you to be able to oversee the implementation of the plan. The details will be written so that intelligent people can understand them. You will probably need to explain to the lesser scientists what you said here of Aerdna's scientific capability."

"But no one will listen to me. How could I implement this plan if I am a traitor and nameless?"

"Learn now," Tymos suggested. "A way will be found to get the plans to those who need them."

"Will you be helping too?" Xan asked, hoping the answer would be yes.

He saw Tymos and Kryslie sigh in unison, and then shrug.

"We have another day of talking, and then we will probably have to return to lessons," Kryslie murmured, trying not to feel resentful.

"And is there a problem with that," Jono Reslic asked her directly. "Have you a pressing need to be elsewhere?"

"No, Sir," she answered truthfully. Except that she had a nagging itch in the back of her mind that she and Tymos did have something important to do. She hoped the next day, when defences were discussed, that the answer might come to her.

For the final day, Tymos and Kryslie sat with Jonnsen, Reslic's eldest son, and Harron, one of Xyron's sons, as the council went over the defensive strategies. Most were either already in place, or well underway. There did not seem anything specific, that they, personally, needed to do.

During the morning break, Elder Timenon sought them out and asked them for their opinion of the matters discussed so far.

"It seems like all possibilities have been covered," Tymos commented, and his glance towards the older scientists and section heads was slightly aggrieved. Now that he and Kryslie had finished their reports, they seemed to have been relegated back to 'half-educated children'.

"But?" Timenon prompted.

"We feel that there is something," Kryslie blurted. "But we can't think what it must be."

"And we wouldn't be allowed to ..." Tymos began to add, but he saw Timenon frown slightly. He subsided. "Sorry, I know what is expected of us."

“I am sure that you do,” Timenon agreed, his face again, agelessly calm. “If there is indeed a task that you must do, that knowledge will come to you at the right time. Are you sure there is nothing you need to do here first?”

“There are several things I want to do,” Tymos admitted, though he didn’t specify. A picture of Zacary came to mind immediately along with the sense of something urgent.

“Patience then,” Timenon counselled, before he moved away to talk to other groups.

Chapter 13 - Subtle Treachery

Morov had little to do during the days when Tymos was closeted with the Elders and Governors. At least when the Prince had been off the Estate, the senior servant had assigned him other duties – but now he must be available for when he was needed.

So he took the opportunity to relax in the special area of the gardens set aside for palace servers. Since his short trip off the Estate, en-route to Dira and while touring back, he had developed a keen interest in what it was like elsewhere on Tymorea. He used his free time to read treatises on the geography of his world, especially the mountains where his charge, Tymos, had been travelling.

He decided against using any of the free benches or low-slung recliners, and sat instead on the ground with his back against a tree, where he was shaded from the brightness of the sun. Every now and then, he looked up from the data padd and let his mind imagine the distant places he was reading about.

On one such glance up, he spotted Zacary working at one of the nearby garden beds. In the two months that he had been back, while Tymos was travelling in the mountains, Morov had caught up on all the gossip about Zacary. How he had turned up back here just after the Royal Tour had gone off, that he was so far the only survivor of the ill-fated third scout party and that he had been tortured and was lucky to be alive. He was a minor celebrity because of that, since the rest of the scouts were dead or still missing.

Morov had his own private opinion, and that was that Zacary had turned yellow and run off. He wasn't feeling particularly sympathetic towards him. When the news had filtered through the palace that Tymos and Kryslie were missing, the little squib had made a point of coming up and accusing him of losing his charge. At the time, Morov had been feeling partly to blame, even though Rogert, the Chief Psychologist, had counselled him that he could have done nothing to prevent it.

Still, the tiny malicious part of Morov had invented reasons why Zacary was still doing menial jobs around the palace. However, he kept those ideas to himself and was glad that his supervisor kept him busy where Zacary could not find him and needle him too often.

For now, he just hoped that if he kept his concentration on his reading, Zacary would leave him alone.

It didn't work.

"Slacking off, Morov?"

"On a break," Morov replied without looking up. "Don't let me distract you from your work."

"Oh, I'm due a break, saw you here," Zacary sounded like he was trying to be friendly.

"Why don't you go and try to hunt up some of your little girl friends?" Morov suggested, hiding his own disgust.

"Hey! What do you mean by that?"

He sounded genuinely surprised, and that puzzled Morov. Enough of the other servants had noticed Zacary hugging young girls, at various times, that it couldn't be imagination. Morov had seen it himself.

To smooth over the situation, Morov tactfully lied. "Well, you know, you are a bit of a hero for surviving all you did."

Zacary seemed to preen, and think that Morov was being friendly.

"I haven't seen you around much since you got back."

Morov thought to himself, "And that much is too much." He didn't want to be rude, but he didn't want to waste time talking to Zacary, and he was relieved when his pager beeped. He glanced at the message, and said quickly, "I have to go."

“Oh? Is Prince Tymos back?”

Morov knew Zacary was watching him, but he could truthfully say, “Old Beelings has been using me as an extra pair of hands – I will be glad when Prince Tymos is back.”

The feigned sour face convinced the other that he was speaking the truth.

Zacary returned to his apparent task, regretting his hasty question, particularly as Morov had betrayed no sign that it might be true. After a while, he moved his equipment closer to where level delta students were doing their physical exercises. The guards near the group ignored him as he pretended to be working. They did not notice his frequent glances at the students or the gesture he made to Stenn Reslic before he walked off into a stand of trees.

The guards challenged Stenn, who simply said, “I’m not going far. I need to ask someone a question.”

“What do you want?” Stenn demanded when he saw Zacary waiting for him. He did not realise that his mind had not questioned why he left his class.

Using an obscure dialect, that he wasn’t aware that he knew, Zacary spoke two phrases. Stenn’s belligerence vanished as the hypnotic trance was imposed.

“Are Tymos and Kryslie back yet?” was the question of most importance to Zacary.

“No,” Stenn said flatly.

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I am! Tymos would go and see Llaimos, first thing.”

Zacary dismissed Llaimos. He was just a baby. “If Tymos ran off, he will be too busy explaining himself to visit babies.”

“He didn’t run off! Father knows he and Kryslie are talking to the mutants.”

Something in Zacary became very interested in that information, so he questioned Stenn to find out all he knew. Then he heard someone calling, and it sounded like that annoying commoner, Keleb, so he quickly made a suggestion, spoke the words to make Stenn forget this talk, snapped his fingers and watched his unwitting informant trot back to his class. He drew himself further into the trees and smirked. Stenn Reslic was going to be in trouble again.

Keleb stopped his practice bout with Jonko when he noticed Stenn trotting off into the trees.

“I’ll just go and see what he is up to,” Keleb whispered, passing the practice sword to his friend.

“Don’t be long,” Jonko warned. “If he is slacking off, his Uncle can have words with him.” He shrugged in the direction of Perrin Reslic who was watching the trees.

When their instructor looked away, Keleb slipped out of the clearing, making a gesture towards where Stenn had gone when the guard moved to intercept him.

“Stenn?” he called quietly. He repeated the call, and still got no reply. He dared not stay away from class much longer, and headed back. He was still distracted, when he returned. Denlic, his new training partner found him an easy victim for his attacks. Perrin called out waspishly for him to concentrate.

On the next change of partners, he found himself nudged by Stenn. His relief at his friend’s return vanished when he was asked, “What’s with Jon? I saw him going off into the trees all of a sudden.”

Keleb was thinking, “First Stenn and now Jonko?”

Aloud, he said, “I’ll go and find out.” When Stenn offered to come with him, he said quickly, “You stay here.”

He didn’t want Stenn in any more trouble. He had been playing up a lot, lately. This odd behaviour was reminiscent of Jonko talking to Zacary and not recalling doing so. Keleb wanted to know if this was the case again.

He hadn't gone far when he saw Jonko trotting back towards the class, but he ducked out of sight for a moment and then headed to where he had seen his friend reappear. Sure enough, he saw Zacary striding away, with his gardening tools, and seemingly ignored by the patrolling guards.

For a moment, Keleb considered asking the guards what they had seen, but he decided against that. He would talk to his guardian first, since Governor Xyron had asked him to report any more odd behaviour he noticed. He hadn't noticed Jonko acting strange since that first time, but Stenn had been acting downright odd for a couple of months – now he thought about it.

Keleb headed back to join his class, and began hearing raised voices. It sounded like Stenn arguing with his uncle. He hurried his pace, wanting to be there to calm Stenn down.

Jonko was already trying to do that, by holding onto his friend as Stenn was saying, "...you're always picking on me!"

Keleb drew close enough to hear Perrin calmly pointing out, "You were not concentrating. I know you can do better. You will repeat the exercise three times and if you still don't get it right you will keep doing it until you do."

Stenn strode off without acknowledging the instruction. He stopped a few paces away; stood rigidly until he controlled his anger enough to begin the 'dance' that was actually a series of sword thrusts and parries. He kept his back to everyone, even his friends.

Jonko stood by Keleb, concerned about Stenn. He sensed Perrin Reslic come up behind them and merely turned and asked, "What do you want me to do next, Sir?"

"Tell me why you ran off from my class!"

Jonko was about to say, "But I didn't," when he suddenly recalled doing that and said instead, "I suddenly felt ill, and needed to be sick. I feel better now."

Keleb felt his mouth start to open at this obvious lie, but Perrin seemed to accept it since Jonko had never left class before or been in trouble.

"Go and see if you can correct Lexina's gamma attack drill," Perrin directed.

When Jonko had gone, Keleb felt Perrin's attention on him. "You were about to say something? Like why you ran off as well? I would advise against copying my nephew's current behaviour. Were you tired of the exercise I set you?"

"No, Sir," Keleb denied all Perrin's insinuations. "However, I was concerned that both Stenn and Jonko were behaving strangely. My foster father has asked me to look for and report such things. When I was in the trees, I saw Zacary striding away. He disturbs me!"

Perrin studied Keleb for a few moments and considered other concerns relating to Zacary and Stenn.

"My brother and your guardian should hear of this and investigate. I am aware that my nephew and Zacary do not like each other, so Stenn is unlikely to want to run off in the middle of a class to talk to him. Jonko has been coaching Zacary, so he should have no reason to lie about seeing him."

Keleb remained silent, as his instructor considered things.

"All the Governor's are concerned about Zacary's recovery...do you have any thoughts about this?"

Keleb shook his head. "Stenn suggested we keep away from Zacary and he does make me uncomfortable for some reason but I can't say why."

"I'll speak to the guards; they have been keeping an eye on him. I don't think it is anything sinister, since Governor Tymoros found no indications of indoctrination, brainwashing or alien control. But he did suffer a severe ordeal..."

"So did I," Keleb reminded the older man and he saw he had startled Perrin with that reminder. "And I think Kryslie helped me. I wish she could check him out and my friends too. If something were going on, she'd know. Do you think you can ask her to do it when she has a free moment?"

“What gives you the idea that she is here?” Perrin asked with a dangerous edge to his question.

Keleb sensed it and paled. “I...felt sure she and Tymos were back. No one has said anything to me but...I sensed an increase in the strength of the aura around here. Jonko should have sensed it as well.”

“And have you spoken of this?” Perrin demanded.

“No! No, Sir, I haven’t.”

Perrin glanced at his wrist chronometer. “At the end of class, bring Jonko to the antechamber next to the Conference Room. I will arrange permission for you and advise your guardian. I will let my brother deal with his ill-mannered whelp. Meanwhile, go and see if you can improve your attack skills against Denlic.”

Keleb nodded and went to obey with a lighter heart. He must be right; Tymos and Kryslie were back, even if they were not letting it be known.

During the mid afternoon, after they had eaten the supplied tray of lunch food, Tymos and Kryslie sat back in two of the chairs. They thought over the past six days, and tried to find any trace of information that they had not revealed. The Elders had gone off to discuss strategies and defences with the scientists. Reslic was busy passing orders to the space fleet and directing the ‘air force’. The latter was little more than the fleet of rapid messenger craft, and their weapons had been installed only months before.

Tymoros was overseeing the recall of the missionaries from thousands of planets. Only Xyron remained, and he was involved in his own meditations, but occasionally asked more about the mutants and the types of mutations they had observed.

They were all disturbed by the beep of Xyron’s communicator. After reading the message, Xyron instructed his discreet and silent attendant to, “Let him in.”

Tymos and Kryslie recognised Perrin Reslic as he strode in. He bowed to Xyron and requested a private conversation. They rose and moved towards the windows and turned their attention to watching the movement of people in the gardens. They were not deliberately trying to pay attention to the conversation, but a few words were sufficiently audible and both began to listen.

“Zacary” was the first word to catch their awareness, and Tymos recalled what Morov had told him a few days before. Then when they heard Stenn’s name, and Jonko’s, the hairs on his neck began to prickle. Feeling that he must join the conversation, Tymos returned to the two older men with Kryslie following him like a shadow.

“Jonko, Stenn and how many more?” Tymos demanded, ignoring the glare Perrin gave him for interrupting.

Xyron turned his attention to Tymos and asked, “You think there will be more?”

Instinct more than proof gave Tymos the answer, “It is likely.”

“How and why would Zacary be influencing them? He has no power now,” Kryslie spoke with emphasis.

Xyron did not comment on the interruptions to his conversation. “He was with the third scout party and found his way back here.”

He quickly and tersely described Zacary’s condition when he returned, in more detail than Tymos had heard from Morov.

“We saw others from that group, commoners and Royals,” Kryslie spoke aloud. “They were all killed. How did he escape?”

“We believe that his brother was also a prisoner, and he managed to help him. We can find no indication that he has been made into a spy,” Xyron admitted, and went on to add, “But we are troubled about him.”

Perrin Reslic spoke up. "We have him watched. He hasn't ventured into unauthorised places but we have had incidents of children being in restricted areas. Keleb has reported incidents of Zacary talking to people and later quite sincerely denying the meeting. Jonko is one of these. He is waiting in the anteroom with Keleb."

"What has Zacary been doing?" Tymos asked.

"Light duties around the Estate," Perrin said. "Gardening mainly. The guards see him talking to lots of people of all ages."

"And you say that Father found nothing?" Kryslie asked.

Xyron nodded. "He did suggest that you should examine him."

"Yes," Kryslie agreed. "And Jonko? Is that why you have him waiting next door?"

Perrin nodded and saw Kryslie exchange glances with her brother, and wondered what they were saying to each other.

"Could you have Xan brought back here. I would like to talk to him before I see Jonko."

Perrin gave a slight bow to Kryslie and left to arrange it.

"You wanted to talk to me?" Xan asked when he arrived.

"Yes," Kryslie confirmed and asked directly, "Does Kellex use telepathy?"

Xan was startled by the question.

"Until I met you, I believed that reading others' minds was impossible. I am sure that no Aeronite can do that. You must be mistaken."

In spite of the negative answer, Kryslie sensed a new terror in Xan's mind.

"No, I am sure that Jordan can," Tymos insisted. "Though that is no proof. And my instinct tells me that it was Kellex who has placed ideas in people's heads before this. Did Kellex have Zacary tortured?"

"I don't know the one you refer to," Xan said with a mouth gone suddenly dry. "But he had that drunken road guard, Yuri. Kellex could make him tell him whatever he wanted to know."

"Yuri," Xyron echoed. He looked at Tymos and explained. "Zacary's brother."

Xan hurriedly said, "But maybe what you said is true. Warlord Kellex always seemed to be able to know what people were thinking."

"Did you see any of our third scout party?" Kryslie asked, but her eyes seemed to be cutting into his mind.

"Only from a distance. I knew the Warlord had prisoners." Xan's mind recalled how he had seen the prisoners being treated like animals, and whipped to work harder. "And I heard he had a way to separate your commoners from the others. I don't know the details."

"Where were you during this?" Tymos asked, intently.

"Away...learning about you, or about the mutants." Xan swallowed hard. He was beginning to understand how Yuri must have felt.

He felt a gentle hand rest on his shoulder, and only then realised that Kryslie had come closer to support him.

"Tell us about Yuri?" Kryslie invited.

"I tried to have little to do with him," Xan admitted. "I last saw him after that abortive raid here. When I told Kellex about seeing you, and your brother, and we saw the fireworks for the birth of the new Prince. Kellex made Yuri tell him everything he could. And during that, Kellex decided that Yuri's brother was one of his 'experiments'."

Xan felt the slight tensing of Kryslie's hand.

Xyron had mentioned that Zacary thought his brother had helped him escape. It seemed likely that Yuri had unintentionally identified his brother to Kellex.

Kryslie asked gently, "What can you tell us about Kellex's experiments?"

"Mainly gossip, things that the older commanders claimed and I didn't really believe. But Kellex did say something to me after I returned with the mutant leader. He asked about entrances to the underground caverns, but I had found no sign of them. He said that they

existed because one of his 'experiments' took someone there. That fit in with what I was told about Kellex liking to corrupt unsuspecting Royals."

Kryslie looked at Xyron and suggested, "Ones with latent telepathy that haven't learnt to shield? Like Sacul."

"We will need to check all the children that have been seen with Zacary," Xyron realised.

Tymos took up the question, "Xan, if Kellex has somehow placed controls on Zacary's mind, how do you think he could work through Zacary to reach others here?"

"I...really don't know," Xan admitted. "I really thought Kellex had to be close to his 'experiments' to get them to do anything."

"Inconclusive," Tymos muttered. "So we say Yuri freed Zacary, but they were caught again...there is time enough for Kellex to have laid coercions on him, but ...I feel we are missing some important information still."

"I agree," Kryslie stated. "I can see Kellex making Zacary a tool to collect information, and later dipping into his mind, but I am not convinced that Kellex could train Zacary to create new 'experiments'."

"That is where our hypothesis breaks down. Krys, do you think you can tell anything from Jon's mind? If it is like Sacul's mind was?"

"I will talk to Jon," Kryslie agreed, and a tendril of a memory teased her mind. Something she had sensed when talking to Kellex...

Yes! The image of a cloaked and hooded figure and the sense of powerful allies. She felt a shiver of premonition and knew her brother shared it.

Chapter 14 - Unwitting Traitor

Stenn Reslic expected more ‘words’ from his uncle at the end of the class, but when Perrin dismissed them and immediately transmitted away, he was greatly relieved. He decided to leave just as quickly to go to his apartment, get clean, eat a snack and get to the nursery.

At least, that was his intention since he was taking his promise of protecting Llaimos, and teaching him, very seriously. Therefore it was a shock to suddenly find himself down in the aircraft hangar cavern, with no idea how he had got there.

Well, he knew how to get there – he just didn’t remember doing it. Especially in the dark.

It was a further shock when he heard the faint clicks of three weapons being put into ready mode, and furtive movements further off in the darkness. His first thought was to run as the guards weren’t yet in view or he would see the red and green pin-lights on their goggles. Common sense told him he had little chance of not being found. If he ran, he would probably run right into an aircraft. In all ways, the guards had the advantage.

He heard running footsteps receding, moments before the expected challenge.

“Stand still! Don’t move!”

He saw in his side vision, two pinpoint green lights and obeyed, watching as the lights came around to face him.

“Arms out straight to the sides!”

Stenn resignedly obeyed, and felt himself searched for weapons or sabotage devices. His transmitter and bio-monitor were removed, before his arms were grabbed.

“Who was here with you?” one guard demanded.

“I don’t know,” Stenn admitted truthfully.

They didn’t believe him for the question was asked again. He repeated his answer.

“What are you doing here?” was the next question.

They wouldn’t believe him, but again he told the truth. “I don’t know.”

The tiny green lights winked off seconds before a powerful torch was turned on in his face, blinding him.

“What hopper brained game are you playing now, Stenn?” another of the guards blurted.

The miscreant in question recognised the voice of his youngest uncle.

“I don’t know,” Stenn repeated, but this time his voice was unsteady.

He knew the routine from then on, and he suddenly felt quite ill. His father had been very unimpressed with his recent spate of ‘mischief’ when he ‘couldn’t remember’ doing things. This was the twelfth such incident in two months, though his father had only learnt about five of them, but Stenn was becoming quite anxious – thinking he was going mad.

He knew what it looked like – like he was still an irresponsible delinquent. But he wasn’t. He wasn’t trying to be clever, or finding reasons to hang back in his studies.

Maybe he had been irresponsible once, but that was before Tymos and Kryslie had arrived. Now he was trying to prove himself. But if he couldn’t explain his ‘inexplicable’ actions...

His mind flicked through likely scenarios as he was hustled to the cavern beam-in point. They all started with an almighty dressing down from his father who had been tied up in important meetings all week, and would resent such a petty interruption.

After that, the options varied, but always came back to the ones he dreaded – having medics and psychs testing him for instability. It didn’t matter that they had put him up into level delta – they could still neutralise his power – like they had done to Zacary.

It wasn’t his father that he faced across the desk in his father’s office, but his uncle. That was no relief, especially after that afternoon. When Uncle Perrin was deputising for his father, he was an implacable force.

“Why were you in the caverns? You know it is out of bounds unless you were sent on an errand.” Perrin did not waste time on preliminaries.

“Uncle, I don’t know – really,” Stenn pleaded. He squirmed, trying to get free from the guard’s grip.

“You were there,” Perrin stated. “The ground level door was open and Jerrak heard someone running out. Who was with you?”

“I don’t know!” Stenn insisted. “Besides, I know where the door is, but I don’t know the unlock code!”

“You could have transmitted in and opened it from the other side. Is that what you did?” Perrin asked accusingly.

“No! I mean, I don’t know!” Stenn insisted.

Perrin demanded answers to more questions, none of which Stenn could answer, and from his uncle’s face he knew his uncle thought he was avoiding admitting his true reasons.

Finally, with an audible sigh of disgust, Perrin directed, “Take my nephew to an isolation room until his Excellency can speak to him.”

“Uncle Perrin,” Stenn protested, trying to struggle around to face his uncle. “You can’t. I have to be in the nursery...”

“You should have thought of that before you pulled your latest prank.”

“I didn’t...”

Perrin sighed. “I know...you don’t remember getting there, never intended to go there,” he summarised severely, making his disapproval apparent. “I appreciate your dedication to protecting Llaimos, but do you really think it wise to be with him if you are doing things unintentionally?”

Perrin used Stenn’s own answers against him.

Stenn stopped struggling and his shoulders slumped. Put like that...

“No,” he admitted dejectedly. “Could you at least tell Jonko or Keleb that I can’t get there?”

Knowing that his friends were tied up elsewhere, Perrin said, more kindly, “Llaimos will be fine for one evening.”

Kryslie tightened her mental shields and paused for a moment before leaving the Conference Room. She could walk out into the anteroom, but she intended to transmit and arrive behind Jonko as Tymos walked to face them. When she had discerned where her friends were positioned, she nodded at Tymos. He began to walk, activating the automatic door, as Kryslie transmitted.

“Tymos!” Jonko exclaimed in surprise. “I wasn’t expecting to see you! I thought I was in trouble.”

“I take it you are pleased to see me,” Tymos grinned. He gave no indication of his sister’s presence, but noted her concentration.

“Of course! Where is Kryslie?”

“Behind you,” Kryslie said clearly.

Jonko spun around and before he could speak again, he found himself caught in an enthusiastic embrace. His mind, full of pleased surprise, suddenly froze when his eyes met Kryslie’s brilliant blue ones. He tried to move, but his body seemed frozen as well. He could still see, and he realised that Tymos and Keleb were moving to the far side of the chamber.

Then his mind seemed to be reviewing his memories, like a flickering reverse rerun of his life. He knew Kryslie was doing something – for the inside of his head felt exceedingly strange. He didn’t try to resist her, because he trusted her, and knew that when she finished, she would explain.

After feeling as if his head was going to explode, he felt that the tight band he could imagine around his Temples – suddenly snapped and the headache was gone.

The rerun of memories went forward to the present.

“What did you do?” Jonko asked. “I know you did something.”

Kryslie grinned faintly. “I removed a whole collection of hypnotic commands – one of which was for you to run to Zacary as soon as you knew we were back.”

“Zacary?” Jonko said incredulously. “How? When? I mean, I know Stenn warned me – but I had met him and he seemed okay.”

“He probably did it at that first meeting,” Kryslie proposed. She sensed Jonko thinking back and finding memories he hadn’t realised he had.

“But why? He didn’t know then that I even knew you. Tobias asked me if I could help a friend of his. So I agreed.”

“It might have been a spur of the moment idea,” Tymos suggested when he came back over. “I suspect that Zacary only worked on younger children before you. The older ones probably wouldn’t have anything to do with him.”

“Why ever not?” Jonko asked.

“A bit of snobbery, I expect,” Kryslie suggested. “Tymoreans aren’t perfect. Zacary was disempowered.”

“Because of what he did to Tymos?” Jonko asked.

“That and other things,” Tymos brushed the details aside. “But I would say that he saw your brown hair, thought you an ignorant yokel, and too juicy a target to pass up.”

Jonko suddenly swore an Earth curse, “Bloody hell! I prattled to him like an imbecile.”

Keleb asked, “Do you think Zacary could have done something like this to Stenn, too?”

“Why? What has he been doing?” Tymos asked.

Keleb mentioned things that he knew about.

“I can’t see Zacary being clever enough to catch him unawares,” Kryslie decided.

Jonko moved his head in a nod of insight. “Senna!”

Tymos made the connection faster than his sister, but only because of comments made by Morov.

“He’s getting the younger girls to come up and kiss him,” Keleb vocalised.

“Yeah, he implied to Stenn that he was going to make out with Senna. Stenn went for him. I saw the scratches and bruises.” Jonko suddenly turned to Keleb. “Are you alright?”

“I had warning, and I didn’t feel comfortable near him,” Keleb murmured. He turned to Kryslie, “What will you do for all the others he is playing mind games with?”

Xyron had come into the anteroom unnoticed, but he asked, “What did you find, Kryslie?”

“Simple hypnosis, very low key or you would have noticed it. I expect that he may have used the same trigger words and actions on everyone he has affected like those children seen doing unsanctioned things.”

“A course of anti-hypnotic sleep conditioning should counter that,” Xyron considered. “I will arrange it for all the students. You know the triggers?”

Kryslie nodded.

“We treated Zacary as a matter of routine when he returned,” Xyron commented.

“If Kellex had him for long enough, he might have been resistant?” Tymos suggested.

“Or the commands might have been reimplanted telepathically,” Kryslie proposed.

“Or we have missed something,” Tymos added.

“Well, I am glad you fixed me,” Jonko said with emphasis. “Could he do it again?”

“Less likely now that you are alert to him, and if I may advise – don’t accept sweets from strangers,” Kryslie forced a wry grin.

“He drugged me?” Jonko realised.

“Yup!” Kryslie agreed.

“Who put him up to it?”

“Our first bet is that odorous Kellex,” Tymos told him. “Perhaps you should have killed him when you had the chance.”

“Anyway, Jon, you are okay to go. Just don’t mention to anyone that we are back, okay?”

Kryslie seemed to want to hurry their friends out. Tymos gave her a quizzical look, but then he noticed Perrin Reslic waiting patiently near the door.

“Yeah, we’ll see you later. I’ll send Morov for you,” Tymos added.

“Won’t you be visiting your brother?” Keleb asked.

“He knows we are back. He’s fine,” Tymos assured him. “Besides, Stenn will be with him.”

Jonko and Keleb left the room, and only then did Perrin Reslic approach.

“Actually, my nephew won’t be able to attend your brother this evening. My brother wishes for you to examine Stenn on his behalf, Princess Kryslie.”

From the use of her title, Kryslie knew the request was official. She would be acting in the President Governor’s name.

“Certainly, Lord Perrin. Where will I find him?”

“Isolation room 11. You will be allowed in.”

Mentally, Tymos muttered, “Uh-Oh.”

“May I ask why isolation was deemed necessary?” Kryslie asked.

Perrin explained, and added, “I sincerely hope that his problem is as easy to solve as young Jonko’s.”

“Yes,” she agreed.

Stenn hadn’t stopped pacing the eight steps wide by eight steps long isolation room since he had been placed there. For one thing, it felt too quiet – like they had done something to suck all the ambient sound from the room. Even when he kicked the table or chair in his excess of frustration and disgust, the sound was muted.

For another thing, if he sat still, he’d start thinking about the inevitable interview with his father, and all of the invidious scenarios he’d already thought of. The time he had spent in the white painted room already seemed like hours, though it hadn’t got dark yet so it wasn’t that late. Still, his stomach was growling. He had intended to eat something right after his class. Without his wrist chronometer, he could not judge the time, so he went to the window to see what he could of the activities outside.

When he heard a faint sound behind him, he went rigid. The feeling of power in the room had suddenly increased, in the way it did when his father came near. He turned, slowly, reluctantly – bracing himself for the expected lecture.

But it wasn’t his father.

“Kryslie? What...?”

“Sit down,” Kryslie directed, pointing to the bed. As he obeyed, she pulled the chair closer.

“When did you get back? Why are you here?” Stenn babbled. He was both relieved and confused.

“We have been back nearly a week,” Kryslie told him, and saw him nod as if just now comprehending something.

“You are the reason why my father has been so busy,” Stenn said.

“Yes, and why he is currently too busy to deal with petty nuisances like you,” Kryslie admitted, and then grinned faintly at Stenn’s involuntary flush.

“Are you here to censure me in his stead,” Stenn challenged.

Kryslie jerked in surprise. “No. Why would you think that?”

Stenn stared at her. “Why? Because you have the same aura of power about you that my father does, and if you excuse my presumption, you feel angry.”

It was Kryslie’s turn to flush. “I am not angry with you, and although I am here at your father’s request, it is not to give you a lecture.”

“What then?”

“I will get to that,” Kryslie promised. “But first, tell me why you have been behaving like a juvenile idiot? It’s not like you.”

“You’re wrong,” Stenn said bleakly. “Though I haven’t been acting like one intentionally since you came, I used to.”

“Tell me what has been happening,” Kryslie suggested. “Just between you and me. From your point of view – honestly. I have heard some things, but I need to hear from your perspective.”

Kryslie sensed Stenn’s reluctance to admit that he thought he was going mad. “This is just between us,” she repeated.

“For now!” Stenn contested. “If my father asks about this, you would have to tell him.”

“What I might have to report to him, may very well be something totally unlike what you are thinking. Really, I have a reason for my questions, but I cannot explain yet.”

With extreme diffidence, Stenn began to tell her of the odd things he had noticed himself doing. There were a lot more such events than Perrin had learnt about. Kryslie noted the oddity that he never mentioned Zacary. Odd because people had seen the two of them talking, amicably they assumed, on quite a few occasions.

When Stenn finished, after saying, “I don’t recall intending to do any of that stuff,” he asked, “You believe me, don’t you?”

“Tym and I haven’t told you to stay away from Llaimos have we?”

“Uncle Perrin stuck me here! He implied I might have harmed Llaimos, if I was doing things unintentionally.”

“Hmm,” Kryslie mused. “Well, Llaimos is fine. He knows we are back, and he has the advantage of being kept in rooms completely shielded from stray thoughts.”

A look of understanding changed Stenn’s face from worried to hopeful. Then it fell into abstraction. “Do you think I am acting like Sacul did? Or hearing voices like Zacary?”

“Are you?” Kryslie asked neutrally.

“Voices? I don’t think so. Certainly nothing like when you tried mind-talk on me.”

Kryslie accepted that and began to comment. “Your uncle spoke to Governor Xyron about you and Jonko.” She paused, giving Stenn a chance to react. He scowled.

“What? Because I sounded off at him?”

“No, because you ran off during class...again...without permission or explanation, and were less than attentive afterwards,” Kryslie corrected him.

“I didn’t run off. Jonko did,” Stenn insisted. He honestly did not recall his own wandering.

“Actually, Stenn, you did. Keleb saw both of you go off...and...he saw Zacary walking off.”

“Zacary? That cretin? I wouldn’t go near him with a twenty foot stave,” Stenn blurted.

“That is what I thought. Jonko told Perrin he needed to be sick, but Keleb sensed he had intended to say something else, then changed it to that.”

“Do you think Zacary is behind this? But how?”

“It seems likely, but I haven’t approached him yet. Tym and I have reasons for not wanting it known that we are back, so Zacary will wait a bit. What I found with Jon, when I approached him, was an implanted series of hypnotic commands. And fortunately we were in a shielded area, for one of those commands was to go and tell Zacary as soon as he learnt we were back.”

“Is that what you think he did to me?”

Kryslie nodded. “I sensed the same compulsion when you first saw me.”

“How? I would ever let that cretin get the better of me,” Stenn insisted.

“Normally, I would agree, but Zacary figured your weak spot. Jon mentioned you had a go at him about Senna.”

Kryslie felt his surge of anger.

“She’s thirteen! He told me how good she was at kissing,” Stenn exploded. “The perverted cretin has been seen kissing a lot of the young girls. He’s eighteen!”

That revelation about the girls, Kryslie filed away for later thought.

“What do you remember about that fight?” Kryslie asked carefully.

"I warned him off my sister, gave him a pummelling, and I didn't care if I split his healing wounds..."

"Did you make up afterwards?"

"No damn way!"

"He didn't offer you a peppermint?"

"No, why would he?"

"Jon recalled Zacary giving him one, and feeling weird afterwards."

"No. No peppermint, but he did try to squirt me with something," Stenn recalled suddenly.

"Ah," Kryslie said without explanation. She had seen a brief recollection of the device in his mind.

"What?" Stenn demanded, tired of all the cryptic remarks.

"Lay down will you? I want to try something."

Stenn complied, without fuss, stretching out on the neatly made bed. He was intensely curious, but he held his tongue, when Kryslie began to move her hand over him, an inch above his clothes, and going from his feet to his head. He could see the look of concentration on her face as if she was looking at him, yet looking into him. He noticed with amazement that the shape of her eyes had changed.

Kryslie adjusted her eyes and invoked the 'energy' sight – and seeing Stenn only as a glowing energy form. Then, instead of looking at the whole shape, she concentrated on one small section at a time. Her perception that all was normal continued until her hand reached the level of Stenn's neck, and then a shiver went through her. She concentrated more intensely, and discerned the faintest trace of a greenish aura at that point. She continued to move her hand over his head, and found it normal.

She normalised her eyes, sat back and considered.

"You found something?" Stenn asked.

"Possibly." She didn't sound certain. "I will have to bring Tym here."

"Am I sick or something?" Stenn demanded.

"No, horribly healthy," Kryslie assured him. She decided it was time she explained things to her friend. "I think that a peppermint that Zacary gave Jon was drugged to make him susceptible to hypnosis, and be purposed to find out things and report back. It was easy for me to counter. Xyron is arranging some sleep conditioning for those who are likely to be vulnerable."

"That might as well be everyone. Zacary has been getting around."

"True, but he has been under observation, and he has mostly spoken to students or lower servants."

Stenn snorted. "He hasn't changed. He is still picking on those weaker than him."

"Except you," Kryslie pointed out.

"And Jonko," Stenn added.

"Well, that's true, but if you remember when we first got here, he assumed we were yokels because our hair was brown then?"

"I did warn Jonko about him – maybe I was too late?"

Kryslie shrugged. "Keleb didn't trust him."

Stenn grinned faintly. "Good for him. So I was a target and you think what? He wanted to get at me for his own reasons, or whoever got at him wanted to get at me?"

"That's it. I'm not sure. If Zacary identified you to the person controlling him, that person might have expected you to have access to more classified stuff."

"Zacary would love to get me in trouble," Stenn admitted. "It probably didn't take much to encourage him to go for me."

"That is another point," Kryslie agreed.

"So, can you help me?" Stenn asked.

“Oh, yes,” she assured him. “But I want you to stay here for a bit – until after I have examined Zacary. Will you be a good boy?”

Stenn growled. “I am not a ...”

He found his mouth covered when Kryslie leant forward and unexpectedly kissed him. He was too stunned to react when she also embraced him, and he found his mind and body could no longer move.

“What did you...” he began to ask as soon as he was able to talk. Kryslie put a finger to his lips to silence him.

“I apologise for taking advantage of you, and truly, I’d like to try that again when we both can enjoy it. However, I had a reason. What did you notice while I was twitching memories in your head?”

“Twitching? Excellent description – I saw my life pass in front of my eyes.”

“Not all of it,” Kryslie assured him. “Just a few months worth. Think back to that episode with Zacary about Senna.”

Stenn did, and he was recalling other things, other conversations with Zacary, and the things he had been told to do. “Can you assure my father I have not degenerated to a complete idiot?”

“At the very least. Now, tell me something. Some of those places that you visited, I never knew of until just now – so I doubt that Zacary could have known either. Do you think any of that might be known of and spoken of by people in the Peace Corps?”

“Some things – like the report archive,” Stenn considered. “I have two brothers in the Corps, who would know all of that, but they wouldn’t have spoken of it. I know because – well – because of my father. I have had to do errands for him recently. What has that to do with things?”

“I am not sure. I need to talk to Tym and to Father.”

“Then why the seduction act?”

Kryslie blushed. “Something told me that if the compulsions were set deep enough, I might not be able to remove them. I had to trick your brain, before anything realised what I was up to. Getting it thinking on certain primal functions, meant I could get so deep that what I did was deeper than any compulsion. You should be immune from hypnosis now.”

“But?” Stenn sensed the doubt.

“I will know more after I have studied Zacary,” was all Kryslie would say. She gave Stenn an encouraging grin, and left him to his thoughts. Not all of which were depressing.

Chapter 15 - The Face of the Enemy

Kryslie went to the High King's suite, and sat herself on the carpeted floor of the main living area, next to Llaimos. She let him crawl into her lap. He sat quietly as if knowing she was thinking hard. She felt a gentle nudge of concern from Tymos, through the twin bond. He was across the room, staring out of the window of the suite.

"I have removed the hypnotic commands from Stenn, but I found something..." She allowed Tymos to review the things she had seen in Stenn's mind, and her vision of the faint greenish glow.

"He was following Zacary's suggestions, but I don't think Zacary was really aware of what he was asking. I think, that we are missing something. I need to get close to Zacary."

Kryslie saw Tymos suddenly get to his feet, and she saw through his eyes that Governor Reslic had entered the suite. He strode towards them, but spoke quietly. "Don't get up, Kryslie."

"Sir?" she queried.

"Do you have a report for me?" Jono Reslic asked, making himself comfortable in a chair he moved in front of her.

"Not a complete one, Sir," she admitted. "I have just come from seeing Stenn, and I have removed all hypnotic commands from him."

"Please put events in sequence," Reslic requested, formally.

"Sir, it is clear to me that Zacary was able to place controls on Stenn, while he was unaware. He created a situation where your son reacted without looking for motives," Kryslie began, and she reported and explained all that she knew. "I am sure that Zacary will not be able to affect him again, but there is something I saw that I do not understand. It feels wrong, and it is unlike anything I have heard of, and nothing comes to mind from the knowledge you, Father and Governor Xyron shared with us."

Tymos spoke up, "The point of difference between Jonko and Stenn was the method used to get control of them. Jonko ingested a substance in a sweet, and it seems that Stenn received some substance through a hypospray."

"I will have a search made for illicit drugs, in Zacary's apartment," Reslic promised.

"I agree that should be done, but could you wait until I have spoken to Zacary? I have the sense that we need to move carefully," Kryslie revealed.

"Very well," Reslic agreed. "What is it that you noticed?"

Kryslie explained about the faint green glow in Stenn's energy aura. "It is like what I found in Sacul, some months ago, before we went on tour."

"I checked Jonko," Tymos told Reslic. "He does not have a corresponding effect."

"My preference would be to keep Zacary in protective isolation," Reslic told them. "Perhaps you will explain your reason for delaying any action against him?"

"It is still nebulous, but the things that Zacary was asking Stenn to do, involve places and concepts that I had not heard of until now," Kryslie said, and she gave examples.

"Verbalise your thoughts," Reslic suggested. "As they occur to you."

"First, Zacary is behind the odd behaviours that were reported to you – like the children going into restricted places, but all those places are not secret. Zacary would have known of them. However, he sent Stenn to places I don't think he could have known of – like the aircraft hangar cavern. Stenn did know of them, but he never spoke of it until Zacary questioned him. And that is where I think we are missing information."

"Krys, they treated Zacary in case he had been conditioned, and we thought the commands might have been reinserted telepathically, probably by Kellex. He would be able to get into Zacary's head and put questions there," Tymos clarified.

“I thought of that. Zacary could have identified Stenn as the President’s son, and Kellex may have had him fishing for information but...I was thinking about some of the things Stenn found himself doing. I don’t think Zacary or Kellex would have thought of them. Kellex’s ideas seem to be tempered by Zacary’s skewed viewpoint.”

Reslic spoke thoughtfully, “You are implying that there are two minds controlling Zacary, in his dealings with others.”

Kryslie straightened, and Llaimos grabbed her harder to stop himself falling. “Yes – that could be.”

“And that energy glow, is related to that second mind,” Tymos proposed.

The image of the hooded and cloaked alien – ally to Kellex, returned to Kryslie’s mind.

“I need to see Zacary, soon, before that second mind becomes suspicious.” Kryslie gently loosened Llaimos’s grip, so she could stand up.

“I will have another talk with Xan,” Tymos proposed.

“I will find out where Zacary is at the moment and tighten the watch on him,” Reslic told them.

“And have a med team standing by,” Kryslie suggested.

“And my son?” Reslic asked, keeping his tone neutral.

“I’ll have a better idea of how to help him after seeing Zacary,” Kryslie assured him. “He will be safe where he is for now.”

Reslic accepted her statement. He rose and left the suite.

Llaimos grabbed Kryslie and grunted for her to lift him. She obeyed the request, and sensed that her brother was concerned for Stenn too.

“We will find a way to help him,” she promised. “He is our friend too, and I don’t think he deserves to be punished for something that he could not help.”

Llaimos went willingly to his nurse, who had hurried back from an errand when summoned. Tymos trotted out of the suite to find where his father was and arrange to see Xan. Kryslie went into a side room where her foster mother was resting and made her request.

“I need to look totally different,” she explained. “I have a task to do, but Tym and I want to keep people thinking we are still away.”

Tanya smiled with delight, at being asked for help by her very competent foster daughter.

“Easy! Come through to the bathroom.”

Tymoros had Xan brought to his public office, and invited him to sit in the visitors seat, while he took his own chair behind the table. Tymos perched himself half on the table, and pretended he didn’t notice his father’s frown at the casual attitude.

“We had a few more questions,” Tymos remarked. “In thinking how to help your world. Do your people have any really close allies? Ones that might be able to help your world as well.”

Xan turned his attention to Tymos and answered earnestly. “Our closest allies are the worlds we colonised, but they are not nearly as advanced as Aerdna.”

“How good are your scientists? Were they the ones who made that new green aura weapon?” Tymoros asked, to get Xan’s attention away from his son so Tymos could scan the young alien.

“No, that was something he bought from Ciriot traders. The other Warlords didn’t think much of it because it didn’t affect everyone, just some. Mainly some of Kellex’s senior officers.”

That fitted with the idea that Kellex knew some of his men had traces of Royal power.

“Couldn’t the Ciriot help your world?” he asked, changing the subject.

Xan’s face paled. “No...they are not allies. Just useful.”

“Why do they terrify you,” Tymos asked, having assured himself that Xan had none of the green energy glow.

“Many years ago, they attacked some of our ships and one of our colonies. We fought them off, but they were not defeated. We have a truce with them, and accept trade, but that is all.”

Into Tymos’s mind came the memory of a Tymorean ship meeting a Ciriote ship. It was little more than a space battle, an interrogation and a death. The Ciriote, taken prisoner, had a hooded cloak over full body armour and a basically humanoid shape. He glanced at his father, who merely said, “We know very little about them. They are space-roving nomads, pirates really, and are usually found in small groups. They are seldom seen in space patrolled by our fleet, and rarely approach planets where we have missionaries. If they have a home world, I have not heard of it.”

“So the Ciriotes are not helping you to conquer us?” Tymos proposed.

Xan half stood to deny that possibility. “None of the Warlords would let Ciriotes into their ranks. We...I mean...the Warlords want this planet so we can live here. The Ciriote would only want to loot its technology and pillage its people, kill anything that moves. That is what they began to do on Zekos, our scientific colony.”

“I agree they would not willingly let the aliens get a foothold here, but a truce between warlike races is a fragile thing – especially if they are technologically more advanced than you. Pirates will take advantage of a war torn planet and wait until your race subdued ours and when you are weakest, move in so you have to defend what you have won.” Kryslie suggested.

Xan realized the sick logic of that.

“Xan, could the Ciriote pass unnoticed amongst your people?” Tymos asked.

“No, they are obviously alien and are seldom seen out of their armour.” Xan answered with his eyes closed – he was trying to remember a fragment of conversation he had once heard about the Ciriote.

“I think I heard once about a breeding experiment between Ciriote and Aeronite. It was such an unpalatable idea that I dismissed it as rubbish.”

Tymos arranged for Xan to return to the Isolation Building, and he returned to the King’s suite, ready to support Kryslie when she examined Zacary.

Tymos was crouched down next to Llaimos, showing him how a three dimensional jigsaw fitted together, when he saw his brother look up and his eyes grow big and wide. He turned to see what had caused the reaction and understood immediately.

Kryslie had reappeared from the bathroom, now seeming to be a short black-haired serving woman. She even wore the grey-brown livery of the lowest strata of servants. Llaimos’s nurse gave a startled squawk, and might have challenged her, but a grinning Tanya followed her out.

Kryslie flicked a mental laugh at her brothers then asked, “Like it, little Bro?”

Llaimos giggled. The full effect was more than just the hair cut and colour change. Tania had used cosmetics very skilfully, to change the lines of Kryslie’s features. Now, she looked exotic even as she adopted the respectful eyes down glide of a lowly servant in the presence of those of higher rank.

She drew level with Llaimos and gave him a respectful bow.

Tymos stayed seated and told her, “Morov passed me the information that Zacary is in the eastern servant’s garden pretending to be asleep. He’s under a tree on the far side from the building.” Mentally, he added, “But his eyes keep flicking open every so often.” He had already told her of the result of his talk with Xan in a similar mental exchange whilst Tanya was doing her make-up magic.

Kryslie dropped her act, saying decisively, “Right!”

As she moved away from the others in the suite, she strengthened her mental shields. Then, even though her father frowned on transmitting into and out of his suite, she did so, arriving at the beam-in point in the servant’s quarters. From there, she walked outside.

The late afternoon sun slanted low over the palace roof, but the day was still bright and the evening meal would not be served for another hour. It was pleasant now that some of the day’s

warmth had eased. The faint breeze still carried the fragrant scents of the blooming flowers and of recently cut grass.

Once outside, Kryslie wandered with apparent aimlessness, pretending to be a shy newcomer, still unsure of her place. She avoided groups of servants sitting in chairs or sprawled on the grass. When she glimpsed Zacary she chose to sit in a hanging two-person seat strung from the thick bough of one of a group of three leafy trees. From the seat, as she began to rock it in an idle fashion, she had a clear view of his part reclining form, although he was off to her side. He would have a clear view of her when he next took a peep around him. He would probably hear the slight squeaky groan as her seat moved.

Even though she was apparently looking up into the leafy canopy above, she was watching from the corner of her eyes. The noise had indeed alerted him. She saw his eyes flick open, and his body move slightly to give him a better view of the newcomer.

Reaching out a delicate mental probe, Kryslie listened to Zacary's unshielded thoughts and hid a grim smile. He was thinking like a male who had just spotted an attractive female. This was the effect she had hoped for when she had asked Tanya for ways to catch his attention. Not that she wanted to seduce him, just to attract him to come to her. Her body language cues were subtle, like sitting alone on a two-person seat, appearing to be oblivious to him, glancing up wistfully as people walked by - he wasn't to know she was subtly deflecting them from approaching her. Of course, being dressed as one of the lowest ranked servants put her into Zacary's safe category. Cleaners, such as she was pretending to be, were not considered particularly intelligent since they had not graduated to the large lyceum for higher learning.

While Zacary was diverted by his fantasies, she probed a little deeper. He was trying to work up the courage to come and talk to her, wondering what she would be like to kiss, and whether this might be his chance to try for something more.

Kryslie considered ways to encourage him and decided jealousy would be the strongest motivation.

Mentally, she asked, "Tym? Can you get Morov to come and try to chat me up?" She felt her brother's amusement through the twin bond.

At the same time, she glanced directly at Zacary, seemed to realise he was staring at her, and after a few seconds, looked away. In her side vision, she saw him sit up straighter, as if about to stand up and come over. She didn't try to influence him, except by giving him another covert glance. Then he risked another probe of his mind. He was vacillating, half convinced her glances were invitations, and still smarting from the brush offs he had received from others like her.

Kryslie stopped her chair swinging when Morov boldly introduced himself and insinuated himself next to her. She leant away from him as if being distantly polite, since she didn't want to discourage Zacary, but to make him want to score off Morov. When she judged Zacary had thought through his casual approach, she sent Morov off.

He wasn't being inventive, but his mind seemed to think that coming by and casually offering her a peppermint was a brilliant approach, and not like any other he had previously used. That was when Kryslie became aware of the touch of another mind in Zacary's, which was subtly reinforcing his thoughts. It was saying that the proposed approach was friendly and unthreatening.

As if arguing with himself, Zacary thought, "She is only a cleaner." The next thought, from that other mind had a sly overtone, "Cleaners go everywhere, and no one notices them."

So cleverly had that other mind merged its wishes into Zacary's thoughts promoting its own desires by playing on those of the man it controlled.

In a shielded part of her mind, Kryslie identified that other mind. It was Kellex, the alien Warlord who had once captured her and Tymos, and who had before that, tried to influence her twin. The sense of his mind was unmistakable. Part of her mind posed the question of 'how far had he moved his baseship when its original position had been compromised?' Its current

location was not her primary concern right then, but rather what it meant of Kellex's mental range. Was he in his baseship, or closer?

When Zacary finally worked up the courage to approach her, Kryslie greeted him with a smile and did not object when he sat next to her. She did not think that Kellex could sense her thoughts through his pawn, but she played safe by keeping vapid female fantasies in the front of her mind, to hide the interest she was taking in Zacary's. She could sense the excitement from Kellex as she gave her carefully contrived answers to Zacary's questions. That she worked at night, cleaning rooms in the High King's palace – not those of the High King himself, but of some lesser-ranked relatives.

The expected question was put to her. "Have you seen the Prince and Princess?"

She answered with an irritating giggle, "Oh no. They are off somewhere I heard. No one would tell me where."

The giggle irritated the hovering mind so the listener retreated, and Zacary's mind went blank, and he sat silently, as if oblivious to her company. She took the opportunity to adjust her eyes to examine his energy aura. In the same place where she had seen the faint energy glow on Stenn, she found a brighter glow on Zacary. When she felt him move slightly, she normalised her eyes.

A quick glance told her that Zacary was moving his hand to his pocket, but his mind was giving no indication of the action. Kryslie grabbed his wrist gently when she saw he had taken out a hypo sprayer. She did not intend to let that be fired at her. When he became aware of the resistance, his mind betrayed two conflicting emotions. A flash of shame and helplessness was quickly suppressed by a stronger mind determined to be obeyed. Zacary fought to raise his arm, as Kryslie sensed the new, malicious, avaricious, mind studying her face and in an unpleasant way, lusting for her. This was definitely not an Aeronite mind.

"Bro?" Kryslie sent a thought to her brother.

"Yes," was Tymos's cautious reply.

"Med team."

The instant the two mid blue-garbed men appeared, and Zacary realised their purpose, Kryslie wrenched the hypo-sprayer from his hand. He began to stand, ready to protest, "There's nothing wrong with me," but he suddenly glanced at the object in Kryslie's hand and turned pale. It was as if he had only just realised what he had been doing. He knew he would be in trouble for having it, knew he had used it before, and what it did. The dominant observer in his mind went quiescent, but did not vanish. It would be passively observing and hearing everything that Zacary saw and heard. Now, however, Zacary's mind seemed blank, and he was confused by the activity around him.

The medics gave him no chance to struggle. They helped him from the seat and to his feet then told him gently, "We will take you to the infirmary and check you over."

While Zacary was still too confused to react, Kryslie handed the hypo-sprayer to the nearest medic adding a quiet instruction, "Check that device, but be very careful."

Kryslie waited until Zacary had gone, gave a glance around to see if the medics had been noticed, and when she sensed no interest, transmitted back to her father's suite.

She chose to arrive in the room she used when staying there, and then flicked a thought at her twin.

"We are in father's sanctum," Tymos told her. "Only Aldiv, Tanya and Gisella are in the outer part of the suite. Come on in."

In the small private inner room, Tymoros and Xyron were seated in comfortable padded leather chairs in a corner away from the desk. Tymos had just risen from a third when Kryslie materialised. He gestured for her to use it. Kryslie sank into it and leant back, giving her brother a mental flick of thanks. The two Governors studied her appearance without comment and

waited for her to speak. She took the time to think over the recent events, to seek any nuances that her mind had noticed subconsciously. Then, considering her words, she met her father's eyes, gave a glance at Xyron, and began speaking.

"Governor Reslic and Tymos were right," Kryslie began. "We were missing something. Two different entities can overshadow Zacary's mind. I am sure the main one is the Aeronite Warlord, Kellex. The mind is sly and suggestive - like the mind Tymos sensed in the caverns that time. It works by making Zacary think he is choosing to do things for his own reasons. It gets amusement out of manipulating him."

"The other?" Xyron prompted.

"The other mind is much stronger and evil," Kryslie shuddered recalling what she had sensed of that one. "I think that energy glow is what enables it to control Zacary, both his mind and some physical actions. While I was with him, he reached for that sprayer to use on me, but not a hint of that was in his mind - no awareness at all of what he was doing."

Xyron's communicator chimed, and he checked the message. "Alexon needed to sedate Zacary. He had a violent episode when he realised we had his sprayer and his drugged sweets."

Tymos had sensed how the second mind had craved to control Kryslie. The idea made him shudder. He said urgently, "I don't think that sprayer contains a drug, or if it does it causes the energy glow. I think you should destroy that sprayer and its contents immediately. I think it is far too dangerous to investigate. That green glow might be some kind of energy life form, or something else."

With equal urgency, Kryslie added, "Make sure you keep Zacary in a well shielded room, so neither entity can touch his mind."

As Xyron used his communicator to stress the suggestions to his brother, Tymoros saw his children catch each other's glance, and even though he had often seen them do that, this was different. They stared at each other for almost a minute.

"Of course," Kryslie murmured aloud, and she finally looked away from her brother. She shook her head slightly.

"What did you see?" Tymoros asked.

"What I said to Xan about the Ciriote," Tymos answered, trying to verbalise the rapid sequence of scenes that had passed through his mind, during that vivid premonition. "We do not have only one enemy to fight, there are two. The Ciriote are here, and they are waiting."

Tymoros tensed. "None of the Elders have foreseen their involvement. No sign at all even hints at their presence."

Kryslie ignored that lack of confirmation. "That second mind, that energy glow - that has to be Ciriote. It was secretive..."

Tymos took over speaking, "The Elders have foreseen an enemy that wants to destroy our world. Because of that, you are doing everything you can to protect our people and the forests and undoing the Aeronite sabotage. That may not be enough. If the Aeronites want to live here, they would not want to create the devastation the Elders saw. Grow their weeds to create a food supply, yes. Hunt our wild creatures for food - that too. All of their seeming sabotage has a purpose and that is to make our world more receptive to their needs. They would not destroy it."

"No," Tymoros agreed thoughtfully.

"The Aeronites are pawns," Kryslie announced. "If their world has become unstable, it was made that way to force them to come here - to make them desperate to destroy us. And in trying, they will be reduced in strength even as we are. Xan said that the Ciriote could not defeat the Aeronites in their encounter..."

She saw understanding in the expressions of both Governors.

"We do know that it is likely that Aerdna will break free of its orbit," Xyron said, with profound sadness. "No one can calculate how soon, nor think of a way to prevent it. Your idea for creating self-contained underground vaults may be the only way the population will survive."

Our scientists are working to combine the best ideas from the archives of thousands of worlds to ensure all environmental needs are addressed. There will be geothermal energy..." This was not the time to go into details. "The question is, will they realise that coming here is not the answer, and heed our suggestions."

"Xan already listens," Tymos knew. "There may be others, and we will ensure that the thinking Aeronites will have the information. We must give them time to prepare. There will be much work involved to create the refuge."

"The Aeronites won't wait much longer to act," Kryslie realised. "We know Kellex fears us, and is desperate to locate us. If he has convinced the other Warlords of the danger we represent, they will attack as soon as they know where we are. However, we can't assume that Kellex won't be overruled. Either way, we cannot avoid this war. The Ciriote won't show themselves until we are defeated, or they think we are. They are the ones that Tym and I must fight."

She stopped talking, and once again, she and Tym stared at each other.

"Father, we need to talk to the Elders, and there is more that we need to tell you," Kryslie finally admitted.

"First thing though," Tymos broke in. "We need to deal with Zacary and Stenn – to remove that energy glow – so the Ciriote will not have any actual or potential spies in our midst."

Tymoros nodded, but said, "And then what do you intend?"

"Later, Father. We will speak to everyone at once," Tymos promised.

"You will find young Zacary in the observation cubicle of my laboratory," Xyron told them.

Tymos dressed himself in an opaque, full body anti-contamination suit to hide his identity. Kryslie merely changed her grey brown livery for a set of mid blue healer's livery. They both entered the observation cubicle and shared the memory of being here themselves when they were recovering from transition sickness, and needing to discover their increased strength. This time though, they sensed that the clear force wall was blocking all mental emanations from without the containment area. They could still talk mind to mind with each other, but that was all.

Aldon had left the laboratory when they arrived, and was now observing from a one-way observation window in a room above them.

Kryslie went to where Zacary was sleeping and observed him. His face looked peaceful. She gently touched his forehead and felt only the drug induced unconsciousness. He needed to wake for her to try to help him, so she sent some of her power into him to speed up his metabolism to overcome the drug.

"Wake up now, Zacary," she insisted when she felt his mind beginning to stir.

His eyes flew open, and his mind revealed that he did not know where he was and that terrified him. Then he realised that he wasn't tied down and jerked into a sitting position, swinging his legs off the side of the chest high bed. His eyes took in the pale blue isolation suit he was wearing and some memories returned. He swore a vile curse, thinking he was alone. Then he stated aloud, but to himself, "This isn't the infirmary. This looks like some laboratory. What the hell is going on?"

Kryslie moved quietly into his view, bringing a cup filled with water, from a table to one side.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded when he recognised the black haired woman he had been talking to. Tymos stayed behind him and used his power to seem invisible.

Zacary grabbed the cup and gulped down the contents, all the time glaring at her.

"Where the hell am I?" he demanded. "And why?" He would have lunged at her, if he hadn't been feeling so dizzy.

"A specialised infirmary area," Kryslie supplied the answer calmly. She was aware of how he was feeling. "The doctors carry out specialised medical investigations in here."

"I'm not sick! You...you set the medics on me, you bitch."

“Yes, I summoned them because I heard the voices in your head,” Kryslie told him.

“How can you? You’re a nothing! Just a night-cleaner!”

Kryslie knew he was afraid. He was recalling back when he had first admitted to hearing voices – and the Governors had made him little more than a commoner. Now he feared they would remove him from the Peace Corps if they thought him mad.

“Zacary, we do not think you are mad. The voices were not your imagination. They were real. I am here, because I can help you.”

There was nothing in his memory of the subversive things he had done in the time since he had been back on the Estate. The only thing on his mind right then was finding a way to get out of the chamber.

With another curse, Zacary shoved Kryslie aside and jumped down from the bed. He took a moment to let the giddiness subside, and then ran towards the door he could see. He hit the clear wall of force and bounced back, incredulous. He put his hand out to touch the sloping desk he could see next to the door, and he felt the force wall again, then began to explore the circular field.

“That is a strong compulsion,” Tymos thought at his sister as he moved out of Zacary’s way. The other was oblivious to his presence. “Perhaps we should try to remove that energy glow first?”

Zacary spoke over his shoulder, “What can a little chit like you do? Get me out of here?”

“I can teach you to shield your mind, so that you don’t hear the voices,” Kryslie told him, even as she flicked a mental agreement at her brother.

“That got a reaction too,” Tymos confirmed mentally.

It had. At first Kryslie had felt a sense of relief, but it was quickly replaced by fear.

“I am here to help you,” Kryslie spoke with emphasis.

“You? How?”

“Me – because I had to learn how to do it, and now I can teach you.”

“I don’t need your help!”

“Would you prefer to remain in isolation indefinitely?” Kryslie suggested. “That is the other option, since when you are free you have been corrupting innocents and making them get into trouble.”

“Filthy liars! I’ve been minding my own business and trying to get fit enough to return to my job.”

Zacary threw himself at Kryslie. Part of his mind was mortally afraid and the other part wanted to use her to get free. He was stunned when the slip of a woman grabbed his wrists and twisted them just enough to make him freeze in place. Then he found he could neither feel his body nor move it. His mind panicked, like a bird trying to fly through a window. He was completely unaware of Tymos, massaging the back of his neck.

Kryslie kept her attention on Zacary’s mind, the deep inner place that welcomed her help. The outer mind was frenzied and she wondered if the one controlling him through the energy glow could still command his mind and knew what Tymos was doing - or if it was a reaction from the glow, when it felt threatened. Was the glow a life form or some kind of programmed electronic nano-device?

Tymos had his hands free from the isolation suit, but he had his mind well shielded. It was as well, for when the energy glow sensed his strong life force, it wanted him. It emerged from Zacary’s body and clung to Tymos’s hand, trying vainly to climb higher and seep into his mind.

“No you don’t,” Tymos murmured, as if the glow was alive. “I have seen the likes of you before, and you are greedy for power that does not belong to you. Come to me and I will give you all you can eat and more...”

The moment that Tymos zapped his power through the entity and destroyed it, Zacary collapsed in Kryslie’s grip. She caught him and lifted him back onto the bed, gently. He wasn’t

unconscious, but now his mind did not resist hers as she tried to sense the presence of hypnotic commands like those that she had seen in Jonko.

“How is he?” Tymos asked mentally.

“No longer resisting. I think that energy thing had an agenda of its own and we threatened it,” Kryslie told him. “But his mind is blank again, like outside. I can’t sense any commands.”

“That bastard Kellex can’t spend all his time watching and commanding Zacary. As a tool, he simply isn’t that useful and Kellex has other concerns. He has to have implanted commands at a very deep level. I think we will only find them if we use the right stimuli.”

“Like seeing us,” Krys thought at her brother.

“Hmmm. That would be one,” Tymos agreed. “There is no guessing what others may be.”

Tymos and Kryslie transmitted out of the force-walled chamber, and left the monitoring laboratory by the door. Aldon met them with a glass of the restorative drink, whilst one of his colleagues went to check on the now sleeping Zacary.

“Was it wise to reveal yourselves?” Aldon asked them. He watched them both drink quickly.

“Necessary,” Tymos said around a mouthful of liquid. “We didn’t expect such an extreme reaction, but at least now, that command is neutralised.”

“I built mental shields for him, and showed him how to maintain them,” Kryslie said. “I hope he will choose to keep them up. But if he is as stubborn as I was, he won’t see the need. Moreover, if he will not forgive our intervention to help him, he may choose to ignore our advice. At least, we have rid him of one mind controller.”

“Now we need to help Stenn,” Kryslie said, pulling herself erect as she felt the restoring effect of the drink.

“Do you wish me to be present?” Aldon offered.

“Yes, if you would come. I don’t expect so much trouble from Stenn. He at least is receptive to our help, and I don’t think the alien hold on him will be as strong as that on Zacary.”

Aldon transmitted the three of them to the Isolation building, and escorted them back into the room where Stenn had finally stopped pacing. Instead, he was sitting on the edge of the bed with his hands trying to squeeze his head.

Kryslie went and sat beside him. “What is the trouble?”

“I have just been hit with one foul headache,” Stenn managed to force out.

Tymos went and sat on Stenn’s other side. “I just zapped the glow thing in Zacary. I wonder if there was a connection to the one in you?”

“I don’t care – can you rid me of that thing before my head splits?”

“Hold my hands,” Kryslie directed. “Do you know how to pain block?”

“Only when I can use my head to think with,” Stenn tried to joke.

“Let me,” Kryslie offered.

Stenn relaxed as the level of pain and ache decreased. Kryslie then moved aside to let Tymos begin to work. He had the isolation suit, she didn’t. The green glow entity had not been able to penetrate the suit.

Aldon stood by Kryslie as he watched Tymos attract the green glow to himself. Stenn watched, with eyes wide, determined not to fight his friend, and having to clench his hands into fists to resist the urges coming from the entity. It wanted to survive, to protect itself; Stenn was equally determined to be rid of the cause of his trouble.

Kryslie realised that she was sensing the panic coming from the glow entity. It was vague, and it vanished the instant Tymos sent a killing surge of energy through it.

Stenn slumped, drained, when Tymos announced. “Two down.”

“I want to sleep for a week,” he announced. “What ever you want of me, you’ll have.”

“Good,” Tymos said briskly. “I want you to let Aldon check you over, and for you to rest for a bit. After that, we need you to be back with Llaimos as you were before.”

Stenn forced himself up. "Will my father let me out? Will he trust your judgement here?"

The question caused a sudden realisation in his two friends, and for a moment, they were both struck silent.

"Never mind," Stenn muttered, misinterpreting their silence.

"Yes," Kryslie assured him firmly. "He asked me to help you. I believe that means he trusts my judgement, and will act on my advice."

"It has just occurred to us that since we have been back, the attitude of the Elders and the Governors towards us has changed," Tymos admitted.

Stenn studied his friends then. "You two have changed. It feels like you are responsible adults and I never expected to see that day!"

Kryslie gave him a mock punch in the gut. "You just have to convince Aldon you are fine. Because we do need you to watch Llaimos, like we said. We have to go off again, and we will have Jon and Kel with us."

"I wish..." Stenn began, but he silenced himself. "You need to use their gifts, don't you?"

Kryslie nodded. "Yes, so that means we need you here, more than before."

Chapter 16 - The War Begins

Tymos sent Morov to get formal clothes for himself and his twin to wear when they addressed the Elders. Kryslie had Delia help her to wash the dye from her hair and remove the make-up.

When they were ready, Tymoros had Aldiv transmit them all to the meeting, which was to be in the Conference Room.

Some of those who had come to hear of their travels had since departed back to their cities, but most of the Elders had remained, adding their time and experience to those bringing together a plan for the survival of Aeronites who had no way to leave their doomed planet.

Governor Xyron arrived after them, but Governor Reslic was already seated at the table. Kryslie went to speak to him, and report on Stenn.

“Thank you,” he said, sincerely, as father more than as President Governor.

She gave him the expected bow as she withdrew to rejoin her brother and father at their seats at the head of the table.

Timenon, stood and invited, “Tell us of the words of the Guardians.”

Tymos began, slowly, for the visions had been rapid, and he still had to form them into a coherent picture. He stood and looked down until he was ready to speak. He began by revealing that he had seen the Ciriots, as if they were hiding and waiting – and told the Elders what he had earlier told his father. He had the complete attention of every person in the room when he said – “this is the enemy that we must fight.”

“We cannot wait for them to defeat us, or weaken us,” Tymos added, speaking with the authority of the wisdom the Guardians had granted him. “We must force this war to start when we are ready, and where we want it. We must help the Aeronites to realise that this war is misguided.”

“But not yet,” Kryslie warned. “There are still things we must do. You have plans to bring people out of the outlying villages and towns and take them to the cities. That should begin at once, unobtrusively. Bring what you can of the herds of cattle and sheep there too, and what there is no room for can be butchered and the meat frozen. For a time, the farmers that are growing grain and other food crops should remain.”

Xyron leant forward. “It is not yet even half way through the growing season...”

“I know, but Tym and I know what we must do...and it is something that only we can do. You have often wondered why our friends Keleb and Jonko came to have power. Now that is clear. With Jonko’s gift with plants, I will help speed up the harvest...”

“And with Keleb’s empathic gift, his ability to attract animals, he and I will draw as many animals as we can to those shielded forests,” Tymos summarised. “We will leave within the day to begin, for we will need every moment we can contrive.”

Timenon accepted their words with, “And when the time is right for the war to begin, we are simply to let our enemies know where you are?”

Tymoros interrupted. “Not where they are, but where we want the war to begin.”

“And how will we let our enemies know that place?”

Kryslie looked down at her hands, and then faced the assembled elders. “Tymos and I did what we could to help Zacary, but I cannot be sure I found every string placed on his mind. We do not have the time to help him further. We did remove the compulsion he was under to report to Kellex the moment he knew we were back and forced him to forget he saw us. So, keeping him in isolation for a time, weaning him from his addiction to the sweets and off that drug Kellex used and teaching him to shield his mind – will give us time for what we must do. However, I fear that as soon as Zacary is allowed to roam free once more – Kellex will regain control and will be more wary than before. Have him watched. If Kellex does regain control, you

will probably notice odd behaviour again. You might be able to use him to give Kellex disinformation.”

When Tymos and Kryslie had revealed all they knew, the Elders left in ones and twos until only the Governor’s remained.

Reslic met their gaze and spoke quietly. “You have passed beyond what we can teach you, and we know that you have been sent by the Guardians to do their work. They will guide you from here on. Do not forget that you may call on others to help you whenever you have need. Keep in touch, for it may be that we need to recall you.”

“Sir, we will,” Kryslie promised.

“Give Aldiv a list of what you need,” Tymoros told his heirs. “And what your friends will need. Come and see me before you go.”

Tymos and Kryslie bowed together, accepting the dismissal. They went to Tymos’s apartment and sent Morov to summon their friends.

Even though they greeted each other with less formality than was possible earlier, Jonko and Keleb both sensed that the meeting was not purely social.

“You were able to help Stenn, weren’t you,” Jonko asked, since the matter was on his mind.

“Yes,” Kryslie assured him. “He will be fine. We were not able to help Zacary as much. To fully sort him out will require time we do not have to spare. The best we can do is to keep Kellex too busy to think at him.”

“Ah huh,” Jonko acknowledged. After a moment of thought, he added, “You are not going to be poking sticks at that critter are you?”

“Not directly,” Tymos assured him. “He will be busy looking for us where we are not. While we are getting you and Kel to help us with a vital task.”

“Us? Will they let us go with you?” Keleb exclaimed.

Tymos smiled wryly. “We told the Governors that we needed you.”

Jonko allowed his face to betray surprise. “You...told them? And you are here unscathed?”

“Not only that, they graduated us out of classes,” Kryslie told him. “Both of you are past level delta, and older than we are...and you are not likely to become Elders.”

“Get to the point...what do you need us to do?” Jonko insisted. Keleb nodded his head in emphasis.

“Sit and we will explain,” Kryslie insisted, and set an example by perching on the end of her brother’s study desk. Jonko and Keleb usurped the two chairs, leaving Tymos to sit beside his sister.

“What we need is to make use of your gifts, in tandem with our own,” Tymos began. “The Guardians of Peace have shown us some of what is to come. The aliens have planned their conquest and they are almost ready to act. Kellex believes we are destined to prevent those plans from succeeding, hence his desperation to have us. If he can’t have us neutralised, the next best idea is to know where we are before they start anything.”

“So they can kill you?” Keleb suggested.

“Or be somewhere else,” Kryslie countered. “Either way we need to keep them guessing.”

“However, we doubt that they will want to wait much longer to attack,” Tymos warned.

Jonko nodded. “And our part in this?” His eyes gleamed with anticipation. “I am tired of doing nothing. Give me a reason and someone to fight.”

“This fight won’t be with weapons,” Tymos warned him. “Tymoreans are not going to make the first warlike move.”

“You motioned our gifts,” Keleb prompted.

“Yes...” Kryslie confirmed. “One of the things that the aliens have been doing is play with the ecology of our world. So far, they have done it in remote locations, but they have begun to grow their food plants. If they intend to bring huge numbers of their population here, they will have to expand the areas they have changed.”

Jonko was immediately interested. “That would take years – wouldn’t it?”

Kryslie shook her head. “Not necessarily. I don’t expect that you know much of ancient Tymorean history, but far, far back in time, a group of Tymoreans chose to leave here and start their own colony. They took with them a terrain-reforming machine and turned an otherwise barren planet into a viable one. However, subtle traces of different elements existed in this reformed world, and since that time, the descendents of those Tymoreans changed subtly. They are Aeronites, the aliens that we are resisting now. They need to add these trace elements to our soil, so the plants they grow will sustain them when they colonise our world.”

“That would ruin our ecology,” Jonko said, aghast.

Tymos’s face was grim. “If they begin to use their terrain reforming machines, the effect will be far reaching and have a profound effect on every person, animal and plant on this world. They can use weapons to destroy vast areas of vegetation and then the ground will be ready to be changed as they wish it.”

He did not differentiate between enemies – it mattered not to the job in hand. He knew too, that no mention should be made of the Ciriote in any discussion outside of the Conclave of Elders, lest that enemy be warned of their foreknowledge.

“We can’t let them do that!” Keleb exclaimed. “Their plants won’t suit us, will they? And the animals might not be able to eat them.”

“Exactly, that is why the Governors have seen to it that all the cities and vast areas of forests will be protected. But that won’t be enough,” Tymos told his friends.

“The animals,” Keleb saw at once.

Tymos nodded. “As things are now, the people in the smaller villages and towns are gradually making their way to the cities. Some will go on foot, driving herd animals just like they do when they want to sell them. Others are going by long range beam.”

“What will they be doing for food?” Jonko asked. “The harvests are barely growing.”

“Yes – and that is where you come in Jon,” Tymos told him. “Only the farmers and crop growers are staying – for now. We believe, that with your instinctive understanding of growing things, and all the stuff Tobias has been sharing with you, and our planet sense, we can control the cycle of plants. In other words, we speed up the harvest and then stop the cycle – put the plants into a kind of hibernation. There is power in the core of this planet and we will draw on this power and use it to protect the crops and the forest seeds for the time when re-vegetation will occur. In protecting the forests we will also be protecting the animals drawn into those places.”

“So I am to speed up the cycle of the harvests,” Jonko pondered. “The people will have a supply of grain to last while they must stay within the cities. I must then stop the plants growing, to preserve untainted plants safe in the ground but that will give the alien weeds free room to grow. Isn’t that what the aliens want – to be able to grow their weeds?”

“Think, Jon!” Kryslie urged. “Think on the source of our power!”

“The Guardians,” Jonko said reverently.

“Yes, but remember our Sacred Trust!” Kryslie continued. “The First Fundamental Law - ‘When there is peace on Tymorea there is peace in the Universe’. Our power is steeped into the core of this planet, in the plants, animals, the people and the very soil. There have been generations and generations of power directed towards peace and harmony. The land will look after its own. You’ll see Jon, when the seeds are dormant the weeds won’t have competition but they won’t survive. The aliens will think they have won, but their plants won’t mature or reproduce.”

Jonko accepted that, but was still thoughtful, trying to imagine how he would do it.

Keleb burst out saying, “You think I can help draw animals to the forests, but how?”

“Your empathy with animals, magnified by our planet sense,” Tymos stated. “We are sure that the Guardians had a hand in creating each of you too – for this very need – since each of you has a very rare gift.”

Keleb was still thinking on his role. “If I draw animals into forests protected by force fields, they will be safe from the effects of war. They will be the breeding stock. If they were not protected our people would have no game to hunt for food. How can we protect all the animals?”

“I don’t think we can help all the animals to reach the forests,” Tymos predicted, “But they won’t be easily caught by the aliens. The animals know what is natural to this world and will support those who fight to protect it, perhaps in strange ways.”

“And we are the only ones who can do this?” Jonko asked. “Surely you will be needed to lead troops of fighters when the war finally starts?”

“Us? Think about it. Governor Reslic is our Supreme War Leader and Admiral of the Tymorean Peace Fleet. Governor Xyron has the technology of thousands of years from thousands of planets to draw on. Our Father, Governor Tymoros, is a brilliant strategist and will direct our ground forces and he will have the talents of all our missionaries to call on. They are returning even as we speak! Our efforts in those directions would be superfluous, yet for all their power, they cannot fulfil this aspect of the defence. Your gifts, supplemented by what power we can draw from the planet itself will affect that final defence. It is what we must do.”

“When do we begin?” Keleb began to rise to the challenge.

“We will leave tonight!” Tymos told him. “You must prepare for a long journey, but we must not be hindered by too much to carry.” The others nodded.

“Keleb, you will travel with me and Jonko will go with Krys. It will be safer if we are not together and Kryslie and I must be careful to remain unrecognized.”

At a suggestion from Tymos, the four split up to prepare for their mission.

Tymos felt the power in the Tymorean soil, power that came from the very core of the planet. He felt this great power flowing through him and submitting to his control as he channelled it to Keleb, supporting his empathic gift. They were deep in a forested mountain region, protected by some of Governor Xyron’s devices. Keleb was in a trance, oblivious to his surroundings; his entire concentration directed to distant animal minds, subtly calling them to this protected place.

Tymos kept part of his mind attuned to Keleb and felt the touch of hundreds of animals as they responded to Keleb’s mind call. Even while directing energy to Keleb, Tymos’s mind touched on many ideas as he explored the power he handled. Half a world away on a different continent, he could sense his sister and Jonko also drawing on the power of the planet’s core. With barely any effort, he could think at Kryslie and she would sense his thought. It seemed like a vast telepathic network that covered the whole world. On a different level, that where Keleb was working he could sense there was something upsetting the natural balance of the planet – the animals sensed it and it was driving them in terror.

With the speed of lightning, Tymos’s mind sought the thoughts of terror, channelled through Keleb’s gift. As his friend continued to draw the animals with thoughts of peace, Tymos overcame the disorientation of seeing through multiple sets of eyes. He shared what the animals felt and saw – vivid flashes of light, the ground shaking, soil and debris falling from the sky, pain and death. Tymos withdrew his mind.

“Keleb?” Tymos sent a tentative thought to his friend. Moments later Keleb came out of his trance.

“What is happening, Tymos? I felt you in my mind.”

“The war has begun!” Tymos said bluntly. Without volition, he turned to face the direction where, many miles away, aliens were bombing a town. It was as if he did not see the tall trees around him. Then he sensed an unspoken question in Keleb’s mind and answered it.

“Not yet Kel, I cannot act yet. Our job here is not finished.” He did not try to explain, the real enemies had yet to show their faces.

There was a steady stream of animals arriving in the forest; they were hopping past the feet of both Tymos and Keleb, unafraid of the humans who seemed to them a natural part of the forest. The animals sought the protected place and their instinct for peace was reinforced by Keleb’s call. The knowledge was passed from animal to animal and the migration swelled. When the stream of animals ceased, the forest would be sealed completely. Then they would move on to another region, and start again.

Kryslie felt the outrage in the soil as the first bombs fell. The psychic aura of the planet was strong even though she was away from the main continent. The upheaval was perceptible even to Jonko and for a moment, his warrior’s instinct threatened to overcome him, but he controlled it. Kryslie touched him in a gentle restraining motion.

“You can do nothing, Jon. You cannot be every where to prevent every attack,” Kryslie said quietly. “The Governors will deal with the aliens. These are just the opening skirmishes, primitive weapons and brute force. We are not finished our task here. We cannot be involved yet.”

There was a certain emphasis on the last statement. Jonko sensed the control Kryslie exercised and knew she was not unaffected by what she knew to be happening elsewhere.

Without prompting, Jonko relaxed back into the trance like state he needed to undertake his task. Confident that Kryslie would watch for danger, he concentrated fully on the delicate task of manipulating the life cycle of the plants. He knew the plant cycle on an intimate level now and had become proficient at affecting each stage, taking power that Kryslie drew from the planets core and directing it to all the plants in an ever-widening circle about him. In this area were fields of barley and rye, closer to the town were orchards of apples and pears.

In previous weeks, in many, many different areas, Jonko had hastened the maturing of the late sun-season crops. As soon as they were mature, the farmers harvested the fruit, vegetables and grains and then sent them to storage silos and cool rooms in the cities. Jonko returned then to place the fallow and unproductive fields into a kind of stasis. The remaining un-harvested plants finished flowering and went to seed. The seeds fell onto the ground and would now lie dormant and protected from mutation until stimulated in a time of peace. Only in the areas protected by force fields would the plants cycle normally or perhaps faster than normal. In these areas, the animals would survive and if the storehouses got low, the Tymorean people could harvest the plants to feed themselves.

Thus, in town after town the farmers finished the harvest and returned to their homes. Unknown to the alien spies that watched the farmers returning, the houses were already empty of women, children and belongings. When darkness fell, the men walked along familiar laneways to one of several designated houses. Then the townsmen went from there to the cities by long-range beam.

Alien spies, long since identified, were quietly apprehended by Tymorean Peace Corpsmen, searched for weapons and communicators, and in a similar fashion taken to the smallest continent where a restraining area had been prepared. Here they would be left alone, and would need to hunt and forage for their food.

Therefore, when the alien attackers turned their attention from the well-protected cities to the smaller towns, the towns were deserted. Alien agents found no people, no personal belongings, no food and no untainted liquids. The agents reported to their superiors in varying degrees of fear or anger. Fifty rural towns destroyed, but the defenders won the opening round. They had outguessed the attackers.

There were a few days of peace before the next attacks. Alien warriors with weapons ready, scouted more towns, finding these also were deserted. It was almost as if the people had left the

planet. The aliens could walk right in and colonize the towns, but the people had gone somewhere and the leaders were still free to attack them. The Tymoreans were not defeated.

Chapter 17 - Meeting of the Warlords

On the far western edge of Tymorea's main continent, in a desolate rocky area that held only scrubby vegetation and was devoid of habitation, Warlord Voltec's baseliner hosted a meeting. He had invited the other five Warlords to that isolated location to discuss the progress of the campaign to conquer their enemies.

Only by the fact of his fifty years of military experience, and his unblemished record of successes, was he the titular leader of the invasion force.

His age-hardened features studied the five younger men, who were in all other ways, his equal in rank, and authority. He did not underestimate the rampant ambition of any of them, but for the moment, as they sat sipping some of his dwindling supply of aged Aeronite liquor, they were less mutually abrasive than normal.

This did not mean they were being perfectly civil, since they were discussing the latest reports that had been circulated on various aspects of the invasion plan. The voices were at times, raised or sharp, but Voltec did not interfere, yet. He was satisfied with the progress of his part of the plan, though he had made many tart comments to himself about the progress of the others. He was using this time to evaluate his peers.

The chamber he had chosen for the meeting was actually his personal control room. A large space that could be considered decadent on a space ship where space was at a premium. In his private area, the seats were very comfortable, the décor blatantly lavish. Paintings of battle scenes, in solid wood frames, alternated with blank monitor screens that were curved to be flush to the circular walls.

The monitor screens could, at whim, be programmed to show any part of his ship, or the surrounding terrain, or to receive transmitted messages, or what ever else he wanted.

Idly, he adjusted the one on the opposite wall from where he sat, to show one of his favourite landscape scenes from his home dominion on Aerdna, and the one next to it to show his dominions emblem, the black and gold nighthawk striking at prey.

When the conversation began to sound like children bickering, Voltec placed his goblet on the low table in beside him, and rose to speak. His movement caused a pause in the level of voices, long enough for him to break into the discussion.

"The Tymorean cowards won't fight us," he proclaimed. His hands went to grip the gilt trimmed lapels of his black uniform. "They simply walked out of their towns and we can walk in and take over."

"They left nothing behind but empty buildings," his brother, Axec, reminded him. He too was clad in black, which was the colour associated with the dominion of his birth back on Aerdna. "Not even crops in the field."

He touched a screen on the arm of his chair and one of the wall screens showed images of deserted villages. Most showed wooden tools abandoned untidily.

"We don't need their rubbish," Voltec said scornfully, turning to glare at his brother. "And the pap they call food is too weak to sustain us. I have sent for the first one hundred farmers to be released from stasis – we can begin to grow our crops immediately. Though for now, they will need to add the essential nutrients."

Warlord Xezir, who wore a brown uniform, was one of the younger Warlords and a scientist as well. He remarked quietly, "I scanned your report, Voltec. It is odd – your brother's mention of the crops – they can't have been ripe. It is only a quarter of the way through the growing season."

"Irrelevant," Voltec proclaimed, waving the comment aside with a hand gesture. "If they chose to harvest unripe crops - that is not our problem. It gives us time to grow ours and I

intend to besiege the cities, as it is obvious that the people all went there. Even with the collection of unripe grain and vegetables, they can't hold out long. The expanded population will eat through the stores in no time and they will be unable to bring more in. It seems that the fools would rather die than fight us."

Zorrec, the Warlord in the dark orange uniform, countered with, "You can hardly claim that. They sent aircraft after one of our scout ships and attacked a baseship."

"And who allowed his position to be compromised?" Voltec snapped, glaring at Zorrec. "Kellex with his obsession about children."

Kellex clamped his teeth down on a retort and tried to appear relaxed in his chair. He brushed some imaginary dirt from the sleeve of his dark green uniform before speaking. "It is not an obsession. Those children could be our undoing if we don't neutralise them first. They are quite powerful for their age."

"So you say," Voltec agreed with thinly veiled sarcasm. "Still, they are two inexperienced youths – hardly a danger. You'd do better trying to remove their elders."

"That is a priority of mine," Kellex agreed, not betraying the fact it wasn't exactly true.

"I didn't see your strategy working on the cities," Zorrec pointed out, deflecting Voltec from his glare at Kellex. He didn't want Voltec trying to demean him too, simply because he had panicked and fled his hidden mountain position. He had scorned Kellex's obsession until he had seen the two red headed children within the camouflage fields around his ship. "How many tons of explosive did you waste trying to destroy the first two? The Tymoreans have shields over them." He implied that Voltec should have known that after the first unsuccessful bombing run.

"And why didn't you tell us about them? You and Kellex are in charge of gathering intelligence on these people," Axec defended his brother. He glared from Zorrec to Kellex.

"They are new," Zorrec stated. "And I thought you had located all the shield anchors before you tried the second bombardment...or what you claimed were shield anchors." He turned to Xezir. "What were those devices?"

"Rubbish. Broken bits of a space ship – probably from one of our scout ships that were destroyed," Xezir said in disgust. "No more than childish attempts to distract us. At least my efforts to distract their scientists are working. One of the accursed Governors has come to the second continent to try to solve the problem I gave them."

"I think we need to know where those aircraft Zorrec mentioned came from," Axec redirected the talk.

"I do know!" Kellex snapped. "They have a hangar cavern in the cave system under the palaces within that mesa. They went there after their precious brats were rescued. There are only twenty craft there."

"Where did the Tymoreans get them from?" Xezir asked. "We have had no mention of aircraft until recently."

Kellex growled. "They can't be more than message ships. You note that they did little more than try to chase us away."

"They were armed," Axec remarked.

"Hyped up defensive lasers," Kellex retorted, dismissively. "And you notice that they only dared fly against us to try to recover those two children."

"Merely because they are children of one of the ineffectual Governors," Axec drawled. "How many ships did you say they destroyed?"

"None! The ship that crashed exploded first. The others only needed minor repairs."

Zorrec snorted softly but made no vocal comment. Those ships were forced to land, but were fortunately hidden by a cloaking field until Kellex's mechanics fixed them.

"And what caused that? Those children?" Axec asked pointedly.

"The children were caught by our allies amongst the ugly ones," Kellex stated flatly. "My men gave the ugly ones and the brats, no chance to interfere or escape. They saw no sign of any locals, but some of the ugly ones might have been nearby and got curious. They couldn't have

done anything, as most of them are brainless cretins. I punished the tribe, to warn them against complaining.”

Voltec suddenly banged a fist on the table in front of him. He received the full attention of the other Warlords.

“Let us not quibble. It is true that even the best plans need to change once begun,” he said in a conciliatory tone. “Even mine, I will admit. So I will begin – do we still have spies within the cities?”

Zorrec, who had the responsibility to oversee the infiltrations, smiled maliciously. “Yes, indeed, and they are still reporting. However, since the villages were evacuated, no more people are allowed into the cities. Not even unlucky or foolish Tymorean travellers. My commanders have coerced a few disgruntled peasants into helping us.”

“Can your agents in the cities find a way to bring those shields down?” Voltec asked.

“They are already working on it,” Zorrec claimed. “However, it will take time to locate the controls and avoid the security. We may have fragmented their so-called Peace Corps, but the few in each city are training peasants to be fighters. I will let you know when I have results. I have authorised our spies to create as much havoc and unrest as they can.”

Voltec gave a snort of mirth. “It hardly matters - the Tymoreans will all die eventually. Once we begin the terrain reforming program and spike the atmosphere with traces of Alfinium, any who prove to be capable of adapting and thriving on it can become slaves. The rest are merely fertiliser for our crops and they will nourish our people when they come here.”

“Axe – show us where we have taken control,” Voltec invited.

Promptly, Axe brought up on a projection screen, maps of the four continents and the numerous island archipelagos. He used a laser pointer as he spoke.

“As we all know, most of the population lives on this continent – where we are now. There are a hundred or so cities, each surrounded by smaller towns, villages and hamlets. We have taken control of seven areas – and have the central cities surrounded.” Axe pointed to the seven cities that were all in the southeast corner of the continent. “As previously mentioned, all the smaller places are empty and we must assume all the cities are shielded. Wazir, do you have anything else of importance to report?”

“Only that our preparations for operating the terrain reformer are progressing well. Our scientists on the third continent are close to having the parameters confirmed. The Tymoreans have not noticed the majority of our ... tampering... and where they have moved to reverse out work, we have in turn restored it. They have not noticed the evaporators we inserted into the oceans – they have some local superstition about the oceans – no one even goes out on boats. They do have crude facilities for desalination – one plant is operating, but there are three others. They can’t have missed the fact that we have made the rainfall less than normal in the past cold season. Drought conditions are spreading and the native trees and plants are tinder dry. With the weather on this world now thoroughly quantified – it will be easy to ignite fires and have them spread fast and far. After that, our plants will flourish.”

Voltec turned to Kellex. “What can you report? Do you know where those precocious brats are? I would be quite happy to bomb whichever town or palace they are in.”

His sarcasm wasn’t unnoticed. Kellex ignored it – he truly believed the prediction of Old Sedgram, his mentor and a former Warlord.

“Those brats haven’t returned to the Estate,” he stated positively, though mentally he hoped his peers wouldn’t notice his unease. “My spy there is sure of that. It is my opinion that the king is hiding them, possibly in whatever backwater they grew up in.”

“Didn’t your spy say they came from off world?” Zorrec asked, casually. He hid a smirk.

“Talk!” Kellex retorted. “If they arrived with traders – who are the only ones with ships that land here – they certainly haven’t left that way – not since we arrived.”

Zorrec shrugged, he didn't mind feeding Kellex's obsession with the brats – after all, when the Aeronites were victorious and the homeworld Superior Council awarded honours, he doubted that Kellex would collect many.

"I wouldn't assume that the brats never returned to the Estate," Zorrec taunted Kellex. "Commander Kek reported that those brats rescued the nameless one from the scavenging animals, one of which mauled him. He believes they took him to the nearest city."

"I agree that Kek is an exceptional warrior, but his belief can be mistaken." Kellex countered. "The nameless one must be nearly dead, if he was mauled after Villeni finished with him. The wounds those creatures give, turn rapidly septic. Anyway, if the Tymoreans start demanding information from him, he will probably will himself to death. I doubt he could stand much of their torture in his condition. As for those brats, if they escaped your Commander, they were very lucky, no doubt. That being so, can you see their elders letting them loose again? If their High King Governor is using them to dupe the commoners, he wouldn't want them risked. I would say they dumped the nameless one at the city, gave orders for him to be taken to the Estate, and then took off again. They are undisciplined whelps."

"Lords!" Voltec called for order. "Does it really matter where these children are? They can't fight us single-handedly."

"The point is, that my esteemed colleague Kellex, claimed he could eliminate all of the High King's get," Zorrec murmured mildly. "He can't even take a baby."

Kellex and Zorrec glared at each other, until a messenger beep broke the tableau. Voltec glanced at his brother who was retrieving a message via the screen on his chair's arm, and then turned back to the meeting, to invite the two scientists to speak.

"Wazim, Xezir, are you ready to proceed?"

Wazim stood, and straightened his dark greyish blue uniform self-consciously. "In addition to what Xezir has reported, our experiments and small scale operations are complete. Already we have areas of the fourth continent under cultivation. We infused Alfinium into the atmosphere and the prevailing wind we created spread it evenly over a wide area. The rain we created using the ocean-based evaporators settled it to the ground. The plants are growing well and we have noticed that the hopping rodents won't touch them."

"Have you any ideas for negating the shields?" Voltec asked.

Xezir answered this time. "Yes, and I earlier suggested things to your brother. However, if we don't get those shields down, the people in the city won't get Alfinium into their systems. Though of more concern, the Tymoreans have also shielded vast areas of uncultivated forest."

He had the attention of all the other Warlords.

"Forests?" Alex echoed. "Why would they bother?" It seemed like he had his mind on something else.

"Why doesn't matter," Xezir said. "But with all that area shielded, the terrain reforming will be incomplete and should the shields be removed at a later time, the terrain reformation may be destabilised, and the changed areas will revert to what has been natural until now."

"It isn't a priority then," Voltec considered. "Once we find and deactivate the city defences, we will know what to look for at the forests. Those controls will surely be outside of the shields. I cannot see people being left inside those places."

"There is one other point," Xezir said calmly. He still had the attention of his peers. "The animals are migrating to those areas."

"I cannot see how that matters," Alex insisted, impatiently.

"Perhaps it doesn't," Xezir said equably. "But the behaviour is odd."

"The animals can wait – we can eat them if we need to and if they are dumb enough to hop into cages – well and good." Alex dismissed that concern. "I have just received a very interesting report. One of my Commanders – at this city called Basiq – has succeeded in entering the city. He had sappers dig a tunnel under the edge of the force dome."

Five voices tried to ask questions at once. Alex silenced the clamour by raising two hands. His face had a faint smirk of triumph.

“They came up under a building and waited there until they contacted several of our spies. If we want, we can bring troops in and take over the city. However, that isn’t all. While our spies were looking for the shield controls, thinking them in the council building, they found a room in the cellar with three tunnels leading off it. They sent a robot probe into one and it is still sending signals from over a hundred miles away. It likely links that city with another. If we travel the tunnel, we can invade other cities as well.”

“That is an awfully long way for troops to travel on foot underground,” Xezir said, breaking into the babble of conversation between Voltec, Alex and Zorrec.

Wazim spoke up. “We can build bullet capsules, pressurised to travel along the tunnels. It would be faster.”

Since the idea was taken up, Xezir shrugged, and then turned when Kellex addressed him. “You have a better idea?”

“Simpler. Just repeat what that first group did. We have the means to work out where to come up. Our spies could tell us that – and it won’t be where the locals expect arrivals.”

“Yes, of course,” Kellex mused. “I wonder if that would work to get into the Royal menagerie. The rock faces of that mesa are well shielded, as are the walls around the Estate above. I do know a way up through the caverns – but it emerges outside the walls.”

“I will work on a solution,” Xezir promised. “Perhaps it is a reason to capture one of the Governors and make him tell us how to get in there.”

“Yes,” Kellex hissed. “And when I am ready, I will issue a challenge to the so-called President Governor and get him away from there. He will not dare refuse the challenge.”

“And the King?” Xezir asked.

“Him...I have plans for him and for the rest of his get,” Kellex promised.

Xezir controlled a sigh. He couldn’t see the sense in worrying about children.

Kellex looked about to erupt, but Xezir forestalled him with a slight hand gesture. “You know more about them than I do – perhaps you can explain why you believe they are a threat.”

Kellex spoke of the foreseeing of Sedgram, just before he died. He recalled to Xezir the legends of the powers of the Royal lines. Xezir listened thoughtfully and finally spoke up. “While I doubt that the baby is a threat...”

“Babies grow up!” Kellex interrupted.

“So they do, but it takes time...I was going to say that Wazim and I have become familiar with the natural forces on this planet. We needed to be to do the weather manipulations and the terrain reforming. I have recently begun to record anomalies in the normal force pattern. One series on anomalies are in the forested areas, and another in various open areas near the cities.”

“And how does this matter to me?” Kellex asked, impatiently.

“Consider – the harvests have already been collected in many areas and are well advanced in others...”

“I heard that – so what?”

“Add to that the exodus of animals to the forested areas,” Xezir continued. “Shielded forests.”

“You think the events are linked?” Kellex realised. “So...?”

“So...if you are right about the power of those two children...”

“I am right...just state what you mean, Xezir. I haven’t time for riddles.”

“Very well, from what you said, only two people other than the Governors can manipulate the natural forces in that way and according to you, those people are the missing Prince and Princess. You know where the Governors are...I can tell you where the children are.”

As Xezir gave Kellex the coordinates, Zorrec listened and noted the numbers. He hid a smile when he heard Kellex say he would put his wards onto finding the children. It didn’t really matter who found them, they too could be a lever to get into that Royal enclave or the menagerie

as Kellex had begun to call it. But he already had Commander Kek hunting them, or had Kellex forgotten? Either way, Kek had his own uncanny ways of finding things. He had years more experience than Kellex's untried changelings and now had an extremely personal grudge against them.

Zorrec could almost hear Kellex thinking about tunnelling under the mesa shields, going up the tunnels, snatching the babe – so he could corrupt another of the Royal kind.

“Corrupt the Royal kind,” Zorrec repeated the phrase to himself. Snippets of ancient Aeronite history came back to him. He found himself saying aloud, “We should turn our full attention to removing all those with Royal blood.”

The discussion between Voltec and Alex suddenly halted.

“They cannot survive without commoners,” Voltec stated.

“You forget...the first Aeronite settlers had Royal blood and they survived the Alfinium in our home ecosystem. If they hadn't, we would not be here today.”

“I haven't forgotten,” Kellex said with assurance. “And if you will excuse me...I will continue to solve that problem – right now.” He strode out of the meeting room and outside the baseship to where his personal shuttle waited on the ground. He wasted no time in getting in and taking off. He activated the cloaking device as soon as the engine blasted into life. Only a tornado like wind and dust cloud showed his departure.

The nav computer was preset to the new location of his baseship. It was no longer in the mountains and relatively close to the Royal Estate, but in an uninhabited stretch of barren land near the northern ocean. While his ship flew itself, Kellex mulled over the information he had just learnt, and made plans.

Let Voltec and Alex deal with the peasant masses, and Wazim and Xezir were well able to deal with the science-loving Governor. Kellex had just thought of excellent plan to draw the king away from the Estate. That only left the President – and if his little toy had heard correctly, that one was away from the Estate for the moment. That thought gave him a modicum of worry. What his toy thought he heard was “...away with the space fleet.” Had he misunderstood, Kellex mused. He must have – for if this world had a space fleet...where was it?

Not once in the twenty years he'd been observing this world had he seen any sign of one and why would the stupid pacifists want a space fleet? Or could even build one...they didn't have huge reserves of metal ore to use. Maybe his little fool of a toy had actually heard 'race meet'. That made more sense – but it gave no indication of how long the President Governor would be away.

Chapter 18 - Infiltration

Commander Jordan straightened his new dark green uniform and fingered the rank insignia self-consciously. Having Villeni present them to him had been a long hoped for, but still unexpected surprise. It had been no less of a surprise to Vila, his sister. However, the lecture on what was expected of a Commander in the Aeronite Expansion Force, was taken word for word from the military handbook. Well, most of it was. Villeni had added his own comments on the penalties of failure. He hadn't mentioned names, but every junior officer was aware of Villeni's denigration of the now nameless former Commander.

Even though Jordan had liked and respected Xan, the man had proved too soft for his position, and had failed his duty. He found it hard to feel sorry for him though, and relished the fact that Xan's demotion had been to his own advantage.

With a last check in the mirror, Jordan left his cabin and strode to the Command bridge, unconsciously imitating Kellex's manner. His first duty as Watch Commander was about to begin.

After familiarising himself with the latest reports from within the ship and from the deployed warriors, he went to sit in the Watch Commander's chair. From that position, which was on a raised dais, Jordan could swivel around to observe any of the monitor screens. He could, as an alternative, channel the information from any of them to a screen next to his chair, or he could initiate communications from there.

He was tempted to do that and call Vila, just so he could share this exquisite moment with her. Then he let caution overrule the idea. Any action that he instigated from that control position, would be able to be scrutinised by Kellex. It would not be wise to do anything so frivolous on his first command duty. He mentally shrugged, and tried to keep the elated smile off his face.

For the first half of his shift, Jordan was scrupulous in checking all the monitoring positions at regular intervals, so should Kellex or Villeni arrive unexpectedly, he could report all the latest details immediately. However, his mind began to stray into idle thoughts of himself becoming a Warlord, like Kellex. He hadn't enjoyed the fantasy for very long when the watch second reported that Kellex was returning.

That news gave him mixed feelings. The duty of Watch Commander had less authority when Kellex was on board the baseship. Then Jordan wondered why Kellex was returning already. The meetings between the Warlords usually lasted a full day.

Jordan replayed the message from Kellex at the Watch Commander's console. His guardian's tone had been terse, as always, but it didn't give the sense of him being angry. He hoped that was the case. He had a classified report to give Kellex; one that he hoped would make the Warlord, extremely pleased.

From long experience with the man, from the time he was only their guardian, he and Vila had learnt that when Kellex was in a foul mood, it was a bad idea to remind him that they were Tymorean bastards. However, it would be an equally bad idea to withhold the information that he and Vila had accidentally discovered. They could say that they needed time to understand what they had learnt about the enigmatic devices all the Royal Tymoreans wore, but that would only placate him a little.

"Commander Jordan," one of the watch officers summoned his attention, breaking his abstraction.

Jordan chose to walk to the man's station, rather than bring the data up on the small screen near him.

It was the weather monitoring station, and whilst Jordan identified the storm front approaching from off the ocean, he listened to the meteorological details. It was going to be a furious storm.

“Send out a warning to all remote groups,” Jordan directed. “And warn all local stations.”

Immediately after the comm officer confirmed the dispatch of the messages, he reported Kellex’s return to the ship’s docking bay.

Grateful for the warning, Jordan kept an eye on the bridge access, and was ready to snap to attention, and salute, the instant Kellex strode in. He was moments ahead of the, “Warlord on the bridge,” warning from the watch officer nearest the access.

Kellex continued without pause, heading directly for the Watch Commander’s chair.

“Report!” he snapped, expecting Jordan to have followed him.

Used to such terse commands, Jordan was ready with the précis of the current situation, and the latest information from the ground troops. Kellex merely grunted, having taken in the information, even though his mind seemed to be on something other than his immediate surroundings.

After some minutes, while Jordan waited, and kept an eye on the activity on the bridge, Kellex seemed to come to a decision.

“Hand over to the watch second. I want you and Commander Vila to wait for me in my private lounge.”

“At once, Sir,” Jordan agreed, saluting correctly. He had a sudden feeling of excitement.

He made the delegation, and summoned his sister, all the time wondering what was up. Kellex wasn’t angry, like when he had heard of Xan’s perfidy. It was more like when he had something he craved, in his grasp. Had he captured the annoying offspring of the Tymorean King again?

No, it wasn’t that. Kellex had practically purred when he had had them before. Something else was up.

After waiting ten minutes without sign of their guardian, Vila spoke aloud, betraying her nervousness. “Have you any idea what he wants?”

Jordan shook his head. “No, but if he rushed back from the war council meeting, and told me to get off watch duty, he must have something important for us to do.”

“Should we tell him of our success with those transporter things?” Vila asked.

After a moment’s consideration, Jordan suggested. “Maybe not yet, unless the information is immediately relevant. We still don’t know their full capability or why you and I are the only ones able to make them work. He would want more information than we currently have. Or rather he’d want to use the things somehow.”

By the time Kellex strode into his private lounge, which was just off the bridge, Jordan and Vila were both jiggling with impatience. However, they both stopped pacing and came to attention, waiting in silence for Kellex to tell them what he wanted of them.

“Sit!” Kellex ordered impatiently, after he had reclined in his special chair. He glared at Jordan, who had grown to be his equal in height.

Neither Vila nor Jordan felt able to relax. They sat forward on their chairs, and prepared to listen intently.

“I have an important assignment for you,” Kellex went on with out preamble.

“Warlord Xezir has detected force manipulations at locus set 149-35-22 and locus set 305-22-07. He attributes these to the two children who are supposedly the High King Governor’s heirs. I know those two whelps are meant to be powerful, but they are still only children and I think they are using some crude mechanism to seem more important than they are. Their current

activities are unacceptable as it will interfere with our plans to create a complimentary environment here. Those whelps may have been given a high rank but they are obviously totally undisciplined. We must bring them here and explain the proper facts to them.”

Neither Jordan nor Vila questioned Kellex’s statement.

“However,” Kellex went on. “There is another important task to be done before I send you to fetch the whelps. I want you to draw Governor Tymoros, the King, away from the Estate. The Governors hide there and have consistently refused to listen to our pleas for help. They have two whole continents with practically no population. I intend to give them one last chance to listen to us and if they refuse to let our people come here for refuge...war will be the only answer.”

Kellex saw the faces of his wards tighten with determination and he hid a smile. Still, he had to use impeccable logic with these two. They were highly intelligent and if they had a flaw, it was in their insistence to look at all sides of a situation. Well, it wasn’t normally a problem, but in this instance, he didn’t want them thinking kindly of the Tymoreans. He wanted them to keep thinking of High King Tymoros as an unprincipled monster.

His success at doing this was an exquisitely pleasant sensation, and Kellex knew he had to hide his satisfaction at corrupting these two of the king’s whelps. They thought they were some Tymorean noble’s cast off and abandoned bastards. They believed they owed everything to him for saving their lives. He turned his thoughts from the moment of introspection.

“Vila, I want you to take your command ship and check out those two locations. Determine if those meddling whelps are there. Zorrec’s Commander is still looking for them – if he gets them well and good. If not, we will fetch them later.”

Vila nodded, eyes bright with excitement. Kellex noticed this and smiled faintly with satisfaction.

“Jordan, I have assigned two full troops of foot warriors to you. I want you to go to one of the towns that we haven’t taken over yet, one where they won’t be expecting a stealth attack...”

He quickly explained what Axec’s troops had discovered. Jordan’s eyes widened in anticipation.

“Vila can join you there after checking for the brats.”

“So we infiltrate the city, bring the troops in and hide them in places our agents have arranged. Then we have the local petty lordlings contact the king on our behalf...Sir, are you sure they won’t know we are not the actual Prince and Princess?” Vila asked.

“Very few people have seen the real ones,” Kellex said as if he knew that for a fact. “All the people know is that they have brilliant red hair. Apart from that – those Royals are so inbred that they all look alike. You two were lucky to be half-common. You know what inbreeding leads to. I expect the king realised that too, since all of his own offspring died. I know that when these two so-called heirs first appeared, they had brown hair and looked and acted like commoners. No one had heard anything about them until they appeared at fifteen. I think the king fathered some bastards of his own or grabbed a couple nameless whelps from somewhere remote.”

Kellex saw Jordan’s knowing smirk and sensed that Vila was thinking of something else.

“Have you a concern, Commander Vila?”

“Not about the assignment, Sir,” Vila responded honestly. “You mentioned needing to educate the changelings. I cannot see the use in bothering with them if they are common born. The new baby isn’t and we can’t leave him there to be made into a barbaric despot. If we could rescue him, and teach him the right way, he would be a link to the leaders and the commoners would respect him.”

Kellex nodded approvingly, that idea had already occurred to him, but the baby would be too young to be useful for many years. He wasn’t going to tell his wards that he had another growing to fill that role.

“If you are willing to do more, I believe there is a way, it will be dangerous though.”

He had Vila's undivided attention, as he revealed the rest of Alex's discoveries.

"However, our first need is to talk to the High King Governor. If we can convince him to help us, the babe will be well enough for a time. If the king proves to be intractable, your suggestion becomes more important."

Jordan felt compelled to ask, "How would we rescue the baby, if your trained infiltrators couldn't?"

Kellex's expression turned feral at the injudicious reminder of his failure, but he quickly realised that Jordan was truly intent on fulfilling his assignment.

"I do have an idea," he admitted with an ill-concealed smirk. "Those Tymoreans think they are so clever. But those underground tunnels are the last way they will expect to find us. Wazim is going to build two bullet capsules for me. You can use these to travel the tunnels, and I am certain that you will arrive inside their defences."

Jordan jiggled with excitement. "Sir, I really think that will work, and Vila and I should be the ones to go."

Kellex eyed him sternly, tacitly inviting him to explain.

"Do you recall those odd devices, Sir? The ones all the high-ranking Tymoreans had? Vila and I finally figured out what they were. They are transporter devices. Vila and I have managed to make ourselves move, virtually instantaneously, from place to place across a large room."

"Indeed," Kellex said with a predatory look. "That is very useful. When did you manage this?"

"Just last evening, Sir. We were trying to see if anyone else could do it, but so far, we are the only ones."

With his right hand massaging his chin, Kellex fired questions at his wards, but the little Jordan could tell him was frustrating.

"You are right, we can use that fortuitous skill. Vila, organise what you need to get that baby here. I want you both to go for him as soon as we have the King in our custody. He can be made to believe that his whelp is a hostage for his good sense, though we will know that we have no intention of harming him."

"Thank you, Sir," Vila said with genuine gratitude.

"Too bad the problem of the older ones isn't as simple. If we bring them here, they will need some severe lessoning. And if they still prove troublesome...well, I will deal with them. Anyway, I will brief the teams, while you two requisition the equipment you will need. Vila, why don't you requisition maps of the accursed Royal Estate, and the intelligence we have on the security system there. I really do believe, that with you in full stealth mode, and able to use those transmitters, that this will work."

After meeting the transport ship bringing the troop of warriors and equipment, Commander Jordan led the scouts to the outskirts of a city, one that was well away from those currently under attack. He sent them to survey the perimeter of the force shield – five miles to either side of the direct line from one of the nearest deserted villages. He had chosen that settlement because it sat over what his initial probes had suggested was a tunnel.

While he waited for the scouts to return, he had some of the warriors unload the mechanical diggers, and others initiating contact with Kellex's infiltrators in the city. He wanted an instant reply, but two hours elapsed before the first response came through.

Jordan had worn a path around his ship with his impatient pacing, but dived back into it when the reply signal came through.

"Identify," Jordan snapped, imitating Kellex.

"Quenna, Sir. Senior scout," a voice answered. "Am I glad to hear from you."

Jordan recalled the man's face. "Report. Have you found the shield controls?"

"Negative Sir, though your message suggested they would be in the council building. However that is so well guarded that a dogmite couldn't get in."

“How many people do you have in the city?” Jordan asked.

“Only five, Sir and we are well separated.”

The infiltrators were highly skilled warriors, Jordan knew, but were still only five against a city full of enemies. “Have you heard any reports from other cities?”

“No sir, not since they sealed the city perimeter, three weeks ago.”

Very tersely, Jordan described the findings in Basiq. The voice of the senior scout sounded excited when he answered. “There have to be other tunnels, Sir. I have spoken to many of the new refugees and they all said that they walked into a building in the village and walked out here.”

“Can you transmit a plan of the city to me, Quenna?” Jordan requested. “With any pertinent notations?”

“Yes, Sir, right away.”

Jordan sat in his pilots couch and studied the exceptionally detailed chart on his data padd. “What are the green shaded areas?” Jordan asked Quenna via the communicator.

“Gardens, Sir. When the riff raff arrived, the town council put them to work planting stuff in every available space – roof gardens, parks, playgrounds, and they are even putting hydroponic tanks in cellars and who knows where. Everyone from outside has to put in a shift of work each day or they don’t get a food chit. That is why I took so long to reply.”

“How are you managing?” Jordan asked.

He heard a faint chuckle. “I have been put in charge of a group of yokels, though since you asked, the five of us are all getting low on the food supplement pills. We have had to ration ourselves. I am starting to feel light headed, even though I am eating as much as all the natives.”

“You will have reinforcements soon. I have orders to duplicate the success in Basiq. I will need to have places to hide forty warriors. Can you arrange that?”

“Yes, Sir,” Quenna affirmed promptly.

“I also need the location of a private place where I can bring the warriors in through our own tunnel.”

There was another chuckle. “I have the perfect place, Sir. A big warehouse that has been half cleared to put in more hydroponics tanks. I will reassign my yokels there and ensure the building must be evacuated for a time. The five of us have been amusing ourselves preparing some annoying distractions all over the city. We can make a start in distracting the locals.”

Jordan controlled a chuckle of his own. “Well done, Quenna. I will ensure that Warlord Kellex hears of your resourcefulness.”

“Was there anything else, Sir?”

“Yes, I need a way for the warriors to get into the council building,” Jordan directed.

“To bring the shields down, Sir?”

“Perhaps, but not initially,” Jordan cautioned him. “I am waiting on reports from my scouts before finalising my plans. When will you be available for future contact?”

Quenna gave his ‘work’ schedule and Jordan ended the communication after telling the infiltrator to carry his small communicator.

While he was talking, the rest of the senior warriors were locating their current position on an aerial survey map and determining where the tunnel would emerge in the city. One put a finger on the data pad screen. “The council building has to be where the long distance tunnels come in. Wouldn’t it be easier to break into it and get into that building?”

“It would if the idea works,” Jordan agreed. “Give it a try with the digging equipment, but don’t be surprised if you can’t. The Tymoreans seem to have technology that has been kept well hidden until now.”

While her brother was preparing to take the city of Amik, Villa took her one-person flitter into a high-level orbit and flew to the first of the locations Kellex had given her. When she

reached the point, which was in the far south of the main continent, she set her ship into a tight circle holding position.

Her instruments showed her the odd migration of all sorts of animals, and seeing the sight of huge carnivores striding amongst the tiny hopping creatures – she was amazed. It was a while before she sensed a feeling reminiscent of falling. Her mind snapped back into analytical mode. She had never suffered from vertigo before – so why was she doing so now?

“What the hell is that child playing with down there?” Vila spoke aloud as she focussed her scanners. Her instruments located and identified the protective screen her guardian had mentioned. They should have been able to get something – some blurry image – through it. However, no matter how she adjusted the settings, she couldn’t get anything. Perhaps she might if she went closer.

Vila took over from the autopilot and turned on her cloaking field. She descended in a wide spiral and then tried to land through the screen. Not surprisingly, she seemed to slide down the side of the quasi-solid protective field. Her next move was to land close by, on a rocky knoll that the animal flood was skirting. Again, she focussed her scanners and from ground level, she got a view into the forest – at least to the point where the trees blocked her vision. Well, that made sense – the animals needed to get in but she needed to go closer to examine the phenomenon and try to locate the Tymorean working there.

At the push on a switch, the hatch of the flitter opened and Vila climbed out, almost having an avian fly into her face. It hit the clear plastic of the canopy instead. She jumped at the unexpected encounter and cursed the small-brained bird. Of course it hadn’t seen the ship, it was cloaked, but it wasn’t incorporeal. With distaste, she flicked the stunned bird off her ship’s nose where it had fallen and quickly finished climbing out. She thought it wise to close the canopy before she went down to the ground.

Once there, she took bearings on features around her to be able to relocate her ship, and double-checked that her personal protective screen was on. Then, being careful not to step on any of the oblivious hopping and scurrying rodents, she walked towards the forest verge.

The vertigo like feeling hadn’t left her, only now it seemed to be pulling her forward. She followed the feeling until trees surrounded her, and that gave her a different kind of shiver. The trees were so tall – what if they fell on her? She hadn’t been so close to trees before – could only ever remember living on Kellex’s great ship. The few times she had visited Aerdna, outside had had tall buildings that wouldn’t fall down.

Despite the need to find the source of the attraction force, Vila turned to return to her ship. Perhaps when the weird migration finished, she could return. Kellex wouldn’t be satisfied, but this forest area was vast and she couldn’t be expected to search it by herself. She would tell Kellex that and report that the power being manipulated was intense.

A loud growl made her freeze into immobility, and then turn very slowly. Not three feet from her, looking directly at her, was one of the enormous predatory felines. Instinctively, she looked at her arm – since she couldn’t see herself, the creature couldn’t either. Could it smell her? She edged silently sideways, just as she thought she was outsmarting it, the big head moved and the nostrils twitched.

Vila stopped again, slowly crouching down to grab one of the stream of hoppers and tossed her catch into the face of the feline. It roared in irritation and moved in her direction. Self-preservation kicked in and Vila ran, no longer caring if she stepped on any of the creatures. The roar came again, but it wasn’t so close. When she risked a glance over her shoulder, she saw the creature take a pace or two more in her direction and then turn back towards the forest.

In her relief, Vila missed seeing the low rock outcrop and tripped over. Animals ran around her, subtly deflected by her protective screen. Feeling like three kinds of fool, she picked herself up, limped back to her ship and dragged herself back into the cockpit.

There, she berated herself for being freaked by trees, but repeated her rationalisation for not searching. It was true that some power was being used to draw the creatures, but once they were inside the forest, they just milled around and gradually dispersed in all directions. Then she tried to rationalise her reaction to the feline. Shock, she decided. It was better not to test the effectiveness of the force screen by letting the creature attack.

Vila forcefully reactivated her ship's engine and punched the next coordinates into the nav computer. She would go and check another of the forest areas – for a comparison - to see if it was still permeable to entry at ground level.

Deep in her mind, Vila was trying not to think of how peaceful that forest had felt, or how it made her feel as if she wanted to stay there and forget all her troubles.

“It is a trick! A filthy mind trick,” Vila told herself. “This whole stinking planet and no one cares about us. Some arrogant noble tossed us out to die – just as they will let every single Aeronite die. They have a responsibility to help us. Aeronites were once Tymorean. Aeronites cared enough to take Jordan and me in. Pyr too – poor little kid. Fancy throwing him out – a mere infant. I don't suppose, since they care so little for their offspring, that we can expect them to care anything for people on a distant world.

“Personally, I don't care if every single Tymorean dies,” Vila stated to herself, with the conviction of twenty years of Aeronite indoctrination. “And if I am lucky enough to meet the bastard who sired me, I'll kill him.”

With that thought, Vila launched her ship to go to another of the protected forests. Two hours later, she landed again on a stretch of open rocky ground and scanned the immediate area. The odd creature still headed for the forest, but not the river of fur and feathers that she had seen at the first place. At ground level, the forest was still visible. Vila repeated her foray on foot, keeping a wary eye out for the large felines and watching her footing on the uneven ground. She only saw small creatures.

After a time, she noticed the lack of the strong drawing in feeling and the tight muscles of her gut relaxed. As she approached the forest, she still sensed that treacherous peaceful feeling. This time she ignored it as she began to follow a dusty trail into the forest. She took two steps, but on the third, her foot kicked something solid and totally invisible. She leant forward to look down, and slammed her head into the invisible barrier.

Vila swore creatively in the Aeronite dialect and finally concluded, “Damn, they have sealed this forest.”

Then she saw that some more hoppers were approaching, they passed her and kept going through the barrier. That gave things a completely new dimension. The damn shield could tell she wasn't Tymorean.

She retreated, deep in thought, and finally decided to check out the other location which was somewhere on the third largest continent. The flight there would give her time to think things over and to figure out how to phrase her report to her guardian. He would draw his own conclusions, but he would also want to hear hers.

She and Jordan had an advantage when reporting to Kellex; he wasn't as likely to take his anger out on them as severely as he had to some other commanders.

She shivered thinking about what he had ordered for Xan. He had ordered Villeni to whip him and leave him for the scavenging animals to find. Though, if what she had heard whispered was true, he had been found by Tymoreans, recognised as an alien and taken to be questioned. Which, Vila had been told repeatedly, was a polite term for being tortured.

Kellex hadn't seemed too concerned. He seemed to think that Xan would die from the torture, claiming that the Tymoreans did things to prisoners that he himself would quail at ordering done.

When the nav computer beeped to warn her of her approaching destination, Vila woke from a light doze and looked at the scene her scanners were giving her - miles and miles of flat land, shimmering yellow-brown in the breeze. She quickly checked the coordinates or her actual

position against the ones she had input, and then enhanced the magnification of the screen as her instruments scanned the area. Once again, she became aware of the sense of being drawn downwards.

A glimpse of something darker than the heads of grain caught her eye. She focussed on that spot and magnified the view further. Two people were down there, alone amongst the miles of grain.

Vila recoiled in shock as the face of a red-haired woman became distinct from surrounding grain. Not only could that woman be her twin, she was looking up, directly at the scanner. The likeness, she quickly explained as the inbred ethnic likeness. The second ... just wasn't possible. Her ship was two thousand feet above the field, and cloaked as well.

Without thought, in what was more a panic reaction than a plan, Vila sent her flitter to where Jordan was working. When she arrived, he was supervising the diggers. He turned when he sensed her.

"What did you find?" Jordan asked her. "Were those too hooligans where our guardian claimed?"

"Yes," Vila admitted, with a shiver at the recollection.

"Then what has you so twitchy," Jordan demanded. "You are acting like one of our guardian's converts."

"What do you remember of that girl – the king's illegitimate whelp? You saw her when she threatened our guardian."

"Her? She was lucky and had those two peasants helping her. Why?"

"Did she look like me?"

"Not really. Why?"

"I went to those coordinates and I saw a woman there who was exactly like me."

"I wonder if that first girl was a decoy," Jordan suggested with wry amusement. "Though I wouldn't dare suggest that to our guardian. Or perhaps, the woman you just saw is a decoy."

"No, that one I just saw was the real thing." Vila went on to describe what she had felt and seen at both places. "It was creepy," she concluded.

"Well, if we have to go after them, we will be warned," Jordan said with assurance. "Have you reported yet?"

"No."

"Why don't you do that, just tell our guardian the facts and let him make his own mind up," Jordan advised. "At least you achieved what you were told to do. I am not having much luck here."

"Why not?" Vila asked with concern.

Jordan scowled and explained about the tunnel he had found. "It was logical to try and dig into it and use it to bring our fighters into the city but none of the drill heads we were given could penetrate the wall. They all became blunt very quickly."

"Was our guardian annoyed?" Vila asked.

"I didn't give him a chance to get started," Jordan told her, giving her a wry smile. "I reported the facts, including the result when I tried to transmit into it...which I might say was like running full speed into a solid wall. Then I immediately told him that I had one third of the warriors sharpening drill heads and one third starting to drill a new tunnel from that building, which is some kind of shrine, to a place just inside the city barrier. I have the five spies in the city keeping people away from the building where we will emerge and preparing hideouts for the troops we bring in. The other third of my men are resting so I can switch them onto sharpening and that lot onto digging."

"Sounds like you have things under control," Vila told him.

"Well, our guardian grumbled a lot about the delay – it will take at least a week to finish the tunnel, and he insisted we work around the clock..." Jordan shrugged. "He still wants us to work faster. Have you got everything ready for when we snatch that baby?"

“Yes and when we have him, I have one of the medics lined up to tend him. He has children of his own,” Vila told him. “He gave me a few necessities to keep the poor brat quiet.”

While the diggers continued to extend the tunnel, Jordan and Vila took turns transmitting with buckets of dirt to a distant dumping place screened by trees. More was packed into a room of the little shrine – since Jordan and Vila found the multiple transmissions tiring.

When they were ready to break through, they waited for the city spies to confirm that the building over their planned point of emergence was empty. Their own equipment agreed. Jordan led his sister and twelve elite warriors into the ‘quarantined’ warehouse. Once there, he briefed both warriors and spies on the next phase of the operation.

“We wait until it is dark,” Jordan began. “They have a curfew from dusk until dawn so no one should be on the streets. Since we will be wearing stealth suits, we should be able to move without the chance of someone walking into us. Zeta squad will stay here and guard the tunnel. Once the rest of us are in position, they are to contact the troopship and bring through the reserves. Alpha squad are to infiltrate the council building. It should be empty, but take care. Your first task is to find and disable the shield controls – bring the shields down. Then find places to hide and wait. The other squads are to form a perimeter around the building. Keep your personal force screens on and remain cloaked until it is time to act. Commander Vila and I will wait, visible, and put our own instructions into play when the first few locals arrive in the morning.”

Alpha leader asked the question, “What are your orders, Sir?”

Jordan tersely explained, “We are to draw one of the accursed Tymorean Governors here and bring him to the Warlord so they can talk.”

The squad leaders betrayed some of their excitement. This was indeed an important mission, even if they did have to take orders from a green commander.

“You all know how to disable the Royal bastards,” Jordan nodded at the alpha squad leader, and allowed himself to smile faintly. “Then since Vila and I have the misfortune to resemble the local tyrants – we are to infiltrate the Royal Estate and take a high ranking hostage.”

Beta squad’s leader remarked, “The palaces – they are over three hundred miles away.”

“I am aware of that,” Jordan agreed. “However, we have learnt that those tunnels – the ones like the one we couldn’t dig into, go from city to city in direct lines. Chef Engineer Bastion has designed a bullet capsule for us to use.”

Jordan didn’t mention his hope that he and Vila could transmit the capsule and themselves even faster than the capsule’s rocket propulsion could take them.

“The capsule can take six at a time,” Vila commented. “The chief has made two for us. Once we control the council building, Jordan and I will bring the capsules to the room with the tunnel openings. We will take four warriors with us and beta squad can follow us.”

The six squad leaders nodded, finding the overall plan satisfactory and not needing instructions on how to do their parts.

An unwary night guard within the council building, found himself surrounded by silent, weapon wielding, dark clad wraiths. He had no time to try to raise an alarm, before he felt the stun. Near morning, the guard stirred when a sharp, searing pain roused him. He could hardly tell the slash on his arm from the rest of the aches resulting from the stun.

The troop medic watched impassively as the blood drained from the man’s arm into a bowl containing some anti-coagulant. When he deemed he had enough, he bandaged the wound, not out of concern for the blood donor, but so that the blood didn’t spread across the floor to be noticed. Then he set about making Vila look badly wounded.

When the first two of the day’s workers arrived at the council building, and were allowed to enter, they stopped in shock just inside the door.

“Your...your highness,” one of them stuttered. “What...”

“Good sir,” Jordan spoke with authority, even as he made his voice sound tired. “I need your help. My sister is gravely injured and my power is all that is keeping her alive. I need to have my father summoned – but I cannot leave her.”

“Of course, your highness,” the first man reacted to the request. “I will send he message now.”

Jordan remained next to where Vila lay on the floor – with his hand pressing on a section of blood stained bandage. He knew that one of alpha squad was following the messenger. The other Tymorean swallowed visibly and asked, “Is there anything I can get you, Prince Tymos.”

“I thank you, but no,” Jordan spoke tiredly. “I do ask that you and your companion do not mention that we were here – this city would be in danger if you did.”

The man swallowed again, obviously nervous at being in the presence of high-ranking Royals.

Jordan sensed the man’s surface thoughts and dismissed him as no threat. He was a commoner, with not even a trace of Royal power and would very soon be knocked out so he had no chance to warn anyone of the trap being laid.

The first man returned. “His majesty will be bringing medics and guards, your highness.”

Jordan nodded, as if in thanks, but both commoners suddenly found themselves grabbed by unseen assailants. They were unconscious before they were tied up and dragged to a janitor’s closet.

Then Jordan spoke quietly. “No one else is to be allowed into the building.” To the beta squad leader he added, “Have the force field generator ready to activate when everyone from the palace has arrived. Make sure that all the Royals are confined and cannot escape.”

Jordan then made sure his own personal shield was on, since once the green aura field was on; he too was susceptible to its effects if not shielded.

Chapter 19 - Protecting the Estate

When the message arrived for the High King, Aldiv read the contents and turned pale. He took it to the space monitoring room where he knew his master was, and using his authority, he interrupted a high-level video conference between Governor Xyron who was still on the second continent, Governor Reslic who was on his flagship the Jacen Tyr and Tymoros himself.

Tymoros read the message and fear tore at him. Despite evidence to the contrary and knowing how capable his children were...he couldn't help the reaction. He feared losing them. He sent Aldiv off with instructions and then tersely read the message to his fellow Governors.

Reslic turned from the conference screen and issued brusque orders to his crew. Xyron asked, "How far have they progressed with their plan, Ty?"

"They are ahead of their estimate," Tymoros murmured. "I believe they are being guided by the Guardians to keep ahead of the Aeronite advances. One of them might have been near Amik, but if so – where are Jonko and Keleb? Surely if either of my children or their friends had been hurt, Tymos would have said so and arranged help through the prearranged channels."

"He may not have done so if his friends were dead," Reslic said tersely. "I have the fleet ships scanning their last reported positions and the area around Amik."

"It sounds like a trap," Xyron warned. "The Aeronites had a try at capturing me, but I was ready for them. They think they now have me running in circles but I am learning things about their technology that I am sure they do not expect. Some of the weapons here, I have seen before. Missionaries from the outer systems have collected them when they helped fight off invaders."

"Must I expect the others?" Tymoros asked, not mentioning the Ciriote by name.

"You should, Ty," Reslic warned. "We as the leaders are prime targets for them. From the little we know, they will want to find valuables and we are the keys to finding such things."

"Can you contact Tymos?" Xyron asked.

"It has been necessary to minimise contact," Tymoros admitted. "Even secure frequencies are vulnerable. The signals can be traced even if the message is not understood. I will try to reach his mind. If he is not concentrating, I may succeed."

Tymoros relaxed back into his chair and focussed his mind in an attempt to send a mental message further than he had tried before.

"Tymos? Kryslie?"

The mental replies came together – muted by distance but as clear as if they were speaking to him.

"Report your position."

Tymos gave his first, "I am between Falvon and Eltoria, Father."

Kryslie spoke immediately afterward, "I am on the third continent – near the southern delta."

Both asked, "Father. What is wrong? We are both fine."

Tymoros did not reply immediately. Finally, he sent, "I believe the aliens are trying to draw me away from the Estate. I had a message from the council of Amik that you were there, needing my help."

"Father, it is an obvious trap," Kryslie warned.

"Do they want you, or are they trying to get to the Estate?" Tymos asked.

"I have not become senile since you both graduated," Tymoros sent back, his mental tone hard. It did not hide his intention. "You know who it must be in Amik."

"Yes, Father," Tymos admitted, speaking for himself and Kryslie. It was no use telling him that Jordan and Vila were irredeemably alienated. They were children Tymoros had sired and

thought to have died through no deliberate or accidental error of his own. He would not, could not, order their death without trying to redeem them.

Tymos sensed that his father was torn by conflicting duties. "Father, Keleb and I cannot leave here yet – what we are doing requires constant concentration," he sent. He feared for his father, and for his little brother and foster mother. Others on the Estate would also be at risk, but Warlord Kellex wanted Llaimos, Kryslie and himself.

Kryslie sent, "Jonko and I are not finished here either, but what we have started will continue without us, though more slowly. Do you want us to return?"

"Yes," was the simple answer. "Xyron is needed where he is, studying the alien technology. Jono is with the fleet. I think they know that I am the only Governor here and dare not infiltrate while I am."

"Father, it may take me a while to return," Kryslie considered. "There is no way to set up a relay of long range beams from here."

"I will have Jono set one from the Jacen Tyr," Tymoros immediately countered. "He is in orbit above Amik."

"We are ready, father," Kryslie confirmed.

Kryslie broke Jonko's concentration as soon as she received her father's mental call.

"Trouble, Jon," she said, and was only peripherally aware of Jonko spinning around and asking, "Where?"

He seemed to sense that Kryslie's mind was elsewhere, and he continued to scan the area around them. He spotted the pale mauve terminus of the long-range beam against the waving corn, but not against the bright sunlight above it.

"We're going to the Jacen Tyr," Kryslie told him as she drew out her transmitter.

Jonko copied her action. He didn't have time to ask her why, only to step into the beam and transmit. He bowed to Governor Reslic the instant he arrived on the ship's bridge and listened as Kryslie received more information.

"We have lost contact with Amik. From here, we cannot see any sign of an Aeronite attack force. Most of the alien activity is still in the south west, and there they have begun moving north again. They are also bombarding the shields around Dira."

"We know they have cloaking technology," Kryslie considered. "They could be hiding their activities near Amik, and using the push down south as a distraction."

"Or it is a small infiltrating group like they sent to the Estate," Reslic warned.

"Is that where we are going? Amik?" Jonko asked. His hand began to move to his weapon.

"No, Father is," Kryslie explained. "He wants me back at the palace. It is likely that the Aeronites will try to infiltrate there when he is in Amik."

She saw Jonko's incomprehension. "Father had a message, supposedly from Tymos and I, that we were there and needing his help."

"Oh," Jonko exhaled, understanding immediately. "Surely they don't expect us to fall for that?"

He saw Kryslie shaking her head and heard her voice in his mind. "I'll explain later, Jon."

Aloud, Kryslie voiced her concern to Reslic. "It has to be a trap to catch Father."

"Your father will have Perrin and a troop of guards. He plans to arrive in a different room of the council building, whilst my brother will beam-into the usual chamber," Reslic assured her, then added. "Your father is neither a fool nor totally unable to defend himself at need. I believe you are aware of that?"

Kryslie did not back away at the implied rebuke. "I know that, Sir, and I know why he is going. However, I do not want him hurt." She kept meeting Reslic's gaze for a moment and then asked, "Would you have the beam reset to the Estate please?"

Moments later, Kryslie and Jonko arrived in her father's sanctum where Tymoros was pacing. Jonko bowed as required in greeting one of the Governors, Kryslie simply went and hugged her foster father.

Tymoros accepted the gesture of empathy but quickly gave her instructions.

"I have begun the first stage of the evacuation. All non-essential personnel are leaving by the beam to go to Dira. They are taking all of the youngest children, those too young for lessons. Llaimos will stay here."

"Why, Father?" Kryslie asked.

"The enemy are trying to break the defences of Dira. I have no doubt that they know the legends and wish to stop us escaping to there," Tymoros told her. "The shields on the city and Temple are holding, but we have not been able to weaken the shields enough to transmit to the Temple, nor is it safe to walk there from the city. I will not send Llaimos there and one of us needs to be with him."

Kryslie accepted her father's statement and placed a hand on his arm. "I need to know all of what is happening – I have felt the bombs."

Tymoros placed his hand on top of hers. An intimate moment of mind fusion gave her the all over picture. It was worse than she had imagined – it was a staggering picture of destruction.

Fourteen cities had become the target of the aliens. First, they set fire to the deserted buildings in the outlying towns and villages and the dried stubble in the fields. Then they bombed the cities, which had stayed shielded at first but after a time had suffered partial shield failure due to sabotage by the many still hidden alien spies. Thousands of Tymoreans had already died from assassinations and the bombs. Each of the cities were surrounded and besieged. That was not an immediately desperate problem since all the cities had supplies to last half a year even with the increased population.

It wasn't just the cities. Kryslie learnt, that after she had left the second continent, the weather there had turned wild. Cyclonic winds were spreading a toxic gas, fire was spreading through the ripening crops, destroying the work she and Jonko had done there. And worse, seeds from the alien plants had spread and were now growing at speed.

Kryslie felt anger rising, but Tymoros patted her hand and said, "They will need food to feed their troops. More and more of their troops are landing with each city they attack. Any animal not already within a protected forest is prey to the new troops."

Jonko was thinking that it was time to show the Aeronites they were not welcome, but then Kryslie shared with him what she was learning from her father.

In the King's mind were reports of bitter fighting between Tymorean militia and Aeronite warriors in the cities that had been breached.

"Reslic is sending down trained troops to support the militias, and he has sent troops into the mountains to set up refuges for the mutants, though many will not accept the help. Many there have already died, since much of the mountainous areas are aflame. Wild winds are also spreading the fires there."

Kryslie dropped her hand and forcefully controlled the urge to go and do something. Tymoros touched her shoulder. "You cannot do everything. For now, I need you here."

She knew that, and still felt helpless.

"When the aliens did not know where you were and to their knowledge you had not returned, they tried to draw you out. Reva was the first city they attacked. Fortunately, we had time to warn them and for them to raise the shields. Then they bombed the open areas between here and there."

"So, the aliens have a way of knowing things...from here.... from Zacary?" Kryslie asked. She sensed Jonko moving restlessly.

"It is likely," Tymoros admitted. "When he seemed readjusted, we let him out of isolation. Not long after that – the attacks began."

“Could he have found out any sensitive information? Can they know that Governor Reslic is away?” Kryslie asked.

“Servants talk,” Tymoros reminded her. “He may have heard things, but the story here is that you and Tymos took it into your heads to go and fight aliens. Some of the lower, less knowledgeable servants are speculating at my degree of displeasure with you.”

Jonko put aside his other concerns for a moment and suppressed a smirk. If Kellex heard that, he’d think Kryslie and her brother were stupider than they were and not likely to hurry back to the Estate. After the last failed attempt, the aliens have not tried to attack the Estate.

Kryslie considered, for a moment then said, “He probably expects you to be too powerful for Jordan and Vila and wants you out of the way. However, they won’t be expecting me to be here since Vila saw me three days ago on the third continent. So if I disguise the extent of my power...because I don’t need to maintain a store of energy within me...they won’t sense me.”

Kryslie suddenly straightened. “Father, the protection of the Estate is in my hands.”

Tymoros nodded acceptance, pride warring with concern in his expression.

“Father, be careful,” Kryslie spoke impulsively.

“I am not going alone,” he promised her. Beyond him, the unobtrusive Aldiv had a determined expression on his face.

Kryslie glanced at Jonko. “Come on – we’ll go to the office of the Palace Guards first.”

Outside the office, Jonko caught Kryslie’s arm and caused her to pause. “Why are they just letting those aliens do as they please? Why aren’t we doing more to stop them?”

Kryslie sensed his confusion and stopped to explain. “The Aeronites are only allowed to get so far, Jon. The cities are the where we stop and fight. We couldn’t hope to save every little village and every town. If we tried, we would have lost ten times as many people. And it is not the Aeronites that Tym and I must fight. There is another race involved in this war and they have yet to show themselves. Until then, we hide our strength.”

Jonko wanted to ask more questions, but Kryslie took his arm and transmitted.

Captain Arden was standing where he could watch a wall of monitors. He saw Kryslie transmit in and gave her a slight bow. “Princess Kryslie. I have been informed that you are to oversee the protection of the Estate.”

Kryslie sensed that he was doubtful of the wisdom of that. He looked at her dusty clothes and bare feet, but made no comment. However, he accepted the fact, since he knew she was the highest-ranking Royal to be staying on the Estate.

“What is the exact status of the evacuation,” she asked crisply.

Arden answered immediately. “All the youngest children and attendants have left for Dira and are in the place prepared for them. Jonnsen and Marrin are with the fleet – but not on the flagship. Konn, Gann and Deanne are in Dira.”

Jonko, being ignored by Arden, grinned faintly. Konn must hate being sent away with the children. He did see the sense in separating the offspring of the Governors so at least one of their heirs stayed alive. He heard a similar disposition of Xyron’s eldest children, and then saw Arden seeming to wonder why Kryslie was not somewhere safe.

“The non-essential personnel are leaving now – and the other children will begin to leave after their lessons finish for the day. However, as soon as your father gives me the word, the long range beam will be reset to Amik, but will then be reset back to Dira.”

Kryslie had a momentary qualm – what if her father needed to return quickly? Then other ideas occurred to her. What if Jordan or his sister had mastered transmitters? They probably still had the devices taken from some of the captured third scout party. They might even know of and figured out the existence of the long-range beams – after all, they had chosen to be in one of the cities to lure Tymoros to them. Yes...if Kellex could use Zacary to find out things, he might

have heard of the concept. He might think Jordan and Vila could force Tymoros to bring them here or that they could come by themselves. They would surely have warriors with them too.

“Arden, have a squad of guards on alert in the beam-in chamber below,” Kryslie instructed. She saw his brows rise in surprise. Jonko caught the disbelief and snapped, “If you recall the aliens that infiltrated here? They had rogue power...”

Arden did recall and he immediately saw the danger and snapped orders through his communicator. It was on a harness over his uniform.

Kryslie let her glance flick over the monitors – the bundle clad servants waiting in the Great Hall of each palace, the younger students at their studies in the small lyceum, the older students in the large lyceum, the range of places all over the Estate.

“The Estate is on yellow alert,” Arden said, noticing Kryslie’s gaze. “The students will stay within the buildings and transmit directly back to their quarters. The gardens are off limits. He went on to detail the status of all parts of the Estate.

“Where is Zacary?” Kryslie asked, suddenly.

“His Majesty directed for him to be returned to the infirmary,” Arden assured her. He used his communicator and asked to talk to a particular guard. He had no reply and his eyes scanned the monitors for a moment before he directed another guard to go and look for the first.

“The little weasel knows how to be unnoticed,” Jonko murmured. “Do you want me to go and find him?”

He saw Kryslie’s eyes going to the monitor showing the nursery where only Tanya, Llaimos, his nurse, Stenn, and four guards remained. They were all in the large day room.

“No, I’d like you to go to the nursery. Llaimos can’t have too many guards.”

Startled, Jonko immediately nodded and transmitted away. Kryslie saw him appear on the monitor, take in the scene and give an ‘okay’ sign via to the camera. Stenn also glanced that way and grinned, realising that she was watching. Then from his position on the floor, he took a weapon from a hidden holster and passed it to Jonko. Llaimos had started to reach for it, but withdrew his hand when Stenn turned and spoke to him.

It gave Kryslie a shock to see how much her brother had grown in the weeks she had been away. Her baby brother was now the size of a five year old and his hair was now thick and red – a match in colour for her own.

The signal to redirect the beam came through the room’s speakers. Alden made the adjustment remotely and redirected it back to Dira when the newly reassigned guards gave the word. The stream of servants arriving and disappearing, began again.

“Shield status,” Kryslie requested then.

Alden glanced at the relevant monitor screen. “All green, Princess Kryslie. That includes the shields on the rock faces of the mesa.”

Kryslie recalled a memory of an attack on the mesa walls. It was part of what she had learnt from the recent mind-meld with her father. The attack had failed to do any damage, but it had been aimed right where the hangar cavern was hidden. The shields covering the entrance went right down to where the rock thrust up from the surrounding flat land - the opening should have been indiscernible.

Everything seemed to be covered. Arden certainly knew his job.

“Can I have a stunner and a personal force screen as well as a communications head set. I am going to patrol, so please advise your guards.”

Arden stopped himself from his immediate instinct to refuse. Instead, he fetched the requested items and said, “Keep in touch and report if you see anything amiss.”

“And if I even sense trouble,” Kryslie assured him. “I want to be outside where I can best sense the Aeronites – at least any that have power. Though I should warn you that it is possible that the Aeronites might send in two that they have made to resemble Tymos and I.”

“Will your brother be coming here?” Arden asked.

“Not yet...” Kryslie told him. She had a premonition that he would though. “If he does, he will be as dusty and sweaty as I am. These travelling clothes are good for hiding dirt. Tell your men that I look like a tramp and no, I am not going to clean up and change just yet.”

Once Kryslie had donned the communicator headset, she checked the charge in the stunner before holstering it in her belt. Arden approved of her precaution and relaxed his concern. He recalled how capable she was – Reslic had said so, and after all Tymos was the eldest male heir of the High King and he was still safely away.

Chapter 20 - Pyr

The small black clad messenger entered the council building through a rear door. He was immediately grabbed by two Aeronite soldiers.

“You! What are you doing here? This is no time or place for games.”

The small red headed figure, clad in Aeronite style trousers and tunic, drew himself up as tall as he could.

“I have a message for the Commanders,” Pyr lied brazenly. “My guardian did not want to risk it by radio. He said that a child would not be noticed.”

“Have you a warrant from Warlord Kellex?” the warrior demanded.

“Sir, I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t have permission,” Pyr insisted. “And this message is urgent.”

The guard decided it was prudent to let the boy through. He knew the Warlord well enough to believe the boy was telling the truth.

“Go on then!” he directed, and then he forgot the child. He was there to stop Tymoreans entering.

Pyr felt his heart pounding. So far, blatant lying had worked in his favour as had staying very quiet when he was hidden in Jordan’s flitter and when he had followed the last squad of soldiers to the city. He had decided he was tired of being considered a child and too young. When he heard that Jordan and Vila were to bring the Tymorean Governor to Kellex, so they could talk to each other and hopefully the Tymoreans would help the Aeronites, Pyr wanted to be there too. He wanted to add his own plea to the alien king to get his help. Millions of Aeronites would die otherwise.

He wasn’t stupid though. He knew he was not a brilliant fighter yet. Good for his age, but he couldn’t fight a grown man. Therefore, stealth was his intention, and to find a place to hide, wait and watch, so he could see what the alien king was like.

With the excuse of looking for Jordan, he strode quietly away from the guard at the door. Then he moved with extreme stealth, down passages, peering into deserted rooms until he opened the janitor’s closet and saw two sleeping men. At first, he thought they were dead, but when he leant in to touch them, he was vastly relieved to feel a pulse in the neck of one and see the chest of the other rising and falling. He retreated and closed the door.

He was glad that Jordan had not killed the men. Even if it had been the work of one of the warriors, he was glad the men had not died. He had seen dead men before, when his guardian had killed a lot of Tymorean prisoners. No one knew he had been hiding and watching. It had made him feel ill. However, the thought of millions of Aeronites dying made him feel worse.

Voices came from within the room he was about to look into. He was going to scamper past, but then he recognised two of the voices as Jordan’s and Vila’s. With a start, he remembered to switch his stealth suit back on before slipping into the room. Inside, he saw a huge table with many chairs around it and dived under them to listen.

“What is taking them so long,” Vila muttered. She was pacing around the far end of the room, and looked as if she had been beaten. Pyr was fleetingly alarmed, then realised that was how they must have tricked the locals. She didn’t sound hurt.

“He is some high and mighty type,” Jordan told her. “He probably can’t go anywhere without a crowd of sycophants.”

“We don’t want a crowd,” Vila reminded him. “What if he does have a huge retinue of guards?”

“It doesn’t matter. As soon as they all arrive, the force field will turn them all into statues,” Jordan reminded her. “The warriors can handle the opposition and put the Governor where he can’t escape. We have a more important job – have you got everything you need?”

“I told you I did,” Vila retorted quietly. “The important stuff is in my pocket.”

Pyr’s siblings were quiet then, as they waited for the High King Governor to come. Well, not completely quiet. Jordan was clicking his fingers – something he always did when he was nervous. Pyr resisted the temptation to chew his own nails. His guardian deplored that nervous habit and had him beaten for doing it. Trouble was, that made Pyr even more nervous around his guardian.

To take his mind off what now seemed like an insane idea, Pyr told himself that no one could see him. If this king person was as bad and mean as Kellex implied – he didn’t have to show himself. He could sneak back to hide in Vila’s ship. Jordan would probably take the prisoner in his when he returned to Kellex.

From his hiding place under the table, he heard an eruption of sound. It came from somewhere nearby. Then he heard an indistinct voice through Jordan’s communicator, and Jordan demand, “What do you mean – he didn’t come?”

More of the indistinct voice and Jordan suddenly blurted, “The field isn’t holding them all.”

He and Vila began to run towards the far end of the room. Pyr heard Jordan order, “Full shields!”

Instants later, there was a very loud “Wumph!” and he felt a pressure wave – not enough to stun him, since the far wall and the nearer furniture protected him. Jordan’s order now made sense.

Aeronite warriors, with blood coming from ears and noses, stumbled into view near Jordan’s position.

“Report!” Jordan insisted.

Pyr listened hard and heard a warrior’s slurred speech. “Twelve Tymoreans, Sir. The King wasn’t there.”

All the warriors were stumbling towards chairs; some missed and collapsed onto the floor. Pyr’s position didn’t give him enough of a view. He edged closer.

“Where is he?” Vila demanded. “Did your warriors wait until the Tymorean guards gave the all clear? Could the damn king know we had put the force field on?” Vila’s voice was pitched higher than normal. She was probably anticipating Kellex’s wrath if they failed.

Jordan demanded in turn, “Is their long range beam still on? Come on Vila, we have to go. We don’t have time to bring the capsules here.”

A powerful voice spoke from within the room, startling Pyr into rolling over to look for the source.

“I thought you wanted to speak to me, Commander Jordan?”

Pyr wriggled to where he could see the speaker. The red headed man wore armour that had a reddish gold sheen, as did the blond haired man a half step in front of him. Neither looked like monsters and the redhead looked like Jordan.

“There was no need for all the subterfuge,” the older man, the red head, spoke again. “Nor for you to attack my escort. Did you think I would not want to speak to my own lost children? I bear you no anger. It was not your fault that you were taken from me – or that I mourned for you as dead. You, Commander Vila and young Pyr.”

In his hiding place, Pyr felt a shock. This man...was his father? He sensed a similar sense of shock from his siblings. The Tymorean King knew their names. He hadn’t been tricked by Jordan’s ploy – not at all. But... how had he known? His guardian’s spy had said that the ones called Prince and Princess, were off somewhere without permission and those at the palace

didn't know where. He knew, from overhearing other reports, that they were actually too far away to interfere.

However, the only ones who could possibly have learnt who Jordan and Vila were...were the real Prince and Princess - the children that had escaped from his guardian. Pyr's mind recalled that time. The girl had said she was his sister, and although she had kidnapped him, she had returned him when he had insisted. He hadn't said a word about that to anyone. Now, he heard Vila venting her opinion of the stranger - protesting that her real father had cast her out to die and if their guardian had not wanted to talk to him, she would have killed him right then.

Pyr couldn't share that view. He could feel that the Tymorean wasn't lying, and the grief the man had felt was real. He started to crawl out from under the table, when he saw more of Jordan's command approaching behind the King. He was about to call out a warning but it was already too late. The two newly arrived warriors sprayed a sleep gas into the men's faces. Both Tymoreans slumped to the floor.

"Tie both of them up," Jordan ordered. "Take the older one to my ship. We won't be long - we just have to get his youngest whelp. That way we will have a hostage to make him see reason."

Shock fixed Pyr in place. They were going to take a baby? They couldn't! That wasn't honourable. He began to follow Jordan, to plead with him, but then he heard one of the newly arrived warriors laugh.

"I will educate this weakling Governor and his friend while you are gone."

Jordan didn't seem to be paying attention; he and Vila were running out of the far end of the room. They had those odd Tymorean devices out. Pyr shrank back under the table. His guardian hadn't given him one - because he was too young. He gave up the idea of following. This whole dishonourable episode was his guardian's idea and the two warriors left with the prisoners were sadistic brutes. The thickset one, Geller, hadn't merely tied the men up - he had used a tangler web and was manually tightening it so that the prisoners would wake up scrunched into a ball.

When Geller began to kick the unconscious men - it was too much.

Pyr sprang out from under the table and ran at Geller. The unexpectedness of the move allowed him to knock the man over. His companion, who had stood guard, now sprayed a weapon around the area, suspecting a shielded adversary.

The weapon had caused his force shield to stop working, and Pyr found himself grabbed.

Geller snarled when he identified his small assailant.

"Does Kellex know you are here, little man?" he sneered. "I'd wager he doesn't."

"Stop kicking them," Pry yelled. "He didn't do anything to you! He came here in good faith, to talk, and if you treat..."

Geller slapped Pyr across the face. "The bastard will talk, and I am going to teach you to stay out of your guardian's business."

With his companion still gripping the struggling child, Geller yanked the boy's treads down, forced him to bend over, and proceeded to give his exposed rear a thorough thrashing.

"Stop it!" Pyr tried to insist, but his throat was tight from fear, pain and humiliation.

Only the sudden movement from the redheaded prisoner caused Geller to stop and toss his little victim aside. He spoke to the prisoner. "That is only a sample of what Warlord Kellex is going to do to you, king."

Pyr was only vaguely aware of the prisoner speaking.

"If your superior was hoping for concessions from me, you have just ended that hope," Tymoros said calmly. He was moving carefully, hiding the fact that he was trying to find the net's release pad. "Unless, of course, he proves his good intentions by having both of you killed where I can watch."

"Not a chance, scum. You will agree to what we want anyway. My Commander has gone to get your precious baby heir."

Tymoros controlled his expression, hiding his anger at being overcome so easily. Mixed with his fear for Llaimos, was his concern for the boy who had tried to help him. He was probably Pyr, the lad Tymos and Kryslie had mentioned. A child he had believed had died at birth. He could hear the stifled sobs from the boy and concern for that child dominated over concern for his own position.

Nor was he as concerned for Llaimos, who was well guarded at the Estate...for Kryslie was there.

Chapter 21 - Attack on the Estate

Jordan reached the stone chamber at the bottom of the stairs just in time to see the purple glow in the centre of it wink out of existence. He cursed, since he did not know how to bring it back. He glanced around at the fallen Tymoreans, most had blood oozing from noses or ears. Those that didn't, like the powerfully built blond man – the probable leader – were still unconscious.

Vila spotted a control panel and stepped around the bodies to examine it. "Jordan," she gestured for him to come over.

Neither of them recognised any of the glyphs, most of which looked like buildings combined with two letters. None had RE for Royal Estate, or PA for palaces or any other suggestive clue.

Vila sensed her brother's agitation and suggested, "That's the 'on' switch, there. Perhaps it will still be set to its most recent coordinates."

Jordan considered that. It was possible. He nodded, and Vila pressed the touch sensitive area. The purple glow reappeared.

"Now what?" Jordan murmured to himself. "Step into it and transmit?"

Vila shrugged. "When we did it before, we had to know where we were going."

"We may have to try that, but since we are not sure, we'd better bring the capsules here. Turn that beam off for now. I will get the first capsule. Can you push those bodies out of the way?"

Jordan wasted no time slipping out and taking the route to the deserted building where their tunnel had emerged. He had considered transmitting there, but that was tiring when he did it too often, and he was going to need his energy and strength.

The Aeronite warriors guarding this access way appeared briefly as they flicked their stealth suits off then back on. Jordan remembered to turn his own back on – which helped him ignore the repeller field that was protecting the route. It discouraged unprotected yokels from wanting to travel that way.

Fortunately, the building was close. He re-entered the gutted warehouse and trotted to the capsule. Two of the infiltrator spies saluted him from near the tunnel entrance that came up through the floor. Jordan nodded at them, took out his transmitter, placed his arms around the oval ended cylindrical capsule as far as he could and transmitted away.

He arrived exactly within the cleared space in the council beam-in room having estimated distance and direction exactly.

Vila now had two of the attack team with her. They still looked like hell – faces pale and drawn with pain. Two more walked stiffly in and the leader said, "Commander, Sirs, we are the only ones fit to fight."

Jordan doubted the term 'fit' and suggested. "One of you go and bring me six warriors from the outer defence perimeter on this building. Four of them can come with us now; the other two can come with you in the second capsule."

One of the warriors went to summon the reinforcements, Jordan glanced at Vila and together they positioned the heavy capsule, pushing it until it was just within one of the tunnels. They used the one that their map indicated was headed most directly towards the Royal Estate.

Feeling the urgency to proceed with their mission, Jordan ignored his earlier caution and transmitted to the building to get the second capsule.

Vila snapped at the still groggy warriors. "Don't just stand there, Captain. Make sure that none of these Tymoreans can get free to warn the Royal Estate about us. That is if any of them are still alive."

"Do you mean kill them, Sir?"

“No, just secure them,” Vila said testily. She knew that many of them were dead, and merely moving them had made her feel queasy. “We may need to question them later.” It was the only acceptable reason she had for keeping any survivors alive. “Ensure any communicators are inoperable.”

Jordan reappeared with the second capsule, just as the six fresh warriors trotted in.

They stared at the long ovoid object that rested on its guidance fins and rocket propulsion vanes as he positioned it to point towards the tunnel where the first one was waiting.

Vila gestured at two warriors. “You two come in the capsules. You others, with us. We need warriors who are fully alert.”

The newcomers eyed the capsule dubiously. They hadn’t been briefed on the operation to the Estate. Jordan tersely explained their new mission, and then he snapped at them. “The assault team are recovering from the concussion grenade. It seems the walls here are shielded in some way and more of the blast was contained. Only four are able to proceed. Each of you will go with two of them in a capsule and follow us.”

“Sir, how will we be getting to the Estate?” one of the other four questioned.

Vila politely explained, in a tone of speaking to dolts. “Jordan and I don’t need a capsule. We can each take two of you with us using these Tymorean transmitting devices. They are perfectly safe. They are luxury devices used by the rulers of this world.”

Jordan stopped them thinking about the method of travelling by snapping, “What is the situation outside?”

“Sir, the locals have discovered that they cannot enter. A crowd is forming outside.”

Jordan spoke into his communicator and demanded a report from the sub commander in charge outside. He listened to the terse phrases of the experienced warrior, and then directed, “Maintain security on this building and proceed with the take over. You are in charge until we return.”

To Vila, Jordan said, “We’ve got to go, turn that device back on.” He continued then to direct the two newcomers who were to follow in the capsules giving them terse direction for positioning themselves inside – a matter of each curling themselves into a small space and strapping in. The other four knew already.

He ensured they knew how the capsule worked, had their maps marked with the route to follow via tunnel from city to city to the Royal Estate.

“Stealth suits on,” Jordan directed the four warriors who would come with them. “Vila, act injured again in case they have guards where we arrive.”

Vila immediately draped herself on Jordan as if he was helping her to stand. Both still had weapons ready to fire.

“Two of you hold onto me, and two onto Vila,” Jordan further directed, he had his second hand ready to operate the transmitter, as did Vila. As a group, they entered the glowing purple beam terminus and envisioned their final destination – a chamber like the one they were in, without the bodies and with a big machine at its centre.

All six Aeronites felt the sense of movement as the scene in the chamber blurred and turned to brightness. When vision returned, and a room solidified around them, Jordan said, “Wow!”

Vila straightened, glanced around and said, “This isn’t the right place.”

The invisible guards released their grip and made shuffling sounds as they looked around. They all heard a tinkling chime, and the sound of running feet, coming closer.

Vila instantly draped herself again, just in time. A man reached a doorway, paused to catch his breath. When he studied the two visible arrivals, his mouth dropped. He quickly hid his surprise at seeing the apparently high-ranking arrivals, straightened his colourful attire, and bowed slightly.

“Prince Tymos, Princess Kryslie, how might I serve you? I mean...” He suddenly noticed the blood on Vila’s face and uniform. “I’ll get a medic at once.”

Jordan stopped him before he had gone two steps. “Sir, please, we need to get back to the Estate. The fool at the last city sent us here by mistake.”

The local official went immediately to the control panel. He ran his fingers over the touch screen and murmured, “Yes, we had one of the Elders come from Amik yesterday. The operator must not have cleared the destination before sending you...”

“Sir, my sister is in a very bad way,” Jordan said, feigning strain and concern.

“I am just setting up the relay, your Highness. I’ll only be a moment.”

Jordan seethed when the man said, “I can get you to the farmlands, but the palace focus reads busy. There will be a delay there. When you arrive, have them send a priority override. I cannot do that from here.”

“Activate it,” Jordan commanded. He felt two warriors grasping hold of him again.

Once again the group, two visible and four shielded, entered the beam terminus, and transmitted away. They experienced the same sense of movement, saw the bright light, and this time had brief glimpses of the intermediate points of the relay. Finally, a room materialised around them, and the tinkling chime sounded again.

As Jordan lowered Vila to the floor again, continuing their ruse, he noticed the tile design on the floor of this chamber. It was a circle of tiles, red around the edge, and with a design of two crossed wheat sheaves. He recognised it as having been one of the glyphs on the machine in Amik. He had no time to consider that knowledge as a portly man in a brown tunic and treads puffed into the room. The scene of astonishment was repeated.

Jordan quickly gave the man orders. “I need to get my sister back to the Estate, urgently. I need you to send a priority override signal and activate the beam for me.”

The man turned to the control panel and obeyed, he touched several places on the touch pad, frowned and jabbed a stubby finger on one spot more forcefully.

“Sir, they are not responding. All I get is the busy signal. This is most unusual. They should reply to the urgent signal. I will go and bring Elder Satreen.”

Vila whispered to one of the cloaked and invisible warriors. “Shut that fool up.” To her brother she added, “The Royals must be fleeing to their supposed sanctuary in Dira. We can easily transmit ourselves, without the beam. They won’t be expecting anyone to do that.”

Jordan nodded faintly in agreement, as the portly man fell to the floor, his dead body still twitching from the energy beam discharged at close range.

Vila controlled nausea and directed, “Take him far enough into one of the tunnels to be out of sight.”

It took Jordan a few minutes to select between the three tunnels but he finally decided that the odd rock formation in the small tiled mosaic in the floor in front of one of the tunnels was the glyph for the mesa where the Royal Estate was situated. When the two warriors returned from hiding the dead man and were again holding onto either Vila or himself, Jordan switched on his stealth suit, and Vila did likewise.

“We have about twenty miles to travel from here to the Estate,” Jordan told the four warriors. “We will have to transmit in stages along the tunnel. I am not sure what the range is for these devices. Keep your hold on us or you will be left behind.” He felt the warriors tighten their grip.

“Our job is to infiltrate the Estate, collect a particular high ranking hostage and return to Amik,” Jordan went on. “I know this wasn’t your original task, but if you obey orders you won’t go wrong. The assault squad will follow us. They have another task to do, and will also keep our line of retreat open. We are to avoid being noticed as much as possible.”

Vila took over the briefing. “Warlord Kellex’s agent at the Estate has reported the presence of a maintenance shaft from the cellar of the High King’s palace to the beam-in room where we will arrive. We will have to climb up to the palace level. It is about a five hundred feet. In both places, we can expect to encounter lots of people, so try to edge around them. We may be invisible, but we are still solid presences. The repeller fields on the suits will help nudge people away but not if they are determined to get where we are.”

The four guards gave a brief acknowledgement over their heat set comm. units.

The group halted while still well back in the tunnel, when they had the beam in chamber in sight as a brightly lit room with many people moving purposefully about. Jordan and Villa both felt the need to munch on some high-energy rations before proceeding further. While they ate, they watched the activity. There was no break in the stream of people. Vila took a moment to clean the blood from her face and hands. She wished she could change her clothes. The Aeronite uniforms looked smart, but they would seem strange to any Tymorean that saw them. They couldn’t be cloaked all the time.

“Check your weapons,” Jordan spoke softly over the heat set comm. He followed his own advice, checking his stunner and disintegrator. Both were fully charged. He heard the sound of one of the warriors replacing a battery pack on one of his weapons.

Jordan also checked that his two fighting knives were loose in their hidden sheaths. His hand felt for the small stun grenades and the tiny smoke canisters on his belt. He could identify each type by feel.

“Let’s go.”

Moving six figures through a crowded room wasn’t easy, but was helped by the nervous jiggling of the people waiting their turn to beam away. Jordan identified the door of the maintenance tunnel from a description Kellex had given him. He opened it noiselessly, for it wasn’t secured. Then he stood in front of the slight opening and whispered in the headset for the others to slip through it. Although he was effectively invisible, the suit’s field disguised the fact that the door had slid open enough for people to slip through. When all had reported, “Through”, Jordan followed. He turned to slide the door shut and saw a guard coming. He gave a brief command for silence and to make no movement.

The oblivious Tymorean guard muttered, “I wish people would not poke their noses where they are not meant to be.”

The guard did glance in through the door and looked around and up. Hearing and seeing nothing, he shrugged and shut the door.

Jordan sent a microburst transmission to Kellex, reporting that they were in position. He received an acknowledging burst. Before beginning to climb, Jordan sent Vila down the narrow side tunnel to confirm that the water supply line was indeed in the position Kellex had told them. She returned quickly, gave Jordan a brief, “It’s there,” and heard him send a message to the assault team that were on their way.

Kryslie trotted from the security monitoring room in the President Governor’s palace, and confirmed in passing the yellow alert status. Extra lights in every passage had begun to flicker yellow, and the passages were devoid of all but essential personnel. Everyone else would be either in their quarters or in other assigned areas, if not on their way to Dira.

When she reached the Great Hall of Reslic’s palace, she eyed the purposeful activity. Small groups of people, all carrying bundles, disappeared at intervals. She expected the scene to be the same in the other two palaces.

All seemed under control, so she went outside into the Government Gardens and let her senses open up to the aura around her. She recalled the alien infiltrators who had come some months before and had tried to abduct her and her brothers. Vividly, she recalled how their

presences had felt to her. She felt nothing like that now. The guards patrolling the grounds noticed her, saluted and continued on.

This time, the guards had warning of an impending intrusion and the Estate was shielded. Also, while there was an alert on, no traders would be allowed to access the tunnels to come up, and none had been within the mesa when the alert had started. To check that her awareness was correct, Kryslie looked up, adjusted her eyes and saw the faint mauve glow of the shields. To normal eyes, they would be invisible.

The idea occurred to her that Aeronites without traces of power would be less detectable. She considered whether Kellex would send ordinary troops or his elite. The latter, she decided, since he must have a way of knowing that all the Governors were away...and he would still think she and Tymos were absent.

How would he think to infiltrate this time? If they tested the shields, they would find them solid, but their testing would be noticed. However, they already knew there were some shields. If they tried an EM pulse, again that would be noticed, although it would not affect the nested shields being used.

What if the infiltrators were already in place, and had been since before the alert? Last time, they had come in with traders during the day, waited until dark to bring in the rest, and until the following day to attack.

The idea unsettled Kryslie, so she began to roam the grounds, listening for stray thoughts and looking for odd movements of trees or bushes. If they were again in the stealth suits, that might be all that would alert her.

While maintaining her heightened state of awareness, Kryslie allowed herself to consider the message that her father had received. Jordan and Vila were obviously bait for him. Did Kellex really expect Tymoros to go there himself? Did he have suspicions that the king knew of their existence? Was his idea to capture the king or just to get Jordan and Vila onto the Estate?

Instinctively, Kryslie decided to transmit to her father's palace. Just as she arrived in the Great Hall there, she heard Arden's voice through the headpiece.

"The Jacen Tyr has lost contact with his Majesty and his group."

Kryslie felt a shiver of warning, and asked Arden, "The new scrambler field that disrupts the stealth function of the Aeronite suits – where is it effective?"

Arden replied instantly, "Only within the palaces, your Highness."

"Does that include down in the beam-in room?" Kryslie asked. She heard an indrawn breath over the comm. set. "No, only on the main levels of the palaces."

"Initiate lock down, Arden," Kryslie directed. She began to feel alarmed.

A brief moment of concern for her father and the people with him was all she would allow herself. Reslic had stressed that her father could look after himself, and Perrin Reslic, the President's brother, was highly capable. She had other concerns and sent a mental warning to Jonko to be extra alert. She transmitted into the palace where the lockdown cadence was audible everywhere, accompanying the yellow flashing light.

Kryslie mentally checked the time. The students would be about to finish morning lessons. They would all transmit directly to quarters. They would have to wait for lunch, as the cooks would have to secure the kitchen and go to their own quarters or to safe areas in the kitchens. Similar actions would be occurring in each of the palaces, and in all departments.

In the Great Hall, those waiting to go down to beam to Dira, immediately returned to their quarters – only guards remained. She queried Arden about those down in the beam-in room.

An idea was nagging at her mind, that Jordan and Vila might have mastered the transmitters.

"Those there are continuing to Dira, but no more are going down. What is your concern, your Highness?"

"What if someone wanted to transmit here from another location, while others are going to Dira?" Kryslie asked. Normally it was possible, but with so many people being beamed out, it wasn't safe.

Arden's tone seemed to imply, 'we've thought of that' as he said, "All the cities will find this destination blocked, and Dira as well. Incoming travellers will be diverted to Reva or the farmlands. All those likely to need to come here have been alerted to the evacuation."

That was all very well, Kryslie decided, but, "Arden, have the guards in the beam-in room noticed anything odd?"

She heard Arden relay the question, which he was taking seriously. She heard mention of an open door and asked in turn how long ago that had been. Too long, her mind mentally calculated. If an intruder had opened the door, they could have climbed, or transmitted up by now and be anywhere.

"Arden assume those I mentioned reached Reva, or the farmlands, and manually transmitted along the tunnel..."

The Guard chief instantly caught her implication. He issued orders, deploying guards to various strategic places.

Kryslie began to scout her father's palace. She was certain, even with out having proof, that Jordan and Vila were on the Estate and coming for Llaimos.

Moving quickly, and with all senses alert, Kryslie checked the ground floor. Most of the rooms off the Great Hall were offices or meeting rooms. The former were locked by a panel sliding across from the frame - an automatic function when the alert was transmitted. The latter were open and a brief glance was enough to confirm they were empty, since the new security fields would nullify cloaking shields.

Passages opened off the hall, in three directions, and the Grand Stairway ascended to the next level. Kryslie started down the left passageway, passing locked doors and checking briefly in the alcoves that alternated with the usually open doors. Some alcoves had recessed seats, or painted murals, others had statues or pedestals with small sculptures. An intruder could duck into them and hide, but with the onset of the alarm, and the flashing yellow lights, he would know he needed to move fast.

Instinct made her turn back before reaching the furthest room, and she ran back past the staircase and began to check the other way. Again, she turned back before the end. This time she had to decide between going up, and checking the serving area at the back of the palace. The upper level drew her and she transmitted to the top of the stairs and looked around. Here the stairway split into two and wound up to the next level. She took a moment to look up, and saw several brown clad guards patrolling up higher.

Sensing they were alert but not alarmed, Kryslie concentrated on her surroundings. This first level was where her father had his suite. It was a possible target, as it was where Llaimos usually slept. She would check there first, she decided, and transmitted there - only needing a moment to visualise her destination.

Her arrival point was the room she used when staying in the suite, and from there, she first felt for other presences, and then cracked the door open and listened. All was quiet within the suite, she had checked all rooms to confirm it was empty.

Before transmitting through the securely locked door, she reported her position to Arden. He in turned warned the guards in the passage outside, so when she appeared, they saluted as well as stared at her un-regal appearance. Arden also added the disturbing information that Zacary was no longer in the isolation room, and two guards had been found unconscious.

Some feeling drew her up to the second level, which was mostly quarters for the people in the High King's extended family. Her own were nearby, one of the inner suites, without windows and lit by indirect lighting. Tymos's suite was in a different wing. She checked her own rooms, and then did a quick sweep of the nearby passages. She sensed people moving nervously behind the locked doors but if intruders broke into any of the rooms, an automatic alarm would alert the guards.

Kryslie found herself heading towards the service area of the level. The maintenance tunnels came up in the basement, and were close to the rear stairs.

Movement caught her eye as she turned into another of the criss-crossing passages. She ducked into a recess, and edged to look along the passage. No one was there, but she was sure the movement was not a trick of the now slowly flashing yellow light.

Using her power to reinforce the idea that she wasn't there, Kryslie edged along the passage. A short figure suddenly darted out of one room, checked the next door, and the next and then entered another. She recognised Sacul, one of her friends, who should have been in the dormitory on the level above. When the boy emerged again, Kryslie sent a thought at him.

Sacul jerked and looked wildly around, believing he had heard his name called and very much aware that he was breaking some very strict rules.

Kryslie allowed herself to be seen, saw Sacul about to exclaim, and gestured with a finger to her lips, for him to be quiet. Then, after closing the gap between them and checking along each end of the passage, Kryslie grasped Sacul's arm and pulled him back into the room he had just checked.

Just touching him, told Kryslie that her young friend knew the trouble he would be in if the guards saw him. She didn't waste time on the obvious, just demanded in an intense whisper, "Why are you here?"

Although he paled, suddenly sensing in her the same aura of authority as the Governors had, he answered. "My friends, the ones that sleep in my dormitory, they aren't there."

Before Kryslie could ask why he hadn't raised an alarm, he went on, "The comm. unit wasn't working, and our dorm attendant, Jessie, was unconscious. I helped her and she woke up. Terry and Lukon attacked her. That was all she remembered."

The two named boys were imaged in Sacul's mind, and Kryslie remembered them from her time in the small Lyceum. Neither were normally rough, or disobedient, but both had started to grow tall.

"Who else sleeps in your dormitory?"

Sacul listed another nine names - all boys - and all the children of missionaries like Sacul himself. None of the others had yet graduated to the large lyceum.

The younger boys would have come from the small lyceum, possibly Jessie would have escorted them. Sacul probably arrived later.

"I was having a lesson in the garden when the alert began. Markon ordered us back inside and told us to come to quarters straight from there." He was babbling, Sacul knew, but he was worried about his friends.

"Were any of your friends acting oddly before today?"

"A bit...I mean, most of our parents have come back, but we haven't seen them."

What little colour that had returned to Sacul's face, drained away as he realised what she was actually asking. "You mean, they might be controlled? Like I was that time?"

Sacul considered, recalling all too vividly, what a voice in his head had tried to make him do.

"No, I don't think they were acting like that. They weren't secretive."

An idea occurred to Kryslie and, gesturing for Sacul to stay quiet, she spoke into her comm set.

"Arden, have the children from dormitory two been relocated to Dira?"

The pause was only brief, before Arden confirmed her fear. She reported that eleven boys were missing from there, and that medical aid was needed.

When the comm. set was off, she told Sacul, "I'll look after things. You get back to Jessie, the medics will be there soon."

Then Kryslie asked, "Have your friends been talking to Zacary?"

Sacul shrugged. "Not that I know of."

“Go!” Kryslie urged. And as the boy transmitted away, she muttered, “Zacary. He has to be behind this.” She didn’t have direct proof, and the younger students were having sleep treatments to condition them against the insidious thoughts that had caused Sacul to act against his nature. Yet Zacary’s ‘peppermints’ that had been dosed with a mind warping drug, had affected older students - like Jonko. He may have had some hidden where the searchers hadn’t known to look.

Kryslie left the little room, what she now noticed was a storage area for cleaning equipment, and began to trot towards the stairs to go up to the level where the dormitories and the nurseries were. In an instant, a range of possibilities occurred to her. The first was that the dormitories were close to the nurseries. The second was that all the missing boys had transmitters and knew the nurseries well. The third was that children had been acting oddly.

She flicked a thought at Jonko, who was well used to the sensation. He must have spoken to Stenn, for she began to sense his mind too. He understood the implications, for he was concentrating on the thought, “We won’t be tricked.”

Reassured that all was well in the nursery where Llaimos was the only child, Kryslie returned her full concentration to sensing Zacary or Aeronite intruders. Her mind was wondering how well Zacary knew the High King’s palace. The apartment he shared with his brother was in Reslic’s palace, and while the basic layout was the same, many areas were used for different purposes.

Kryslie acted on instinct once again and transmitted to the next level, where the two wings of the Grand Staircase rejoined. Almost immediately, movement caught her eye. A flash of black just disappearing into the left passage. She sprinted from the stairs to the passage and was just in time to see a figure move purposefully into a crossway. It wasn’t one of the guards, for it was clad in black, not brown, and the way it moved, lacked the economy of movement trained into the guards.

Kryslie sprinted to the crossway, and began to follow the figure. She recalled the fleeting image and decided she could not tell who it was, yet. The man was wearing a dark close-fitting hat that hid the colour of his hair. As she followed, padding silently on the wood, she reported to Arden, and reached out to sense the intruders mind. It seemed blank, and that was strange, for an intruder should be taking in his surroundings, considering everything. Suddenly, she was sure who it was.

“Zacary!”

The figure almost careened into the wall as it spun around. Recognition was instant, and Zacary fled. He was fast, desperate, but unlike Kryslie, he could no longer draw on his power to give himself more speed.

Kryslie caught up to him, and was about to grab him when he suddenly whistled shrilly, and ducked out of her reach.

“Zacary ! I can help you,” Kryslie called to him, as she began to chase him again, sensing nearly mindless panic.

In the next instant, Kryslie began to feel the effects of transmitter repeller fields pushing on her from all sides. Her personal force screen absorbed and transmuted most of the energy, but she was trapped within the overlapping fields, as Zacary was racing off.

All around her in the narrow passage, children were materialising. Sacul’s dorm mates were all glassy-eyed, and those nearest her began screaming in pain as the effects of prolonged exposure to the repeller fields began to be felt. Several were on the floor, having been knocked over by her momentum in the instant of their full re-materialisation. Those on the outer edge of the group were pushing to get closer to her, oblivious to the fallen ones, and stepping on them.

The immediate need to help the children warred with the need to seek Zacary and the intruders.

“Halt! Stand aside!”

Years of obedience held, and the children complied. Those crowding her stepped back, and some trace of intelligence began to resurface. Kryslie checked the three on the floor first. They were too quiet. One had broken ribs and was breathing with some trouble. Kryslie unshielded and sent some healing energy into him, until his breathing eased. The other two were unconscious, possibly kicked by some of their oblivious friends, but they were both breathing without trouble.

She then checked those that were screaming, knowing from first hand experience how they were feeling. But if they were making so much noise, they were not dangerously hurt.

For each of these, she grounded some of the repeller energy and sent a sleep command to their minds and eased them to the ground. The silence was a relief. As she tended the last of them, the guards and medics arrived.

Leaving the children to them, Kryslie raced off in the direction Zacary had gone. By now, he could be anywhere amongst the criss-crossing passages on that level. She checked with Arden, but he could not see Zacary on any of his monitors. He reported that many of the security cameras around her position were inoperative.

Kryslie glanced immediately to where she knew the nearest ones were. The presence of black patches on the white paint around them told her that someone was deliberately disabling them. She wondered if it was Zacary, or someone else. The signs indicated a high-energy weapon, set on a narrow beam that perfectly hit the target.

When she had seen Zacary take off, he had not been headed for the nursery, but towards the rear of the palace. This made sense if he was somehow trying to meet Jordan or Vila, the only ones she considered likely to be able to influence him. She transmitted to a place near where the back stairs reached that level. Standing perfectly still within a slight recess, right next to the ornamental pillar at the top of the stairs, Kryslie used her power to cloak her, and slowly turned her head to study the scene around her. This part of the palace was not elaborate. It didn't need to be. Nearby were the linen rooms, the ironing room, and the room containing the laundry chute. Further away were the duty servers' lounge and the small kitchen for preparing basic meals. The walls here were of polished wood, lacquered in their natural shades and decorated only with woven tapestries in harlequin designs. No one was moving nearby, the nearest rooms were empty of the sense of people. The servants on duty on this level were either with their assigned charges, or would have gone to the safe room further down the passage from her watching place.

As she looked around, she noticed more of the blackened, burnt out cameras. Had Zacary come this far, or come from here? It was more likely to be the intruders who had the high-energy weapons. To try to determine that, Kryslie asked Jonko another question, and waited as he passed it on to Stenn. "How good is Zacary with beam weapons?"

"Average to lousy," was the answer in Stenn's mind. Jonko's was saying, "Worse since his injuries."

Kryslie returned her full attention to her surroundings. A prickle of warning was running like an ant stampede up her back. She might be between Zacary and the intruders, but she had no idea where they were. Before she moved, she directed Arlen to have guards search the laundries and kitchens - working their way up from the lowest level.

Even if she couldn't see the intruders, she knew what they were after. She moved again, heading towards the nursery. All was still quiet there, she would know if the situation changed.

If Zacary met with Jordan, Vila or whoever was in charge, they would assume she knew they were around. She would be a target, and so she kept alert for odd shadows, things that were out of place, possible booby traps, or malignant presences.

The light came from glowing panels set in the roof; she checked these for shadows that shouldn't be there. The light shone down, so shadows should not fall on the passage floor. The light coloured wood would show any that did.

Now the hair on her head began to prickle, as if the air had become charged. She stepped into a recess that contained a seat, and let her mind filter the thoughts coming into it. She categorised and ignored the fearful thoughts of the people in the rooms she was passing. Most were older students, alone, or sharing the space with a friend. These were passive thoughts, emitted due to fear. What Kryslie tried to sense were thoughts from someone like her that had some telepathy. These would be stronger, even if the thinker did not intend to broadcast them. If Jordan and Vila were like her and her brother, they would have some telepathy, but since they tried to ignore it, she hoped they would be less adept at shielding when in a stressful situation.

Kryslie had the sudden thought, that surely the patrolling guards should have seen the intruders by now. She queried Arden, and had him check with all the guards. If he had lost contact with any, he would have told her. His reply came after several minutes.

“I have voice contact with all. Second level response at ninety percent.”

As soon as he gave her the unfamiliar terminology, the information of its meaning came to her. Anyone could learn the guards’ normal reporting terminology and procedure. However, only the guards themselves knew of the silent confirmations sent electronically. That ten percent of the guards had not responded both ways, indicated that the intruders had replaced the guards, and were making use of their weapons and equipment. She should have thought of it sooner, for the aliens had done the same thing when they had intruded before.

Arden had not said so, but he would be sending reinforcements.

The sound of something tinkling, like fallen glass or fine china, seemed loud in the unnatural silence of the passage. The noise wasn’t from close by, for the full tone was muffled. In an instant of knowledge, she pictured the place where a set of tiny teacups sat on display. At the same moment, she felt a spurt of fear, pain, and then blankness.

Kryslie did not report the noise to Arden. If she did, any Aeronite with a stolen comm. unit would know where she was. Instead, she crept in the direction of the cup display, with her mind open to sense any strangeness, and her eyes flicking everywhere. She saw more blackened sensors, and this time she had a whiff of burnt insulation that the air cycling system had not had time to remove.

The prickling of her scalp was increasing. It had not quite come to feel like the sense of warped power. Perhaps it was the effect of uncontrolled power. Jordan and Vila would not have had the training she had, to be able to master it. How would it feel if they were concentrating on a task they believed to be honourable, ethical, and vital?

In her mind, stealing a loved, cherished and innocent child from its rightful place was not ethical or honourable. However, her estranged siblings had been raised by their enemy, trained and conditioned to listen to and obey to Kellex. If he told them the task was necessary, logical and ethical, no doubt they would believe it.

Arden sent, “More sensors on the lower levels have malfunctioned. Reset in thirty seconds.”

She doubted the reset would work, but the information indicated more Aeronites on the lower level. It could be no coincidence that they had chosen to enter the Estate that way.

The thought that Jordan and Vila had learnt to use transmitters, returned.

Kellex must still have a collection taken from the members of the third scout party. Half of that group had been from the Estate and would have had personal transmitters.

Her hope was that even if they met Zacary, they would not have an image to transmit to, to arrive within the nursery. She mentioned the idea to Jonko, and the reply she read in Stenn’s mind only partly allayed the fear. “He never slept in the nursery. He lived in my father’s palace with his parents before they went off to be missionaries.”

It didn’t mean that he did not know where the nurseries were, and he would know you could transmit through a locked door.

Kryslie crept up to the area where she believed the noise had come from. She stopped just in the passage leading there, pressed back against a hanging tapestry and carefully looked around the corner.

Like everywhere she had been, the area was deserted. However, there were broken shards of china on the floor, in front of the alcove. She considered what might have broken them. A misaimed weapon? Someone that had hidden there, but was found and challenged, jumping up and knocking the shelf?

Before going closer, Kryslie scanned the area - one of the open lounges that had a variety of chairs in clusters of two, three or four around low tables.

There! Something black, just protruding from between two chairs.

Chapter 22 - Kin Fighting Kin

Zacary was hardly aware of what he was doing. His real self was hidden deeply, quivering in terror, watching his body moving like a programmed automaton. Somehow, he had managed to get out of the isolation cell where the guards had taken him. All the way there, he had tried to struggle free, had protested his innocence, had insisted it was all a mistake, and he had done nothing wrong. But deep down, he knew his body had done the things they claimed, even if he had no control over it. He hardly remembered how he had reached the High Kings palace, the overwhelming thought had been the need to do so unseen. He had to meet someone...

Seeing Kryslie had been a shock, a reminder of the frightful trouble he would be in for leaving the infirmary and attacking the two guards when he had fled. And he was disobeying lockdown orders during a high alert. As a member of the Peace Corps, he knew the punishment for disobeying orders. Even as a civilian, he knew the result of ignoring them.

His own essence had reacted so strongly, that for a moment he had overcome that other mind. But while he had reacted in shock and mindless panic, that other had taken control again. He had run, set the children on her, knowing that the repeller fields should disable them all. If Kryslie was not harmed, she would have to help the children before coming after him. He would have time to flee, time to hide. He wanted to hide.

Yet his body kept moving, heading towards the servants' areas, looking for someone. Then the orders had changed, and he had found himself in that alcove, crouching under the shelf, hidden by a hanging cloth, and waiting for some guards to go past.

Then his body began to move, standing abruptly, banging the shelf, sending the precious tiny china cups flying.

Zacary found himself staring, horrified, at the broken shards on the floor. He dropped to the floor, crawled back into the alcove under the shelf and hugged his raised knees tightly. Whatever was propelling his body, tried to make him move, but Zacary held onto his shred of self-awareness with everything he had.

The horrid voice in his head started again, angry with him, flaying his self-esteem to the size of a rat, telling him what he must do to redeem himself. He tried to ignore it, pretending not to hear it.

Finally, the voice seemed to give up. "Crawl to the damn Governors then," it said with utter contempt. "Let them whip you to raw meat. You will be dead by day's end."

The voice stopped, as if the mind behind it had given up on him. That seemed a relief, until his mind focussed on what had been said. He was a traitor, even if not by choice. But who would believe him. He would be better off dead, but a part of him wanted to live, even if living meant being punished horribly as he deserved to be.

Somewhere during the long minutes of self-loathing and self-contempt, he remembered Kryslie saying, "I can help you." And she had, he recalled. He had fought her, no, that other had fought her, but she had won. The darkness that had been pressing on his mind had gone. He wanted to feel that relief again.

Still hugging his knees, Zacary called out softly, "Princess Kryslie? Please, if you can hear me...you said you could help. Please, I don't want to do this...I don't...help me!"

He was terrified as he strained his ears to see if anyone had heard him. Guards would probably shoot him on sight. He hoped fervently, but dared not pray to the Guardians, that Kryslie would come, would hear him.

Zacary sensed a presence near him; it felt like Kryslie, or her brother. Even without power himself, he was still aware of it. He looked up, glanced around, saw a red headed figure coming closer. He was about to stand up and bow to Princess Kryslie when he registered the oddities.

This red head was the image of Kryslie...but seemed older. This one was wearing an impeccably neat guard's uniform. Why would Kryslie have wasted time changing, while she was chasing him? Why?

The comfort of knowing exactly what to do, relaxed him. All would be forgiven if he obeyed every direction this time. He just had to wait where he was until Kryslie found him. Then he was to beg her for help. And she would help him, like she had before. She understood that it wasn't his fault and that he hadn't wanted to do all the dreadful things he had done. He went back to gripping his knees, and waited.

He glanced up again when he heard the faint sounds of bare feet on the polished wood floor. Just a slight scuffing.

"Princess Kryslie, you have to help me, you have to..." Zacary scrambled to his feet. She was ignoring him, looking around. He grabbed the fabric of the dusty coverall. "Please, take me away from here. If you don't, they'll make me take them to the nursery. You mustn't let them."

"Llaimos will be fine," Kryslie told him as she looked around for the imminent danger. "Give me your weapons."

Zacary released her and began to comply; giving no thought to the fact that he had stolen the weapons from the guards he had attacked in the isolation cell. In any case, he should not be carrying weapons. As his hand brushed hers while handing over the stun gun, he felt a faint shock like from electricity, and he realised she had a force screen on. It was repeated when he handed over the energy beam weapon.

Kryslie had pushed the stunner into her belt, but she checked the charge and setting of the other before putting it with the stunner.

When he touched the knife he had also taken, the weapon seemed to come alive in his hand. It jerked towards Kryslie, and he let out a horrified denial. In his mind, he heard vicious laughter, and his true self was shoved into darkness.

Kryslie sensed the instant when Zacary's mind was grabbed again by that distant controller. The attack, seen only as a movement in her side vision, was countered by an instinctive defence. One of many trained into her by President Reslic and his brothers.

The mind controlling Zacary, anticipated her move and jerked him back, only to launch another attack. Who ever it was, was a skilled and deadly fighter, but Kryslie had been drilled in advanced self-defence techniques and Zacary's physical body was not fit enough to perform the intended attacks.

Kryslie withheld her full strength when she spun and kicked the knife out of his hand. The follow-up kick to his head, sent Zacary falling unconscious to the floor. As she leant down to check that he was alive, she saw a brief flash of bright light and felt a tingle all over.

Realising that her force screen had just absorbed a weapons discharge, she spun around. Behind her, trotting closer and mentally snarling was Vila, already drawing a different weapon and bringing it up to shoot.

A sharp pain shot up Kryslie's arm, as she barely dodged the energy beam. Her suit had almost overloaded there as it neutralised the beam. She had to dodge again to evade the follow up knife thrust.

"Who would think you a Princess," Vila snarled, angry that her attacks had failed. She twisted her arm to free it from Kryslie's grip. "You look like what you are, a filthy gutter rat, only fit to be a drudge. Tymoreans must be imbeciles to think otherwise."

A second knife was in her other hand now, as she had realised that Kryslie had a protective force screen on.

Kryslie thrust Vila away from her, pushing her into one of the chairs, and gaining time to draw her own knife. She didn't consider either of the high-tech weapons, since Vila was surely shielded too. She hadn't seen where Vila had stowed hers, but that wasn't important. She needed to watch Vila's hands, the two knives, and the tell tale muscles in her opponents face.

Vila bounced back, with an intent look on her face. Kryslie lunged at her, aiming for the weak point in the protective armour, she expected Vila to have on under the stolen uniform. A jolt, like a powerful punch, hit her in the side, knocking her off balance. Instants later, pain erupted there, but Kryslie did not dare let it slow her.

Grabbing onto the back of the nearest chair, Kryslie swung herself over it. Vila immediately followed her, and was able to dodge her opponents attack, and launch one of her own. They both dodged and parried, as they avoided being trapped or tripped by tables and chairs.

Kryslie deduced that Zacary had woken, and had Vila's weapon. He had been the cause of the energy jolt that had overloaded, and neutralised her force screen. Now she was managing to put furniture between her and Zacary, for another such jolt would disable her.

"So, you need help to fight me," Kryslie said, after brushing her comm. unit to the on position.

Vila ignored the jibe, forcing her opponent towards the outermost chairs. She didn't quite keep her intention from her mind. Kryslie saw movement, and deliberately turned her back on the now standing Zacary. In the next instant, she spun and kicked out hard, hitting Zacary in the side of the head. He went down again, and the weapon clattered to the floor.

Aware of the final resting place of the weapon, Kryslie began to attack with greater vigour, forcing Vila back, and when the older woman summoned more energy to retaliate, allowed herself to back away.

They were out of the ring of chairs, and Vila closed in again, thinking to trap Kryslie against a wall.

Aware that they had been fighting for too long, and Tymorean guards might arrive at any time, Vila smoothly sheathed one knife, and drew her other weapon.

"I have had years more fighting experience than you, bitch," Vila boasted. The beam should have burnt a chunk out of her opponent, injured her too much to fight further. It didn't even touch her. The realisation that her opponent was highly skilled and, even with out a force screen, not an easy target sent a surge of panic through her.

Vila instinctively drew on her power. Fuelled by anger and fear, it surged in her, giving her manic strength. She forgot her tech weapons, and lunged with the knife, determined to kill or disable the presumptuous whelp.

Kryslie found that it took all of her skill to counter her opponent and force her way back into clear space. She didn't want to kill Vila, but the opposite wasn't true. The older woman was terrified of failing and would not give up until her opponent was dead or disabled.

Time was forgotten, as the fight went back and forth, with each opponent dodging or crashing into furniture.

"I only have to nick you and I win," Vila said hoarsely when Kryslie had blocked her latest thrust, and they were glaring eye to eye, faces only inches apart, their blades locked together.

Maintaining eye contact, Kryslie used her free hand to reach for the controls for Vila's force screen.

"No you don't," Vila said, giving her opponent a power-fuelled shove with the hand holding the energy beamer. With her hand free, she could aim it, while her opponent was off balance.

Kryslie recovered quickly, and without looking, jumped backwards over the fallen Zacary, and in a rapid swipe, recovered the weapon he had dropped. An energy beam passed over her head, and before a second burst came, Kryslie fired at Vila.

Neither attack had the desired effect. Kryslie had aimed for the controls of Vila's force screen, but it hit and fused the energy beamer, causing Vila to drop it or burn her hand.

Vila snarled in shock at seeing Kryslie unaffected by the deadly energy that had struck her in the chest.

"You can't kill me with that, I'm shielded from it," Vila snarled.

"Too bad," Kryslie forced a smile, making Vila step back a pace. She did not betray how close that last jolt had come to injuring her. She needed moments to draw in more energy to replace what she had used to dissipate the deadly beam. Vila had not noticed how the lights had brightened and how the air felt charged. Kryslie drew the free energy back into herself, and watched her opponent who seemed to need a moment to catch her breath.

"Reinforcements will be here soon," she needled Vila, distracting her. Her own awareness was on the furniture around her, confirming her mental map. All through the fight, she had known exactly where everything was, even when things were subsequently moved or broken. She was aware that Zacary was vaguely conscious again, moaning faintly as he tried to crawl out of the way.

Vila lunged again, but Kryslie was ready for her. This time she stood her ground, and grabbed Vila's knife arm, pushing it away from her and twisting it. Vila screamed and the knife flew from her hand. Yet Kryslie sensed it was deliberate.

Before Kryslie finished spinning Vila into the wall, she felt the sense of danger and the sudden impact of Jonko's mind. He was fighting Jordan, in the nursery. The sharp burning slash just above her ankles, went unnoticed.

Vila hit the wall hard, but recovered quickly, pushing off it and spinning around. She challenged, "Try that again, bitch. I bet you can't do it."

She lunged again, in such a way that Kryslie's instinctive reaction was to repeat the same manoeuvre.

"Jordan has your little brother," she claimed, as Kryslie tried to throw her aside. This time, she had her weight centred and was ready. She jerked her opponent towards her.

Kryslie automatically adjusted her balance, but was suddenly aware of the weakness creeping up her legs. She tried to push against Vila, but her legs gave way, and she collapsed within arms reach of Zacary.

She could see the knife in his hand, the greenish substance on it, and realised he had slashed her with a poisoned knife. While she drew in more power, and the lights dimmed, Kryslie hid her panic by speaking calmly.

"Is this the way to treat your sister?" The weakness was rapidly spreading, she could feel it in her thighs now.

"It is what verminous guttersnipes deserve when they think they can stop me. I am not your sister. You are some trash the Tymorean King dredged up to fool the commoners into believing his seed wasn't weak from inbreeding."

"Kellex sure did a job on you," Kryslie said with pity, not malice.

Vila reacted with a hard fist jab to Kryslie's jaw.

"Shut your mouth," she warned. "We came to get your little brother. There was no way we were going to let that poor brat grow up to be an uncaring monster like his father."

As she finished speaking, Vila realised that she was suddenly feeling weak. The sensation disconcerted her, and she was not prepared for Kryslie's upper body to thrust upwards, and her arms to grab her. She felt herself collapsing to the floor, next to her prisoner.

"You should be unconscious," Vila stated, throwing off Kryslie's grip with effort. "You will be soon, and you can join your bastard of a father as Kellex's guest. He has some asinine idea that he can teach you better manners and civilise you. Personally, I think he ought to kill you and be done with it." She was panting heavily, and trying to force her pulse rate and heartbeat to slow.

Kryslie didn't respond, she felt her mind on the verge of blacking out, and sent a mental call to her brother. With her last strength, she gave him details of the situation in terse phrases and vivid images. Let Vila think she had won, for now, because if Kellex had her father, that was where she needed to be.

Yet Kryslie still fought the encroaching oblivion, for she sensed something in Vila's mind, now that she believed she had won. The next stage of the plan. Some other threat to the Estate...she couldn't focus, and was only vaguely aware that Tymos was warned, and he was coming. She tried to reach out to Jonko, with the last of her consciousness. Through his eyes, she saw that he was fighting two Aeronites, one of them Jordan. She saw nothing of Stenn, or Llaimos, or her foster mother. She had to believe they were still safe, and that reinforcements were almost there. Surely Arden heard the comments Vila had made...

Jonko heard the faintest of sounds and was ready when three Aeronites kicked the door open and rushed in. The four guardsmen had seen his sudden alertness and were also ready, and began firing as soon as the figures were in sight.

Behind him, Jonko heard the inner door slam shut, the lock bolt thud into place and sounds of furniture being formed into a barricade. When the tech weapons proved ineffective against the intruders, they holstered them and drew fighting knives in one rapid movement.

The guards took the fight to the Aeronites as Jonko spun around, sensing the energy preceding someone transmitting in. He took out one figure, on the instant it was fully stabilised but before it had a chance to fire a weapon. The other attacked, forcing him to defend himself. Then his eyes spotted a familiar device – a transmitter – attached to the alien's waist and Jonko knew who he fought.

He had to stop Jordan using the stolen transmitter to get into the inner room. Better still, remove it or destroy it. The furniture barrier would do little if Jordan got in.

Jonko used every bit of skill he had to keep Jordan busy, and in a brief lull, called to Kryslie, hoping she could come and help. He was only peripherally aware of the other guards, noticed first one and then another go down. Then two of the intruders. The remaining Aeronite came at him, and then another re-entered the fight, another Tymorean went down. He scored on one Aeronite; that one was out of the fight. He tried to locate Jordan, and still keep his two opponents from killing him.

From the inner room, he heard Tanya scream, and Stenn give a roar of fury. Jonko renewed the strength of his attack – he couldn't go to help Stenn. The slightest lapse in his dynamic defence would have him killed.

Tymos, far off in the protected forest, drew Keleb from his trance. "We have to go. Llaimos is in danger."

Keleb shook himself to loosen muscles stiff from prolonged inaction while he had concentrated on the animals. "How will we get..." he began to ask, but Tymos had moved close and transmitted them both. He blinked, as he recognised the President in front of him when they rematerialised. He realised they must be in space, on the President's flagship.

There was no time to bow in greeting. Reslic ordered, "Go!" as one beam terminus faded and another appeared. "The shields on the Estate will be down for an instant, and will then go back up."

Moments later, the gardens of the Estate materialised around them and the sense of conflicting energies stirring in the aura.

"We have to get to Llaimos," Tymos insisted, as a flare from above brightened the ambient light. He glanced up as the energy waned from the defensive shield above the Estate. The shield had held.

Once again, Tymos transmitted them both – this time to the nursery using a view through Jonko’s eyes for his reference, when he could not get a reply from his sister. He and Keleb arrived behind Jonko, between him and the nursery inner door.

The odds thus changed to one on one, the three remaining Aeronites were quickly overcome.

“Jordan transmitted in,” Jonko said quickly, he was already reaching for his own transmitter. “Stenn moved stuff in front of the door.”

Tymos felt his brother’s mind and received a vivid picture of the room. He forced the same image into the minds of his friends, adding aloud, “We want to arrive between Stenn and Llaimos”. Then he was in the inner room, seeing Tanya holding Llaimos behind her in one corner, crouching behind the scant protection of a potted plant. The rest of the furniture formed a barrier at the door, beds, chairs, spare linen, small cabinets...

Stenn was fighting Jordan, keeping him from his target, and both were using their full strength. Jonko and Keleb moved immediately to bracket Stenn, Tymos went to stand in front of Tanya as the last line of defence. Jordan suddenly had to defend against three opponents, and he stepped back to get the room.

He was good, Tymos observed. He must have had experience fighting in tight places, but in terms of skill, not even close to the level achieved by students of Jono Reslic.

“Give up,” Stenn advised his opponent. He had overcome his shock at needing to fight an enemy who was so like his best friend. The resemblance was skin deep. “You can’t win against four of us.”

Jordan jumped back further, drew a weapon, and fired it in Tymos’s direction, as pounding began at the door.

“You will have to do better than that, brother,” Tymos challenged. His force screen had dissipated most of the beam and the only damage was to the plant that caught the edges of it. Tanya had instinctively ducked, leaning over to protect Llaimos.

“Interfering peasants!” Jordan snarled, frustrated at seeing his chance to steal the child vanishing. He heard the sizzle of a disintegrator beam, the sound coming from behind him. He smelt the ozone tang of the discharge. His reinforcements were almost through the barricade.

Reassessing his chances, as he heard the furniture barricade moving, he attacked the central Tymorean again. The blond haired lad was a good fighter, one of the Tymorean President’s whelps. The two newcomers had brown hair - they could only be talented commoners. They were less of a danger.

While he watched his main opponent, and seemed to be ignoring the other two, his left hand was aiming for the figure seen in his side vision. His knife thrust was parried, and the aim of the disintegrator was kicked aside. The beam took a chunk of the wood and plaster from the ceiling, but he didn’t lose his grip. He parried an attack from the blond haired fighter, and fired his disintegrator again, in the direction of the red head. All three of the nearer Tymoreans came at him, as energy beams from two weapons lanced from the cluttered doorway. Fighting to protect himself, Jordan took his eyes off his target for a split second. In that instant of inattention, the red head, the woman and the child, vanished.

Jordan snarled a curse and fired from close range at his three opponents, not caring that his own suit took some of the energy of the disintegrator. The two Aeronite reinforcements fired at them too, as they scrambled up over the debris. Then he felt an intensely painful tingle and stumbled slightly - thinking his force screen was failing. Instead, he realised that his opponents had also vanished.

He recovered his balance and spun to face the two reinforcements.

“Too damn late,” he yelled at them, needing to vent his anger. “You were too damn late!”

Chapter 23 - Aftermath

Rousing and recalling what had happened to her, Kryslie tried to struggle free of Vila, but only succeeded in making her stumble slightly. Her own body felt limp, without energy, though now the lack of feeling in her legs had gone. She could feel where Vila's hands were gripping her, holding her in position over her shoulder. There was little to see from that position, only the ground. When her eyes finally focussed, Kryslie identified the stone floor of the beam-in chamber.

Vila stopped with a jerk. She stood on the tile mosaic in front of the tunnel to the farmlands and then slowly turned around. Her body tensed and then began to shake. Her legs collapsed under her, bringing Kryslie's head closer to the floor and letting her prisoner roll off her shoulder.

Kryslie felt the aura flow into her from where she touched the stone. She imaged it pushing the vile chemicals from her system, burning off the drug-induced lethargy. She lay motionless, still in no condition to fight again. When Vila rose, swearing, "To Jyx's midden with the damn Tymoreans," Kryslie rolled over to see what had angered the other woman.

No more than two body lengths away, a large pool of blood spread around the half-severed neck of an Aeronite infiltrator. The dead man's dark, whiteless eyes were fixed and seemed to be staring at her, pleading.

Wincing with the effort, Kryslie tried to push herself up to see more. She had a fleeting glance of three more bodies, all dead in the same manner, before Vila gave her a savage kick and knocked her down. Studying the brief memory, Kryslie noted first that the dead were all wearing palace guard livery. They must have taken the uniforms from genuine Tymorean guards.

With a vicious anger fuelled jerk, Vila yanked Kryslie up by holding the back of her neck.

"You bastards claim to be nice, peaceful, do-gooders...not only won't you help us, you kill people like gutter rats."

Kryslie tried to turn her head for a better look around, succeeded slightly, but then spotted a detail that Vila hadn't. She saw two more bodies, beyond the original three, and these were Tymorean. The glow light from above reflected off the white in their staring eyes.

They were killed like the others, throats slashed and they had not been dead long. Their blood pooled around their necks, had started to dribble down a slight slope in the stone floor forming into a pool, mixing with blood from the nearest dead Aeronite.

Vila seemed to notice where Kryslie was staring, and gave her prisoner a derisive shake.

"Never seen death before?" she demanded. "Some great hero you are! Weak! You Tymoreans are all weak. Get used to it, gutter filth. It's what your precious benefactors want to do to all my people. But it is what is going to happen to all the power infested Royal elite. We are going to liberate the commoners and help them rise from the muck heap where you keep them..."

Getting no response from her prisoner, Vila released her and let her drop. When the younger woman still didn't react, Vila strode around the dead and went to the capsule that was still half within the tunnel. She input the entry command on a keypad, and the hatch door cracked open.

Kryslie felt Vila release her, but could do nothing to control her landing. Her mind was in the midst of an intense premonition.

The creeping pool of red blood between the Tymorean and Aeronite bodies, that was beginning to obscure the tile mosaic on the floor, mingled and turned to glittering gold and silver. The bodies vanished, and the tile mosaic changed from the mesa glyph to another. One she had seen before in the Temple of Dira. This vision was important, she knew.

She came back to awareness to find Vila strapping her into some kind of coffin like capsule.

She heard Vila muttering, "Come on Jordan. How hard is it to snatch one helpless baby?"

With her prisoner securely tied, Vila began to pace the chamber, outside the capsule. The steps sounded more like she was nervously fidgeting, than patrolling or strolling. She would occasionally glance in at her prisoner, and at those times, Kryslie stayed still. When alone again, Kryslie tested the restraints and as the drug wore off knew that she would be able to break free.

Finally, she heard other people outside of the capsule.

She listened to a male voice ask, "Have the pipes been fixed?"

Another male voice, "Yes - we just need to start the timer before we leave."

The first said, "Set the timer for fifteen minutes, then follow us in the second capsule."

"Yes, Sir."

Vila looked out and asked, "Where is the baby?"

The male voice, Jordan's she assumed, "I don't know. I found five men in the nursery and when I finally got into the inner room they were guarding, there was a woman there, with a red headed boy. He was walking, looked to be four or five - not a baby. It was a trick! I almost got myself killed for a trick!"

"I have the girl Kellex wanted," Vila told him as they entered the capsule.

Jordan glanced at Kryslie and his expression might have been Kellex's own.

"Come on, this has been an expensive exercise. What killed the rear guard?"

Vila spat on the floor. "Tymoreans, I guess."

Jordan looked around, seeing the two extra bodies. "Two of these aren't ours," he noted. "The warriors who were with me upstairs are all dead."

"Then these killed the others before they died."

Jordan took a final long look before saying, "Let's get out of here. We'll..."

Kryslie didn't hear the rest of his sentence. Twice in a very short time, she was gripped by a forceful premonition that sent a surge of power through her. Truth came to her as clearly as if she were reading a transcript. "No, the palace guards would use stunners first, and then if that didn't work, they would physically overcome the intruders. They would want prisoners for questioning, not to slash their throats. And just as surely, if the Aeronites had killed the palace guards, they would not kill themselves. Whoever had done the killing here had known that the force shielded armour and stealth suits were not proof against deliberate, forceful, knife thrusts.

As if sharing her premonition, Kryslie felt her brother in her mind.

"Where are you?"

In rapid words and images, she showed him. She felt his anger at the deaths.

"I'm coming down..."

"No! I'm coming good. I will be able to get free. Jordan and Vila are here. They have father, or rather, they've sent him to Kellex. I will let them take me to him. But you must stay with Llaimos. And there is something else. They were doing something to pipes - setting timers."

"What pipes?"

"They didn't say, and I cannot sense where. My mind is still fuzzy - but you have less than fifteen minutes to find the place."

A jerk shook her as the capsule began to move. "We're leaving. The capsule moves along the tunnels. The last two Aeronites will be taking the other one."

“Which tunnel?” Tymos demanded. And she knew he was running. “Give me a picture.”

His presence vanished briefly as he transmitted down to the beam-in room, hoping to catch the last Aeronites, to question them.

Tymos held his foster mother and brother as Tanya began to shake in reaction. Llaimos was filled with frustration at being so helpless.

“We are safe,” Tymos assured his foster mother. “And if Jordan has sense he will retreat.”

“I thought he was you,” Tanya blurted. “Until Llaimos ran away from him. Then Lord Stenn reacted. Who was he?”

Tymos gave a terse answer. “One of us who is rogue.”

Stenn blurted, “Where is Krys?”

“I called to her,” Jonko added, worried.

The sense of the images his twin had sent him finally came to him. “She encountered Vila,” Tymos told them. “Zacary drew her out.”

“Is she alright?” Keleb asked. “Why doesn’t she come here? And where is Zacary?”

Tymos sifted through the mental impressions. “Vila had some drug on her knife. Zacary had it and slashed her. She will be right again shortly, but she is letting Jordan and Vila take her back to Amik. The Aeronites have our father there.”

Stenn paled. “And Uncle Perrin?”

“I don’t know,” Tymos admitted, shaking his head. “I just know that your father has lost contact with the entire group. We can’t worry about them now. Stay here ...”

“Where are you going,” Keleb demanded, alarmed by what he sensed from Tymos. His friend didn’t answer. Instead, he was jogging out the door.

As soon as he was out in the passage, outside of his father’s suite, he transmitted to the beam-in cavern. He had touched his sister’s mind, felt her weakness and the fuzziness of her mind. She had shown him the dead men, and the capsules. She wasn’t there, but one capsule was.

Tymos adjusted his eyes and scanned the room. He noticed the glowing trails his sister had mentioned, all over the outside of the capsule.

Two more Aeronites still had to return here. Where were they? Did he have time to wait for them? No, nor to try to block the tunnel to Reva. He had to find the pipes they had sabotaged.

He felt torn by conflicting needs. Yet, really, he had no choice. Krysle was as competent as he was, so was their father – they would find ways out of their trouble. Llaimos couldn’t, and as the highest-ranking Royal on the Estate, he had the whole Estate to protect. And now, if Krysle was right, two Aeronites were sabotaging the vital heart of the Estate.

Some instinct caused him to stop and examine the chamber. He adjusted his eyes to look for other clues. The bodies on the floor, the walls and the door to the maintenance tunnel, all glowed when looked at in the UV end of the light spectrum, but the glow stopped at the open door.

His feet took him to the door in four strides, the glow went within, and was on the rungs of the ladder leading up to the basement of the King’s Palace.

He reported what he had found to Arden, in terse unemotional phrases. The Guard Captain promised to send a team down there.

Not wanting to waste time climbing up the ladder, he transmitted up to a point in the basement. The image coming from some of his father’s memories. Thinking on the problem in hand, roused other memories. Ideas flashed through his mind, were examined and discarded. Pipes of all kinds existed under the palaces - water, waste, air, conduits for power. Two images stayed, the huge cavern with the air circulation machinery, and the room with the pumping equipment where water from the distant storage basin was raised into the cisterns to feed the kitchens and drinking water taps.

Tymos found the top of the steps and looked around. The glowing trails went in all directions.

He began to move towards the great air pumps, thinking that timed switches suggested explosives, but he felt it had to be more than that. Time was running out, and he couldn't check all places.

He spoke to Arden, raised the alarm, and told him to send down engineers in protective suits.

Coming closer to the chamber, Tymos moved quietly, listening intently for unusual sounds. A timer might be silent, but men moving around might make enough noise for his sensitive ears to hear above the humming of the compressors. He studied the room, using his eyes adjusted to see far away, to search for signs of interference. It took him a while to realise that there were no glow trails there. Had he made the wrong choice to come to the air chamber? Was the real sabotage somewhere else?

"Arden," he spoke softly into his headset. "How close are the engineers? The air room is empty."

"The duty crew are suiting up. I will send guards to the water chamber. Do you need help?"

"No, I will check here, but I cannot do both places."

"Understood."

He ignored the orders going out to the guards, his eyes were already scanning the criss-crossing pipes and the visible workings of the machines.

Down here, the memories of the Governors were little help. Xyron knew all about the machinery and how it worked, but he hadn't needed to come down here in years. The workings had grown.

Feeling the need to hurry, Tymos tried to hurry his survey, even though he knew it wasn't wise. The saboteurs would not have made their interference obvious.

Moments before his internal time sense reached zero, he ordered Arden to, "Shut down the air and water machinery."

With a solid 'thunk', the compressors stopped pumping and whirred to a standstill. Seconds later, something clicked - loud now in the silence. A spurt of flame, quickly quelled by fire suppressant, drew his attention to one section of the workings. His mind identified the section, and his eyes scanned the blackened area for damage.

"Why block the inward air? Was it so they could recycle the existing air?"

Tymos studied the cross over section where internal air mingled with fresh. His eyes finally spotted the base of a long narrow cylinder. He would have to climb to examine it. When he was lying on top of one of the silent compressors, he reached for the cylinder and eased it into view. A tube went from it, into a small hole in one of the pipes. A soft hissing told him that the gas was slowly escaping from the cylinder. He closed the valve and read the gauge. It showed the cylinder as nearly full: the gas must just have started escaping. Any that was in the air system, wouldn't be spreading with the fans off.

Tymos had no way of knowing what the gas was, but it had turned the clear plastic tube to a muddy brown.

Sounds below him heralded the arrival of the engineers.

"Up here," Tymos called, and the team leader climbed up to join him.

The engineer took in the situation, listened to what Tymos could tell him and said with assurance, "We can take it from here, Prince Tymos."

With a nod, Tymos handed the cylinder over, and began to climb back down. He hadn't heard from the other group of specialists, and he wanted to check if the water system was not compromised as well. Once on the floor, he transmitted himself directly to the water chamber, arriving to face armed guards. He was recognised, and the weapons were lowered.

“What happened here?” Tymos asked immediately.

The team leader of this second group of engineers approached and reported. “So far, we have found nothing that is suspicious.”

“Let me have a look around too,” Tymos asked, with his mind already concentrating on what his adjusted eyes were inspecting. He scanned each section of piping and machinery, noticing absently, that there were no glowing trails here either and in part of his mind he realised that the trails and the sabotage were unrelated. Despite a lack of evidence of sabotage, he was certain that there was something to find.

“Check the colour of the water,” he suggested as the idea suddenly came to him. “They connected a cylinder to the air system, the gas going in was brownish.”

Several engineers moved to obey, going to collect sample vials and pulling tools from their utility belts.

“Who normally has access here? It needs an authorised pass doesn’t it?” Tymos asked the team leader who was still beside him.

“Only the duty crew. That’s all of us here, and Frellen. The access codes change each shift.”

“Frellen?” Tymos asked. “He’s not here?”

“No, Sir. When the lockdown order came, he was on a personal errand. He had to go to his quarters, not to the safe area down here.”

A prickle tickled Tymos’s spine. He would need to find Frellen; he may have been compromised.

“Keep looking. If I notice anything I will let you know.”

He moved away, thinking hard. Unlike the air circulation chamber that was of necessity wide open so the air could be channelled to these lower levels as well, the water chamber was merely an enormous pumping station.

How had the aliens known where to come? Tymos thought immediately of Zacary. He had betrayed Kryss, but he would have had no reason to be down here to know the layout, and he couldn’t have done any sabotage - he was upstairs. Could it be another of Kellex’s puppets? Had it been Frellen, and he was drawn away to lead the saboteurs here? If he was, where is he now? Where were the last two of the Aeronite saboteurs?

Tymos asked Arden to locate Frellen, and the response came quickly. He was not in his quarters.

He was summoned before he could think further about the missing man.

One of the suited up engineers, was holding a cylinder. This one had a tube that was connected to a vertical pipe. It was much wider than the one he’d seen in the air chamber.

As he studied it, the engineer explained, while he pointed to where wire was wound around the plastic. “I believe there was some kind of stop valve in the tube that broke when current went through the wire. We can’t tell how much of the substance in the cylinder has seeped out, but it won’t have mixed far, with the pumps off. We can easily flush this section.”

“I will leave you to deal with it,” Tymos announced. He felt a lessening of tension knowing the sabotage had not had the intended effect, what ever it was. But his concern for the missing Frellen, had not abated. He moved away from the engineers and went to where the nearest pipe entered a tunnel. There was enough room for a man to walk alongside the pipe, for maintenance purposes.

When he decided to enter it, one of the watchful guards silently followed him.

On emerging from the second tunnel, having followed it all the way from where the pipes came up from below, he heard Arden requesting his attention.

When he replied, Arden reported, “The beam-in room is empty. We have removed the bodies and that second capsule is gone.”

“Understood,” Tymos gave the customary reply.

“They are gone then, Prince Tymos,” his guard shadow suggested. “The devils that done the damage?”

“It seems so,” Tymos said, but he wasn’t convinced. He was still feeling shivers down his spine - warning him of something. “However, Frellen is missing.”

“Do you think he helped do this?” the guard asked, tensing for action.

“Not willingly,” Tymos hoped that was true. “I want to find him.”

Tymos continued his search until a new voice spoke to him via the headset.

“Prince Tymos, come and talk with me.

Without realising it, he stopped moving, and his guard escort nearly walked into him. For just a moment, anger flared. He needed to find Frellen, had to know where he was and if he had helped the saboteurs.

“Get others to help your search,” Tymos said, resigned to obeying Governor Xyron. “And don’t assume that all of the aliens have gone, or died. I will be in the security control room.”

He hardly heard the expected agreement, as he moved aside to transmit up several levels and into a different palace.

In the control room, he saw Xyron immediately. He was still clad in the white coveralls he used when performing scientific investigations in the field. He gave the Governor a slight bow of greeting, less than normal as an indication that he was acting in his father’s place, and was for the present, Xyron’s equal. Though he did not feel anything close to being an equal.

The Governor’s first words, although sounding like a polite query, felt like a rebuke.

Reining in his first instinct of making an angry retort, he noticed Xyron watching him as he rephrased his answer. “Llaimos is in Father’s quarters with Stenn, Jonko and Keleb. I will know, immediately, if he is in danger.”

“And your sister?”

“She is fine...” Tymos summarised what she had encountered, done, and intended.

For a time, Xyron considered the description of the capsules used by the aliens to travel along the underground tunnels.

Tymos found himself pacing the control room, oblivious to the irritated glances from Arden. He stopped abruptly when Xyron said, “Being a leader does not mean doing everything yourself. It means being available to oversee the larger picture.”

“Do you mean I have to just sit here?” Tymos snarled.

“It means being available to do what only you have the skills and knowledge to do and let those trained to do lesser things...do them.”

Some of the anger drained from Tymos, as he realised some of his irritation was frustration, and some a build up of power within himself. “There is something going on around here that I cannot see...”

“Perhaps if we move to the chairs yonder, out of Arden’s way, we could figure it out together.”

With a terse nod, Tymos agreed, although he was still too twitchy to sit still.

“Is there anything else that has happened here, that you haven’t mentioned? What is making your power stay at such a high level?”

It was the mildest of reminders, but it doused the activity in his mind and cleared it of the irrelevant. In a microsecond, the true cause of his unease became blindingly clear.

Tymos spoke slowly. “Something is making trails wherever it touches, wherever it walks. The analogy is poor, but picture the slime trails of snails and slugs. I can see them only when I adjust my eyes to see in the UV end of the spectrum.”

Xyron tensed then, his attention fully focussed. “Where have you seen them?”

“All around the beam-in chamber, the walls, the capsule when it was there, around and on all the bodies. I thought it was related to the Aeronites, because the trails went up the ladders to the basement and then went in all directions. But they were not in the air chamber or near the water pumps, not even on the cylinders.”

Xyron gave Arden an abrupt order as he stood up, "Have a member of each guard group report to Suriyon immediately." He went to one of the nearer communications panels and spoke to Suriyon, who was one of his brothers. The terse phrases were highly technical, but the meaning came into Tymos's mind. Some of the guards would soon have the means to see the trails and to look where they went.

Only then, did the realisation occur to him that he should have followed that enigma up, and not obsessed over the missing engineer.

Xyron returned, and spoke softly. "I have just spoken to Jono, he instructs you to do whatever you must, to ensure that Llaimos remains safe."

As Xyron continued to speak, Tymos felt shivers running up and down his spine. What if his search for Frellen, had been imposed on his mind to keep him away from Llaimos?

"...Jono is going to force the Aeronite air fighters away from Dira and the Temple. As soon as he does, you must take Llaimos to the Temple. One of us, either myself, your father, your sister or yourself, must be with him."

The shivers he felt up and down his spine became an unpleasant prickling. Then, as he wrestled with the implied suggestion that he go and wait with Llaimos for an attack that might not come...his whole body was subjected to an icy atavistic chill.

It came from Kryslie, far away in Amik. It was not a telepathic sending, but coming through the deeper twin bond. He had a vision of what she was seeing, the glowing trails, the hooded figures, and then he heard one word in his mind, "Ciriote."

The Ciriote, the true enemy, were in Amik. The Ciriote were in the palace.

As that message faded, another sensation replaced it. Trouble. Trouble here.

With a terse, "The Ciriote are here," he ran from the control room, paused briefly outside to sense the location. He had received a mental cry of alarm and terror, not clear like he received from his twin, but an intense emotion. He had no sense of where or from whom the alarm had come, but he used the 'there' of where he needed to be as his focus, and trusted the Guardians of Peace to take him there as he transmitted.

Chapter 24 - The Real Enemy

The capsule began moving, accompanied by the roar of a powerful engine. The noise echoed in the tunnel and pounded her ears. It was a clever way to travel the intercity tunnels if they could not transmit. The capsule must ride on a cushion of air, or some sort of antigrav generators, for there was no vibration from wheels, or the uneven rock, or knocks against the wall.

When the capsule finally slowed to a halt, Kryslie was ready to break herself free, but Jordan was taking no risks with his prisoner. He had a disintegrator powered up and aimed at her.

"You aren't incapacitated," he commented. "Tricky little thing, aren't you. Vila was sure you were nicked, but you can't have been or you would be unconscious now."

"She was," Vila insisted as she released the restraints. "How else could I have captured her?"

Jordan ignored that. "Get up, don't try to escape. I don't particularly care if I rid you of a hand, or a leg. So keep your hands where I can see them. Vila, check her for weapons."

Vila found and removed her stunner, transmitter and two knives and put them all into places on her own belt.

"Walk out," Jordan directed, and Kryslie chose to obey, as if not at all worried by the weapon Jordan held, or his threat. The way he was holding it, was an open invitation for her to take it from him. She would, when the timing was right. Vila's grip on her arm wouldn't be a problem either.

They emerged in the beam-in chamber at Amik. Kryslie glanced around and saw unconscious or dead Tymoreans scattered around the floor. She saw the blood oozing from ears and noses, and sensed no life from any of them. She controlled her anger. Only seven bodies. That could mean five were still alive. Her father wasn't here, nor was Perrin Reslic.

Vila dragged her into the adjoining council room, and both she and Jordan looked around as if expecting to find people there. They were uneasy, but not alarmed. Jordan drew out a portable communicator and spoke into it, requesting a report. It went unanswered even when he repeated the call.

"He might be busy," Vila suggested, bringing Kryslie nearer the window so she could look outside. "Geller was to take the king to your ship. He might have taken the other one too."

Jordan twitched uneasily. "We don't need the other one. I am going to see what is happening."

"I'm coming with you. Halden can stay in charge. We need to get this prisoner to my ship."

Kryslie was making her own examination and adjusted her eyes to look for tiny clues and trace evidence. A faint glow in parts of the room caused her to adjust her eyes further. She saw glowing trails when looking in UV light. She had the sudden feeling that trouble...bad trouble...was nearby.

The council building was sound-proofed and shielded. It was not until Jordan opened the outer door that she felt the impact of the Aeronite attack on the city. All at once, her empathic senses were overloaded with pain, despair, grief and terror. Her ears heard screams, yells, gunfire, bombs, klaxons and voices over loudspeakers.

Just then, she could do nothing to help herself. It shouldn't be happening, Kryslie thought, but then if Jordan and Vila had got into Amik, the defences were breached. Spies and infiltrators had probably compromised the shields. The bombs were falling from overflying Aeronite jets. One step out of the building and Kryslie knew the shields were fully down.

Jordan studied the scene, saw a warrior about to trot past and called him over.

"Report," Jordan demanded.

“Sir, we have control of all the strategic targets but I have a message for Commander Halden – we are encountering serious reverses, reprisals, resistance out on the city fringes. Some group is returning fire with automatic weapons.”

Jordan accepted the report, and instructed the warrior to add a message to those he was taking to Halden. “We are taking some prisoners back to Kellex. Halden has full control.”

By the time the warrior trotted off again, Kryslie had regained control of her self. She had strengthened her mental shields to block out most of what she was now sensing, and was silently thanking Reslic for the hard lesson he had forced on her.

Now she looked around, still with her eyes adjusted, and saw glowing trails leading away from the building, and going in all directions. She followed them as far as she could with her eyes. The import of the warriors report occurred to her. If the Aeronites were meeting serious resistance involving automatic weapons, it wasn't the peaceful Tymorean city folk doing it. The people of the city had no need for automatic weapons – the shields were meant to protect them.

Vila jerked Kryslie back to her immediate surroundings. “Jordan...who are those figures?”

The ones Vila watched all wore long black robes that brushed the ground and had hoods that concealed their facial features. Kryslie felt power surge within her as if her body knew she was about to fight. One of the figures fired at an Aeronite soldier and within instants, the warrior was engulfed in flame. Not like an inferno, but with an intense fiery glow that spread all over him, made him scream and begin to run, mindlessly. Another warrior tried to help him, but the merest touch and the glowing flame spread over him too. He began to scream as well.

Jordan, took out one of his weapons, and fired at both warriors; the screaming stopped. Then he dragged Vila and Kryslie back inside and slammed the door. A word was in Jordan's shocked mind. “Burnfire”.

“We cannot stay here!” Kryslie spoke with authority.

“Shut up!” Vila demanded.

Kryslie didn't. “Did you know the Ciriots were here?” They were too shocked to answer. “You saw it - they love to torture and Aeronite flesh burns as well as Tymorean. That stuff only stops at stone or metal.”

“Stop it!” Vila shrieked as pounding began on the door – a systematic rhythm that would soon break the door.

Jordan stood as if mesmerised and Kryslie opened her senses and tried to reach her father. She felt the faintest touch and turned her attention to scanning the adjoining rooms. Instinct and fleeting images in Jordan's mind told her that Tymoros and Aldiv had been in the meeting room, but that the king was to have been taken to Jordan's flitter.

“In a few minutes, we will all be Ciriots prisoners. Is that what you want?” Kryslie spoke loudly, firmly. “Do you want to become flaming torches too?”

Jordan grabbed his sister, who was still holding on to Kryslie, and transmitted – just as the door splintered.

They rematerialised outside of the city, near a tiny wayside shrine – one of the tiny water springs for travellers that were dedicated to the Guardians of Peace. Nearby were two flitters, but Jordan's sudden exclamation suggested he expected them to be cloaked. Kryslie could see glowing trails all around the two ships and spotted a cloaked and hooded figure staring to emerge from behind one of them. She shook herself free and ringed herself with power, and then spread it to protect Jordan and Vila. They had spotted the danger and were drawing weapons, assuming that their prisoner would not choose to run away.

Jordan fired his disintegrator at the approaching figure. Parts of the cloth cloak disappeared to reveal shiny black armour under it. He kept firing, even though the disintegrator was doing no harm to the approaching figure.

There was no way to see the expression on the Ciriots face, even if it was human enough to interpret. It returned fire, using a weapon that made everything burn. Vila gave a gasp as the fire

spread rapidly towards them. She and Jordan turned to run, but Kryslie now gripped them and held them in a tight grip.

“Look,” she told them, using her head to point at the ground in front of them.

Both Aeronites saw the fire rush to encircle but it could not reach them.

The Ciriots saw the same thing and a rapid clicking betrayed its anger at being thwarted. A second Ciriote approached. This one fired a different weapon and a ravaging energy beam erupted from it.

Vila stifled a scream. “We have to get away,” she said shakily, staring at the wall of fire a foot from her face. She could feel the heat, but it was not burning her. She turned to look at their prisoner, with awe on her face.

With ‘command’ in her tone, Kryslie said, “Return my transmitter to me.”

Vila obeyed and Kryslie released her to take it. “Picture the location of your Warlord’s ship,” Kryslie ordered. She merged the two visions she received from Jordan and Vila, and reinforced it with their ‘sense’ of the big ship.

“We cannot transmit that far,” Jordan managed a protest.

“No,” Kryslie agreed. “But with your power added to mine, we can. Transmit now.”

In sight of the baseliner, within its cloaking shields, Jordan tried to take control again, but something about the woman-child gave him the shivers.

“Warn your warlord, if he will listen, that the Ciriots are here. They must have learnt of your plans. If they took your prime prisoner from you...”

“You are our prisoner,” Vila insisted in a shrill voice. “Kellex will...”

“I know what that bastard will want to do with me and I won’t allow it!” Kryslie snapped. “Perhaps my saving your precious skins will convince you that I am not your enemy. You and the Aeronites are Ciriote victims - fodder for them as much as Tymoreans are. Both of you have power – use it! It is wild, untrained, and could fail you. I should destroy it, but now is not the time. Use it to protect your people, and don’t try to stop me. Go!”

Kryslie transmitted away without warning, leaving Jordan and Vila staring at the now empty place beside them. The tingling from the brief repellor effect went unnoticed. Both realised that she, their enemy, had saved their lives and taken them to safety. She could have transmitted away at any time and left them to die horribly.

With only a fleeting instant to think of a place back in the city, but away from the council building, Kryslie drew images from her father’s memories. He knew Amik well, and had several favourite places. She picked one at random and transmitted, materialising to hear a woman shriek in terror and then stop abruptly.

“P...Princess Kryslie?” the grey haired woman uttered in shocked surprise.

Kryslie turned. “Yes. I am sorry I startled you.”

“How...how can I help you? My café is closed. We were told to close up and stay inside. What is happening? Is our city invaded? The shields were meant to protect us.”

“I wish I had time to explain,” Kryslie told her. “Stay inside. Those who have taken over the city have misguided motives. They are little different to Tymoreans. If you treat them politely, they should have little reason to harm you.”

The woman nodded, and then Kryslie went on. “However, there are others here too. The robed and cowed ones should be avoided, and if they don’t see you, you will be much safer. Those evil ones have my father and I must find him.”

“You can’t go out...” the woman protested uselessly, for Kryslie had vanished again – like an illusion that hadn’t been real.

She only transmitted a short distance, to a sheltered corner of the street outside. Even as she had spoken to the woman, she had used her mind to search for such a place. She did not want to make the old woman a target by being seen walking from her café.

Once outside, Kryslie tried again to get a sense of her father. She still only felt a vague touch; enough to know he was still alive but not clear enough to use to transmit to. Instinct told her that the Ciriote had him, and had known where to find him. She didn't try to ponder how. There were probably Ciriote spies amongst the Aeronites, like they had made of Zacary on the Estate.

The touch she felt was too faint to use to find her father, so she knew she would have to make her way back onto the centre of the city. She moved as she had been taught, watch for watchers, move in shadows, and freeze into stillness until people passed. Each time that she stopped, cloaked in power, her eyes sought for the glowing trails and the building she had seen in Jordan's mind through which they had entered the town.

After an hour's fast scouting, during which she sent her brother details of what she had seen, knew or suspected, she found the building near the centre of the city. Slipping closer, she saw dead Aeronite warriors and the Ciriote trails around them, going in and out of the building. From a safe distance, she sent a thought within, trying to sense if her father was there. Receiving no response, she edged closer and used that odd 'depth perception'. What her mind saw was not clear, but she saw an outline, similar to the rocket capsule and vague moving figures. Her instinct told her that her father wasn't there. She placed the building on her mental map of the city and continued on.

She reached the council building, with its imposing edifice of local stone and watched for a time, seeing no Aeronite warriors and aware of people within. No one seemed to notice her entering, and the first people she encountered were local Tymoreans, commoners. They all emitted furtive thoughts and moved out of her way when she looked at them.

Kryslie knew that Jordan had maintained a perimeter here, to keep locals out. Had the locals overcome his warriors? She called out, "This building is a very unhealthy place to be right now. Tymorean fleet soldiers will be arriving here within minutes. Anyone found here will be taken for questioning about the murder of seven Tymorean palace guards and the abduction of high Royal officials."

Like rats encountering a starving feline, the looters fled. Kryslie stayed; she had a reason. She needed to get a communicator from one of the dead guards or use the comm. system in the beam-in chamber.

When she saw the beam-in chamber, her plans needed revising. All equipment in the area was slagged metal and synthetic. The headsets of the guards had been ground into fragments. She had to search all seven of the dead Tymoreans to find one with a workable portable back up unit. Kryslie silently cursed the Ciriote as she searched. The Tymoreans had died from a concussion weapon, but someone had slashed throats and wrists and made odd cuts of the dead men's faces. The presence of glowing trails and handprints proved that the Ciriote had handled the bodies. They had also examined the tunnel entrances, but the trails did not go far within.

Kryslie activated the comm. unit and sent a priority signal to Reslic on the Jacen Tyr. As soon as she heard his response, she reported on the state of Amik. He still had no contact from her father's but told her that Tymorean troops would beam down to begin to retake the city and flush out the Ciriote. He added that twelve other cities had been taken over and five more were under attack.

The other cities could not be her concern. The Ciriote were here, they had her father and she would find him. Taking one last look around the stone chamber and sent a plea to the Guardians to help her and for father to survive. Then she retraced the glowing trails back through the meeting room and onto the street.

She maintained her stealthy mode of movement, keeping the brightest or widest glow trails in sight, and kept every sense alert for a hint of her father, or the whiff of danger.

The brightest of the trails led to the broad façade of the mercantile centre, where trade of all kinds was conducted. The currency depository was also located there.

“Pirates,” Kryslie thought. “Of course they would come here.”

She looked for guards; saw dead Tymoreans and Aeronites on the short entrance stairway.

The money cache was a steel walled room, under the building. Only high officials of the Mercantile Guild had the means to access it. They were men of impeccable honour.

After waiting five minutes and seeing no Ciriote, Kryslie raced into the building, past the solid wood door they had wrenched from its frame. A trail of bodies – burnt, bleeding or knifed – led her deeper into the building.

The faintest of moans seemed loud, and Kryslie silently sought the source. She found a grey haired man, knew him to be Elder Kayseth and knelt beside him to share some of her own energy with him, and try to help him heal. After a few minutes, the man opened his grey eyes and recognised her.

“They had the King prisoner,” Kayseth forced the words out. “They went to the stairs leading to the depository. I have not seen him return. You must help him.”

Kryslie ran back to the main hall and found the downwards stairs. Where the depository door had been was a rubble-filled archway. Inside, the once neat shelves were hanging at odd angles. Metal boxes were strewn on the floor with their sealed lids twisted open, and all glowed when she looked in the UV range. The Ciriote had been there – but were gone.

Kryslie returned upstairs and followed a fainter trail that led further into the building. She followed it to where it exited the building at the rear. There in the street, Kryslie smelt the tang of smoke, and saw plumes of whitish-grey smoke rising from the nearest row of brightly painted wood structures. These were shops, and from their signs, they provided some of the expensive luxury items. The glowing trails went into them.

“Father?” Kryslie thought again. “Where are you?”

This time she had a fleeting sense of his mind. He was closer, and she let instinct move her to her left. She stopped outside a jewellers shop.

“Don’t ...let them...catch you,” Tymoros’s thought came slowly as if he had to force himself to think.

Kryslie felt the pain in his mind and body as an echo in her own.

“Distract...” she felt the thought continue and fade out to nothing. At the same time, she sensed creatures moving up behind her and turned around.

Six of them, cowed and robed in dark brown and aiming weapons at her. She identified needle guns, energy beams and paralysis beamers.

A mechanical voice spoke, directing her. “If you do not wish to be killed here, you will go into the place behind you.”

Killed now, or tortured shortly, Kryslie thought to herself. She had her transmitter, and could escape from them once she found her father.

This building had a narrow frontage, the glass display window was broken and the gem that had been displayed there was gone. Kryslie backed towards it, watching the Ciriote, and half turning to glance down to watch her footing.

“Move faster, king’s spawn. Join him as our guest,” the mechanical voice told her. “You will tell us all your secrets.”

Kryslie didn’t answer back, waiting for the moment when she was just within the building and her escorts still without, to make her move. The two Ciriote waiting just inside the door were unprepared for her rapid action. She ducked to one side and was suddenly behind them. A violent kick into the spine of one and an upward punch to the jaw of the other sent both sprawling. As they tried to stand without tripping over their ankle length robes, Kryslie took their weapons and used one on them. Both made a clicking yowl that increased in pitch and finally they fell silent. She fired at the two just entering, causing them to step back, and then ran down a passage leading from that looted display room, past equally looted storerooms and right into the owner’s private area. She could hear the rapidly clicking voices of the other Ciriote coming after her, and slammed the door shut. It wouldn’t slow them for long.

Here there were two bodies, visible as huddled heaps in light coming from a roof skylight. The first was a commoner. The remains of his clothing indicated that in life, he had been wealthy. His body had cuts, burns and stabs. Many had bled profusely. The second body was burned, unrecognisable, but the lower part of it wore fine leggings of a medium green shade, and these had two gold stripes trimming the lower edge.

Kryslie touched the body, felt the lingering sense of Royal power and knew he had not been dead very long.

“Aldiv,” she realised. Her father wasn’t there but there was blood away from where the bodies lay. She gave the room a quick glance with her eyes adjusted. The glowing trails of the Ciriots did not go any deeper into the building.

The sense of their nearness, warned her to hurry. The door was glowing around the handle, and would burn through soon, but she needed to check all the rooms off the main one. The bathroom was empty, the bedroom smelt of waste matter but no one was there. The last door led to the food preparation room was also clear of Ciriots trails and empty of people. It had a door that normally led out into the street, but this was roughly barricaded with what had once been the top of a wooden table. She jammed the door shut behind her as the inner door slammed inward.

The Ciriots were closing on her, perhaps aware that this room was a dead end, and anticipating her terror when cornered. She began to hear their amplified clicking voices and a mechanical translation, offering her the choice of surrender to them or dying. She ignored them in favour of putting her mind to sensing what lay beyond the blocked door. Her transmitter was in her hand, and just before she transmitted into the wide laneway outside, she tried once again to reach her father.

Nothing.

She began to smell smoke, but not like the smoke of wood burning, or of a forest fire: this had acrid tang of chemicals burning.

The irrelevant knowledge that the wood used to build houses was treated with fire retardant, was replaced by an intense premonition of danger and the need to be outside. In the moment it took to adjust the transmitter, the entire ceiling of the room became a sheet of flame. The first embers fell as she began to dematerialise.

Out in the laneway, Kryslie spun around hearing a ‘whoosh’. The entire building was burning, all the wood, and even the paint was burning from the stone walls. A breeze ruffled her clothes, and in that instant, she smelt something smouldering, and in the next her clothes were aflame. She was aflame...

Instinctively, Kryslie drew in power from around her, from the fire, from the ground, from the air. It was not enough, the pain was intense and there was no air left to scream. She begged the Guardians for oblivion, she felt them around her and then she seemed to explode into light.

The pain vanished as if she had been blown out of her body. Her essence seemed bodiless. The flames had gone, she was extremely weak, and her vision began to go black.

Was this death, Kryslie wondered? Did death come with gentle voices in her mind? She knew those voices. The Guardians were talking to her.

“No, child, you will not die today – what is gone is only that which bound you to a mortal body, tied you to a physical existence. Now, you are free...”

“Free...” her mind echoed. There seemed a world of meaning, just beyond her grasp. Was she now simply a ghost? A shade of her former self?

She began to feel pain once more, as the fading voices seemed to say, “No, you are more...”

Then the oblivion that she begged for overcame her mind.

Chapter 25 - Second Attack at the Estate

Tymos had analysed what his extra senses had received and transmitted to the nursery. He arrived back where Llaimos had been a short time ago and saw within that room, glowing trails that had not been there when he had left. His heart thumped harder; the Ciriote knew too much if they had come there. He sensed terror nearby and used that to focus his next transmission.

He recognised the room where a terrified Madame Teena was trying to protect six young children, and Sacul was brandishing a knife.

The cloaked figure facing them had an energy weapon covering the group and a mechanical device was issuing vocal demands for information. Sacul's expression, when he saw Tymos arrive, warned the intruder and it spun around and activated its weapon.

"That won't do anything," Tymos said as he sprang at the intruder. Teena shoved her charges out of the way, as the aim of the weapon came near their former position. It stopped firing when Tymos wrested it away and threw it across the room. He mentally told Sacul to "Leave it and get the children away" when he became aware of his young friend edging towards it the weapon.

The Ciriote was a vicious fighter, and powerful. It fought with its full strength, even though it believed it was only fighting a child. It grappled with Tymos, and they both rolled together after Tymos pushed it to the floor. Tables and chairs became wrecks of wood and metal, and decorative wall hangings were torn from the walls as one or other of them tried to get the other tangled up. The creature did not seem to believe it would be overcome, but when it realised that it had misjudged its opponent, the mechanical device emitted curses and the creature was suddenly slack.

Tymos eased his position cautiously, in case the creature was foxing. Then he carefully reached out and rested a hand on his opponent's chest. He sensed no life there.

"Damn! It suicided." He had wanted a prisoner to question, but failing that, he pulled off the obscuring cowl and saw the shiny black armour beneath it. He tried to open the armour, but there was no obvious way to do so, and even using all his strength, he failed.

He activated his communicator and reported to Arden and then waited with his victim until two guards came to take the body to Xyron's lab for later study. When he went in search of the children, and found them huddled in a room just down the passage.

He spoke to the trembling senior nurse. "I will take you all to my apartment. It is well shielded and you will all be safe there."

After seeing the group to their new location, Tymos continued the thoughts that had been occupying his mind. "They should have been safe in the nursery. Only an insider could have allowed them to have access. Only a high ranking insider would have known the specific security override."

That thought gave Tymos shivers. "How had the Ciriote even got to the Estate? In a robot capsule like the Aeronites? No... that didn't seem right. They might have come along the tunnels somehow, but what was more important was how they had got the codes."

The hair on the back of Tymos's neck rose...Kryslie had mentioned the seven dead Tymorean guards in Amik, and the five she could not account for. Tymoros was missing, and Aldiv, and Perrin Reslic, all of those might know the codes, but surely they wouldn't...

"Not willingly," Tymos said aloud. He recalled how the Ciriote had been able to control Zacary and Stenn without either of them realising. But his father was much stronger, and so was Perrin Reslic...

Tymos returned to the nursery and looked for glowing trails. Only one led to the nursery; someone had led the creature there.

“Zacary!” Tymos thought, and he raced to where Kryslie had seen him last, unconscious on the floor in the small lounge area. His former classmate was not there but the brightness of the glowing trail leading up to that level was much brighter than the one leading to the nursery. Tymos back-tracked the bright trail to the beam-in point in the Great Hall. His fear grew when he saw two other trails leading away from there. How many other Ciriots might there be? Two? Four? Six? He reported to Arden. If his fears were right, there was a Tymorean transmitting them... but where had they gone?

They were pirates, his mind said, recalling that information. “Where might they think valuables would be? The blood raced from Tymos’s face. “The Governors’ quarters.”

He spoke into the comm. mouthpiece and gave a warning to Arden and was immediately assured, “All computer systems are now locked out. Security access by Xyron only. Full shields and fields will activate on your command.”

The Tymorean Governors did not accumulate belongings and valuables. What they considered important was knowledge, information and personal skills. And if knowledge was power, they wouldn’t want the Ciriots gaining access to the extensive archives of data from thousands of worlds and several millennia.

Tymos accepted the assurance and transmitted to the King’s suite. His mind was already full of the information on the protective screens and fields able to be set up there.

As soon as he arrived in the main room of the suite, Llaimos broke from Tanya’s embrace and ran to him, clinging to his waist. He was crying, and Tanya looked distraught. Keleb too, was white faced. Tymos listened to Tanya saying, “He won’t stop crying,” as he gave the “Full defensive screens, full shields,” voice command.

Tanya was not far from tears and Keleb was saying, “He is in pain. I don’t know what is wrong.”

Tymos lifted his growing brother into an embrace of his own and tried to make sense of the boy’s turbulent mind.

“Bro, you are not ready yet to fight,” Tymos whispered, as he sent some of his healing energy into his brother to ease the pain of his rapidly growing body. “I know you are getting bigger and bigger, but you have to wait. Soon though, soon...but we must be in Dira first... in the Temple.”

Llaimos was less than a year old, but his power was already rising into a body that wasn’t ready for it.

“I have to control your power, Bro, just for now. Trust me, and let me into your mind.”

Tymos sensed his brother’s complete confidence in him as he spoke the ritual words that would freeze his power at its current level. After a while, Llaimos’s crying eased to whimpers as the pain he had felt diminished to bearable levels.

Stenn Reslic, a silent observer until then, asked, “What is happening elsewhere?”

With Llaimos clinging to his neck, Tymos kept a firm hold on him and enlightened his friends.

“Father is missing, so is Aldiv, and five guards.”

“Uncle Perrin?” Stenn asked.

“He’s one of the missing. And it isn’t just Aeronites we are fighting. Ciriots pirates were in Amik, and Kryslie thinks they have Father – possibly your uncle too. The Aeronites have control of the city, but the Ciriots are pretty well doing whatever they please. At least one of the Ciriots came here.”

Jonko stiffened, Stenn’s expression hardened. “How?” they both asked.

“The Aeronites came in capsules propelled along the transmission tunnels. Possibly the Ciriots did too, or they may have used one of the guards, made him bring them here.”

“Never,” Keleb insisted. However, Stenn said only, “It’s possible.”

Tymos nodded. "I fought one of them in the nursery. It had Madame Teena, Sacul and some of the youngsters held up. It suicided when I got the better of it, but it shouldn't have got in there. Only someone who knew the high level security codes could have let it in."

"My uncle!" Stenn said, turning pale with shock.

"Or my father," Tymos said grimly.

"Then there is no guarantee we are safe here," Jonko said, stating the very concern that Tymos had.

"My father has a secure area in his palace," Stenn said. "But it may be no safer. I mean, weapons won't work in there, and we can't transmit there, and even if we change the access code, Uncle might still be able to override it."

"The computers are locked out to all but Governor Xyron, so it's worth the risk; they won't expect us to be there...it is a kind of containment cell isn't it?"

Tymos had information come into his mind, and Stenn confirmed it.

"We won't be able to transmit all the way so if you think we should go there, we all should have the new personal force shields on." Stenn decided. "I have one on already."

"So do I," Tymos admitted. "You know where they are?"

"Yes, I'll get four more." Stenn agreed, but reminded Tymos, "You'll need to give the door release command, and then the seal door command after I go out. I'll pound on the door in a rhythm of twice pause twice pause twice when I get back."

The commands were given, and then with Llaimos still clinging to him, Tymos moved closer to his foster mother and freed an arm to embrace her.

"Father chose well when he married you," he told Tanya. "You are magnificent."

"I am hardly serene right now," she managed to admit. She was still on the verge of tears.

"You haven't fainted yet," Tymos teased gently, and managed to get a faint smile from her.

"I won't give those intruders the satisfaction," Tanya managed to sound determined. "Do you know if Ty is alright? And your sister?"

"No, but I know both are alive and no one smart would anger either of them. Trust their skills and their power and never doubt that they have the protection of the Guardians of Peace."

Tanya allowed herself to relax enough to begin to consider personal comforts. She went to where she kept a small supply of refreshments and snacks in the suite, and ensured everyone had both. No one was fully relaxed, even with Tymos passing on what little information he heard over the suit comm. No one had been able to find the creatures who made the glowing trails.

Llaimos stayed hugging his brother, and Tymos didn't notice his weight. He paced the room, needing an outlet for the energy building up inside him. He stopped and suddenly stiffened, as Llaimos let out an agonised wail. In his mind was a picture of Kryslie, and the knowledge that something was wrong. He was too young to know or even think of what. Too innocent even to understand the impressions Tymos was receiving. The Ciriote had done something to her, and now her mind was silent.

"What's wrong?" Keleb asked, sensing their distress.

"The Ciriote have Kryslie," Tymos said, his voice taut. He held Llaimos in a tighter grip, trying to ease his brother's fears. Ignoring his friends and foster mother, he was whispering to his brother's mind. "Bro, she is alive, they haven't killed her." He sensed his brother could not believe that. "Bro, calm your mind, like we taught you. I know she is alive, she is my twin, if she were dead, I would feel our twin-bond break. It is still there..." He tried to share the feeling with his brother. Llaimos's wailing decreased.

Jonko commented calmly, "She is still alive."

Tymos nodded. He did not tell his friends that they had hurt her badly.

Some instinct roused in Tymos, at first he thought it was another feeling coming through the twin bond. His unease was growing. He spoke to Arden, and asked if the guards had spotted any

more glowing trails. The only ones were within the High King's palace, but so far, only on the lower level.

"Tymos?" Keleb spoke quietly. "I feel...something...evil."

"Yes, I do too. Be ready for an attack. This room is shielded, but it may not stay that way."

Keleb drew out a stunner and a knife.

"What extra fields were you invoking before, Tymos?" Jonko asked. "Will weapons work in here?"

"Energy and projectile weapons should be disabled," Tymos said quickly. "And it is likely that intruders will be armoured and shielded. No one should be able to transmit in."

Jonko pulled out a knife and had a disintegrator ready to draw.

Tymos was edging Tanya towards the door to the king's inner sanctum. The protections were even stronger in there.

The explosion came as a complete shock. The outer door of the suite blew inwards and four black armoured figures burst in, weapons ready. Jonko and Keleb moved to face them as Tymos ran for the inner door, grabbing for and dragging Tanya into the sanctum and across to where Tymoros had his solid wood desk.

"Get behind that," Tymos ordered, shoving Llaimos at her, and then up ending the desk to make it a barrier.

He was aware that Arden knew of the explosion, and his frantic warning rang in his ears. "The shield generator has lost power."

Tymos spoke back, "Get it working again! Is there a back up?"

"Re-routing power now, but at your location, only the defence fields are operating. Back up on the way."

Judging from the agitated clicking sounds out in the suite, the intruders had discovered that their weapons didn't work. Trouble was, with the intrusion shields down, more of the creatures could come in through the breach in the wall.

Tymos turned and saw that his friends were each fighting two figures, and were coming off worst. He had his two fighting knives in his hand as soon as he had pulled the inner door shut and given the activate command for the extra protections. He hoped they would be enough.

As he ran up behind his friends, he sent a message to their minds, "Duck!" and leapt over their heads and came down kicking at the two intruders that were slightly back from the others. The momentum of his attack knocked those two down, but not for long. They were quickly trying to find their feet, despite the awkwardness of their armour.

"Joints," Jonko reminded Keleb now that they each had only one opponent. The dynamics of the fight had just changed.

The two that Tymos knocked down had yet to get up, but they were fighting fiercely, angry now at being bettered. They tried to pull Tymos down, so they could roll on him, or stab him with their own blades. Whenever they struck, their target had moved. When they looked to find him, he came in with an attack of his own, aiming his knife into the weaker armour at the joints where limbs needed to move. He glanced up after ramming home a knife into the armpit joint of one opponent, and had a glance of two robed figures just inside the door of the suite. One was placing a device in the centre of the blasted doorway. He saw a third figure, dressed in black, as he fought off an attack from his uninjured opponent, finally making a killing thrust into that one's neck joint. The three new figures were no longer by the door when he looked that way again. He rose and spun around; Jonko had his opponent down and was helping Keleb.

Beyond his friends, the robed figures were watching. They had prisoners. Tanya was struggling to try to get to Llaimos. The figure holding the boy was succeeding with contemptuous ease, despite the fact that Llaimos was wriggling like a desperate eel. The third figure now had his face exposed and Tymos saw the rigid figure of Perrin Reslic. The blazing eyes of the President's brother betrayed the fury of his resistance to the commands on his body

and mind. He was unable to move and fight as his inner mind desired. There was no doubt about how the intruders had been able to get their captives.

Jonko and Keleb turned as they finished the last of their opponents; Tymos stayed beside the two he had fatally injured. From his position, he saw the robed Ciriots were arrogantly watching his friends. They must have decided that he was a mere servant since his clothes were dirty brown, and his friends were wearing the attire of nobles.

The robed Ciriots both drew weapons, and one spoke in their clicking speech, and the mechanical device translated, "Make any move, and we kill the woman."

Jonko and Keleb stayed still, sizing up the chances of disabling these new intruders. They both realised that if they had penetrated the inner sanctum, at least some of the protective fields must have been deactivated, potentially making energy weapons useable again. Even if Stenn were to return, they would have no chance to don the personal force screens to protect themselves.

Tymos was aware of commands directed at Perrin. His former teacher's hand was moving towards a device on his arm and his mind was deliberately wide open. He wanted Tymos to know what he was being made to do. He was resisting, and not completely succeeding. On one level of his mind, he was cursing in highly un-regal verbiage, knowing what the enemy wanted him to do and trying to resist the compulsion. On another level, his mind was spilling to these enemy beings, information on many topics of interest to the Ciriots.

Through Perrin's mind, Tymos heard, "Bring those last shields down!" and Perrin's mind giving the literal truth, "All the shields are down."

With a glance, Tymos confirmed the fact. Perrin resisted telling them of the defensive force fields, but only for a few moments. Knowing that the older man could override the defences, Tymos sub-vocalised into his headset and warned Arden to be ready to reset the fields if they went down. In turn, Arden reported that power had been rerouted and the outer shields had been reset.

Perrin's mind was being asked why the weapons did not work. It began to explain the layers of shielding and field protections. His hand jerked towards the control device on his arm that Tymos knew was a computer that could override all security and defences.

Tymos needed more time to think, and sent a flick of energy, like lightning, across Perrin's mind. The man's hand went into a spasm and for a time he could not input the commands.

Now, Tymos adjusted his eyes and quickly scanned the room. He instantly understood the different patterns and lines of force that were his visualisation of the defences.

The reddish lines were from the device placed at the outer door - the Ciriots device. They overlaid everything in the room as if making the walls part of a bubble of protection. It would stop outside help coming in. He would need to remove that. Under that, the pale mauve of the Tymorean shields, like those on every place where non-combatants were sent to be safe. The anti-transmission screen, showed as a yellow glow on the outer walls, and the weapons suppression field as a fine whitish mist.

A plan to end the stalemate formed in Tymos's mind. He sent a mental command to a startled Stenn, who had been trying ineffectually to re-enter the King's suite. The alien device in the doorway was itself a force screen generator, and whether intentionally or not, it blocked transmission.

He sent a warning to Jonko and Keleb to act on his commands. Then he concentrated on his brother and carefully explained, in simple terms and picture images, what he hoped to do. He felt Llaimos's unqualified agreement and understanding. Finally, he gave Arden orders to act on Stenn's command, to lower the anti transmission field.

In his mind, Perrin's cursing turned into a warning. He couldn't resist the force of the Ciriots command any longer. The defensive force fields went down. He did not let on that the shields were back up.

More clicking speech translated into, “Drop your weapons, and stop fighting, or one of you will die.”

The creature was still expecting the main trouble to come from his friends. Tymos stood, and walked between his friends, neither of whom had obeyed the Ciriote command.

“No!” he said, causing both Ciriote to focus eyes and weapons on him, and only then notice the colour of his hair. “They obey me!”

A burst of sharp toned clicking speech did not translate. The Ciriote holding Tanya put an odd-looking weapon to her neck and fired. She gave a squeal of pain and collapsed. Then the device translated, “The child will be next. Drop your weapons.”

The Tymoreans still did not obey. Instead, Jonko and Keleb moved further apart, and continued to stare back at the intruders. Tymos spun and fired in a rapid movement, using his high-energy beam weapon to turn the Ciriote device in the doorway into molten slag. He faced the intruders once more and gave them no indication that anything was happening behind their backs.

Stenn materialised, used a stunner on his Uncle, and caught him before he fell and transmitted away. Moments later, Tymos read in Stenn’s mind, “I’m ready, tell me when.”

Tymos was concentrating on the Ciriote still holding Llaimos. That one was saying, “I will perhaps kill this boy...or finish off the woman. She is of no use to me.”

The Ciriote’s patience would soon end, Tymos knew, but he was waiting for the inner prompting to tell him when to act. He saw the Ciriote’s hand begin to tense, ready to fire his weapon, a disintegrator.

“Drop!” Tymos said loudly, and both Jonko and Keleb obeyed.

The hand holding the weapon moved as the Ciriote turned his attention onto the one who defied him. The beam of his weapon vaporised a groove in the floor as it changed its aim to Tymos, but it could only cling hungrily to his personal force shield. This was the most dangerous part of his plan, because while he was shielded, Llaimos and his friends were not. The leader only had to drop his brother and aim the weapon. Tymos hoped that he would not activate the disintegrator close to himself, and that his brother could hold on tightly.

Raising one arm above his head, while still watching the Ciriote, Tymos invoked the protection of the Guardians for his brother, foster mother and friends. He felt a surge of power and knew his pleas had been answered.

Two weapons were trying to disintegrate his shield, and Llaimos was gripping his captor – his fists full of dark brown fabric. That Ciriote did not notice the holds, as he was determined to destroy the one who defied him.

With a mental command to Llaimos to stay still, Tymos brought both his arms out in front of him. His hands contained no weapon, but suddenly an energy beam seemed to shoot out from each of his hands, striking the Ciriote at the exact place where their shield generator sat at their waist. He was reflecting the energy beams back at them.

Mentally, Tymos gave an order, “Full defences, now” and the ravaging beams suddenly stopped as Stenn reactivated the defences using the device Perrin had on him.

Llaimos sensed the hold of the Ciriote loosening, and he twisted free and ran behind the desk. His captor had made an abortive swipe in an effort to retrieve him.

Both Ciriote looked around, eyeing the door of the sanctum as the only route to freedom, but also subtly positioning themselves to fight. Neither were cowards, and both were positive of their superiority over the Tymoreans.

Tymos began to move forward, keeping the attention on himself. He sent a command to his friends, “Now!”

Jonko sprang up and raced to Tanya; Keleb aimed for the desk and swept up Llaimos. The shield that prevented transmission went down, and Jonko, Keleb and their burdens transmitted away.

The Ciriote attacked, making high-pitched clicking sounds. One kicked out at Tymos, and stumbled back when his target stayed solidly upright. The other leapt at him and Tymos met him with a solid defence and grabbed the over robes, using them to send that Ciriote stumbling. The two Ciriotes were not used to fighting as a team, and Tymos was able to deflect attacks from both as well as make attacks of his own. The heavier armour of the Ciriote protected them from hurt when Tymos tossed them into furniture and the walls while he avoided most harm by being fast and light. The few attacks that got through, stopped at his force shield. All the time, Tymos was looking for an opening and when it finally came, one Ciriote ended up with a knife thrust into his throat. The clicking from that one became frenzied. It tried to halt the flow of purplish blood. It fell, twitching.

The other one clicked a challenge, that was translated into the mechanical voice as, "All of your weak kind will die. Killing me will not save them."

This opponent was even stronger than the other was, Tymos realised, but that did not deter him. His own strength and power were working to his will, his technique and movements instinctive, thanks to the intensity of Jono Reslic's training. While they rolled, kicked, and bounced off furniture and walls, Tymos was looking for a weak point to attack. Ideally, he wanted to disable this one in a way that prevented him from biting on its suicide capsule.

Tymos tried a trick, he had only idly considered. He transmitted a very short distance, so he emerged behind his opponent, and slightly off the ground. He kicked hard as he dropped, and landed on the back of the fallen Ciriote. The creature tried to buck him off, but Tymos clung to him, catching the creature by the back of its neck. The next move the creature made was predictable; it rolled, thinking to squash the scum that had tricked it. Tymos pretended that it had winded him, and lay still when the creature turned over, but it had left itself vulnerable, Tymos found a new grip, and squeezed the armour under the creature's chin, and in turn rolled it onto its back.

The creature still fought, swatting at the Tymorean with little effect. Tymos's force screen took most of the force of the creature's fists, but its own protection was no longer so effective. Yes, it still wore armour, but without the force screen, it was weaker.

Tymos continued to squeeze, showing no mercy as the creature's struggles became more frantic, and its mind tried to overpower Tymos's well-shielded mind. The creature found it could not move its jaw to break the vial of poison.

"What a weakling you are," Tymos stated, turning the taunts of the creature back on itself. "Look at you, pathetic, a failure like all of your kind will be."

The clicks being made by the creature were translated as gabble. It tried to spit at its tormentor, but could not. Its mind was in frenzy, and its thoughts were fragmented, trying to think of a way to escape or to obey the prime command to suicide rather than be made to talk and reveal the secrets of its race.

Tymos spat to one side of his prisoner. "Weak indeed if you must rely on poison to stop your mouth, and weaker still if your mind cannot block mine."

If he had to be honest, the images being spewed by that mind sickened him, even as the information they were giving him was of vital interest. Then they began to blur, as the creature fought for air. Tymos felt power building up inside him, and the anger of the Guardians of Peace was like a rumbling of thunder in his mind. The energy inside him grounded through the creature he held. In his head, he heard the voices of the Guardians, not gentle this time, but implacable.

"That creature did not deserve to live!"

Tymos knew that the strike was not of his own intention, but he did not dispute the justice of the creature's death. He raised one arm in a gesture of agreement and in thanks to the Guardians.

Then he heard in his mind, "Examine this creature. It is not merely a follower."

About the creature was a faint glow. Tymos's fingers tingled even through his force screen. He ripped the anonymous brown robes from the dead Ciriote, and saw that this one had armour that was a deep purple, not black. This obviously had significance. Was this creature a leader?

His mind prompted him to examine the body further. With his fighting knife, he pierced the tough fabric at the armour flexing points and hacked at the material until he could remove pieces of the armour. First, he freed an arm, and saw the bluish tinge to the skin, and he sliced the flesh and saw bluish flesh. The sight caused nausea, but he continued until he had freed the head from the helmet and he could view the face.

The expression there was of terror, frozen at the moment of death. Even if it had been in repose, the features would have been ugly by human standards. It had protuberant bony eye ridges, dominant bony cheekbones with tight blue flesh clinging to the rest of the skull shape and stretched over the bones.

The urge to examine the creature waned. The Guardians had wanted him to see what they were truly like.

The creatures were not invulnerable, and behind the concealing armour, they could be made to fear.

Tymos knelt beside the body, and took deep even breaths until he had control of his stomach. He had killed before, but this was up close and personal. He climbed stiffly to his feet and walked to the door of the suite, sparing a thought for what his father would say when he returned.

"Shields down," he instructed.

Jonko waited just outside, and he caught Tymos as he stumbled through the door.

"All green?" Jonko asked.

"Yes," Tymos confirmed, pushing himself free of his friend, and forcing himself to walk on his own. The passage was a blasted mess, blackened, charred, with the metal structure of the walls showing through where the plaster finish was gone. The floor was charred too, and slippery with the fire suppressant. At least the people in the rooms behind the walls were safe. The security shields would have protected them.

"We are in Kryslie's suite," Jonko told him, and he refrained from asking if Tymos could make it that far.

"I'm fine, Jon," Tymos insisted, aware of his friend's concern. "That last Ciriote was some kind of leader."

"Talk about it later. Lady Tanya and Perrin Reslic are still unconscious."

Tymos would have liked simply to drop into a chair and rest, but he did not know if the danger to his brother was over yet. For now, he was in charge and had to appear confident.

The first person he saw was Keleb, using a cloth dampened with perfume, to wash Tanya's face. He turned his head and saw Stenn standing over the unconscious form of his uncle.

Llamos uncoiled from a chair and flew at him. Tymos didn't have the strength to lift him, but as soon as his brother clung to his waist, he felt energy beginning to fill him. As his mind began to lose the tired feeling, he had a real shock. Llamos had grown even taller, in just the past half hour.

"Tymos, help my mother," Llamos thought at him.

He gave Llamos a grateful return squeeze. He had the energy to go on.

"I need to wash a bit first," Tymos said, and I need a drink, he thought, to get the smell and taste of death from my mouth.

Chapter 26 - Tymos Heals the Injured

He returned, able to present a façade of his usual self. “When did you learn nursing, Kel?” He asked, trying for mild humour to ease the tension.

Keleb wasn't in the mood for it. “There is a swelling on the side of Tanya's head, and it is very hot there. Can we bring in help? Stenn insisted that we waited until you came.”

Tymos met Stenn's direct gaze, and understood when he saw Stenn glance down at his uncle. They did not know who else might have been compromised, and there was more in that look, but Stenn was not about to speak his concern.

“Let me where you are Kel, and go and see what my sister has here to drink. Probably nothing stronger than juice or flavoured cordials, though she might have some biscuits.”

Llaimos understood every word, and followed Keleb like a shadow. He was hungry.

Tymos needed to concentrate on his foster mother and wanted no interruptions. He glanced at Jonko, and signalled with his eyes to go and back Stenn up. It was a precaution in case Perrin woke and was less than docile. Jonko nodded and walked casually in that direction.

Allowing his mind to read the energies he saw swirling in his foster mother, he sought the cause of the problem. He had seen the Ciriote fire a weapon at close range, but it had been neither a projectile weapon nor an energy weapon. Had it been, she would not be alive.

“Tanya,” he spoke softly, trying to reach her essence. She did not respond. He gently rolled her to one side and examined the energies again, looking deeper into the area of the swelling and afraid of what it might be doing to her brain. He saw it finally, a tiny pinprick of a glow, with the hot swelling around it.

“So that is it,” Tymos murmured into Tanya's ear and taking her left hand. “I can help you.” Under his hand, he felt the faintest twitch from her fingers. “You are a true warrior of the spirit, Tanya. They tried to control you, but your body resists. I have dealt with these infestations before, and this time, you have done half of my task for me.”

He kept up a calming flow of chatter as he focussed his power to a finer and finer point, deeper into the tissue being compacted by the swelling. As he had for Stenn, and Zacary, he sent his power into the alien energy mote and overpowered it. Then he gently massaged the swelling, encouraging the excess blood to return to the normal circulation patterns. He contrasted this use of his power, with what he had done to kill, and came to understand that he had a duty to heal, and to remove evil that threatened innocents. He silently asked the Guardians for the wisdom to know when he must kill to bring healing.

Tanya stirred under his hand, her eyes opened and tears began to leak from them.

“You are fine now, Tanya,” Tymos assured her. “We all are.”

Llaimos came and crawled onto the couch next to her, as if oblivious to his increased size. His mouth was surrounded by cake crumbs. He gave his mother a hug that she returned – finding relief in his nearness but shock at his abrupt growth.

“Little bro, if you keep stuffing your face with cakes everyone will call you a barbarian and no one will be able to keep you in clothes. Why don't you go with Kel and see if our sister has something you can wear that is not split at the seams.”

Again, Tymos was deliberately speaking lightly. He had noticed Tanya's shock, but now her maternal instincts resurfaced as she dealt with her son's embarrassment.

“Let me up,” Tanya requested of Tymos. “I will see what I can find.”

She spoke softly to Llaimos who was hiding his face on her, like the youngster he really was. As she walked slowly towards Kryslie's sleeping room, she glanced at the figure of Perrin Reslic, as if she knew without being told that Llaimos was better away from what Tymos needed to do next.

“Keleb, I lost the headset I had. Can you get through to Arden and tell him they need a clean up crew in father’s suite. Ciriots corpses, one of which is a leader. And have something to eat too, Kel. We all need the calories.”

When Keleb was across the room activating Kryslie’s computer console and communicator, Tymos walked to where he could stare down on Perrin Reslic. The older man was conscious now, but his face showed no anger or frustration, just resignation.

“You know what you have to do,” the President’s brother stated calmly. “I have become a traitor, and you must act in your father’s place.”

On the other hand, I could summon Xyron here to deal with this, Tymos thought, but I know Perrin did not willingly obey those alien monsters.

“I delved into the sewer of a mind of the leader of that group of creatures,” Tymos said flatly. “They like to break strong willed people, like you. It gives them a real sensual high. It’s sick. If I were to kill you, or have you locked up, I would be serving those vile creatures. Yes, they controlled your body, but not your mind.”

“I cannot be trusted,” Perrin said, getting more emotion in his voice. “You cannot let me loose.”

“There is another option,” Tymos countered.

“No! You know what your father and my brother would say and do. You must not let me...”

Tymos interrupted him, “Your brother is not here, and as you reminded me, I am acting for my father. I do not have to do as you command. Quiet! Answer this question – do you wish to die rather than do your duty?”

The question had the desired effect. Perrin snarled, “I am no coward and I can still tie you in knots, Prince Tymos.”

Stenn muttered, “I wouldn’t bet on that, Uncle. After all, I knocked you out.”

“And I will prove it to you that it was a lucky accident,” Perrin snarled, trying to sit up. He saw the stunner in his nephew’s hand and settled back.

“Well,” Stenn remarked calmly. “Now we know you have incentive to live.”

Tymos flashed Stenn a warning look, and then turned his full attention back to the man on the floor.

“What do you remember?”

Perrin considered. “I remember not being able to move until those cowed creatures told me to stand up and made me bring them here.”

“When you arrived in Amik, they had a force field on,” Tymos prompted. He saw Perrin trying to remember.

“Yes, but some of us could still move.”

“Krys saw seven bodies in the beam-in chamber there. They died from the effects of a concussion grenade. Five were missing.”

“His Majesty?” Perrin asked, alarmed, and again trying to sit up.

“Krys will find him,” Tymos assured him. He felt the waves of guilt suffusing his former teacher.

“Perrin Reslic, you are not a traitor,” Tymos insisted, not giving Perrin a chance to speak. “And you can argue that point all you like with his Excellency at a later time. I can help you!”

“You are little more than a wet eared whelp,” Perrin snarled. “My brother would have me disempowered. He would have no choice.”

Tymos was perfectly serious when he asked, “Is that what you want? Really want? I can do that too.”

“It is necessary. You must not allow those creatures to use me again. I know too much. I can endanger everyone.”

His voice was insisting, and his mind was thinking the same, but Perrin's eyes betrayed the sentiment. It was true, he wasn't a coward, and in truth, he didn't want to die, he didn't want the Ciriote to win, but he did not want to bring harm to innocents.

"Very well," Tymos seemed to agree, and when Stenn was about to protest, he gave his friend a slight headshake.

He stared down at Perrin, looking for the energy glow he knew had to be there. It was, and it was brighter than Tanya's, but then, hers had just been inserted. The Ciriote had longer to work on Perrin.

Ideas moved in Tymos's mind. Was the energy glow a life form or a device? From examining Zacary, he knew the glow could control the host even when, or especially when, it could not be in contact with the Ciriote...programmer?...but did it matter which Ciriote mind spoke to it? Had the Ciriote in the purple armour been the one to purpose it? Would it be reachable by any other Ciriote, if there were more on the Estate?

He considered all points, and how it had made no difference to the glow if the host had power or not. So, what if he did disempower Perrin? It would not make him forget all the sensitive information he had as his brother's second in command. It really wouldn't stop him endangering others if the glow controlled him. All it would do, if Perrin was locked up or dead, was to deprive the Tymoreans of a very able war leader.

No, the answer was to remove the glow, as he had done for Stenn and Tanya. The few hours that Perrin had been in Ciriote hands were not enough time for them to play deeply with his resisting mind.

So, the question boiled down to what this glow was going to do when it realised that Tymos was going to remove it. The one in Zacary had reacted violently, and this time, he did not have Kryslie to help him.

"Very well," Tymos repeated, making his voice sound reluctant. "I see the truth in your view. You cannot be allowed to retain your power. I honour your courage, Perrin, and as I have not done this before, it may be a very agonising procedure. If you remain still, it will be easier for you. Better still, would be if you placed your mind in a meditative trance and allow your body to relax, so you do not resist me."

Tymos saw the eyes close, and he placed his hand gently on Perrin's face. Once again, Perrin had his mind completely unshielded, and Tymos sensed him clearing his mind of all thoughts. The emotions took longer, to clear, and Perrin did not try to hide them. He was afraid, but there was trust there too.

Finally, Perrin was fully relaxed. Tymos was en rapport with his mind, he began speaking quietly, explaining what he was going to do – or rather, what he wanted the energy mote to report to its masters. Lurking in the older man's mind was a presence that was gleeful, aroused by having caused the downfall of a powerful enemy. The glee increased as Tymos warned that the process would be agonisingly painful.

Tymos was aware of the presence as he began to draw Perrin's power from him, and was abetted when Perrin put himself into a deep trance, that might seem like death. And then, when it seemed like its host could no longer resist, the energy mote took control. Perrin's hand jerked up, grabbed Tymos by the throat, and began to squeeze.

Jonko and Stenn started to move to help him, but Tymos was ignoring the attempt to strangle him. The personal force field was preventing the hand from tightening too much.

"Jon, Stenn, hold him still."

The energy glow was clear to Tymos's adjusted eyes. He focussed on it, even as Perrin's body began to thrash in an attempt to get into a better killing position. To trick the entity controlling Perrin's body, Tymos reduced his own power, closed his eyes and waited for the thrashing to pause. Then he slowly sank from his knees to fall over Perrin. In truth, it was to help hold the body down, but he wanted it to seem like he was unconscious.

Perrin's eyes were open, though he was too deep in trance to see. The mind observing through the energy mote gave a satiated laugh. Tymos gathered power in an instant, causing the room lights to dim for that time, and sent that power to the point of his mental focus. The awareness of another mind vanished, and Perrin dropped from trance to unconsciousness.

Carefully, Tymos rose to his knees and checked Perrin's condition. He sent healing energy into him and then sat back – too weak to stand.

“Jon, would you let Xyron know what happened? He will want to check Tanya and Perrin over, and he might have the means to make them rest.”

Stenn gave a soft snort. “Uncle won't. Are you sure he is rid of..”

Tymos nodded.

“I am surprised that he let you have him in a position of inferiority,” Stenn uttered his belief – only because he thought his uncle was still unconscious. “Or that I got the better of him.”

“It won't happen again, nephew,” Perrin growled. “Nor will I let those...creatures...have me again.”

“I doubt that would be interested in you now,” Tymos said, as if carefully considering the idea. “Not after you proved to be so weak that you let a child get the better of you.”

Perrin growled again. “What did you do to me, Prince Tymos? My head feels like a bomb exploded in there.”

“That's what that Ciriote watcher thinks happened,” Tymos told him, but he knelt down, rested his hand on Perrin's forehead, and sent his healing energy to reduce the pain. “You now have the chance that you really wanted – to get even with the bastards.”

“You didn't learn to be so devious from me,” Perrin growled, but this time it was with grudging respect.

“Didn't I?” Tymos said with a faint smile. “I had to learn to be devious to outsmart you.”

Jonko returned from sending the message and raised an eyebrow in query at his friend. Teasing Perrin Reslic was never a good idea, but Tymos merely turned his head slightly and winked at him.

Governor Xyron arrived, bringing a med team with him. Jonko, Stenn and Keleb bowed when he arrived, but Tymos did not. His friends stared at him, wondering why he ignored the traditional courtesy.

“What happened here?” Xyron asked Tymos.

“You have seen the bodies in father's suite?”

“Yes. Ciriote are they?”

“The one with purplish armour is a leader. He had control over Perrin, via another of those energy entities. The leader underestimated me, and did not succeed in taking Llaimos. However, he took the opportunity to infect Tanya, as he had Perrin. I have removed the energy glows from them both. Tanya should be fine. Perrin was only in their control a matter of hours.”

Xyron directed the med team to examine and tend both victims.

“And Llaimos is unaffected?” Xyron asked with concern.

“The Ciriote did not harm him. Being a child, they did not try to control him. As for seeing them being killed, he seems to be fine. Although his mind is advanced for his age, he is still very young. He obeyed my directions, and his major concern was for his mother.”

Xyron nodded, keeping his reactions private. “Do you intend to remain here?”

“For now,” Tymos decided. “Stenn mentioned a place in his Excellency's palace and if we have to move we will go there.”

“Do you think there are more intruders? We have sealed the beam-in chamber now and the guards all have lenses to see the glowing trails you mentioned.”

“If the guards do a thorough search of this palace checking out any trails, and find no more Ciriote, I think it will be safe enough to cancel the lockdown.”

The med team escorted Perrin Reslic from the suite, and decided that Tanya could remain. They arbitrarily insisted that the entire group needed to eat and rest. No one argued, but they knew that lockdown had to be lifted before that would be arranged.

When the suite was quiet again, Tanya re-emerged, from Kryslie's sleeping room telling Tymos that Llaimos was asleep and had usurped one of Kryslie's one-piece exercise outfits. She said that she intended to copy her son's example.

"What do you think, Kel, are all those Ciriot creatures gone?" Tymos asked.

"Can't you tell?" Stenn asked.

"I am exhausted," Tymos admitted. "And Kel is a bit more sensitive to unnatural creatures than I am. If Kryslie were here she would know – but she isn't."

"I think there are no more," Keleb gave his opinion.

Stenn exhaled a deep breath and then demanded, "Are you going to go and help Kryslie now?"

Tymos went and collapsed into one of his sister's chairs.

"No."

"What?" Stenn, Jonko and Keleb all exclaimed at once.

"Kryslie is as competent as I am. I have to trust her to survive and do what she intends. I have to stay with Llaimos, and it isn't because I don't trust all of you to protect him."

"Why then?" Stenn asked bluntly.

"I am the only one here that can control his growing," Tymos told them.

"Can't our Guardian do that?" Keleb asked.

"Well, he could, but he has to oversee an awful lot of things at the moment," Tymos admitted.

"I guess so, but why is your brother growing so fast?" Keleb wanted to know.

"It isn't something I can explain," Tymos said. "Truly, the Guardians..."

"He's the third," Stenn stated bluntly. "Kryslie said that. Kel, he's just being modest – at least he is now, when he's no longer pulling rank on my uncle."

"Modest? How?" Jonko glanced at Stenn for the information.

"This whole useless war is a symptom of the ending of an age. The heralding of a new millennium – history repeating itself. Tymos is one, Kryslie is another and Llaimos is the third."

"Make sense, Stenn," Keleb grumbled. "I haven't had time to study much history."

Stenn took a deep breath, and walked to another chair. "The Guardians of Peace always choose three advocates during times of trouble here on Tymorea. Tymos and Kryslie are two, and to act, Llaimos must be grown. There isn't time for us to wait fifteen years. But I don't know why you have to hold him back."

Tymos murmured, "He must come into his full power in the Temple, but we cannot go there yet."

"I'll accept that," Jonko decided. "But what does that have to do with teasing Perrin when he is helpless?"

"Best time don't you think?" Tymos tried to joke. His friends were looking at him as if he were someone they had never seen before.

"He will pound you when he is better," Jonko predicted.

"Tymos forgot to greet our guardian properly too," Keleb noted. "I am surprised that nothing was said."

Stenn gave a weak chuckle and dropped backwards into the chair. "I am slow witted today. With Uncle Ty missing, Tymos is acting for him. For now, he out-ranks my uncle and is Uncle Xyron's equal."

"That is just part of it," Tymos finally sobered and admitted. "Your uncle still sees me as a child, lacking experience. That is truthful enough, even though they tested Kryslie and me and graduated us out of lessons. I am not sure that he realises that the three Governors melded their minds with ours. What that means, is that all their knowledge, all their memories, and the

memories of all the previous Governors, are in our minds. When we need to know something, the relevant details surface.”

“Have the Guardians spoken to you?” Stenn asked, partly in awe.

Tymos nodded. “But we don’t know what we must do yet. All I know is that Krys and I must be free to act. We are not any kind of super being. We cannot fly out and kill every enemy. We don’t need to – that is what the Peace Corps and the space fleet are for. The Governor’s know their roles. We are wild cards – when we need to act, we will know.”

“So what must we do now?” Keleb wondered.

“We wait,” Tymos said. An answer that satisfied no one.

Chapter 27 - Tymoros Returns

High King Tymoros came back to consciousness, slowly and painfully. He felt decades older than his fifty-five years. As memories returned, he tried to sit up, but he was so weak. Then he heard scuffling close by and he spoke softly. "Who is there?"

The noise approached. "Just me." It was a child's voice, whispering. "Stay quiet, mister, or them creatures will come back."

"I have to get to a communicator," Tymoros tried to insist. His voice sounded like it came from someone nearly one hundred years old.

"You ain't in a state to find one," Pyr told him with a child's bluntness. "When them robed ones came and found you, they took off the net thing, and every thing else." He didn't state the obvious, "Even your clothes."

"Yes, indeed," Tymoros managed to sound calm. He added, for the boy's benefit, "A standard means to instil fear in a prisoner. Do you know where we are?"

"Some building," Pyr said. "They took you from where Jordan had you."

"Why are you here? It is dangerous," Tymoros chided gently.

Pyr didn't answer the first part of the question. "They are not interested in children. Besides, they never saw me. When I stay still, no one does. Reckon they think children are stupid or mindless."

Tymoros sensed the resentment, but didn't try to probe it. He was thankful for the child's presence. It offered him hope, and he did not share the sentiment about the lack of worth of children.

"Do you know where my clothes are?" Tymoros asked.

"They left them where they cut them off. Them's in shreds anyway. They dragged you here like you were. But I'll look and see if I can find something. Someone must live here."

They both heard clicking noises. Pyr whispered, "That's them talking."

Tymoros heard him scuttling away, making as little noise as a rat. He was glad. He didn't want the boy to see what these creatures did to him. With his memory returning, so did the pain. Before leaving the council building, they had tried to make him tell where all the treasures were. Tried to make him withdraw all the Tymorean troops and make them surrender. He knew, that they knew, that he would not. They merely wanted a reason to play with him. Their games were painful. They wanted him to scream, but they liked watching him grit his teeth and stay silent. When he had given in, and screamed, they had left him alone for a time.

Then they had brought him elsewhere, and made him watch as they tortured the jeweller, Dantry. This must still be his private dwelling. They had tortured Aldiv, who had tried to protect him. They burnt him alive.

The guilt came close to overwhelming him. Aldiv had been, more than a servant to him for over two decades. They had been friends. The memory made him roll over and try to stand. Only then did he realise that his hands and feet were tied to each other.

The only warning he had was the swishing of the fabric robes over the metal armour. For a fraction of a second, he felt something cold and metallic touch his back, and then the terrible pain lanced through him again. This time, for the child's sake, he bit back a scream. He knew this was only the beginning. While his mind was full of pain, he heard the insidious voices trying to command him, to make him obey them. His mind shields had slipped. He tightened them again.

The level of pain decreased when the weapon was withdrawn. He heard the clicking voices and wondered what they would try next. They had tried the flame weapon and discovered that it did not hurt him. From the way they had all gathered and chattered, they did not understand why. They demanded to know, but he had not told them that he still had a force shield on. Unlike their own, his was skin-tight and unseen. The disadvantage was that the rod weapon

when placed on his skin caused a local overload. A knife stab would have a similar effect – if they thought of it.

Pyr scuttled behind the robed figures. He knew what they were going to do and it made him want to be sick. He couldn't hate the man. He was not going to let the creatures take his mind over, and he didn't want his people to suffer because of him. Those two now dead, had chosen to try to protect him - not out of fear, but because they really respected him. Pyr had sensed that. He had never sensed such sentiment from any of his guardian's men. Except for Jordan and Vila, they would have, but that was more out of a sense of duty.

"But he wouldn't help us either," Pyr's mind insisted, thinking of his guardian. He knew it because he had been listening to what Kellex had told Jordan and Vila.

Those horrid creatures were punishing the Tymorean worse than what Geller had done to him. But these creatures were doing it for their own greedy reasons, not so that the man would help the Aeronite people.

Being out of the room wasn't enough. Pyr felt when the punishment began again as an echo in his own body. The only advantage was that all the robed ones hovered nearby, enjoying their captive's agony. Even if they saw him now, they wouldn't care. They quickly tired of tormenting children.

Now was a good time to sneak into where the owner kept his clothes and see what he could find for the man. Pyr had been in here before, hiding, and knew there was a wooden chest at the end of the bed. He guessed it contained clothes. When he lifted the padded lid, a foul smell greeted his nose. He quickly shut the box.

The noise attracted attention. Pyr saw the movement in the doorway and froze in place, praying to Jyx that he would not be seen. He clenched his teeth to stop them rattling in his terror, as the robes of one of the creatures brushed his legs. He had drawn his knees up to his chest. The creature stopped, right there, in front of the box. With one metal covered hand, it held the lid up. With the other, it reached into its robes, unsnapped something, and began to eject waste liquid into the box.

Pyr held his breath until the robed figure had gone. When his heartbeat slowed and the blood stopped pounding in his ears, he realised that the pain echo had stopped. Then he heard animated clicking from the outer room. Something was exciting them. He didn't know what, but he hoped they would all stay at the front of the building.

He recalled his reason for being in the room, and knowing that the creatures had fouled all the owner's clothes, he grabbed some sweat smelling garments from half under the bed. A shirt of some kind, and breeches. The fabric was soft, at least.

He was intending to go back to the man, but the animated clicking coming from the front of the building was loud. He wondered what the matter was, and put the clothes in a corner and slipped along the passage.

He watched from under a table, and saw the creatures going out into the street, disappearing in the doorway.

"Stealth suits," Pyr confirmed for himself. "Cowards," he whispered. They were if they used such things on defenceless enemies. He crawled behind chairs and other furniture, drew himself up next to the window, and stood perfectly still. With care, he drew the curtain aside just enough to see into the street.

He drew in a breath with shock. For a moment, he thought the red headed woman was Vila, and he almost called out a warning. Two things stopped him. The woman wasn't Vila, because she was wearing dirty brown coveralls and if he called out, the creatures would cease to ignore him. They would be angry if he warned their prey off. They might kill him before he had a chance to...to help his father and before he had a chance to try to atone for things done by his Guardian.

He knew the woman, though. She had said she was his sister too, though Jordan had told him that the woman was vicious, and mean. Right now, her expression seemed to confirm that.

He couldn't help her, but she had managed fine before. He needed to help his father. That mattered more to him now.

As he edged back away from the window, staying on his feet this time, he saw a collection of objects carelessly tossed on a table. He glanced at the door, the last two robed figures were watching the street, they didn't see his hand reach out and take one of the objects. It looked like one of the transporting devices Jordan had shown him.

He needed to freeze again when the figures turned to grab weapons from near the door. When they hurried outside, Pyr raced to the back room. His mind told him that the creatures really wanted the redhead and he prayed that she would be as clever at evading them as she had been in escaping from Kellex. Oh, his guardian had been purple faced with rage.

He was glad now that he had not mentioned his brief abduction to his guardian. Jordan had been angry enough, and had spanked him, almost as hard as Geller had. He believed their guardian was always right, and had warned that Kellex would treat him worse if he argued that he wasn't.

Pyr grabbed the bundle of clothes as he ran, but found the man...his father...barely conscious.

"Quickly...is this yours?" He pushed the metal thing in the man's bleeding hands.

The man roused, identifying the transmitter by feel.

"Hold on to me," the man hissed.

Pyr obeyed. In the next instant, he saw a bright light, and before he could exclaim, he saw they were out in the street at the back of the building. He guessed what had happened, but didn't stop to think about it. The man was naked, vulnerable, tied up. Someone would come if he didn't do something. He took out his small knife and tried to cut the stuff tying his feet, then felt the man hold his arm. He stared in amazement as the man strained against the wrist ties and snapped them. With his hands free, the man did the same with the ankle ties.

"Help me up," the man asked, and Pyr obeyed, but either the man was heavy, or he Pyr, was weak with fear.

Then he heard a sharp whistle, and saw a man beckoning from a nearby doorway. As he helped his father that way, the man emerged, darted looks up and down the street, and came to help.

As soon as they were all inside, someone shut and locked the door. When his eyes adjusted to the dimness, Pyr saw two figures. A woman came and eased herself into position to take the weight from him.

"You be a good lad," she told him. "Let us help him now, though you would do best to stay here for a bit."

He was happy to agree, and sidled to where he could peep through boards that were a crude barricade across the window. He still saw no one in the street, but the building across the way was now aflame.

"No!" he whispered to himself. He tried to believe that the red headed woman wasn't in there.

Thinking that, he suddenly saw her appear in the street, and flames suddenly engulfed her. He shoved his fist in his mouth, wanting to look away, but unable to. In the next instant, there was a brilliant flash of light. When his eyes stopped watering, he saw the woman lying in the street and the flames were out. She was no longer clad in the dirty coveralls, but she wasn't a blackened corpse either.

He tried to will her to wake up, to run. There was no response. With a glance at the old couple who were clucking like hens over their guest, washing his wounds and wrapping a blanket

around him, Pyr sidled to the door, studied the simple locking mechanism and opened it. He went out, giving the old couple no chance to protest, and closed it behind him very quietly.

Before he went from the door, he saw robed figures appearing out of the air. He didn't dare move, since he couldn't tell how many more robed figures were still in stealth mode.

One figure nudged the woman with his foot, and then leant down to hold her neck. After a brief clicked phrase, he took the woman over his shoulder. That must mean she was alive, Pyr realised.

He watched as three of the robed figures went along the street to his right. The others turned the other way and vanished again.

For over a mile, Pyr followed the robed one who was carrying the woman. Then his skill at stealthing deserted him. A robed figure grabbed him by his hair and he was dangled so his feet were two hand spans off the ground. It clicked a speech, and the other ones turned. The hand holding him shook him, and then the creature's other hand pointed to the woman's red hair.

With a sudden pounding of his heart, and the throbbing of blood in his ears, Pyr realised that they believed he was related to the woman. He tried to struggle free, but his captor backhanded him with his metal covered hand. He felt his nose break and searing pain in his cheek, before his mind blacked out.

Tymoros accepted the fussing of the old couple as they tended the most recent wounds. He had managed to tend the earlier ones, but now his power was at low ebb. They hadn't asked his name, but simply assumed he was Royal because of his hair, which was still red despite the encroaching grey hairs. They talked of seeing the king some years ago when he had last come through Amik on his tour. Then they chattered about the shields that had protected the city, not complaining that they had failed but firm in their belief that the Governor's would soon fix the problem.

"I need to report," Tymoros said with a hoarse voice. It was barely a whisper. His throat was raw and painful because one of his tormentors had shoved a device in his mouth before activating the burning beam.

The old couple exchanged fearful glances, but the woman nodded and the man slipped away. After a long time, by when the woman had finished washing his wounds, bandaging the worst of them, and had helped him into the torn breeches and tunic the child had dropped, her husband returned with two Tymorean fleet officers.

Tymoros struggled to sit up, and stand.

"Your Majesty!" one exclaimed, recognising him and taking in his condition. "We did not expect..."

The old woman put her fist in her mouth, and looked close to fainting. Her husband moved to support her.

"It's the king," she whispered with agitation. "I should have found something better to wear than that torn tunic the child had with him."

"Where is the boy?" Tymoros asked, looking around. He was now on his feet, supported by the officers.

"He ran off. Saw something out the window and slipped out before I could stop him," the old man said.

Tymoros did not berate him. "If any of your friends find him, look after him. He helped me when I needed it."

"We will, Sire. I will spread the word," the old man promised.

"And I will advise Commander Pellis," the fleet officer promised. "Governor Reslic sent down four companies to re-take the city. He told us that Princess Kryslie made the request."

Tymoros nodded, recalling a moment in his delirium that he had felt her mind trying to reach his.

"Is my daughter still in Amik?"

It was the old man's turn to look ashen grey.

"Oh..." he said, his hands going from his wife, to wring together. "I..." he gulped convulsively, "I didn't connect..."

"You may speak without fear, sir," one of the fleet officers invited.

"It's just that...Silas said...them robed ones picked up a red head from the street, just outside. I never thought..."

"My daughter, if it was her, is adept at surviving. She is an excellent fighter – with and without weapons." Tymoros's voice was still hoarse, but he was calm. "If they took her, she is still alive. Perhaps the boy went after her to help her as he helped me."

The old couple clasped each other's hands, and huddled together.

"You have my sincere thanks for helping me," Tymoros told them. "I wish I could reward you, but I must return to the palaces and my duties if this warfare is to end."

Then Tymoros vanished as abruptly as he had appeared in the street. The old couple could only hold each other and pray to the Guardians to help their king to end the war and the rising toll of dead.

Tymos found it as hard to wait for news as it was for his friends. What news he heard through his communicator, he passed on to the others. They knew that Zacary was dead, and it seemed he had killed himself. Elsewhere on the Estate, the buildings were almost deserted. Only a skeleton staff remained. Stenn should have gone already, but he refused to leave his self-imposed duty of helping to protect Llaimos. Tanya had refused to leave for Dira, choosing to stay in Kryslie's suite to wait with them. Her reason was simple. When her consort returned, he would come there.

And near dusk, he did.

Tanya gave a cry of relief and sympathy. She leapt from the chair and ran to him. Holding him tightly and being held tightly in return. The younger men all turned their faces away, as the king and his consort were reunited. Only Llaimos watched, and expressed his understanding by increasing his grip on Tymos's hand. The king needed those moments to receive the special calming empathy of his consort.

When he felt the gentle hand on his shoulder, Tymos turned and looked into the bruised and blackened face, and took in the torn and odorous clothes his father wore.

"Father," he said with sympathy, and he reached out his free hand to send some of his healing energy into him.

"I am well enough," Tymoros whispered hoarsely. "We must bring Llaimos to the Temple. He needs to be there."

Llaimos freed his hand from Tymos's grip and threw himself at his father. Tymoros lifted the tall child into a firm embrace. Though he did not say so, he felt the power surging in the child's body. It was like a tidal wave, trying to reach the high ground. He sensed Llaimos's potential, and the mind's strength, even though it was still ignorant. Whatever it was controlling that surging power, was weakening. He and Tymos were doing all they could to bolster it. When that wall was breached, Llaimos needed to be in the place sacred to the Guardians so that there was no chance of that mental void being contaminated.

"The Ciriote will attack here in force within the hour," Tymoros spoke, and everyone was quiet. "Jono is tracking a thousand fighter ships coming from the second continent. He has the fleet fighters keeping the Aeronites away from Dira. The defences are permeable to transmission. The Elders and the missionaries, are also be coming to Dira...they will come to the Temple when called."

"Uncle Ty," Stenn asked then. "What of Kryslie?" He knew she was going to be needed to open the gates of Dirakee, the legendary fortress of the Tymorean people.

“She will join us in the Temple,” Tymoros stated, holding onto his belief that the Guardians would protect her.

Tymos placed an arm around his father, on the other side to Tanya. He shared his power with his father, and spoke to his mind. “Kryslie is alive! I don’t know what happened, but she is alive. She went to help you – what happened?”

Tymoros placed his hand over Tymos’s and shared an intimate moment of mental fusion. Llaimos seemed part of it too. “I think she is a prisoner of the Ciriote,” he summarised.

Tymos did not betray that news to his friends. He simply straightened, pulled himself free from his father and spoke to his friends. “Stenn, Jon, Kel – come to Dira.”

He took Llaimos from his father, and would have carried him but his brother wriggled free.

“The Aeronites have turned to flee,” Tymos explained. “We must go now.”

He glanced at Tanya, but her stance next to Tymoros said clearly that she would stay with him.

Down in the beam-in room the evacuation was in its final stages. The people queued up to leave moved aside to give Tymos and his group priority.

As soon as they arrived in the room in the city of Dira, they transmitted again via the reset beam to the Temple. In that place, a strong sense of peace settled around them and the tension they had been under for the past hours began to ease.

Tymos took a deep breath, and drew in the aura. He still had Llaimos by the hand as he looked around. He was on the Temple’s lower level, in the open space between the double row of columns, at the front entrance. Stenn, Jonko and Keleb automatically looked around, hands on weapons.

“We will be safe here,” Tymos assured them. “The Guardians protect this place.”

Stenn was the first to relax his stance. Reverence towards, and belief in, the Guardians had been bred into him. He was now looking around with eyes wide and a facial expression close to awe.

It was rapidly growing dark, but as the Temple was set on a hill, light from the setting sun still lit the façade.

Keleb looked down, becoming aware of a faint glow at their feet. He saw they stood on an intricately tiled mural depicting three figures walking up a hill. When Stenn became aware of his interest, he glanced at the picture and explained.

“The Guardians of Peace walked here, millennia ago.” Then, as if that thought roused another, he added, “We can’t stay standing here. Tymos and Llaimos will want to be in the Altar Room.”

He turned to them and said, “How do we get there?”

Tymos gestured at the stairs that ascended from each side of the entrance. “That way, but come inside first. We will need more light inside now the sun is down.”

As soon as they emerged fully into the large meeting area, the altar room caught their attention. It was at the far end of the vaulted chamber, at a level above even the upper galleries on each side.

Two lamps sat on the altar, glowing brightly, illuminating the whole of the Altar Room. The light also reflected off the multicoloured glass window behind it.

While his friends and brother stared at the wondrous sight, Tymos released Llaimos’s hand and turned to a wall between the two front entrances. From his previous visit, when he and Kryslie had spent the Season of Storms here, learning from the Elders, he knew the controls for the lights were behind a false panel there. Though he had never needed the knowledge then, he found he knew how to brighten the lights and proceeded to turn on all the lights both on this lower level and along the walls of the upper galleries. His friend gave a faint sigh of awe.

Llaimos began to tug on Tymos's hand; his young face was staring at the lights in the Altar Room.

"The front stairs are closer, Bro," Tymos told him.

Although he had assured his friends that they were safe, they had not forgotten recent events. Jonko and Keleb went up first, Stenn brought up the rear. Tymos made no comment, just slowed as Jonko and Keleb took turns checking each of the side rooms along the north gallery. The first was a servant's room, then a bathroom, then the room where his father slept when he stayed at the Temple. Then there was the north side chamber, a quarter of the size of the meeting room below, but another place where groups of people could sit and relax.

The lights in there were not on, so Tymos mentioned the storage rooms that led off it. Keleb reported that all the doors were secured.

Then they came to the end of the gallery. Here a closed door, to the left was another door that led to a gallery that went along the outside of the north side chamber. To the right were four steps that went up into the Altar Room. Jonko stepped ahead of Llaimos and ascended first. He stepped to the right at once to let Tymos and Llaimos follow him. Keleb slipped around the left where three benches were placed near the wall. He glanced at Jonko as he began like a feel a cool breeze was blowing through him. His friend was looking around, seeing that Tymos, Llaimos, and Stenn were bowing to the Altar. Belatedly identifying the sensation of the aura, and connecting it to the notion of a Temple as a place of worship, Jonko and Keleb both bowed to the Altar as well.

Tymos took Llaimos over to one of the benches, and sat with him.

"When you get hungry, there should be stasis packed food and water in the storerooms off the south chamber," he remarked, aware that Llaimos jerked up at the idea of food."

Stenn nodded, but was too intent on examining the Altar Room. Keleb finally blurted the question that had been worrying him.

"What happened to Kryslie," Keleb asked. "She went with Jordan and Vila, but then what?"

For a long moment, Tymos didn't answer. Then he spoke, calmly, but also with a new deliberation.

"When they returned to Amik with Kryslie, the Ciriote had shown themselves there."

Stenn hissed in anger. "Those creatures that had my uncle were Ciriote? I didn't know what they looked like, but I remembered you mentioning them. Perhaps this useless war makes sense – unholy sense. You expected there to be more, didn't you?"

Tymos merely nodded.

"Father walked into a trap, though he thought he was prepared for it. The troops that went with him were hit with a concussion grenade. Half died; the rest became Aeronite prisoners. Father arrived separately and tried to convert Jordan and Vila. He wanted them to realise that their role in this war was wrong. He had no warning of the Aeronite that crept up behind him. Nor did Aldiv. I expect that was when Jordan and Vila left there to come here. They had worked out how to use transmitters."

"He should have disempowered them," Stenn said flatly.

Tymos sighed. "He had no chance, then. But it is not their fault that they became what they are...any more than it was yours to become a tool of the enemy."

Stenn went rigid, as if Tymos had just slapped him. "I would have accepted disempowerment in preference to being a traitor. As Uncle Perrin would have."

"Both of you are free to fight," Tymos said fiercely. "And I am glad! I am glad I was able to oust those energy things. Anyway, that no longer matters. To continue – Father was helped by Pyr, the child we met on Kellex's ship. Only the Guardians know how or why he came to be there. When the Ciriote overcame the Aeronite captors, and took the Father and Aldiv prisoner, Pyr followed. He helped father escape. Kryslie protected Jordan and Vila, and left them back where Kellex now has his ship. She went looking for father, and provided a distraction so he could

transmit away, but she was in turn captured by the Ciriote. Father believes Pyr went after her. He says, as you heard, that Kryslie will come here, as soon as she can, to help us open the portal.”

“So...now we have to wait...again,” Jonko remarked.

“Yes,” Tymos told them. “But you do not have to stay with us. No harm will come to Llaimos here. He and I will wait in the Altar Room. You three are free to wonder anywhere within the Temple or the grounds.”

Jonko and Stenn both felt the need for physical activity, and went out to make themselves familiar with the Temple...just in case.

Keleb followed Tymos, and after a while, spoke of what he was feeling.

“This is all becoming a little unreal,” Keleb admitted. “It might just be this place, because it is so full of the aura. And you, Tymos, since we have been here, you don’t seem the same. I can’t explain what I mean, though.”

“The sensation is called fey,” Tymos said. “And I know what you mean. I feel a little odd myself. You can be assured that I do not intend to die, but I do feel that I am on the edge of some great change. Soon, Kryslie, Llaimos and I must become what we were destined to be, and I am still ignorant of what that is.”

The Temple at Dira began to fill with Elders from all parts of the world. They assembled in the lower meeting area, and took turns to wait with Tymos and Llaimos in the Altar room, each brought news of the conflict with them. No more cities had become controlled by the Aeronites, since the shields on the remaining cities had been strengthened. However, acts of sabotage were still occurring and the alien spies would be looking for ways to breach the stronger shields.

Xyron arrived from the Estate, reporting that only five people remained there, and they were in the auxiliary control room deep in the basement of Reslic’s palace. Tymoros was one of them, and he was overseeing the withdrawal of the ground-based Tymorean troops - fleet fighters, road guards and members of the Peace Corps.

The commoners amongst these groups were being deployed to the cities – the Royal Tymoreans were all withdrawing to Dira.

The fleet air fighters were engaging the Ciriote ships – slowing their advance and breaking their formation. Reslic and the staff of the space-based ships were still in space, but on notice to retreat to Dira, once all other personnel were safe.

Stenn, Jonko and Keleb returned to the Altar room and joined the wait. Hours passed, night approached and it became morning again. Tymos let Xyron take over controlling Llaimos’s growth, and he began to pace the altar room. He tried reaching his sister’s mind, for the umpteenth time. He felt twitchy, full of energy. He needed to do...something.

He caught the movement as his friends bowed to a newcomer. Tymoros had arrived, with Tanya. Tymos went to his father, as Tanya gave her consort a last embrace and accepted the offer from Stenn to bring her to where the other consorts were waiting.

Tymoros was calmer, the death of Aldiv, and the torture of the innocent civilians by the Ciriote, and his inability to fight effectively while hindered by the Aeronites, no longer haunted him. He had not forgotten any of it, but now his main concern was Kryslie. The Ciriote had her, and who knew what they were doing to her.

“Father, the Guardians will protect her,” Tymos told him. “They made us to end this conflict. She will come back here.”

“I felt that I had to come now,” Tymoros explained. “Esmous is overseeing the last of the withdrawal and will seal the Estate. Kryslie needs to be here.”

“I know,” Tymos agreed, and then he heard a message through his head set. He spoke a terse reply. “Withdraw the fleet.”

Far in space, Reslic accepted the command and began to implement plans already in place.

Xyron and Tymoros watched Tymos resume his pacing. Neither questioned the timing of Tymos's command, and they both tacitly accepted his right to give orders. He was reacting to instincts stimulated by the Guardians.

"The Ciriots are like rabid animals, intent on looting, torturing, killing and destroying. They have already wreaked too much damage. I do not wish any more Tymoreans or Aeronites to die. Kryslie, Llaimos, and I can fight them. Reslic needs to be here, to draw Kryslie back here."

Tymoros sent a mental command to his fellow Governor; he could not wait to finish the withdrawal. Moments later, Reslic appeared in their midst.

Tymos felt vast relief, seeing the President Governor. He felt it to an even greater degree when he felt the three Governors merging their power to support his. He tried again to reach Kryslie. This time, he felt a response, a tenuous whisper of thought from a very long way away. He felt a small hand slip into his and Llaimos added his own growing power to the merge.

"Kryslie?" Tymos tried once more and this time he heard an answer, not just in his head, but also audible within the Altar Room.

"Tymos, Llaimos, I am coming."

Power built up in the room. Jonko, Keleb and Stenn moved uneasily. The Elders withdrew, eyeing the younger men as they went.

Stenn muttered, "I'm staying. I don't know what is going to happen, but I intend to see it."

They all heard, "The world is chaos. The winds are making the ground quake. We dare not transmit."

Kryslie's voice was coming in gasps as if she were running. "We are in the open, the Ciriots are attacking again, but they can't touch me."

"What did the Ciriots do?" Stenn asked shocked.

It seemed that Kryslie heard him. Still gasping, she replied, "The Aeronites had a machine, meant to make this world suitable for their kind. The Ciriots found it and meddled with the controls and then activated it."

Chapter 28 - Questions

Jordan and Vila had gone in search of their guardian to report, but Kellex had not taken it well. Now they stood in his official chamber and listened, stony faced to his ranting. He was not just angry as their guardian, but in his role as one of the six most powerful Aeronites on Tymorea.

“You failed me! A simple but important mission – to take a mere infant and you couldn’t even do that! You had that verminous red headed girl whelp in your control and you let her go! A child, younger than you – and she out-smarted you. Where is the Tymorean King? What incompetent underling did you put in charge of him? Or did you let him talk himself free too?”

“We left him with Geller, but he is dead,” Jordan announced tersely.

“No more than he deserved,” Kellex snarled. “You have made me a laughing stock with the other Warlords. You disappoint me.”

“Sir,” Jordan tried to make his Commander listen to the rest of his report. So far, he had only let them answer his specific questions.

“I do not want to hear your excuses,” Kellex thundered.

“But, Sir!” Vila tried to add her voice to the plea.

Kellex backhanded her, making his anger clear. “I knew training a female was a mistake. Nothing either of you freakish changelings can say will change my opinion of you. We ...are...winning! We are taking over their cities and their pitiful troops run from us. Their aircraft are not opposing ours.”

“Lord, the Ciriot are here,” Jordan blurted desperately, and then he too felt the sting of Kellex’s anger, and had to keep a tight control on his own. He persisted in speaking. “We have seen them! They were in the city when we returned with the girl, and they had taken the king. They were waiting for us at our ships.”

“You cannot expect me to believe such a fantastic pile of drivel. If they had come here, our scanners would have spotted them.”

“Lord, it is true,” Vila insisted.

“Enough!” Kellex roared. “Report to senior commander Villeni and when he has taught you a lesson in truthful reporting, you will go and complete the mission I gave you. Do not return until you have the brats or have killed them. GO!”

Ashen faced, his two junior Commanders saluted, and walked stiffly from his presence. Kellex growled angrily, thinking of all the time he had wasted training those two. Perhaps he should have simply killed them, like he had the older two. He considered his other ward, Pyr.

“Too young to be useful,” Kellex muttered. “But at least he is more obedient. He is already showing initiative and is keen to fight.”

New reports began to come in; distracting Kellex from wondering where his youngest ward was if his elder sibs had returned. The child was not important. His last fleeting thought on the subject of his wards was that it was fortunate that he had the foresight to authorise creating a clone of Jordan. A whelp he could mould from birth.

Disobeying Kellex’s orders was not an option and both Jordan and Vila had to control their anger and resentment. As long as they could remember, they had obeyed their guardian, and done their very best to make him pleased with them. Now, he had told them their best was nothing. With out needing to speak, Jordan and Vila each knew that the other felt the same. It was an ability they had tried to ignore, but now, it was all that stoped them from outright mutiny.

Kellex had never ordered official punishment for them before. The mere thought made them feel humiliated. Yet they knew, instinctively that if they let their resentment show, Villeni's punishment would be much worse.

Later, after Villeni had finished with them, both Commanders walked slowly back to their quarters, rebellious and resentful, and their thoughts were simmering with anger. Only the sure realisation that Kellex could read them like a book when he chose, forced them to control themselves.

Neither spoke, or thought at each other. Their sense of personal humiliation was too great. Each only wanted to be alone, take a dose of pain relief. If they were to go out and try to prove themselves, they had to be fully fit and ready to fight.

Vila decided on a short period of meditation. She wanted to think over their abortive mission, and work out what they could have done differently. Kellex had already vented his opinion, but he had refused to listen to the whole report.

Her first thought was to ask herself why she had let the girl go. At the time, it had seemed so logical, so correct. Had that little chit bewitched her?

No. Young though that girl was, she had immediately seen the implications of the Ciriote presence. She must have known, somehow, what the Ciriote were. When they were near the ships, and the creatures had appeared...she had done something to protect all of them. It wasn't some kind of force shield, because she, Vila, had made sure that she was unarmed, unprotected, and had no means to escape.

Then...she had commanded them...in the same way that Kellex could.

For the first time in her life, Vila realised that Kellex was not always right. The girl had implied that he wouldn't listen, and he hadn't. In fact, he seemed to have no real concern for them when they had not done exactly what he wanted of them.

He had said it would be a simple task, and he had planned the whole scenario, but, he hadn't allowed for the Ciriote. He dismissed the mention as lies, but he had known who they referred to.

Then that girl had said that the Ciriote must have learnt of their plans – implying a traitor close to Kellex, or within the Aeronite forces. Had Kellex known and wanted them to fail? She didn't want to consider that idea.

The chime of her door distracted Vila. She had the sense of her brother.

"Come in." The door responded to her voice command and Jordan entered, and went to perch on her bed, and he looked down at where she sat on the floor.

"Kellex is wrong. He should have listened to us," Vila said resentfully.

"Of course he should have," Jordan agreed forcefully. "And he will learn that soon enough. Personally, I don't want to be around when he does. He will probably blame us for his close-mindedness."

"He certainly won't admit he was wrong," Vila concurred.

Jordan swung his left leg for a while before continuing. "I feel that we have been blind too."

"Blind? How do you mean?"

Jordan shook his head. The fleeting idea he had was still nebulous. "Kellex called us freakish changelings..."

"He was being despicable," Vila said waspishly.

"Probably, but why that term? You didn't want to think this before, but the Tymorean King called us his lost children. I didn't like the idea then either, but it makes horrible sense – like why it is only the two of us that can use those Tymorean devices."

Vila began to feel slightly ill. "That girl...called me sister. And she looks exactly like me."

"And the other one is very like me," Jordan suddenly realised.

The enormity of that realisation stunned them both. “We always knew we weren’t Aeronite, because our eyes are different. Kellex always said we were cast out and he rescued us. I never questioned that until now.”

“He must have stolen us and mind-washed us,” Vila gulped. “I don’t want to be Tymorean; they are so...so...despicable.”

“Or that is what Kellex always told us,” Jordan said with a look at his sister. He stopped short of saying that Kellex had lied to them ever since they could remember, and they couldn’t remember being with anyone else.

“Jordan? I think that girl did something to me. I didn’t want to believe it when she called me sister. That was before now. I thought I knew my place and who I was – now I don’t know any more.”

“I don’t think I have changed much,” Jordan was thoughtful. “I still think it wrong that the Tymoreans won’t help us. I can’t not try to make them see sense. Just thinking of all the Aeronites who will die if we can’t make a place for them here – it makes me feel sick.”

“Jordan...why do we have to take what the people here have? There is a lot of empty land...”

“Because they...” Jordan stopped suddenly. He was going to say that ‘they’ had kicked the original Aeronites off the planet. But no one living here now was one of those ‘they’. If there was an issue to be had, it was with the current rulers who refused to help. They had no right to blame the downtrodden common folk, who according to Kellex were kept in ignorance by the despotic Governors. There was no reason to punish those commoners.

“I wonder if anything we have been taught about the Tymoreans is really true,” Jordan mused. “The people don’t look to be suffering deprivation, even if they are not using technology. The city was shielded until our people sabotaged the protections. A despot wouldn’t care.”

“And I think today has shown that Kellex never really trusted us. He seemed like he hated us as much as he hates the king and the other Governors. We always did our best to please him, and when he gave us our Commands, I thought he was proud of us,” Vila felt the sting of rejection.

“Proud of himself,” Jordan murmured. Talking ill of his guardian still felt like treason.

“Oh, no!” Vila suddenly exclaimed.

“What?”

“Pyr. He is our brother...Kellex stole him too.”

“I remember him as a baby,” Jordan told her.

“We can’t leave him here with Kellex.”

“He doesn’t know any other life,” Jordan objected. “Should we throw him to those he thinks of as enemies?”

“We should let him choose,” Vila told her brother.

Jordan stared at his sister and saw the same realisation dawning on her face. “Are we going to change sides?”

Vila paled at the enormity of that treasonous idea. Kellex would have them killed.

“Even if we are Tymorean, the Tymoreans won’t accept us now,” Vila said quietly. “And however you look at it, the Aeronites still need help. I still want to make the Tymoreans see that. And until now, Kellex didn’t treat us too badly. We were better off than a lot of the children I saw when we visited Aerdna. We always had everything we needed.”

“Let’s find Pyr and talk to him,” Jordan decided. “Whatever we decide to do will affect him too. If Kellex decides we are traitors, though he stopped short of saying that earlier, who knows what he will do to Pyr.”

“He has been acting oddly,” Vila recalled. “Ever since Kellex moved the ship here.”

“Ummm, that might have been my fault,” Jordan admitted. He watched Vila get to her feet and put her weapon belt back on. “He told me that he was glad Kellex’s prisoners got away. That girl, her brother and the two peasants. I gave him a warning.”

Vila realised that Jordan had punished him. In hindsight, his action had been correct. Kellex would have done worse if Pyr had said that to him.

“He should be at his lessons with Cormini,” Vila said after checking the chronometer.

“Let’s hope Kellex is too busy to be lounging in his personal area,” Jordan said. “I don’t want him to see us still here.”

The teaching area was in Kellex’s suite. Pyr still had his cabin there, though both Jordan and Vila had been granted their own space, away from their guardian.

Both places were empty. Cormini was not in the teaching area either. Pyr’s normally neat room was empty but showed signs that he had left in a hurry. His normal day clothes were in an untidy pile, half on and half off a chair, and his one permitted weapon, a low power stunner was not on its rack. Several sealed ration bars had dropped to the floor near the door.

Alarmed, they went in search of Cormini, the man who taught Pyr, and had once taught them.

His cabin was not far from Kellex’s, but it had a privacy glyph on the lock, and he didn’t answer their request for entry. Jordan decided to make use of one of the privileges of his confirmed rank, and overrode the privacy code and entered.

“Cormini, where is Pyr?” Vila demanded.

The old teacher had been huddled over a table, drinking from a flask. He pushed his chair over backwards when he shoved it back to get on his feet. He was trembling when he saw who had entered.

“He has gone He left this message.” Cormini walked unsteadily across to a message recorder and played the message. It was brief.

“Mini, I have gone with my brother to fight. I want to be a warrior like him.”

“Does our Guardian know?” Jordan demanded and the man nodded.

“He was delighted with his initiative.” Cormini admitted, trying to stand straight.

“He wasn’t with me, Cormini,” Jordan paled. “He’s only a child, almost the age I was when I got really sick.”

“If he does not survive he is of no use to us!” Cormini repeated in a voice that was pitched higher than his normal voice. It was what Warlord Kellex had told him.

“You are wrong, Cormini.” Vila went and stood in front of him. “We have seen the Ciriots on this world. If he came with us, unknown by us, then the Ciriots have him. They were waiting at our ships, and killing our warriors! They would kill him with out a qualm; he’d be of no use to them!”

“The Ciriots have betrayed us!” Jordan stated flatly. “They have become our enemies.”

“Treason!” Cormini screeched.

“I fought with Princess Kryslie,” Vila told her former teacher. “I could not defeat her by myself. She matched everything I tried and still seemed to have more in reserve. In spite of that, she saved us from the Ciriots. Kellex wants us to kill her, though I feel it will be a mistake. She told me that she had not been born to fight us, only to destroy our warped power. Instead of doing that, she told us to use our power to preserve our people if we could. It is the Ciriots we should be fighting. The Tymoreans have never attacked us, merely defended.”

“You are speaking treason!” Cormini repeated, his voice still high pitched.

“No, Cormini,” Jordan spoke firmly. “Our first duty is to our people. We must fight the Ciriots. They have decided we are no further use to them.”

Cormini had turned pale as he began to understand the implication of Jordan’s words.

“Go!”

Jordan and Vila retreated, tense with worry, and went to Jordan’s cabin.

"I need to know the truth," Jordan said, going to access his computer terminal. "Kellex doesn't care what happens to Pyr. He probably took him to spite the Tymorean king. He probably cares as little about us and simply likes the idea of us destroying our kin."

"Do you truly believe that we are kin to that girl and to the king?" Vila asked.

Jordan nodded.

"Then maybe we could go to them and demand their help," Vila suggested. "Maybe Kellex lied when he said they refused help, perhaps no one asked them."

"It's possible," Jordan agreed. He had sat himself in front of his computer and was manipulating the device using the touch pad. He was busy accessing secured sections of the ship's files. "Let us be thankful that he never had us demoted. With our rank confirmed, accessing restricted files is easier."

"Easier, but you are talking of getting into our guardians private files," Vila realised.

"Uh huh," Jordan admitted. "And if he changed his security protocol, and the firewall detects me, we had better not come back. Do you want me to keep on going?"

Vila bit her lower lip; she knew this was the moment of decision. "Yes. I want to know our true origin. Do you know his passwords?"

Jordan glanced up and gave her a shrug. "I learnt them about a year ago, when he had me doing some confidential stuff for him."

"Try it," Vila urged.

"Go lock the door," Jordan directed.

It took Jordan five minutes of manipulating the pressure sensitive pads to pass the security protocols. At the end of that time, Jordan muttered, "He is an over confident, damn idiot. Or he was sure we were too stupid to try this. I'm in his private journal file."

Vila was looking over his shoulder as he did a search through the entries.

"Found it," Jordan announced quietly.

In his private journal, Kellex didn't hide his smug satisfaction of his own cleverness. He wrote in detail of how he had made use of one of the ugly ones – a mutant who was able to change his form to mimic anyone. He had convinced the man to mimic two children holding hands. He admitted his pleasure at having so useful a reason to kill such a freakish abomination. His intense satisfaction in tricking the Tymorean King was plain.

"Holy Jyx," Vila swore.

Jordan was searching for later entries, and found details of how he had mind-wiped their memories, and of the training regimen he wanted for them.

Vila wanted to be sick, and Jordan wiped sweat from his ashen face.

"Our father, our real father. Kellex made us lure him to that city, and now he is probably dead," Jordan said, feeling ill.

"Or tortured," Vila added. "The Tymoreans will never forgive us."

Jordan did a search for other mentions of the Tymorean king and scrolled down the entries. "There's more. He has written here of some prophecy claimed by an old, senile warlord. I don't think he heard it all, but he has here something about three of the king's children were going to save the Tymoreans. Kellex says here that he had thought it crazy."

"He must have been afraid that it was true," Vila suggested. "And that is why he took us."

Still scrolling through entries, Jordan was glancing quickly at each. He stopped at one and read it more slowly. "Here! He says he had two of the king's children killed. Made it seem like an accident. He ensured that a trader ship crashed. We once had two older brothers."

"See what you can find about Pyr," Vila urged.

Jordan found the reference. "That time he switched children. He took Pyr and replaced him with a mutant's child, but he had already given that child a slow acting poison. He found out that the Royal consort was pregnant, even though she was with the king on tour. He found a way to make her go into labour early."

“Get out of there,” Vila said urgently. “Find a site that might be useful to us to find the girl and her brother.”

Jordan reacted to her urgency and went into a different restricted site, and had a minute to think up a plausible plan, before Villeni strode in with as little warning as they had earlier given Cormini.

“Why are you still here?” Villeni demanded.

“Sir, we are checking where the best place is to try for the king’s elder brats,” Jordan said, looking up and giving Villeni a respectful nod. “We cannot redeem ourselves by trying again without a plan.”

“Warlord Kellex has orders for you,” Villeni told them. “You are to find a way to get into that Temple of theirs.”

“Yes, Sir!” Jordan agreed instantly, putting a determined look on his face. “That is some kind of sacred place to them. Has he instructions for us once we find a way in?”

“Report when you succeed and he will instruct you,” Villeni directed. “And I wouldn’t want to have to discipline you both again if I find you still here in ten minutes.”

They waited until the senior commander was gone, and the door relocked before speaking.

“It is as good a place as any to go,” Jordan said. “But we need to find Pyr first. Then we can plead the case of Aerdna. If they will listen to us, and not try to kill us on sight. This war is wrong. We shouldn’t be wasting men and resources trying to conquer this world. We should be using them to save our own planet, or find unoccupied worlds. Kellex might think we are winning, but he is blind. It is what he wants to think. The rulers of this planet have outguessed the Warlords at every step.”

“Yes. You are right. I will take my command to try to find a way into the Temple, and if I see any Ciriots, I will fight them. If Jyx is kind, I will find a way to beg the help of the scientists of this world, to help Aerdna.”

“Let’s find Pyr,” Jordan said. “He must have stowed away in one of our ships and got out at Amik.”

“I hope it was before the Ciriots found the ships,” Vila said, mentally praying.

Chapter 29 - The Plans of the Enemy

Kryslie was not unconscious when the Ciriot picked her up – just very, very weak. She kept her eyes closed, except for a quick peek, now and then.

The Ciriot had appeared like wraiths – from somewhere. She did not believe they could teleport, so they must have cloaking technology as good as or better than what the Aeronites had. This was a chance to find out how they came - that was if they were taking her somewhere and not just intending to finish off killing her. She was relieved that none of the six Ciriot had her father.

These creatures were so confident of their dominance, that they did not expect her to escape, and the Ciriot that was carrying her did not seem to notice his energy being drawn from him.

She was fully recovered, though she still didn't completely understand what had happened except that the Guardians had quenched the clinging flames, and kept her alive. Her clothes had burnt, but her skin was untouched.

A ship was, indeed, their destination. It was big enough for more than the six Ciriot, and looked like a large ovoid, sitting on four tail fins. Inside, Kryslie was taken to a compartment and in there, she saw a motley collection of other prisoners. There was a mix of mutants of all descriptions, Aeronites, Tymorean commoners, and all were hung by the wrists from manacles hanging from the low ceiling. She was treated the same, and left there.

Once the compartment door was slammed shut and the locking mechanism was engaged, Kryslie tested the restraints and simply snapped them, first from the hanging chain and then from her wrists. She took time to examine all her fellow prisoners. Some were dead, others moaning incoherently from pain or terror. The few who were conscious and quiet, asked for release and she obliged.

“Stay here,” she told them. “We are in no condition to take them on yet. I suggest you brace yourselves, they are going to lift off.” No one disputed her; they recognised her for who she was. Even undressed as she was, they looked at her with undisguised hope.

She had a chance to learn about the Ciriot, and she wasn't going to wait.

The ship launched, by powering directly up into the Tymorean sky. The gravity force was fierce, and all the moaning captives mercifully blacked out.

When the g-force abruptly vanished, Kryslie knew they were in orbit, but the feeling of weightlessness did not overly affect her. She found her body was instinctively reacting in ways Reslic had trained into her. While her fellow captives were floating and looking ill, she floated to the door and examined the locking device – a wheel and two rods. She had no trouble manipulating it from the inside. With a wrench on the manual winding handle, the door swung open. She held it so it only opened enough for her to slip out. Once in the narrow passageway, she reclosed the door and went left, away from where she sensed other life. She found her way to the drive chamber and examined the unfamiliar machinery. Memories surfaced, from either Xyron or Reslic's memories. She made sense of what she saw, and went to study the control board – a computer with Ciriot glyphs. As different lights flashed, she correlated changes in the orientation of the ship with the lit buttons. Knowledge came to her of the steps needed to bring the ship down, but Kryslie was sensing the ship was falling planet-wards already. She decided it was safer to return to the compartment with the prisoners, rather than risk being found loose. Once again, she braced herself, and when the ship landed gently, she hid using the simple skill of standing very still and cloaking herself with power.

In the Ciriot ship, it wasn't completely effective, but it also wasn't necessary. None of the Ciriot came to check on the prisoners.

Kryslie felt the vibration from the movement of the Ciriots as they left the ship, and waited until the stillness and silence returned before she ventured out again. She saw the outer door standing open, and edged towards it. What she could see, as far as she could see, was a scene of desolation. In all directions, the landscape was black, scoured down to the rock. Nothing organic remained in existence. The Ciriots were not in sight, but their trail led around to the other side of the ship. Before she stepped out, she checked for a guard. In doing so, she found where they had left their disguising capes and cowls, and took one without a qualm. It would be a disguise, and a form of covering. Once outside, she moved around the ship and the only non-natural structure came into view. It was a dome, made of metal and glowing faintly. Since there was a dense layer of smoke hanging in the air, the glow was not from sunlight, so it must be from a defensive screen. All six Ciriots were walking towards the dome, in their black armour, without the disguising capes and cowls.

The smell that pervaded the air was familiar. Kryslie recognised it as the substance that had fallen on her and caused the clinging flame.

“Burnfire,” Kryslie murmured, recalling the name Jordan had given it. This desolation was what was left when it was used. She wondered who had done the damage, Aeronite or Ciriots, and where she was.

Adjusting her eyes again, Kryslie saw the glowing trails left by the Ciriots going from the ship to the dome, but no others. If this was a Ciriots place, none of them had been there since the burning. Then she saw the Ciriots were all drawing weapons. She began to follow them, keeping low and in line with the ship. The arrogant creatures never even glanced back. They did not expect anything to be alive in the blackened area.

Kryslie caught up to the rearmost Ciriots, studied the armour and what she could see of the equipment it wore. Just before it entered the dome, she raced forward and struck. The faint noise did not carry in the dead air, and the creature had no chance to click a warning.

An analytical part of her mind, told her it had been a clean kill. She quickly lifted the dead Ciriots and carried him partway around the dome, ensuring she was not seen from any of the viewing ports.

Quickly, efficiently and without remorse, Kryslie removed the items that she could use, and systematically damaged everything else. The weapon that spewed burning fire went into a pocket of the black cape. She kept the disintegrator in her hand and a very sharp knife tucked under her arm.

Then she considered her next move, and decided to creep further around the dome, keeping to the patches of scoured rock, and avoiding the gritty ashy residue that would show footprints. She stopped at a locked rear entrance. A short burst of the disintegrator solved the lock problem, but she moved away a bit, around the curve of the dome, and kept her senses alert for a reaction. None came. She returned to the door, eased it open, looked in and then slipped into a storage room.

Now she could hear pleas, screams, consternation, and the mechanical device that translated the clicked orders. The pleas and the translation were in the Aeronite language, an older or changed form of the main Tymorean dialect.

It was obvious that this was a scientific outpost, and the scientists here had little resistance to torture, for one was talking as fast as he could. Between sobs of pain and terror, he was trying to save his life by telling of the machine they tended. He was babbling and pleading for the intruders to leave the controls alone. It was also apparent from the wording of the pleas, that the Aeronites thought the intruders were Tymorean.

Kryslie opened the storage room door a fraction. She saw a Ciriots toss a man aside, and move to the machine. There he manipulated dials and levers with the intent of a vandalising child. She waited no longer to act. Moving into full view, she shot five times in rapid succession and the five remaining Ciriots fell silent and still.

The four Aeronite scientists stayed cowering on the floor, recognising her as a Tymorean Royal and expecting more torture.

“Get up!” Kryslie ordered. “All of you. I want you to turn this machine off.”

The bravest of the terrified men said, “We can’t. Your soldiers started the program. It can’t be stopped.”

“Those creatures were not Tymorean, but Ciriote,” Kryslie told them. “And it is ridiculous that you cannot stop this machine. What if I destroyed it?” She aimed the disintegrator at the machine to give them the idea, and had all four men gabbling at her, trying to warn her against it.

The machine was terrain reformer and while she listened to the mingled speeches of the terrified men, information about how the machine worked came into her mind. It used the planet’s natural energy field to spread the programmed changes.

“Quiet!” Kryslie ordered. Her loud voice startled the men into silence. “Tell me what area it was programmed to change and why the area around here is lifeless.”

When all four tried to explain at once, Kryslie insisted, “One of you!”

The explanation also explained why the men were still terrified of her. It had been set to transform the third continent only – to make it like Aerdna in climate and flora. The settings had been painstakingly balanced, using small-scale experiments in other places to set the parameters. The Ciriote had wilfully played with the dials and touch pad, and then started the bastardised program.

“Check what it is now set for,” Kryslie asked in a modified voice. The men skittered to obey her, and each turned pasty white and began to sweat. None of them wanted to speak.

“That bad,” Kryslie spoke in an unthreatening voice, and put the disintegrator away. “And you cannot adjust it?”

“No, Sir...um...Mam...um...”

“If you tried, what might happen?”

“Better to let it run and then try again,” the bravest of the men gulped.

“Is it still set for just this continent?” She received a cautious nod.

“Is part of this process the use of Burnfire on the land?” Kryslie asked.

Another set of nods, but the men were fearfully watching the walls of the dome flex as if they were in the path of a violent wind. Kryslie could sense that they were.

“Pack your stuff. You have five minutes, not a second longer. You cannot stay here.”

“We...we aren’t prisoners? You aren’t going to kill us?” the brave man ventured.

“No.” Kryslie said tersely. “If your planet, Aerdna, is going to survive, it will need its scientists. I’ll take you back to your baseliner. You would have done better to use your brains to find ways to help your planet, but obviously your Warlords don’t appreciate science except as a weapon.”

She sensed resentful agreement. “Hurry!” she reminded them.

The men had the sense to don protective suits and right on the specified time they followed Kryslie out of the dome. Things had changed. The blackened landscape was now overlaid with a faint energy glow. The air was no longer still, as wind howled into the vortex where energy was being consumed. The air carried the gritty black dust.

On the walk back to the ship, Kryslie used her personal energies to walk against the strong wind, and the scientists followed closely in her wake, the leading one gripping the back of her coveralls and the others holding on to each other. They did not sense the conflicting energies, as she did. They felt the wind, she felt the warping of the natural aura as it resisted the shape the machine wanted to force on it. The ambient energy was vile, and she would not draw on it.

As they drew closer to the ship, they found themselves in its lee. The wind was less strong for it was streaming past the ship.

Inside the ship, everyone sighed with relief from the effort of walking there.

“Find a seat, strap down,” Kryslie ordered. She went first to the hold where the prisoners were, and systematically freed the rest of them. The dead, she gently lifted to one side. The injured, she helped to a seat around the hold.

“Do your best to hold on,” she told all who were conscious. She did not have any energy to spare, or the time, to try healing the injured.

“Help them I will,” one of the misshapen mutants spoke up. “Know of you, I do. Hold promise, I do.”

“Thank you,” Kryslie said, sincerely. She smiled at him, and returned to the main control chair, left empty by the latest arrivals. They had scuttled to obey her, and still looked afraid of her.

Kryslie didn't care if they were; she just needed them to obey her.

“Can you fly this?” one of the scientists dared to ask her.

“Can you?” she countered, and would have welcomed a positive answer.

She heard, but ignored the low denial. Her mind was studying the controls and comparing them to the myriad of images that she was ‘remembering’ from the Governors’ memories.

Xyron knew of aircraft from thousands of worlds, and finally one image matched what she needed to deal with. The other images were forgotten, and only the information about the one ship stayed in her mind.

The ship belonged on some obscure planet way out on the rim of settled space. The Ciriote must have stolen it from there.

Trying not to look as if this was the first time she had tried to fly an aircraft, Kryslie ran her fingers over the controls and the engines started. As she recalled each step of the ship's operation, more interior systems came to life – the nav computer, the internal pressurisation, the air recycling and the comm. system.

Then, as the wind continued to press on the ship, Kryslie activated the blast off switch and quickly grabbed the steering controls.

When the Ciriote had landed the ship this time, they had brought it to rest on its side, so when the propulsion system was activated, the ship was propelled along the ground, until Kryslie heaved on a lever, brought the nose up a little, and they lifted into the air. Once she was at a safe height, she used one hand to manipulate the navigation panel. It gave her enough information so that she could head in the general direction of the main continent.

Out of the forward view window, Kryslie's adjusted eyes watched the roiling energy fields as they flew over the barren landscape. Glancing from the view, back to the controls, she tried to locate the cloaking field generator. But Xyron didn't know of it and nothing looked ‘tacked on’.

She didn't verbalise her thoughts. They didn't need to be reminded that this ship was likely to become the target of three races of beings. Unless she could cloak it or communicate with the Tymoreans.

Once they were underway and Kryslie was comfortable handling the aircraft, she asked the scientists if they knew where the nearest Aeronite base was. The four men exchanged glances; none of them wanted to be the one to reveal such a secret.

“It really doesn't bother me,” Kryslie told them when it became obvious they wouldn't talk. “I would be quite happy to land anywhere and let you walk there. On the other hand, I could continue to the palaces and let you be taken prisoner. You can think about it until we cross onto the main continent.”

She pretended not to hear the four talking softly. Finally, one volunteered coordinates.

“That isn't Kellex's new camp is it?” she asked the men. A glance back at them, told her she had unsettled them. The man who had spoken shook his head.

“Probably just as well,” Kryslie spoke aloud, but more to herself. “I have a major score to settle with him.”

And when she had taken Jordan and Vila back, she had used their mental reference, not coordinates.

She adjusted the crafts heading to arrive near the indicated area and kept her concentration on flying.

Occasionally, she tried to reach her brother's mind. Something was preventing her. Perhaps it was the distance, or maybe it was because she was in the alien craft. She hoped that he and Llaimos were safe and her father too.

After a time, one of the scientists moved to the co-pilot's seat and began playing with the computer devices. He brought up a kind of radar and the comm. system on which they only heard the clicking speech of the Ciriote. Kryslie wished she could understand it.

"What frequency are they using," Kryslie asked him. She received in reply a technical explanation that began with, "It isn't exactly a frequency..."

After a few minutes of it, she cut him off with, "Can you use it to tell your Warlords not to fire on us?"

The man nodded, fiddled, and spoke into a microphone. Kryslie heard the reply, but didn't trust the promise of safe passage any further than when she dropped the Aeronites off. Still, the radar would warn her if she was going to have company and in the meantime, she would try to find shield and cloaking controls.

The Aeronites exited the craft with undisguised relief. They half expected her to change her mind and kill them after all. She waited until they were far enough a way to blast off again, and did so. She hoped her other passengers were braced for it. This time, she headed for Dira, knowing deep within her that she needed to be there, and wanting to leave the current area as fast as she could.

Her luck ran out half an hour later, when a flight of aircraft appeared on the radar screen, heading directly for her. Using the ship's internal comm., she warned her remaining passengers that she was going to have to land and it might be rough.

Now her mind was full of techniques for outsmarting planes that were after her. She guessed the memories came from Reslic's experiences. She went lower and skimmed the ground, finding a valley between hills and slowing to fly into it. As soon as she landed, she gave the order to leave the ship and run.

Not all the passengers were in a state to run. Some of the common born Tymoreans could hardly walk. Without being asked, the mutant passengers simply lifted these by making a seat between two of them, and the three 'ran' together.

Kryslie could not waste worry on those who were already dead. It was war, and proper burial rites were a luxury. She followed the last of her passengers to the scant cover of a grove of trees that was perched on the side of one of the hills. Once there, she directed the passengers to stay still.

The wind was beginning to rise there, and Kryslie was aware of the energies beginning to roil. They had barely outrun the edge of the terrain-reforming program, and it had not stopped at the edge of the third continent.

The pursuing jet fighters flew over. Minutes later, she heard a smaller number returning, doing a strafing run along the valley. The sound of the high-powered projectiles hitting the hull was louder than the engine noise, but the ship did not explode.

For the next run, two of the aircraft flew lower and dropped explosives along the valley. The ground rocked and the ship exploded.

Only when she could no longer hear the jet engines, did Kryslie allow anyone to leave cover. She gathered them together.

"The nearest town is twenty miles away. That is where we will go. From there, I can get you to a city."

The twelve commoners looked relieved. The misshapen faces of the fifteen mutants might have been inscrutable. The one who had offered to tend the injured, took on a role as leader and stated, "City have us not. With you, go us. Fight with you, we promised. Strong we are."

Kryslie studied them, felt their determination and accepted the offer. "Come then. To the village first."

Chapter 30 - The Devastation Spreads

The mutants continued to help the injured commoners, on the long walk. Nearer the town, they foraged through the harvested fields for overlooked vegetables. They chewed on these while waiting in a deserted building for Kryslie to return. They didn't seem to mind if the vegetables were over ripe or partly rotted.

Kryslie took the Tymorean commoners to where she knew the underground way to the city began. They only stared around the seemingly empty cellar, but Kryslie saw where a hologram of a solid wall hid a control panel. She went directly to it, stopped the projection and as she punched in an override code to re-enable transmission, saw the familiar shape of a transmitter on a narrow ledge. She took it with a sense of gratitude, for the Guardians must have foreseen her need.

The glowing mauve terminus of the long-range beam became visible.

"Four of you, stand there..." Kryslie directed. She positioned the men, and took a position close to them. "We will arrive in the city. Expect to face weapons when we arrive, but there is no reason to fear."

She was not wrong, and was pleased to see the guards were alert.

"Your Highness," the lead guard greeted her. He did not point his weapon down. "Before he left, Elder Fenshin said you would come."

That the Elder had foreseen her coming there, before she had even decided to do it, proved that the Guardians of Peace were with her.

"These four men need medical attention. I have eight more that I need to bring through. Can I leave them with you?"

"Are you sure they are not infiltrators, your Highness?"

The question, although it implied distrust of her judgement, was understandable.

"I can tell Aeronites from Tymoreans. All of these have white in their eyes. Yes, I am sure. Are you still having trouble with saboteurs?" All six guards nodded.

"Are you looking for the saboteurs?" Kryslie asked.

"Yes, but all the high ranking corpsmen have gone," one of the guards blurted.

"It may seem like we have taken your protection off you, but what is needed here are people who know their city. It will be easier for you to root out strangers." Kryslie appealed to their civic pride. "The experienced fighters are needed to fight where the danger to citizens is worst."

"What is happening?" the lead guard asked. "We have heard nothing for days. Not since the shields went full on."

"Let me bring the others through, and then I will tell you what I can, briefly. I must get to Dira, and soon."

"You can take the beam," another guard reminded her.

Kryslie shook her head. "I have reasons for going overland. I am not alone. Please – time is short."

When the third trip was complete, Kryslie gave the men a very terse report and listed all the cities already in Aeronite control, and revealing that some of the cities had two kinds of invaders. She stressed the importance of maintaining security and being ever vigilant. Then, without asking permission, she transmitted away.

The mutants were outside, staring at what looked like a rapidly approaching storm front. Kryslie knew what it was - the disturbance from the unbalanced terrain-reforming program. It had caught up to them. Whilst she still could, she drew energy from the aura.

"We have to run," Kryslie directed. "We will have the storm at our back, and it will be turbulent."

The mutants could run faster than Tymorean commoners, but not at the speed that Kryslie could maintain if she was alone. Keeping that in mind, Kryslie led the group towards the next nearest village in the direction of her intended destination. She found that the mutants had surprising stamina.

In that village, they encountered Aeronite troops, ones that had never seen mutants before. A short battle was joined, but when the Aeronites saw their beam weapons hit an invisible barrier in front of Kryslie, and the projectiles fired by the mutants and themselves, fly in unpredictable directions – they chose to flee.

Kryslie told the mutants to hold their fire. The Aeronites had been edgy already, then freaked by the mutants and the approaching storm. She sent a mental command after them, and hoped that at least one of them would hear her suggestion to hide in the cellars. There at least, the power beneath the planet's surface would protect them.

The hours wore on, and the storm front was full of cyclone strength winds and thunder that deafened them and shook the ground. The winds blew them along, and seemed to be trying to pluck them from the ground. Kryslie kept her own connection to the ground, but the mutants seemed not to notice. It was as if they simply made themselves heavier at need.

They stopped at intervals, where the wayside shines, made of stones, protected springs of water. At each stop, Kryslie tried to reach her brother. It seemed that her failure was due to the roiling energies.

Coming onto dark, they reached one of the larger towns and found signs of a battle. Aeronite warriors lay dead on the main street, some with once bleeding cuts and slashes, and others with limbs torn from their torso. The dead faces were fixed in masks of agony. Yet others were blackened heaps of burnt bone and flesh on the stone terraces.

“Stop,” Kryslie said abruptly. She looked around, increasing the perception of her eyes. Buildings showed where bombs and incendiaries had landed. She ran for a closer look and found large areas flattened and destroyed.

“Keep alert,” she warned the mutants. “This is the work of the Ciriote.”

The mutants needed little more direction than that. They were used to hiding from raiding groups of Tymorean guards, Aeronite warriors and other mutant groups. They quickly retreated from the town, back to some outbuildings a mile away.

“This place is Wequinston,” she said aloud. “The people here were quite wealthy. They were miners. There is a lode of silver running near here. The Ciriote probably learnt of it and came to raid it. They might still be around.”

“There be two,” a mutant pointed.

“More behind,” another warned.

“Circled we are,” a third confirmed.

Kryslie whispered to the nearest mutant, “Use knives. Aim where the armour must move.”

The nearest mutant growled nastily and passed on the message.

When the circle closed in, two dozen Ciriote all focussed on her as one of the ruling Tymorean class. When their captives didn't try to run away, they must have believed the group was too petrified to move. They were wrong. The first one to come at her died for his assumption. Then the fight was on in earnest. The mutants ran at the nearest Ciriote, and thrust knives into the joints of the Ciriote armour, cutting through the tough material, and inflicting damage to muscles and tendons, or reaching deeper into vital organs.

Their opponents went berserk, inflicting damage too, but the mutants were fearless fighters, and Kryslie was capable of holding her own.

Part of her abhorred the killing, but everyone of the Ciriote, would happily torture and kill her and all of those with her. They were vermin.

One by one, the Ciriots went down, with arms and legs made useless, and a knife in the throat to finish them.

Only one of the mutants died, and one received a bad wound. He kept pressure on his leg wound until Kryslie came to him and used her power to start the wound healing.

“Princess fight like man,” the mutants muttered, in admiration. “Glad we, friend you are.”

Kryslie gave them a wry smile. “Let’s leave. I don’t want to meet any more. We will keep going.”

There had been more, who had seen what had happened to their fellows, and decided to keep out of sight and send messages on ahead of them.

Flying craft, sounding like thumping thudding machines, flew above them, shining lights down to the ground in an attempt to locate them. Whenever Kryslie heard them coming, she moved away from the road, and used whatever cover she could see to confuse the hunters. Sometimes she had to tell the mutants to hunch up like rocks, for there was no cover at all.

When the search did not find them, the Ciriots craft began to bomb the road behind and in front of them. Kryslie immediately left the stone paved road and moved to the edge of the vegetation beside the road. Sometimes there were trees, sometimes only bushes, and finally, they began to run across country, with Kryslie following an internal prompting in her choice of direction.

“Surprised, me, that see you they don’t,” the mutant named Hoppa, commented as they continued to run. “Glow you do, like light in empty gourd fruit.”

Kryslie glanced at her arm and saw what he meant. She could not explain it, except that she felt filled with the aura, and in the past when she held more energy than enough – her hands had glowed.

“See it not,” Kryslie answered him in the mutant’s dialect. “Power of Royalty not for likes of Ciriots.”

“Us privileged,” Hoppa chuckled. “Safe you keep us.”

“I hope so,” Kryslie promised. “With the Guardians help, I will.”

“Guardians never help us before,” Hoppa told her. “Make them you will?”

“You are loyal to this world, even if you don’t like my father and the other Governors. The Guardians know that. The Ciriots defile our world and so they must die.”

“Make soon,” Hoppa growled. “Go now, where to?”

“I know of some old mine works. We should be able to rest there for a time.”

They rested there for an hour, in an underground chamber that was formed by excavating dirt from between two layers of rock. But even down there, they could still hear the demented howling of the wind. Kryslie felt the planet protesting, as a kind of phantom pain in her own body.

Being underground though, she was close to the untainted aura and this refreshed her, and seemed to be rushing into her and trying to expand her out of the confines of her mortal body. She thanked the presence of the mutants with her, for they reminded her of who she was and where she needed to be.

Her companions found stored supplies and pure water and feasted on these to regain their strength. Kryslie ate only a little despite the insistence of the mutants. She didn’t need to get energy from food.

When they began to run again, it was under a dark sky full of clashing colours. Twice they heard flights of aircraft flying over them, once Ciriots, once Aeronites.

Sometime during that night, they came to a bloody battlefield. Tymorean and Aeronite dead lay side by side. Her companions suddenly veered away. Kryslie felt an unpleasant tingling on her skin.

“Active dust,” Hoppa said, pulling on her arm. “Very bad. Us mutants change unpredictable - Royal may die.”

“Then you stay clear. I must learn who these warriors were.”

Kryslie felt the aura still strong in her and trusted that the nuclear effects would not harm her. She needed to find a communicator, if there was one that still worked. Her eyes, adjusted for the dark, also saw the active glow. She saw well enough in the dark, to memorise faces and name some of the dead. The leader of this group had been Tennin Reslic. One of the President’s lesser cousins.

In him, Kryslie felt a flicker of life and she knelt down beside him and shared some of her energy with him.

The eyes opened. “Take what you need, daughter of the light. I have waited for you to come; now I am at peace.”

Life went from Tennin’s eyes. Kryslie felt a fleeting touch, as of the Guardians, and took his commset and weapons.

She rejoined her companions where they waited beyond the area of death.

“The dark eyed ones did this not,” Hoppa said, his voice full of anger. “Poison this is. Land dead now.”

“We have to keep going,” Kryslie directed. Her own anger at the wanton destruction accompanying a plea to the Guardians for a means to purify and revitalise the land.

Coming towards Vega, having run fifty miles during the night, Kryslie finally felt the touch of her brother’s mind, and her heart and spirits lifted. “Tymos, Llaimos, I am coming.”

She felt them want to know where she was and what was happening. She had little time to reply, for the Ciriote ships had found them again and were trying to hit them with beam and projectile weapons.

“The world is chaos. The winds are making the ground quake. We dare not transmit. We are in the open, the Ciriote are attacking again, but they can’t touch me.”

She ran in a zigzagging pattern and went on to think at her brother, “The Aeronites had a machine, meant to make this world suitable for their kind. The Ciriote found it, meddled with the controls, and then activated it. The shockwave from the energy warp is spreading.”

“Where are you?” her brother’s thought came at her.

“Near Vega. We are running for the city. Warn them to raise the edge of the shield on my command. I promised to protect those with me. The Ciriote are still trying to kill us.”

As they approached the shield, a ground force of armoured Aeronites attacked.

“Go, you do. Stop these we will,” Hoppa told her, as he and the other mutants turned and fought off the aliens.

Kryslie slowed her pace and stopped close to the boundary of the shield. Through it, she saw men waiting for her command, but she turned her back on the city and studied the fighting. The mutants were determined to protect her; the Aeronites were desperate to get to a place of safety. She knew they would not be able to survive in the unholy chaos without going insane.

In a loud voice, amplified by her power, Kryslie called out, “Everyone, Cease fighting!”

All the battling figures stopped in mid action.

Kryslie walked back to the fighters and said, “This is wrong!”

The mutants stepped back from their opponents, but were ready to protect her if the Aeronites tried to attack again.

The troop leader came to face off with Kryslie. “If those city peasants won’t let us in, we won’t let you in,” he threatened. “You can take the risk of being killed by those strafing us too. You Tymorean Royals deserve to die anyway.”

“You can hardly blame the city folk for denying you entry, considering what your Warlords want you to do. They have no wish to be enslaved by Aeronite warriors,” Kryslie countered. “In the cities taken over by Aeronites, the people have been dying in large numbers.”

“Then they are fools and deserve it. We offer them a better life than they have under the despotic rule of the Royals.” The leader truly believed what he was saying.

Kryslie considered how to handle the man. “Tymoreans are not in the attacking aircraft.”

“Do you think me stupid? My own people would not be attacking us.”

“I did not say they were. The Ciriots have been trying to kill me too,” Kryslie told him.

“Ciriots? They are our allies, but they are not here!”

The other Aeronites began to mutter uneasily.

“Then, if they are your allies, why don’t you ask them to rescue you?” Kryslie suggested in a perfectly even tone. She could hear the thumping of the Ciriots aircraft, coming back for another attack. “They will be back in a few minutes.”

The troop leader reached out to grab Kryslie, but his arm was gripped in a vice like hold.

“If you want my protection,” Kryslie told him. “Then you will order your warriors to disarm. I will allow you to enter the city, but once inside you must surrender to the city guards.”

The thumping engine noise was getting louder.

“How do I know you won’t kill us?” the leader asked, looking for the attack craft.

“Because I do not hate you enough to want you dead,” Kryslie told them. “You are merely obeying orders, and your people are as much victims in this war as the Tymoreans are. Will you disarm and surrender to me?”

The first of the next round of bombs fell; close enough to send a shower of dirt and tree fragments over the whole group.

“Yes!” the troop leader agreed, and his men dropped weapons and ran to the shield. Kryslie trotted with them, the mutants collected the weapons and sprinted after her.

“Open the shield!” she yelled. The glow disappeared from ground level to man height, for only the time it took for the group to enter.

“Hold it there!” a firm voice ordered.

Kryslie slowed and found the owner of the voice, the one in charge of the men with weapons aimed at them.

“Your highness...are you alright?”

“Are you Guard leader Maston?” Kryslie asked.

“No, Mam, Guard second Farris, acting Guard leader. I was not told to expect mutants and our enemies.”

“No, I apologise. My communicator is not working well. However, the mutants are my friends, and the Aeronite warriors have surrendered to me,” Kryslie stated. She could see Farris about to object.

“Guard Second Farris, I do not have the time to argue with you. As Heir Designate to His Majesty, Governor Tymoros, I out rank you. I also have the authority to act in their name. So you will listen to the conditions that I give to these former enemies, and you will ensure all the city folk abide by their part.”

“Yes, Mam,” Farris agreed stiffly.

Kryslie turned to the Aeronites standing in a huddle, and looking frightened. The ground was shaking with the intensity of the bombing occurring outside the shield.

“You voluntarily surrendered to me. I am now placing you in the aegis of the guards of this city. If you wish to earn my gratitude and safe passage back to your base-ship, you must abide by these conditions...”

“You will send us out again in this? We cannot fly to our ships...”

“If you will not listen, I will simply have you thrown into the nearest cellar,” Kryslie said, letting her impatience show. “You will be tagged so that everyone will know you are offenders on parole. Should you begin fighting, perform acts of sabotage, harm anyone within this city, your freedom of movement will be curtailed. You will work with the people of the city to repair the damage caused by those of your kind that have infiltrated here. It would be to your

advantage to convince those spies and saboteurs to cease their activities and surrender as well. I am sure you do not want to have the shield come down just as a bomb lands near you.”

“Why should they trust your word,” the leader snarled.

“I personally do not care what you think of me,” Kryslie told him. “And perhaps you will not believe that the only ones of your kind that I have an issue with are your Warlords. Your people were once Tymorean, and as such, I believe you deserve help. I do not believe you deserve to die by Ciriots means. I have seen them kill Aeronites as well as Tymoreans.”

Kryslie turned to Farris. “If these Aeronites help you with vital works, and do not act against you they are to be treated well. If they do not, you may incarcerate them. Any others that surrender are to be treated as these, and also made to help undo their damage.”

“You will return to remove them?” Farris asked.

“That is my intention,” Kryslie admitted. “But I must return to Dira, quickly.”

“What of those...mutants?” Farris said with fearful distaste.

“They are loyal Tymoreans,” Kryslie said. “And I have said they are my friends. We would all appreciate something to drink. We have fifty miles of road dust in our mouths.”

Farris suddenly remembered protocol and sent some of his men to bring refreshments and others to take the Aeronites to a temporary holding room, so they could be tagged.

Kryslie used the moment of peace to send word to her brother. She sensed that waiting to hear from her again had been almost unbearable. She told him quickly that she was in Vega, and of the Aeronites that had attacked them. As she mentioned the agreement she had made, she heard a loud explosion, and saw two robed figures running towards her. Abruptly, she terminated contact with her brother and drew a weapon.

“Hoppal Ciriots! How did they get in?”

Kryslie gave orders to the remaining guards, and heard them summon reinforcements. Guards further from Kryslie challenged the two figures, but neither stopped or heeded the weapon fire hitting them. They simply fired back at those who had fired at them.

Farris tried to insist that Kryslie moved to safety, but she did not. She used the practiced movements of the guards to distract the Ciriots, and moved to cover so as to approach them from the side.

Having seen that the robed figures were hostile, Farris proved he was a skilled leader. Kryslie saw he had the situation in hand, and gestured to the mutants to follow her and seek for others. In her mind was the idea that the Ciriots travelled in packs of six.

She was correct. Her instinct led her to a shadowed doorway. The remaining four Ciriots were not cloaked, and did not have time to regret their lack of caution. Still, they fought furiously, and two of the mutants received fatal injuries.

When Farris found her, after killing the first two Ciriots, he stared in disbelief as Kryslie stood up from examining the two she had personally killed. She wiped off purplish blood on the dark brown rough spun cape of the nearest.

“What happened here?” Farris asked.

“Ciriots travel in packs of six. I terminated these. Please have the promised refreshments sent to the council building, and if you could arrange it, I need a change of clothes. Guard issue, nothing fancy. After a break, I will travel by beam to Kyr. I would appreciate it if you would warn the council of Kyr that I will be coming and that I have my mutant allies with me. I insist that you perform death rites for Thaddeus and Toltar.”

Farris answered in the affirmative, but he was looking at her with both shock and respect. “I will see to it personally. We found explosives and vials of some substance on the two we killed. Are there likely to be more?”

“I will do a quick reconnaissance before I come to the council building,” Kryslie promised.

“Your highness that is not a job for...”

“Farris, do what I told you to do. This is my business.”

Without apology, Kryslie trotted off, following the glowing trail as it zigzagged around buildings and finally seemed to go into the shield.

“How you find trail,” Hoppa asked.

“Never mind,” Kryslie told him. “These must have snuck in when the shield went up to let us in. I can see no sign of others going a different way. Come on. I need to get to Dira.”

Kryslie was glad of the drink, but did not delay her departure any longer than she needed to. She had explained to the mutants how they were to get to Kyr, and they professed to be honoured. They knew to expect a similar welcome in the next city, although Hoppa had already explained. “City folk like us not. Think our looks will catch to them. Like that always.”

“For that, I am sorry,” Kryslie apologised. “But even I cannot change all minds.”

“Fault not yours,” Hoppa assured her. “Friend to us you are. Power filled we are – with you.”

Kryslie smiled wryly, “People are scared.”

“Mutants scared too,” Hoppa agreed. “But we have chance to fight.”

Chapter 31 - A Dead City

Kryslie needed three trips to transmit the remaining twelve mutants to Kyr. On the first arrival, she identified the City's Mayor dressed in hastily donned finery. The twelve armed guards were eyeing the mutants.

She stood tall and spoke immediately to the elderly mayor. "Thank you for your welcome. These are friends and allies of mine. I leave these four in your protection while I return for the next four."

The Mayor was speechless when she returned for the final time. He seemed to want to ask if the mutants were likely to turn savage. Hoppa and his brethren simply stood back away from the city folk and made no move.

"Esteemed Mayor," Kryslie spoke to him in her most respectful tone. "I must apologise for not being able to stay long. Can you give me a quick report of the status of your town?"

The man responded as she had hoped, giving her the report without all the traditional courtesies first.

"The shields are protecting us, and keeping the air in the city relatively calm. The relays from the outer towns are giving readings of hurricane winds, and high dust content in the air. We have had aircraft trying to break the shields, but they stopped several hours ago. I believe they went off to the west. Since then we have heard two flights flying over and heading towards Keta and Dira."

"How is the morale of your citizens?" Kryslie asked.

"We are all frightened. Why did the Peace Corps men have to leave? What if those evil creatures you saw in Vega are here too?"

"If they are here, you would know it by now," Kryslie told him soberly. "Those that were seen in Vega slipped in when the shield was raised to let me in. They were terminated on my orders. The Ciriots are the true enemy in this war. They tricked the Aeronites into attacking us, and they are now showing their contempt for Tymoreans and Aeronites alike."

"We have had many instances of sabotage and vandalism in the city," the mayor remarked. "Are these acts of these Ciriots?"

"No, I believe there will be Aeronite infiltrators in your city. They will be trying to bring down the shields in the mistaken belief that those who are trying to get in are their allies. You must ensure the shields stay up. You have received information on how to identify Aeronites, and should you apprehend any of them, I wish you to keep them prisoner. In Vega, those who surrendered to me have promised to abide by the city laws and help repair the damage their kind are doing. I promised them that if I were able, I would see them back to their base-ships. My offer stands for any who give themselves up to you. If they find the offer hard to believe, perhaps speaking to those in Vega will convince them."

"We have little contact with the other cities, the signals are often full of interference," the Mayor said, fearfully. "When will this war be over?"

"We are doing all we can," Kryslie said, speaking on behalf of the Governors. "Do as you have been instructed. Stay within the city and try to hunt out the misguided ones. Further instructions will be forthcoming as necessary. But I must go on, and I will bring word of your city to my elders."

The elderly mayor took the hint. He demanded to know if the beam was ready.

Kryslie heard the confirmation that the beam was activated, and set to take her to Ecla. She also heard the concern that there was no vocal confirmation from the distant city.

Her sense of danger was suddenly extreme.

When she brought the first four mutants to Ecla, she materialised in an area full of stone and wood rubble. The cause was obvious; a huge hole had been blasted in the roof of the beam-in room and through it, she could hear the roaring of the hurricane strength winds passing over the city. At first, she thought that the wind had lifted the roof, but then she saw the scorch marks around the edges of the hole. Looking up, she saw that the sky looked orange and on the floor under the hole was a faint layer of orange dust.

She listened with senses other than hearing, and the mental silence of the city alarmed her.

“Hoppa, I don’t like this. When those at Kyr activated the beam to here, someone should have come to greet me...and there should have been guards in here. Stay here while I bring the others in, and then we will see what has happened.”

She had instinctively looked for the glowing trails and the room was bright with them. The Ciriote had been there - had come in through one of the tunnels, or had left that way. She read the glyph - Ruhr.

“We watch. Ready to kill enemies,” Hoppa promised.

“I don’t need to tell you to protect innocents?” Kryslie reminded him.

He merely nodded. “Know difference now.”

When she returned the third time, there had still been no contact with the locals.

Kryslie directed, “We will stay together in case we meet Ciriote. They have been in this room, but I think they have gone.”

She led the way through to the main part of the council building, and found the reason for the mental silence. Bodies lay scattered through the rooms, killed by weapons of various kinds. No one had been spared; even the small child of a councillor lay dead. She felt her anger rising, and heard the growls of the mutants. She kept moving past the still forms and went to look outside.

Hoppa had glanced through the windows, checking for signs of the enemy; he moved to block her from the door. “Go first, I will. Air is orange. Poison perhaps.”

Kryslie nodded, accepting the warning, but went around him to open the door. As he had said, the scene outside was tinged with orange, as if the air was full of reddish dust. Along the deserted roadway, trees were bent and broken, and the wind was blowing debris along the street. Her senses warned her of the danger. The wind outside was hurricane force, and even the mutants would have a hard job to walk against it.

“You stay inside,” Hoppa insisted. “This poison harm us not. Adapt we do to ignore it. We scout outside. You keep look inside. Shield up, not down. Leave Thomas and Dupal with you.”

Kryslie did not let on that she knew Hoppa had lied. He did not know for sure that the poison would not harm him. It was his choice and the choice of his fellows to risk themselves to find the truth she needed. Her one glimpse outside had told her that the Ciriote had been in Ecla in force, and she did not have time to hunt out any that remained. However, there were things she had to do.

“You are right, Hoppa, but do not stay out long. I do not like this place.”

Kryslie returned to the beam-in chamber and used the communicator to call ahead to Ruhr. In her mind was the knowledge that Ruhr was over a hundred and fifty miles away. How long would it take them to get there if they were using one of the Aeronite rocket capsules?

How long ago did they leave?

It seemed to take too long for them to answer and her mind was picturing scenes like those that she had seen here. While she waited, she called mentally to her brother, gave him the picture of Ecla.

“The city feels dead. There is too much silence, and the air outside is full of a reddish poison. The Ciriote have been here but I think they have gone again. The streets and the entrance

to the Ruhr tunnel are bright with Ciriote trails. The weather is at its full ferocity so the shields must be fully down. I cannot contact Ruhr, but it may be that there is too much atmospheric interference.”

In her mind, she heard Tymos telling her, “Seal all the tunnels. Reslic will try to contact the three cities that are accessible from there and give them instructions. Father says to look for the shield controls in the mayor’s office. If you can reactivate them, you should do so. Then get here. You can still transmit along the tunnels even if they are sealed.”

Kryslie began to run, not sure of her sudden urgency. It had started when Tymos had said to get there, to Dira. She didn’t wait to see if the two mutants followed her, but went to where she expected the mayor’s office to be. She knew when she found it for the body on the floor was dressed in the mayor’s formal robes. Kryslie briefly checked the body. It was cold and stiff. The wall that had hidden the shield controls had been blasted out of the way – whoever had done it had been in a hurry. The touch screen was smashed, and the unit yanked out from the wall so it hung from wires.

“Go and check through the building,” she told her companions. “Let me know what you find.”

Kryslie thought of how the shields were controlled, and the knowledge she needed was instantly in her mind. The control panel was simply a relay point to split the power to the different layers of shielding. As it was now, no power was going to any of the shields. To make all the shields go back up, all she needed to do was join the two wires to each other. She found the tools she needed in a nearby cupboard that had not been opened. She joined the single thick wire to the six finer ones. The sounds of the wind decreased.

The mutants returned. “Big hole at back. All dead inside. Place a mess.”

They followed her back to the beam-in chamber, and stood watching while she checked the controls for the beam generator. The controls and the device had not been touched.

Kryslie thought aloud. “It was an Aeronite that brought the shields down and they wanted to use the tunnels. Kellex would know of them from Jordan. The Ciriote, if they learnt of it, might want the technology. Though it would do them no good.”

Whatever the reason, it meant that the controls she needed now, would work. Though she had never known before now that the tunnels could be sealed, she now knew how to do it. First, she adjusted the direction for beaming to Tyra, and activated the seal tunnel sub-program. A very loud ‘thunk’ and a puff of air were indications that the solid metal door had fallen into place. The metal wall was some distance down the tunnel, at about the position of the city’s outer walls and the shields.

She repeated the procedure for the tunnel to Basiq, before setting the machine to Ruhr.

Why she decided to enter the Ruhr tunnel and walk along it a short way was a matter of instinct. After the first few yards, only a faint glow continued. At the place where the metal wall would fall, the trail stopped. In reaching that point, Kryslie had seen enough evidence that a rocket capsule had passed through this tunnel. The smell of burnt fuel, the ashy feel to the wall, and small rocks knocked from to the ground. The Ciriote did not have the anti collision fields working. She hoped the Ciriote in the capsule were addled by the time they reached Ruhr.

As she ran back along the tunnel, Kryslie thought about how they had got the capsule there. Had they some of their own, or was the one they used stolen from the Aeronites in Amik? Obviously, the hole in the roof was how they had inserted it in the chamber. That meant they hadn’t travelled in it from Amik. There were at least six cities to travel via between Amik and Ecla. If they had come that way, they would have stopped at each point along the way.

When she returned to the chamber, she saw more clearly that the rubble had been cleared to give a capsule a clear path to the tunnel. Studying the pushed aside stones, a glint of gold and a faint reddish blue gleam caught her eye. She had not yet adjusted them back to normal after needing to see in the dark.

The two mutants helped her to move the larger pieces of rubble, to enable her to reach what she had seen. As soon as her fingers had pried it from its resting place, she knew it was her father's ring. The gold circle held the odd stone she had first seen on the night Llaimos was born. That felt like an age ago.

"Tym?" Kryslie called with her mind. Her brother had mentioned that their father was in the Temple. When she felt his response, she thought at him, "Ask father where he lost his ring."

"What does that matter, Krys. Get back here!" Her twin sounded edgy and agitated.

"Ask him!" she insisted. She began to share the desperation she had felt in her twin's mental tone, but she also felt the answer to her question was vitally important.

"In Amik. The Ciriote stripped him of everything," Tymos told her impatiently. "Why?"

"I found it. Here in Ecla."

"Krys, just get here, please."

Her mind asked, "Why was the ring here, loose?"

Another mental voice reached her. Her father.

"The boy may have found it...taken it."

"Pyr?" Kryslie had seen the picture image in her father's mind. "You saw him?"

"He helped me...then went after you."

"Guardians protect him! Father, I didn't see him. I have to find him."

"It was his choice," Tymoros sent to her. Yet, his grief was again raw and anguished.

"Father, he is a child. He could have had no idea..."

"He had seen the Ciriote..."

"Father, if they have him, we can't leave him with them. He is your son, even if he is estranged. If his power rises, I do not want the Ciriote using him. I am going to Ruhr."

"Kryslie!" Tymoros thought strongly, trying to stop her.

She knew her decision was right. Her father had betrayed that Pyr was indeed coming into his power. He was in conflict between wanting his lost son to be alive and safe, and the greater needs of all the people of his world.

Without further delay, she sealed the tunnel to Ruhr, and then returned to the door leading to the street.

"Hoppa! Return now!" she yelled. With the city again sheltered from the wind, she was heard.

In minutes, she saw the mutants running back. Their gait, normally ungainly, was made more so by the need to skirt or leap over debris. When they re-entered the building, she saw that their treads and tunics were coated in the orange dust. They all stayed back from her to avoid rubbing the dust on her.

"Some here not dead," Hoppa told her. "Shot at we were."

Kryslie quickly counted heads. They had all come back.

"Good shots, were not," Hoppa assured her.

Kryslie made an instant decision. "I'm going to Ruhr. I think some of the Ciriote have gone there. Even though I have sealed the tunnels, I can still transmit. I was unable to warn Ruhr, but the President is going to keep trying for me."

"Dangerous. Only one of you," Hoppa told her.

"The one of me is dangerous to them," Kryslie reminded him. "But I need you and the others to stay here to look for and help any survivors. There should be stores of food somewhere."

"Fight creatures all at once, you can't," Hoppa argued.

"I will if I have to, and I won't be an easy target," Kryslie told him. "But I can only take four at a time, and I won't have time for three trips. With luck, I won't be fighting alone."

The mutants seemed to look at each other, as if thinking mind to mind. If they were, Kryslie could not hear them. Hoppa stepped forward with Thomas and Dupal.

One of the others spoke up. “Now shields up, dust settles. Stays down. We stay. Build pyre for dead, look for life.”

“Plan is good,” Kryslie acknowledged. She could see problems, but there was an answer. She took the gold ring from her finger. It was etched with the sigils of the Governors. She no longer needed it to confirm her place on Tymorea.

“I do not know your name,” Kryslie admitted to the speaker.

“Joseth, tribe of Gorlas.”

“Take this ring, Joseth. Should anyone question your right to be here, show them that. This is a time when all Tymoreans need to work together, and I applaud your offer to help those who would scorn you.”

“Promised we did to earn your help,” Joseth reminded her.

“You have, and if you know of a way to contact your kin – all the mutant tribes...tell them there is a place for them here. I too will try to send word.”

Joseth and the others all bowed to her – she had just done them great honour.

Hoppa, Thomas and Dupal, also seemed to stand straighter and followed her back to the beam-in chamber with renewed intent. She reset the beam and warned. “I hope to get to Ruhr before the Ciriote. It will be close. We might walk into a fight.”

Her companions followed her example and drew weapons, a mixture of types taken indiscriminately from Aeronites, Ciriote and dead Tymoreans.

“We ready,” Hoppa announced.

The stone lined beam-in chamber in Ruhr was full of armed figures when Kryslie and her companions materialised on the tiled circle. Around her were local guards, and commoners in the uniform of the Peace Corps. Weapons were half raised, as if they feared she was an enemy out to trick them. Her red hair seemed to reassure them. They glanced from her to the tunnel in alarm.

“Have you sealed the tunnels?” Kryslie demanded as soon as she materialised. Blank looks were her answer. She could hear a roaring noise coming from the tunnel, and feel a breeze from air being pushed out of the tunnel.

“The Ciriote are coming in a rocket propelled capsule,” she told them as she went to the control panel for the beam generator. She had to push people from her way, and activated subprograms that the locals had no idea existed.

“His Excellency warned us,” a man tried to explain. His words died when he heard a thump and the floor of the room shook. “What was that?”

The roaring noise was still getting louder.

“Damn,” Kryslie cursed. “It didn’t stop them! They come now!”

The silver grey capsule erupted into the room, scraping the tiled floor as the last of its momentum was used up. It had no viewing ports, so the Ciriote might not be expecting resistance, but even so, they would be armed and armoured.

Energy beams lanced out from the weapons of the defenders as soon as a crack appeared in the metal of the capsule. The Ciriote leapt out, battle ready and returning fire. They killed half the defenders before the rest crowded closely behind the shields of the Peace Corpsmen. The mutants dived low, and leapt up at the Ciriote, using knives as they had before, to good effect. But more Ciriote emerged from a second capsule, and fired at the mutants, as they rose to attack again.

Kryslie saw them die, but was too far away to help them. She was hampered by the other fighters who wanted to protect her. She moved to the edge of the chamber, using her power to be less noticeable. She took aim with her own weapons, and fired as soon as she had clear shots at the vulnerable places in the Ciriote armour. She didn’t remain in the same place for long, these Ciriote fired back when they realised where the shots came from. Ciriote dropped, injured, but still

firing at the defenders. Her efforts turned the advantage in favour of the defenders, and the few Ciriots still standing backed towards the capsules.

Kryslie became the focus of four weapons, but the beams didn't touch her. The Ciriots, angered by her success in harming their group, forgot for a moment about the other defenders. Shots came from those who did not have Kryslie in the way. The creatures did not intend to give up. One holstered his weapons and reached for her, arrogantly certain that he was stronger than the small red-headed female. She gripped him in turn and pulled him off balance. As he fell, she had her knife out and into the side of his throat. While the last three were trying to reach her too, the defenders copied her example and used their knives.

Silence fell in the room, as the defenders took stock. Kryslie eyed each of the fallen Ciriots; they were not all dead. She saw one raising a disintegrator, and surprised every one by leaping over fallen bodies, and thrusting her knife in his throat.

Aware of the gaze of the remaining defenders, she rose and faced them. "Make sure each of these creatures is dead. As representative of the Governor's of Tymorea, I have judged them guilty of crimes against the people of this world."

The town guards stayed back, stunned and seeming ill at ease. Two of the Corpsmen, moved to obey her commands. A shout of warning made her turn. Stepping out of the first capsule was one of the purple-armoured Ciriots, and he dangled an unconscious red-headed child as a shield in front of him.

None of the locals dared to move, they were frozen in place by the threat to the child, who had to be of Royal blood, and the weapon aimed at Kryslie.

The creature clicked a sentence in his own language. The translation device emitted the unacceptable demand of, "Surrender this city and all of its treasures, or this child dies." The child was Pyr.

Kryslie turned slowly, as if unworried. She faced him and spoke, "How much do you value your life, Ciriots. You are not immortal. You have seen how easily my companions killed yours."

The creature gave his answer as an indiscriminate shot at the defenders trying to shelter behind the shields of the Corpsmen. He hit the elbow of a guardsman that was protruding from behind the shield. The man screamed, and fainted from the pain, and seeing part of his arm disappear.

It turned the weapon on Kryslie, and fired. When she was unmoved, and unharmed by the close-range disintegrator beam, it began to back away. It kept the child as a shield, and that told Kryslie that it was not as confident of its safety as it wanted her to think.

Kryslie fired at its feet, below where the boy's body protected it. It jerked its shield down, and Kryslie was ready. She fired at the side of its neck, aiming so perfectly that she did not touch Pyr. It wasn't a fatal shot, but the Ciriots dropped what it perceived to be a useless ploy, and moved to draw another weapon. He was fast, but Kryslie was faster. She leapt at him, knocked him down and drove her knife in his throat. She watched without expression as the light died from its eyes.

Only then, did she rise and go to check on Pyr. She felt his neck for a pulse, and was relieved to feel it throbbing strongly. She turned to look at the shocked defenders.

"Are they all dead?"

The Corpsmen nodded, grimly, but they were all looking ill. Kryslie entered the first capsule to ensure there were no more surprises in there. Then she went to check the second capsule. That too was empty.

The guardsmen were carefully lifting their dead into a neat row by one wall. Kryslie went to Hoppa, and freed his body from under a dead Ciriots. She did the same for Thomas, and Dupal, and only then did the Corpsmen find the courage to challenge her.

"Your Highness, you should not be doing that."

Kryslie glared at the man. "I don't notice any of you giving respect to these who fought with me, to defend this city."

“But your Highness, they are mutants!”

“Yes, they were brave and fearless. Loyal Tymoreans even as you all are. They have served me well, and faithfully. I insist that the people of this town grant them full honour.”

“As you wish, your Highness,” the man bowed in acknowledgement. “We have summoned a medic for the injured. Is the boy alive?”

“Yes, and he will do well enough for now. I will take him with me when I proceed onto Asal.”

“You cannot leave...”

“I will, because I must. So listen well. The tunnel to Ecla is sealed at both ends. I do not know if any more of these creatures were caught between. You must still be vigilant. You were lucky here. Most of the people in Ecla are dead.”

She heard the indrawn breaths as she said, “I did not get there in time. You need to be particularly alert for any of the dark eyed ones. They will be trying to bring down the shields. I believe that was what happened in Ecla, and the Ciriot took the opportunity to come there in force. These creatures are a race of warlike pirates and made an alliance with the dark eyed ones. Only now, they are showing their true intent. They have betrayed their allies.”

“We have several dark eyed ones in custody,” a corpsman reported. “What should we do with them?”

“Keep them confined, and look out for more. They are misguided and as much victims as we Tymoreans are.”

She ignored the comments of disagreement, and went to pick up Pyr, She carried him to the beam controller and freed one hand to reset the coordinates.

“Your highness,” a guardsman ventured to question her. “We have had little contact with our superiors. When can we get more help here, to defend us?”

Kryslie settled Pyr on her shoulder and spoke quietly, “The other Peace Corpsmen, and the fleet warriors, must go where the need is most extreme. Here in Ruhr, you have been lucky. Many cities were taken over by the dark eyed ones, and are vulnerable to the attentions of the Ciriot. If you continue to be vigilant, and follow the instructions given to the town leaders by the Governors, you will be safe.”

With that, Kryslie walked into the beam terminus and transmitted to Asal.

Her reports grew more frequent, but she spent time in each city – hearing reports and reassuring the city leaders that they had not been abandoned.

In the altar room of the Temple, Kryslie’s reports gave a terrible picture of destruction. The Governor’s maintained a calm demeanour, but Stenn could see the strain on his father’s face and Tymos knew the growing toll of dead haunted his father.

The long periods between reports, added to Tymos’s twitchiness. He was controlling it for his brother’s sake, but it was getting harder and harder to restrain the power surging in Llaimos and to resist the urge to be doing something more than merely waiting.

Stenn watched his friend, and knew the Governors were watching him too. They seemed to be placing a great deal of trust in Tymos, and he wondered what Tymos was destined to do.

Then suddenly, Kryslie was amongst them. Deep silence replaced the sound of her voice in the air of the room. Everyone saw that she carried the limp body of a redheaded child.

Chapter 32 - Nemesis Unleashed

Tymoros moved quickly, taking the burden from Kryslie, and taking the boy to the foot of the altar to place him in the care of the Guardians. He stayed there next to him.

Kryslie went straight to her brothers, giving in to the urgency that had driven her to get there. Tymos did not berate her for helping those on her way, but joined Llaimos in giving her

an embrace. The three of them felt a surge of power as they joined, and the last restraints on Llaimos's development were gone. His body began to stretch and expand, but he held back vocal sounds of distress. He felt his siblings supporting him, and numbing the pain as the inescapable forces matured him.

Watching from a few yards away, Jonko, Keleb and Stenn could not see what was happening clearly. All they knew for sure was that an aura of light was growing brighter where the three stood, and that the figure of Llaimos was getting taller.

To the observers, it looked as if their friends were oblivious to all those around them. Stenn could see Tymos's face, and he stared in amazement as that seemed to be changing – going from adolescent to adult. When the three finally drew apart, three adults stood there. Suddenly, having witnessed the transformation, Stenn felt more confident that his friends, Tymos and Kryslie, would fulfil the prophecy.

He was unable to take his eyes from the newly matured Llaimos. He was still clad in one of Kryslie's coveralls, but the brownish fabric had stretched in proportion to his new size. His siblings still held his hands, and had their full attention on him. His eyes were closed as if he were listening to voices in his head that only he could hear.

He was.

"Llaimos," Kryslie spoke to him. "All the knowledge that is ours is available to you. It will surface when you need it. Our minds contain all our experiences, and the experiences of all the Governors, present and past. This gift we give you, as we have held it in trust from the Guardians themselves."

"I have been so afraid," Llaimos admitted. "I knew I knew nothing. You did your best to help my learning, but once you were away no one seemed to realise that I needed to learn as fast as I could."

"That is not all you fear," Tymos said gently. "You have never had the chance to learn to fight and defend yourself. Nor have you had the training we had to master our power. We haven't had the time to help you with this, but if you let us mind meld with you once more, we will give you the mastery you need."

"Can you do that?" Llaimos thought back with undisguised relief. He had never needed to hide his thoughts and feelings. These who were his siblings always seemed to understand.

"Bro, the guardians made you to fight for them, even as they created us. They will guide you too, but we can teach you what you need, so it is there on an instinctive level. Skills will be available when you need them, and you do not need to fear that your power will master you."

The three gripped hands and stood unmoving for a seemingly long time.

"Kryslie, Tymos, you have always been there for me. How can I possibly thank you?" Llaimos murmured.

"Thank the Guardians who kept us safe until we were old enough to know how to survive," Kryslie advised.

Tymos added, "And be different enough to assume nothing and question everything. We are their Advocates, as now, are you."

"I can feel them in you," Llaimos admitted, surprising his siblings. "Can't you? Feel them in me?"

"Yes, now," Kryslie admitted with a faint wry smile. "Before...we had our minds on many other things."

"We have to bring our people to safety," Llaimos said, but the same knowledge was in the minds of Tymos and Kryslie.

Together, but with Tymos and Kryslie each still having one of their brother's hands, they turned and faced the altar, raising their hands high in a gesture of obedience to the Guardians.

Stenn murmured, “Wow! Do you see that?” To his eyes, a light had appeared behind the Altar, and was growing in brilliance. He could see a fantastic scene, with trees and hills disappearing into the distance, where the wall of the Altar room had been. Outlined by the brilliance, were three figures, darker silhouettes with featureless faces. He heard tinkling voices as the figures spoke in unison, “Welcome.”

The Elders came first, all having heard those voices and responding to them on a deep level. Their faces filled with awe as they came into the presence of the Guardians. Beings who were, until then, merely creatures of their faith. They walked eagerly through the portal. Most did not even seem to notice how it was the High King’s children that were stabilising one end of the mythical portal to Dirakee, and the shadowy Guardians who were holding the other.

Then the Governor’s heard, “Bring your people...”

Reslic, having a communicator and portable data device with him, began to issue orders for the final withdrawal and for the orderly arrival of the Royals from Dira.

When Stenn saw his brothers and sisters arrive in the room, he moved back behind Jonko and Keleb. He knew he was meant to go with them, but he was determined to stay and fight with his friends.

His father passed the arm of his mother to Jonnsen, his eldest brother. She was carrying Ennis, his youngest brother. Tymoros passed Tanya to Marrin, his next oldest brother. He only then recalled how only those with Royal Blood entered Dirakee, and the consorts were commoners.

“They are privileged and have earned their place by giving birth to the next generation of Governors and for protecting the children of each generation,” Jono Reslic stated. Stenn jumped. As he was staring at his mother and Tanya, his father had approached with his uncanny knack of turning away notice.

“You cannot stay,” Reslic said with all his authority in his tone.

“I am staying! I will fight with Tymos, and Kryslie,” Stenn said with both defiance and determination. He stared back at his father even though the look on his father’s face augured trouble. For a time, Jono Reslic turned his attention back to the stream of people arriving from Dira.

After his family had entered, Xyron’s consort and many children followed.

Stenn noticed his father go tense, and then he and the other Governors walked out into the Temple. He wondered what had caused that, but his mind was full of his intention and he continued to watch as all the other children, with their attendants, and strangers that he didn’t know, mingled with servants and the lesser relatives of the Governors. Some of the strangers were in the Peace Corps and the space fleet – judging from their uniforms. Many were grimy, sweat stained and torn. Stenn realised the others were missionaries who were still wearing the varied clothing from the planet of their posting. As each group arrived, they stared at the light and the marvellous place beyond it.

His attention went from the stream of people when Keleb asked a question. “Why are Tymos and Kryslie just standing there? Do they know all these people are coming past them and disappearing?”

“Can’t you see it?” Stenn asked incredulously.

“See what? Those three seem to be glowing, but that is all,” Jonko added his view.

“That bright light behind the altar... is Dirakee,” Stenn said confused. “It is the place of safety promised to us...”

“No, we can’t see it,” Keleb said, suddenly resigned. “Because Jon and I are not Tymoreans of Royal Blood.”

“But you have power,” Stenn argued. “You did a lot to help Tymos and Kryslie. You deserve the right to enter.”

“So you think,” Jonko said thoughtfully. “But, it doesn’t matter. I intend to keep helping Tymos and Kryslie, even if it is our destiny to be expendable. Perhaps that is why we too were given power.”

“Well, I intend to fight with them too,” Stenn said forcefully. “Even if I have to fight father first.”

Keleb stopped watching the stream of people in the altar room, as he sensed from without that some of the people were fearful. He slipped out into the main room of the Temple and sought the origin of the fears. He found a small family group, with the father and mother trying to reassure their children.

It was soon clear that they had just come from a far distant world and were still trying to take in the sudden change in their life.

Part of him recalled that feeling. “Before you lose the chance, you should at least go and see what the place looks like.” Keleb commented to the children. “It looks like a place where you can have a perfectly wonderful holiday.” He only had Stenn’s description to go on, and he did not let on that he was not to enter.

“But there are people bombing us here, and back home, it was a bad place, but we knew how to be safe. But what do we do here?” the older girl demanded of him.

“In Dirakee – you have no need to worry about any of that,” Keleb promised. “The Guardians of Peace will keep you safe.”

The children seemed to stop being afraid, Keleb didn’t know if it was what he said, or if the Guardians had spoken through him. They took their parents hands and dragged them into the Altar room.

Keleb was in no rush to return. He waited as the stream of people became a trickle, wandering aimlessly until he came close to the little side room where the communicator was situated. He did not intend to eavesdrop, but he heard Tymoros speaking and realised that he was inviting the Aeronite Warlords to come to the Temple. He moved away.

“Keleb, have you a problem?” Xyron asked when he emerged and saw his ward nearby.

“No, Sir,” Keleb assured him. “Most of the people have gone on, I think.”

The Governors began moving back into the Altar room.

Reslic was listening to reports, and Keleb heard the speaker saying, that the Ciriots were fleeing from around Dira. Then Reslic directed, “Recall all fighters. Return to the hangar cavern and secure the ships. Have all pilots come directly to the Temple.”

Xyron then spoke into his own mobile communicator. “Esmous, leave that message on the screen and finalise transferring the power to the geo-thermal backup.”

Keleb couldn’t help but question the mention of the back up system. “Why are you keeping the computers running? If there is no one on the Estate to keep intruders out, they might access the information in the archives.”

Xyron was not angry at the question. “Kel, the Great Ones might need to access the information there. They will be able to access the archives, but no outsiders will. We will also need to have the computers running ready for the return.”

“I cannot see that being soon,” Keleb admitted.

Xyron smiled and shrugged. “We have sent the Warlords a message. The Guardians requested us to invite the Warlords to come here. I expect they will go to the Estate, looking for us.”

“To gloat,” Keleb muttered. “Will you be staying to talk to them?”

“No, the Great Ones will act as the Guardians’ Advocates,” Xyron explained.

Tymoros added, "The Warlords will be allowed to enter here, but will be unable to leave until the Guardians judge them. Any that swear to peace, will be protected and those that don't must fend for themselves."

"What of the lesser Aeronites?" Keleb asked. "What will happen to them?"

"Trust the Great Ones. They act in the Guardians name," Tymoros said quietly.

The stream of people eased to a trickle, and Stenn heard his father giving orders for the last of the staff from the palace to come. Then he saw his father walking purposefully towards him.

"I'm in for it now," Stenn muttered, but then he heard Tymos's mental voice. He had assumed that his friend was oblivious to everyone. "Stenn, you cannot stay here, even though we would welcome you."

"I am staying," he insisted mentally.

"We are honoured by your offer of service, Stenn," Kryslie added gently. "And we do have a request that we do not wish to ask of any other..."

"I'll do it," Stenn promised, rashly.

"Please take Daniel with you into Dirakee. He is our natural father, from Earth. He has earned his place there, for keeping us safe for so many years, but he cannot enter on his own," Kryslie asked him. He sensed her concern for the person she named.

Stenn stopped cursing himself for being tricked, and looked around. He saw the brown haired stranger, standing back in one of the alcoves. The man's face was full of confusion and incomprehension, and his eyes were on Tymos and Kryslie. Like Jonko and Keleb, he couldn't see Dirakee, just the brilliant glow around the three Advocates.

Obediently, because he had promised, he walked over to the stranger and offered his hand.

"Sir, my friends, Tymos and Kryslie, have honoured me by asking me to be your escort. We go to Dirakee, where we will be safe until this war is over."

Jono Reslic saw the change in his son's expression and stayed back. He watched as Stenn went over to the stranger he knew to be the natural father of Tymoros's heirs. Any lingering resentment over his son's blatant rebellion vanished. Stenn really had no option about entering Dirakee. The choice was not his to make, and now it seemed he was doing the Guardians' will.

Reslic turned his attention back to monitoring the withdrawal of the flight crews. They would be arriving within moments.

Finally, only ten figures remained within the Temple, and three of them were moving to the portal, looking back even as the shadowy figures of the Guardians had hands out to greet them.

"My children, our trust, the trust of all Tymoreans, is in your hands," Tymoros spoke quietly.

On the verge of their true destiny, Tymos, Kryslie and Llaimos quoted softly, "When there is peace on Tymorea, there is peace in the universe. We will not fail you."

It was a promise both to the Governors and to the Guardians.

The light began to fade as the Governors passed through the portal. The three who had helped hold the portal open for so long, slowly lowered their arms. Each heard the Guardians in their mind, saying, "We will be with you."

Knowledge of what they must do came into their minds – the whole task was vast, but they would start by ensuring all the Tymoreans were safe, all the innocent Aeronites had a chance to return to their ships, and the Warlords had a chance to see the truth.

The rest of the task would become clear in time.

The light faded completely, but some of the brilliance remained in the eyes of the chosen ones, and their red hair seemed to be like fiery haloes. They seemed almost surprised when movement close by returned them to themselves and they identified those who remained. Jonko, Keleb, Xan and Pyr who was slowly sitting up and looking around.

Kryslie went over to him and spoke gently. "I am glad you are well again."

Pyr jumped, and turned around. His eyes went past her, and he took in the strange surroundings. For a moment, his eyes were wide in fright, but then they returned to Kryslie.

"I don't hurt anymore," he whispered.

"That is because the Guardians healed you," Kryslie told him. "You are safe here."

"I went to help you," Pyr said dropping his head. "But they caught me. How did you find me?"

"I believe the Guardians led me to you," Kryslie said. "Come, do you want to meet your other brothers?"

"Jordan, Vila, are they alright?" Pyr asked urgently.

"I took them back to Kellex's ship. As for after that, I do not know."

"They were after the baby," Pyr said, afraid Kryslie would be angry. "They didn't get him, did they?"

"No."

"My guardian will be angry then," Pyr decided. "He may have had them chastised."

Kryslie waited as emotions played across Pyr's face. "It was not an honourable thing that my guardian ordered them to do. I...tried to help the man too. He said he was my father. Was he?"

He saw Kryslie nod. "Is he alright? I would like to see him again." He put his hand into Kryslie's, and let her lead him to her brothers.

"He is well, thanks to you. But for now he is busy elsewhere," Kryslie told him. "You might have seen my brother Tymos, and beside him is our younger brother, Llaimos."

She did not mention that Llaimos had been the baby his other sibs had gone to abduct, but the thought never occurred to him as he realised the resemblance Tymos had to Jordan.

Pyr dropped his hand, turned to Kryslie and bowed deeply.

"Princess you brought me back from the brink of madness and death, my life is yours."

Kryslie looked at him as if judging him. It was almost an effort to speak aloud.

"Brother, your offer of service honours me but in return I say – your life is yours! The bravery you showed to my father gave him strength and heart in his hour of need. In you, he found something precious that he thought he had lost forever. That is a gift beyond price. You were never part of the Aeronite cause; we don't doubt your loyalty to us..." Kryslie paused and let Llaimos continue.

"Brother, my father has seen me grow from child to man in minutes. It is my hope that you can be to him the child I was not destined to be. I would be honoured if you would stay with me."

There was no hesitation, Pyr bowed again and went to stand with Llaimos.

Tymos glanced at the others and he caught the eyes of Xan. The young alien had spent as much of the time since going to the Royal Estate talking and working with the Tymorean scientists.

"Xan," Tymos said to the young alien. "You have no part in this war. You should wait here because you are the only one who knows how to save your people. The Governors gave you the plaque with all the plans and specifications the scientists gathered."

"But...how will I get back? All of your people came here...and vanished. Mine will only try to kill me."

He glanced at Pyr who nodded solemnly.

Kryslie considered him for a while before saying, "The Warlords will come here...thinking it is their own idea. They will be allowed to enter, but will not be allowed to leave. The Guardians of Peace will judge them."

Xan turned pale. "You cannot think they will let me..."

"This is the Temple of Peace, Xan," Kryslie stressed lightly. "They will also find that they cannot harm you. It will not stop them speaking, but words won't kill you."

Tymos added his own persuasion. "Tymoreans did not start this war, we merely defended ourselves. The Aeronites are not the real enemy and that is why we have worked to help your

people. You already believe this war is wrong. The Warlords will have a chance to learn the truth and to consider other choices. If they agree to leave and return to Aerdna to implement the plans you have with you, they will return safely to their baseships and be allowed to leave. If they do not...well that will be their choice too. Either way, the baseships will leave, with or without the Warlords.”

“What of the Ciriote?” Xan asked. “They have given us help when no one else would.”

“Do you think they will leave if we ask them?” Llaimos said, joining the discussion. “It seems to me that they used you to try to weaken us, and now that they think we are defenceless, they have turned on you too.”

Xan shuddered. “No, they won’t leave.”

Jonko pushed away from the wall where he was listening and watching the events unfold. “What are we to do? Kel and I?”

Tymos glanced at his sister and answered. “Krys and I know you have served us well in the past, and Llaimos knows you protected him when we could not. I know you have no desire to stop now. I ask that you both go with Krys. She must visit all the cities...you will be of great help seeking out the last of the Aeronite infiltrators, and looking for the Ciriote or their artefacts.”

“And you?” Keleb asked.

“I will be travelling back to the mountains. I must bring the mutants back to safety. We promised them that. I will have many helpers to find the hidden enclaves of Aeronite warriors. They too, will have our protection.”

“Where will you bring them?” Keleb asked.

“We will bring the mutants to Ecla,” Kryslie said. “Only a fraction of the population there is still alive.”

“Why can’t I come with you?” Keleb asked Tymos.

Tymos looked at Kryslie. He said, “You heard what Kryslie reported. Outside the shielded places, the conditions are unstable. The mutants are already unstable. They can adapt to the ambient conditions. Neither you, nor Jon could survive out there with out full armour. We do not have that. Krys and I, we can.”

Keleb subsided. He wasn’t happy at Tymos being alone, but he knew Kryslie would need help.

“What must I do for you, Sir?” Pyr asked looking up at Llaimos.

“I am Llaimos. You do not need to call me Sir. It is my task to go and locate the Ciriote.” He felt Pyr begin to tremble. “I didn’t say fight them. I heard father say you were very good at hiding. Will you teach me that? We don’t want them to know we are learning about them.”

Pyr had heard Kellex say that you had to know your enemy. “Yes. I will help you.”

Keleb handed a wrist comm to Tymos.

“This is the President’s – he was using it before he entered Dirakee. You might need it.”

Tymos accepted it, realising that the President had left it for a purpose. “What’s the other one?” he asked.

“My guardian left his here too, Krys do you want it?”

Once it was in her hand, Krys’s mind recalled all that Xyron used it for. She passed it to Llaimos.

“This is the link you will need if you want to download any information you learn about the Ciriote. It will let you access the computer archive at the Palace.”

She watched her younger brother as he too found the information about the device coming into his mind. He nodded agreement to her statement.

“So, what do we do now?” Jonko asked, glancing around the nearly deserted Temple. “Do we wait for the Warlords to come here? Keleb said the Governors sent a message to invite them.”

Tymos knew of that, and commented, “They will come soon enough and we have more important things to do than await their pleasure. Anyway, Reslic has this device set to give me a warning when someone gets into the control room in the palace where the message is currently displayed. I intend to be gone when they get here.”

“The Warlords surely won’t know that everyone has left the Estate,” Llaimos suggested. “He will probably send in another infiltration group.”

“It won’t take long for them to figure out everyone has gone,” Kryslie predicted. “Then Kellex will be there as fast as his ship can blast. He will want to gloat over his victory and claim to the other Warlords that he is in control of the Estate.”

“I expect he will realise his mistake?” Jonko commented dryly.

“He might send Jordan and Vila back there,” Pyr suggested in a shy voice.

Kryslie nodded at the boy and added, “Or he might expect them to be able to come here, transmit in. The Aeronites must know the importance of the Temple to us, or why have they been so intent on pounding the defences here.”

“You’re right, Krys,” Tymos confirmed. “They will want to control this place too – but they have no idea the nature of the power that protects this Temple.”

“So, you expect the Aeronites to be able to walk into the Estate and find the message waiting?” Keleb suggested.

“They will have to work for it,” Tymos said with a faint grin. “Reslic left the full range of shields up – with the exception of the anti-transmission shield. We might need to get back in...”

“Jordan and Vila can use those transmitter things,” Pyr warned.

“Yes,” Kryslie agreed. “But if Kellex or those other Warlords want to fly there, they will need to drive off the Ciriote.”

“And bring down some of the shields,” Jonko pointed out. “You expect those doppelgangers of yours to figure out how?”

“If they get into the control room, the controls for some of the shields are there. They can bring down enough to think they have won – but if they are smart they won’t want them all down or the Ciriote will target them.”

“But Jordan might get hurt,” Pyr said with concern.

“I expect him to be sufficiently intelligent to think of that,” Kryslie told Pyr, and patted his shoulder gently. She then seemed to wander away from the group, as if her mind was somewhere else.

It was, because her mind was filling with information about all of the cities. Some she knew already, from visiting the places on her return. The rest seemed to be available to her through some vast telepathic network – but it might have been the all-seeing awareness of the Guardians being shared with her.

The need to leave crystallised suddenly. She went and embraced Tymos and Llaimos together. Their minds merged and she shared with them her experience with Burnfire.

“I feel more like a creature of energy than flesh and bone now,” she told them. She sensed that they did not understand, but they would – in time.

Krys made a point of giving Pyr a hug too, reminding him that she, Llaimos and Tymos were his kin. She whispered in his ear, “The Guardians will be with you.”

Then with a casual beckoning gesture, she told Jonko and Keleb, “Come on – we’ve work.”

They both straightened eager for something important to do. They went to collect weapons from the pile left for them by some of the palace guards. Krys eyed the collection and chose some for herself.

Before they left, she explained, “We have to visit every city, and seal it. Before we can do that, we have to make sure every Aeronite and every Ciriote are out of the city and all the things they brought in. The first ones we are going to are the ones in imminent danger of attack by one

or other enemy. I know which ones they are. Then we will go to the ones that are still secure. The worst affected cities will be last, since we will have a great deal to do in those.”

“All that is going to take us months, at least,” Jonko realised.

“Then we need to start,” Kryslie directed. “Hold on to me.”

All three faded from view when Kryslie activated her transmitter. Only then did Jonko and Keleb realise that Kryslie’s power was now so great that distance was no longer an issue when she transmitted. It seemed to them that she was using the energy aura of the planet as they had once used the energy grid at the Estate.

Tymos knew what he needed to do but he had to wait until Reslic’s device told him that the Warlord’s had the Governor’s message. However, he was still hearing in his mind the amplified whispers that were the thoughts of distant telepathic mutants. The power in the Temple focussed the thoughts, and he knew that the mutants had left the mountains because of the raging fires. Already word was spreading for them to go to Ecla. The tribes were sharing the observations they made on their travels, so all could avoid the Ciriots, and the desperate Aeronites where they huddled in meagre shelter, or caves, or excavated holes in the ground. They noted which streams and waterways were fouled and which were still clear, which empty villages were still safe to stay in, and where the glowing active dust had poisoned the land.

The mutants were inherently unstable and mutated fluidly to forms that were impervious to the dangers they now faced. For what the terrain-reforming wave had started, the Ciriots were intent on finishing.

Already Tymos knew of places where the terrified Aeronites had gathered – unable to contact their ships, running low on field rations and unable to forage or even travel overland back to the ships. He would take them to safety while the unforgiving Warlords were unable to punish them for deserting their posts. He believed that those left in charge in the Warlord’s absence would be glad to have them back. The mutants would help him, for he would also be taking their women, children and elderly dependents to Ecla and the promised sanctuary.

Llaimos no longer felt the frustration of ignorance. He was ready to do his part. He would learn about the enemy – an enemy who had no idea that he was now an adult and dangerous.

Let his sibs deal with the Tymorean citizens, and the mutants and the Aeronites – all those groups knew of the High Kings eldest children, and believed he was still a baby.

He turned to Pyr. “My Uncle’s ship is available for my use. I am going to study and sabotage Ciriots ships. The knowledge you have of Aeronite craft will be of use to me. Let us collect weapons for our use.”

On the Altar, he found his father’s transmitter, and recalled and understood all about its function. This would be the first time he had used one. He sensed Tymos’s mind in his, observing, checking, but not interfering. He and Pyr dematerialised and reappeared in Reslic’s ship. Tymos’s mind withdrew. Llaimos was not angry at the concern, for Tymos and Kryslie had always cared for his wellbeing and Tymos had let him take the new step with out insisting on helping him.

The shield above the Temple was being bombarded. He studied the effects on the shield and identified three types of Ciriots weapons – bombs, high-energy laser beams and wide area disruptor beams. He would not have to go far to find his first victims.

Pyr did not realise how new Llaimos’s knowledge was. He had been unconscious when the Guardians had matured this brother, and so he perceived this brother as older and wiser. Certainly, Llaimos knew everything he needed, especially about the amazing ship that seemed more advanced than his unlamented guardian’s personal ship.

“How will he get out of here without being a target?” Pyr asked, as he too glanced upwards.

Llaimos grinned. “One, we will be cloaked and shielded.” That was the obvious part of the answer.

Then he activated the screens and scanners of the ship and pointed to one with a grid like background and 3-D outlines of the Temple and all the smaller buildings around it, and with in the protective shields. It also showed the gardens, fountains and pathways. A narrow mauve coloured ribbon like glow linked the ships position to a point outside the shield and some distance away.

“This ship takes off vertically and then goes into horizontal flight. It is in the terminus of a long-range beam – that mauve corridor. It will take us from here to a point in the upper atmosphere. Once we are there we can start picking our targets.”

Pyr’s eyes gleamed. “Can you teach me to fly this? I’ve done lots of simulator practice on fighter craft. Even old Villeni said I was almost as good as Jordan and Vila.”

“You can be my co-pilot – I think you might even have more experience than I do,” Llaimos said seriously.

Tymos found Xan wandering through the Temple, fearful and afraid.

“My friend, I have told you that nothing can harm you here.”

“Prince Tymos. It isn’t just that. I can’t help thinking of all of my people, here and back home that are in danger.”

Tymos gripped his shoulder and said, “I will do all I can for those here, I promise, and the Guardians will be with you once you return to Aerdna. Have patience Xan. There will be time to do all that is needed. Krys and I have seen that it will be so.”

Xan relaxed a little. “I am still not looking forward to hosting the Warlords. Will you be leaving the last of the weapons here?”

Tymos’s grin heartened him. “No to the weapons – they will have enough of their own, though none of them will work. If I were you, I would stand back and enjoy their frustration. Oh, and help yourself to the supplies in the far right hand chamber. There’s nothing fancy, just emergency ration bars, but if you are going to let them make you ill with their impotent glares, eat now.”

“When will you be back to talk to them?” Xan asked.

“Not until I have all the mutants to Ecla and all your people to safety. I will start doing the latter when their Importances, the Warlords are unable to claim their sub-officers are deserting their posts. I hope the officers in charge in their absence have more compassion.”

“I saw a comm. system here,” Xan pointed out. “And they will also have their portable comm. units. They can still give orders.”

“Perhaps,” Tymos considered. He allowed himself to sense the tumult outside the Temple shields.

“Apart from the interference from the Ciriote attacking here, the atmosphere is unstable. Comm frequencies might be jammed or restricted to short range.”

On the other hand, Tymos mused privately, the Guardians might decide not to let the Warlords contact their ships.

Chapter 33 - Confounding the Enemy

Jordan did not have to speak to know that Vila shared his dread of returning to the Royal Estate. Common sense told him that security would have been multiplied there now, and the transmission tunnels blocked or watched.

They were in the beam-in chamber in Amik. A metal plate now blocked each of the three tunnels, and all access to the room was securely sealed. However, they knew what the room had looked like and had a picture to transmit to. No one had sensed their presence when they had transmitted back into the city.

In the short time they took to get from the outer edge of the city to the council building, they had decided trying to locate Pyr was going to take too long.

“We have replacement stealth suits,” Vila said, finding something positive. She couldn’t help feeling that something could see them.

“But they had a way to make us visible up in the palace. They will have put the same thing in that chamber now, for sure.”

“We have concussion grenades and the green force generator,” Vila tried, but she already knew the Tymoreans now had personal force screens that negated both. She abhorred the thought of using the concussion grenades again.

Jordan knew his sister was trying to be encouraging.

“Villeni told me that we have ships attacking the Estate. The Tymorean attention will be on that.”

“Is that our guardian’s doing?” Vila asked, surprised.

“Villeni didn’t know which Warlord organised it – he just decided it would be a useful diversion. As for the rest, they surely won’t expect us back so soon.”

“We will have to be careful, that’s all,” Jordan told her. “Let’s get going.”

After half an hour of silence, Vila spoke again. “All these transmissions are tiring, and we are not even half way there yet. I feel like we have been forced through a dozen walls.”

Jordan had to agree. “Logically, that is if I were in charge of security, I would have ways to block these tunnels, so any one trying to bring an army through would be slowed or stopped. Since only the Royals have transmitters like these, they wouldn’t necessarily worry about an enemy transmitting. We know we can transmit through walls, I don’t think the blockages are more than a solid wall. Do you want to walk for a bit? It seems to help us get some energy back.”

“Please,” Vila agreed. “I know our guardian is impatient and not particularly pleased with us right now, but he has no idea that these transmitters use our personal energy.”

Vila fell silent, reminded of her revulsion in having to fight the Tymoreans. She resented that Kellex had stolen them from their rightful place and made them enemies of their true kin. The Tymoreans would never forgive them for what they had done.

“Do you think...that the king...our father...is still alive?”

“I don’t know,” Jordan shrugged. His gesture hardly noticeable in the dim glow of his hand held light. He did not want to think of the man he’d met briefly, who had been willing to forgive them, and whom they had betrayed.

They finally reached the farmlands, having remained undetected by the guards in each intermediate beam-in chamber. The slight noises they made sometimes caused the guards to spin around with weapons ready. Seeing nothing, they went to each tunnel in turn and listened intently for a time. Avoiding them was easy.

After they were in the final tunnel, leading to the Royal Estate, they sat and rested. They used it as an opportunity to eat several ration bars to give them energy they expected to need to fight. As they neared the palace end of the tunnel, they doused their light and instinctively went into full stealth mode, using every bit of the skill trained into Kellex's chosen elite. They crept closer, silently, stopping and listening when the far opening was two hundred yards away.

Neither had their armour sealed during the tunnel transit.

"I can't hear anything," Vila thought at her brother.

"Nor I, and I can't feel any faint breezes to indicate movement from ahead," Jordan confirmed. "Obviously they have finished evacuating the non-combatants, but surely they still have a guard there."

Jordan flicked his headpiece shut, activated the armour's scanners and studied what he could see of the room ahead. "Still nothing," he thought at Vila. "Though if I were the guards, I would be listening for noises and positioned to be out of sight of the tunnels and able to aim at the openings."

Vila sealed her own armour as Jordan suggested, "We will go closer, watch out for sensors."

"They might already know someone is coming," Vila thought, catching her brother's paranoia.

"We'll commando crawl out of the tunnel," Jordan suggested mentally. "They won't expect anyone to do that."

For a good reason, Vila decided. Getting up in the armour was awkward.

When they emerged from the tunnel and looked around, they saw no indication of guards, visible or shielded. Although feeling foolish, Jordan stood up and carefully scanned the room. Something was not right about the situation.

"Do you recall how that girl knew of the Ciriots because they leave trails visible in UV light," Jordan thought slowly. "Well, I can see trails ... the Ciriots have been here."

Just on chance, Jordan sent a thought at Pyr.

Vila's hopes rose and fell. They had tried to reach him when they were back in Amik. She had to believe he was dead. She couldn't bear to think that he was a prisoner of the Ciriots.

"I don't like this," Jordan spoke softly. "It feels like the whole place is deserted."

Vila shivered. "Let's get going. Do you think they would have left this beam machine set to Dira?"

"I would have," Jordan decided. "For a quick exit, and if everyone is gone, no one would change it. Shall we try?"

Vila nodded and watched Jordan fiddle with the controls. A glowing purple beam appeared, directed along one of the tunnels.

"Looks right," she said. At least it wasn't pointing towards the farmlands. "Let's go..."

"Put your head piece down. If we meet anyone, they might mistake us for the prince and princess again. I'll demand a report if the guards query us."

With a faint laugh, Vila followed the suggestion and made sure her red hair was visible. It had worked in Amik, where the Tymoreans had retaken the city. The city guards had assured them that all the Aeronite infiltrators and Ciriots either were dead or had fled.

"All the Royals have gone on to the Temple," the guard reported. "I am surprised that you are here, your Highness."

"We have duties that we have just completed. Now, will you tell us if it is safe to go there now?"

Jordan imitated his guardian when he was in foul mood.

"Soon after everyone else left here, the planes began bombarding the Temple shields again. It isn't safe for you to walk up there now," the guard insisted, unconsciously wringing his hands.

He looked like he wanted to drag them away to somewhere safe, so Jordan said, “We can transmit ourselves there. That isn’t an issue. I need to see what is happening so I can make a proper report for the President.”

The guard breathed out and relaxed. He took them to the edge of the city. Jordan studied the situation. The Temple sat on a hill, not far from the edge of the city. Close enough that the watchers felt the ground shake as bombs landed. Jordan used his suit sensors to watch the energy emissions, and could see the shields were glowing and periodically flaring.

“Thank you,” Jordan told his escort, as he took Vila’s arm and transmitted from the man’s sight. He didn’t go to the Temple as he had implied, but to a sheltered corner out of the guard’s sight.

“I don’t recognise those fighter ships,” Jordan said when they were alone. “Or those greenish energy blasts.”

“Ciriote?” Vila suggested. “The Tymoreans wouldn’t be bombing their own sacred Temple. And we can’t transmit that far, and if the Royals walked there, it must mean they can’t transmit there.”

Jordan didn’t answer right away. He was thinking and finally said, “I had better report to Kellex. He isn’t going to like it, but what else can we do?”

He had to boost the signal power to maximum to reach Kellex’s ship, and had to wait until Kellex came to the comm room.

Vila heard his response when Jordan had to take the earpiece away from his ear. Kellex was jubilant when he heard that the Estate was deserted. He ordered Jordan back to make sure. He ordered Vila to get into the Temple and report from there.

Kellex blithely assured them that the odd weapons must be new ones conceived by Warlord Wazim, and likely it was Voltec testing them.

Jordan’s expression was full of concern when Kellex cut the signal.

“I never thought I was a coward,” Vila said, her voice unsteady, “But I do not want to go out there.”

“He wants a report,” Jordan stressed.

“I know that, but he refuses to believe that the Ciriote are here and trying to beat us to some prize. But even so, I can be killed as easily by Aeronite fire as Ciriote,” Vila said.

Without admitting that he agreed with her assessment, Jordan suggested, “If you get in, surrender to the Governors. Ask them straight out for help for Aerdna.”

“If they knew what we did...we don’t even know if the king is alive...they’d kill me.”

“If the king is dead, they won’t know and if he is not, he said he’d speak for us,” Jordan told her.

“I wouldn’t like to bet on that,” Vila objected. “But what if I can’t get in? They might have a barrier to stop people transmitting there. Then I will be outside in that bombardment.”

“It might be a religious thing, having to walk in,” Jordan said. Then he added, “But when you materialise, transmit again right away and when you get next to the shield, do a short flit inwards.”

“I will likely arrive in the middle of a crowd. All the Royals are meant to be there – the area isn’t very large. The place must be crowded.”

“Like I said, surrender,” Jordan said.

“Kellex will kill you, if I do,” Vila told him.

“How will he know?” Jordan countered. “He might simply tell me that females should never presume to be commanders. Go.”

Vila took a deep breath, gathered her courage, and studied the scene towards the Temple and transmitted.

When she materialised, she nearly fell over as the ground trembled. She mentally prayed for protection and quickly transmitted again. The next time, the pressure wave of an explosion blew

her off her feet. It galvanised her to transmit again. The next emergence, she was next to the glowing shield and she heard the scream of an approaching missile. She transmitted again.

The shield a few yards away took the force of the explosion and emitted a blinding glare.

When she could see again, Vila realised she was within the Temple grounds and the peaceful scene seemed out of place with the sound of bombs.

“Jordan?” she used telepathy aimed at her brother. She didn’t want this conversation broadcast on a comm. frequency. “I am inside the shield; I can see the Temple and all the grounds are deserted. The Royals can’t all be within the Temple – it just isn’t big enough.”

“Check it anyway – someone has to be there,” Jordan insisted. “Everything Kellex found out says that is where they went.” He sensed that Vila was as confused as he was.

Vila couldn’t shake the feeling that someone was watching her as she scouted the gardens. The beauty and intricate design of the beds made no impression on her. She considered it wasted space – since she only knew spaceships and crowded cities.

On the threshold of the Temple itself, she literally could not force herself to go in. She could go so far, and no further. She tried to transmit in, but nothing happened. She stepped back, and backed away from the Temple.

“Jordan...no one is around...but I can’t get into the Temple...I simply can’t go in. I’m coming back...”

“Wait a moment. I will see what Kellex says,” Jordan said.

Vila didn’t stay near the Temple – it was freaking her. In addition, she still had the sense of being watched.

When she finally heard Jordan’s reply, it made her no happier.

“I told Kellex that your suit comm. couldn’t get through the interference. He is sending one of the squadrons to reinforce the one that is here...”

“These are ours?” Vila asked in disbelief.

“He says they are,” Jordan told her. “He will have your flight second bring your ship there. He wants you in command, trying to break the defences. I have to go back to the Estate, find the shield controls and bring them down. Kellex sounds so arrogantly smug. It is as if he thinks he has not only outsmarted the Tymoreans, but the other Warlords as well. I wouldn’t gloat until I knew where all the Royals actually are. Anyway, when your ship gets here, they will send a signal and you can transmit to it.”

After a moment’s silence, Jordan thought at his sister again. “Vila? Are you okay?”

“Yes. I might as well be a good little Commander, mightn’t I? The Tymoreans might as well have left the planet. Kellex is the only protection we have; especially now the Ciriots are here.”

Xan slipped back into the Temple and found Tymos, who looked to be meditating in the Altar Room. He waited a short while until Tymos decided to notice him.

“It was Vila,” Xan told Tymos, once the Prince looked his way. “Looking as efficient as ever...until she couldn’t get in here.”

“She’s wavering,” Tymos told him. “She’s questioning Kellex’s indoctrination, but can’t quite make the break.”

“You could have brought her in, like you do when I need to go in and out,” Xan suggested.

“Not yet – not until she has decided which side to fight for. Not until she has proved herself,” Tymos said quietly. “And she and Jordan have to get the Warlords to come here.”

Xan sighed and decided he would never understand Prince Tymos’s mind.

“Kellex knows the Estate is deserted. I have no doubt he is on his way there right now. He wants Jordan bring the shields down so that he can fly in. The instant he learns of that message, he will come directly here with the other Warlords on his ship’s afterburner.”

“He will think ill of Vila, if he succeeds when she failed,” Xan predicted.

“He thinks she is useless anyway,” Tymos told the young alien. “He won’t be expecting a trap, and there are no controls here for the shields.”

“Whatever,” Xan muttered, to finish that conversation. “You’ll be gone as soon as Jordan finds that message then?”

“Yes, I have a lot to do,” Tymos agreed.

Jordan waited until Vila confirmed she was safe in her ship and lifted off, before sealing his armour, activating stealth mode and retracing his way to the beam-in room in the city of Dira. He walked quickly, fluidly avoiding the crowds of people on the streets who were busily buying food supplies.

He felt at that moment as if he had as little chance as Vila of breaking free of Kellex. It was like his mind and body had been conditioned to obedience. Maybe, Kellex would forget his earlier displeasure with his wards, if he could claim to control the Royal Estate.

Jordan maintained caution as he transmitted back to the Royal Estate. He was ready to fight, but there were no signs of people or of energy signals suggesting cloaked guards. It did not feel right...to be able to walk in, walk around...and remain unchallenged. He used his suit sensors to check thoroughly before going over to the maintenance shaft he had used before. That was not locked, or protected in any way. He opened the door and checked the tunnel going up – nothing.

Now he had a chance to look around and he saw two more tunnels he had overlooked on his last two visits. The one that led to the air-conditioning and water circulating areas went ahead; the others went off to either side.

So much had happened since he had come to try to take the young Prince. He suddenly felt he knew the answer to why the estate felt dead. The poison the warriors had put into the air and water, must have killed everyone. That thought did not make him feel any better. It was another great crime the Tymoreans would not forgive him for. Maybe that was why Vila had not seen many people at the Temple. The lucky ones had left before the air and water had turned foul, and the rest were lying dead on the upper levels.

At the time of that attack, he hadn’t cared if the Tymoreans died. Now that he knew his beliefs had been wrong, the idea made him ill. Suddenly, he wanted to see if his vision was correct. Maybe they had realised the problem in time, and had a way to protect people.

Keeping in mind his current orders, Jordan decided to see where these other passages went. Both stayed on the same level, so he chose to go left. He stayed in stealth mode, but saw no guards, no bodies, or intruder sensors. He emerged into a large cavern filled with enormous computers. The area was dimly lit, with only security lighting. Jordan found the access pad, and his fingers itched to try accessing this treasure of electronic information. Kellex would give him a medal if he succeeded.

After a fruitless hour, of unsuccessful access attempts, his message relay beeped.

“Report!” was the terse message from Kellex.

Jordan returned his mind to business. “Sir, I have seen no one here. I am currently in their computer archive, and I am about to check a third area of the basement level, and then go looking for their security control room.”

As he’d hoped, Kellex was excited by the computer archive, and having all the secrets of the damned Tymoreans readily available. Despite that, he snapped for Jordan to bring the shields down so he could land on the Estate. That was the first priority.”

With a sigh, Jordan left the tempting computers and continued to scout this lower level, ignoring the doors leading to stairs going upward.

All the while, somewhere in the back of his mind was the nagging feeling that this was all too easy. Another buried part of his mind was the guilty feeling that he was again betraying his own kin. He squashed that thought. With no Tymoreans here, he couldn’t surrender to them, and that idea seemed to make less and less sense. Disobeying Kellex again, would be a death sentence.

“Blessed Jyx,” Jordan exclaimed when he walked into the wide open, unprotected and still operational secondary monitoring room.

He stared as he tried to make sense of what each of the small screens was showing. They were flicking and changing scenes every half a minute. Rows of tiny lights all glowed green. Jordan went to each of the control boards, set in front of the five empty chairs, and set to deciphering the Tymorean script. He kept glancing guiltily at the screens, but every scene was devoid of people. Somehow, the absence of people made the hair on his neck try to rise. His relief at seeing no signs of death everywhere was tempered by the irrational feeling that he was being watched. When noise, like static, came over one of the open comm. frequencies, he spun the chair around as he reached for his disruptor weapon.

Seeing no one, he rose and walked around, checking all corners. When he turned his attention back to the wall of screens, he saw one had blanked out and now had a symbol on it and a flashing series of glyphs. He translated them as, “Incoming Message.” Only then did he realise the symbol was the official symbol of the Tymorean Governors.

Jordan went to the control panel nearest that screen and studied the symbols there. He forgot the message when he decrypted the glyph for ‘shield’ under half a dozen press switches.

He pressed each of them in turn, starting from the left, and the green lights flicked to orange and then red. He looked around for a way to determine which shields he had taken down, and then mentally kicked himself. He was used to thinking Tymoreans used only basic technology and what he was staring at proved that belief to be a myth.

“Shield status – report,” he stated in careful Tymorean.

A mechanically generated voice answered him. “Altitude shields at ninety percent power, fluctuating between seventy and ninety-five percent.”

Jordan caught a flash for one of the monitors, and realised someone was attacking the Estate. He wondered if Kellex knew.

“Perimeter shield inoperative from ...” the height details meant nothing to him.

Another flash caught his eye, and this time he saw on one of the monitors, some kind of storage shed burning fiercely. He wasted no more time before reporting to Kellex.

Jordan waited on the paved terrace outside the palaces as Kellex’s ship landed. When his guardian had approached, the ships trying to overload the shields had flown off. Those attackers had still managed to inflict damage, as some of them had fired lucky shots under the remaining shields. Half a dozen buildings had been hit and were burning.

His superior, wasted no time emerging and striding arrogantly to his ward.

“I claim this Estate,” Kellex announced loudly. “You are my witness. Now take me to the control room. I will state my claim and those renegades sent by one of my peers to attack this place will report too late. I, Kellex, broke the defences here. Me!”

Jordan didn’t dare refute the claim. Kellex wasn’t quite rubbing his hands with glee, but he was making sounds like someone savouring a favourite food or drink.

Down in the control room, having allowed Jordan to transmit him down to the lowest level, Kellex stared at everything in turn until his eye caught the flashing message symbol.

Even before his hands touched any press switches, the message began to play. Kellex hissed when he saw the faces of the three Governors appear on the screen. His whole body went rigid as he listened to the message.

“Play again,” he demanded in Tymorean, and as the message was repeated, he recorded it to send to the other Warlords.

“The weakling Governors want to talk, do they?” Kellex snarled aloud, forgetting he wasn’t alone. “There is nothing to talk about. They will tell me everything I want to know and then tell everyone that I now rule this planet. This planet is mine, and those excrescences will die.”

He spun around, saw Jordan and had a feral grin on his face as he directed his ward. “Stay here! You are in command in my absence.”

Jordan flicked a glance at the screens, but said, "Should I try to break the encryptions on the computer archives, Sir?"

This diverted Kellex further. "Yes, do that. However, keep an eye on things from here. Perhaps you should restore the screens after I have gone. I don't intend to let any of the other Warlords take this prize from me – particularly not the traitor that has those cowardly fighters attacking here. They fled when they saw my squadron coming."

"Yes, Sir," Jordan acknowledged with promptness, and Kellex smiled his feral smile before he commanded, "Take me back up, and return here."

Once back in the great hall, he strode out of the palace and to his ship.

Using his mind link to Vila, as he watched Kellex blast off, Jordan told her what he had found, and warned her that Kellex was on his way back to his ship.

She in turn relayed what Kellex was sending to the other Warlords. As a squadron leader, her ship's comm. could monitor the command frequencies. Apart from repeating the recorded message, Kellex told his peers that Jordan was in command at the Estate during his absence, and tried to find out who had sent planes to attack the Estate. Privately, Vila added, "If it was one of them, they won't admit it. Personally, I say it has to be the Ciriote."

Jordan shared her belief, but if Kellex didn't want to believe the Ciriote were on Tymorea, that was his look out. Just thinking of their one time allies, made Jordan decide that having full screens back on the Estate was a very good idea. The Ciriote would return as soon as Kellex's squadron was out of sight.

In the Temple, Tymos turned to Xan. "Kellex has the Governors' message. He has told Jordan that he is in command in his absence. I recorded him saying that. He will be on his way here – right now."

Xan paled.

Tymos grinned and said, "My friend, the Warlords will not be able to harm you here – remember."

"You said weapons won't work in here. What about fists and feet?" Xan retorted.

"No harm will come to you," Tymos assured him. "And Kellex won't be able to get in until the other five Warlords have all arrived."

Without further fuss, Tymos transmitted away, and Xan found a place where he could watch for the expected arrivals.

The approaching hum of fighter planes was the first indication. When they were close enough, he recognised Kellex's distinctive personal ship – painted in vivid green, in the lead. He had already noted that the aircraft that had been pounding the Temple shields had fled.

"Kellex will land and keep the squadron aloft," Xan predicted, speaking aloud to himself. "Try to," he corrected. He watched as Kellex circled the hill containing the Temple, lower and lower, and finally setting his ship down in front of the ornate main entrance.

"Doesn't give a damn about the garden bed," Xan noted. "I wonder which Warlord will arrive next. Zorrec? Voltec? Axec?"

When he thought about his former mentor, Xan felt a combination of guilt and rage. However, the aura of peace in the Temple soon reaffirmed the rightness of his decision to help the people of Aerdna, and not just the wealthy ones who could afford to buy or bribe a place on the first evacuation ships. He could see, if no one else did or would admit, that there wouldn't be enough ships on Aerdna and all the colonies, to bring every Aeronite here.

Xan looked up as more aircraft flew over. Black with silver markings – Voltec.

Within half an hour, all the Warlords had assembled. Kellex had tried storming into the Temple, without success. Now he was holding Voltec back and what Xan heard was, "...a show of strength."

“Well...what now,” Xan wondered. “I think a strategic retreat. I can wait for them to find me - sometime after they have had a chance to calm down.”

He knew all the little nooks and alcoves in the Temple, and moved into one near the tiny food preparation cubicle. Hardly had he made it to his shelter, the very floor of the Temple seemed to shake with the volume of Voltec’s voice amplified to a fearful ear-battering roar.

“Open up, you cowards...you wanted to talk!”

The hair on Xan’s neck rose and he felt a breeze stirring. He glanced around, seeing nothing, not even a window open to the outside. It was the same sensation he had felt while he was watching the Tymoreans disappearing into a bright light. The next thing he heard was the deliberate tread of six pairs of booted feet. He pictured the arrogant faces, of the men that were the highest Aeronite power on the planet, and who believed they had beaten their chosen enemy and would soon see the cowering wretches...Xan tried to forget when Kellex had sent Villeni to approach the cowering wretch that had been himself.

Hearing the shouts of anger, outrage and disbelief, increased Xan’s determination to keep out of their sight. He stood rigidly against the wall of the cubicle, beside the opening, and prayed he would not be found as the booted feet, no longer trod in the deliberate judicial pace, but ran throughout the Temple like rabid hunters.

He heard Xezir’s voice, sounding like it was just next to the door of his chosen alcove. Unexpectedly, it sounded calm and controlled. “We are in their sacred Temple. If they are not here, then it is because they have ceded it to us.”

Two voices, Wazim and Axec, voiced their agreement, but Kellex shouted, “But where are all the Royal bastards?”

“Does it matter?” Voltec challenged. “We are taking over the cities, the Tymorean ground troops have retreated, and their aircraft are a joke. None of the peasants are going to serve cowards who have fled.”

“I have Commander Jordan in command at the Royal Estate,” Kellex inserted, his tone less belligerent, but still voiced at the same volume.

“The planet is ours!” Voltec claimed passionately.

In his hiding place, Xan heard the Ciriots returning. They had a different sound, a hum with a thumping noise too. It took the Warlords longer to become aware of the noise. As one, they raced back to the entrance, intending to return to their ships, and found they couldn’t.

The consternation, did give Xan a moment of vicarious amusement. He heard each one trying to contact their circling squadrons, and thinking that yelling would improve the signal strength. He wondered what they were hearing.

“What!” he heard Voltec demand in disbelief.

“Ciriots!” Axec said, a moment later.

“Send the rest of the fighters to exterminate them,” Zorrec commanded.

A quieter voice, told his subordinates, “Cloak the ship and blast off.” That was Xezir.

“Use the scrambling field,” Wazim told his people.

Xan dared a look out of the opening near him. He could see Kellex, and his face seemed to be reflecting the green of his uniform.

Voltec then proclaimed in his amplified voice, “We have defeated the Tymoreans. We will defeat the Ciriots.”

Unobserved, Xan shook his head in disgust at the Warlord’s obstinate blindness. How could they still be unaware of the damage the Ciriots were doing to the planet? If what Prince Tymos had told him was true, the Ciriots were turning the planet into a radioactive wasteland. Moreover, all that was mixing with the sabotaged terrain reform program.

Then Xan himself paled and felt ill. No one would be able to live on Tymorea, outside the protected cities. What would happen to the Tymoreans? Sure, they were protected for now, but even with the early harvest, the people would soon run out of food.

What could Prince Tymos and his sibs do?

Chapter 34 - Tymos Rescues the Defenceless

While Tymos waited for the Warlords, he had listened to the soft telepathic voices – relayed and amplified by the power in the Temple. From the thoughts of the distant mutants, he located the largest concentrations of trapped Aeronite warriors and identified individual mutants. He used their minds to give him the coordinates he needed.

When he arrived, suddenly, appearing out of mid air, the mutants immediately targeted him with their hodge-podge weapons. However, his brilliant auburn hair was recognised and the weapons pointed down.

Tymos took in his surroundings with a sweeping glance around. He was not in the mountains and the reason for that was clear. Thick black smoke billowed up from huge, widespread forest fires. The mutants had fled their villages and were roaming freely, in the general direction of Ecla.

Communication between the tribes was via the few telepathic mutants, and those Tymos met, shared the knowledge they had with him.

“Learnt we did,” Bordon, a skinny, wiry mutant admitted. “Noxious ones, robed, hard skinned. Kill as look at us.”

“Ciriot,” Tymos named them. “They set the dark eyed ones onto us.”

“Die they will,” Bordon promised. “That kind scavenges around cities. Bomb towns, villages, everywhere.”

“Where are your women, children and old ones?” Tymos asked.

“In cave, travel in dark, so avoid glowing places. Travel when noxious ones cannot see.”

Tymos nodded. “And you have seen dark eyed ones?”

Bordon gave an ugly grin. “Dug like hoppers into ground. Smell fear pong miles away.”

“Take me to your women folk and I will take them to Ecla.”

“How take?” Bordon demanded.

“I can transmit five or six people with me,” Tymos explained. “Like I did coming here.”

“Promise you, they appear in city?”

“I got here, didn’t I?” Tymos chided gently.

“Did,” Bordon had to agree. “Then I show you dark eyed hoppers.”

Three of the male mutants chose to stay with Tymos, leading him to groups of terrified Aeronites. They were all so relieved at the prospect of rescue from the wildly changing weather and the mind-twisting distortions of the air that they immediately surrendered. When they were promised a return to their baseships, they babbled the coordinates and hoped it wasn’t an offer too good to be true.

Tymos transmitted through the extra shields now protecting the baseships, and several times still hostile guards challenged him. However, the rescued Aeronites spoke in his favour, and gave him time to transmit away again.

When Bordon had led the way to all the hidden Aeronites he knew of, he led Tymos to another group of fleeing mutants. Many times Tymos came near cities where Aeronites huddled in dugout shelters, unable to enter the cities and trying to evade the attacking Ciriot. Often they had seen Aeronite fighters engaged in air battles with the Ciriot, and coming off worst.

The Aeronites were worse off on the ground than were the mutants. Their armour may have given them some protection, but not enough. However, by digging into the ground, they were protected by the same power that Jonko had summoned to hasten the harvest and safeguard the seeds.

Neither group thought to question how Tymos could move through the acrid and poisonous atmosphere, walk across areas of glowing radioactivity, avoid falling bombs, without becoming ill.

His power protected him from all the dangers.

Every now and then, he felt the mind touch of Kryslie or Llaimos and they shared images and impressions.

As Tymos travelled, his army of mutants slowly grew and they proved to have an uncanny knack for locating Ciriots and Aeronites alike. At first, Tymos left the Ciriots alone, simply reporting coordinates to Llaimos. When his mutant scouts reported a group of Ciriots with both Aeronites and mutant prisoners, he decided to act and sent his mutant army out to circle and flank the Ciriots.

At a hand gesture from Tymos, two mutants allowed themselves to be seen. Immediately, four of the visible Ciriots went in pursuit, leaving only two to guard twelve bound and secured prisoners.

So arrogantly confident were they – the two standing guard never looked around – just watched the chase. They never even considered that there might be more than two scared mutants trying to release their kin.

While Tymos controlled the minds of the two guards, an easy task since they had been unsuspecting of danger, his mutant allies cut the leather bindings and freed the prisoners. All were away into the nearest scanty cover within minutes. Tymos was impressed by how well they vanished into the dips in the ground, behind brittle and dead vegetation. Half of the mutants returned two creeping up on the oblivious Ciriots guards and thrusting knives into the vulnerable joints of the black armour. Tymos withdrew his mind from theirs an instant before they died.

A short time later, the two decoy mutants returned dragging the bodies of the four Ciriots that had chased them. Tymos grinned, not because he enjoyed killing, but for the mutants to take it as praise for their fighting prowess.

An itch of a premonition caused Tymos to silence the shouts of celebration.

“Hide the bodies,” he directed quietly. He didn’t need to tell them to avoid being seen. That was a natural instinct of all mutants.

Tymos tried to locate the source of the danger he had sensed. He heard the familiar thump buzz sound of a Ciriots aircraft approaching and made himself still. He called quietly for the mutants to do the same. He drew power from the aura to blanket them all, ignoring the discomfort of the warped energy.

The craft flew low over their position, and dropped an insulated crate. A small parachute zipped open and the crate floated down just beyond a line of desiccated trees. Tymos began to trot in that direction, alert for the possibility of more Ciriots.

Once he was at the dead trees, he stopped and used the aura to cloak himself again. He had guessed right, there was a grounded Ciriots craft. How many guards had they left here? One? Two? More?

One strode from the aircraft towards where the crate was half-buried in the dusty dry ground. It must contain something heavy but not fragile. Tymos inspected the Ciriots craft and saw blackened streaks along its length. Perhaps the ship had been damaged and the crate contained parts to repair it?

Tymos sensed some of the mutants creeping up to be beside him.

“What you do?” Bordon asked in a whisper.

“I’m going into the ship,” Tymos told him. “You four, take that Ciriots out of the way.”

The Ciriots had reached the crate and was bringing it back without the parachute. From its posture, the crate was heavy, and its full concentration was on the task.

The creature never saw or heard the mutants and had no chance to call out a warning. Tymos ran low and came to the dead Ciriote where it lay behind a low mound. He quickly stripped off the black armour and donned it himself. It smelt foul, probably of Ciriote sweat if not other bodily fluids.

“Keep out of sight,” Tymos told his companions as he hefted the crate. He held it easily, but he adopted the same posture as the dead Ciriote, and strode openly towards the Ciriote ship and its invitingly open boarding ramp.

From his brother’s mind, Tymos had some idea of the layout of Ciriote ships – although Llaimos implied they stole ships from many different worlds. He also warned that all Ciriote ships carried Burnfire in sealed palm sized canisters.

As he approached the ship, Tymos sensed it was not empty. He entered warily, even though he was disguised in the concealing Ciriote armour. As he had walked with the crate, he had used his perceptive sense to determine the contents. His guess of parts had been correct, and his mind told him they were parts for the engines. Therefore, once he was within the ship, and his glance around brought memories from the mind meld with Governor Xyron and images from Llaimos, he strode confidently towards the engine section.

He saw and memorised everything he passed and tried to ignore the powerfully alien stench of the Ciriote. From the size of the ship, Tymos deduced it could carry twelve and his team of mutants had accounted for seven.

Once Tymos put the crate down near the engine, he returned to where his perception had located the weapons store. He wrenched open the door and examined each kind, taking two, of different kinds, but likely to do most damage to Ciriote armour. He was aware that one of the creatures was creeping up on him, probably suspicious as to why one of his crew had not answered his questions, or perhaps why three others did not.

Tymos sensed the instant when some of the unaccounted for Ciriote reported that the prisoners had gone and the guard detail was missing. The one stalking him became more determined to confront the intruder. It decided, correctly, that Tymos was one of the Royal Tymoreans that his kind had been seeking, and was supremely confident of capturing him.

There was neither compassion nor compunction in the Ciriote’s mind. It was already anticipating the capture, immobilisation and torture of the prisoner and the kudos he’d receive for making the prisoner reveal the secret locations of the planet’s treasures. It sent a signal that remotely locked the outer door, to prevent anyone else from learning things from the prisoner.

That suited Tymos, who in turn intended to get information from the Ciriote. He had his weapon aimed when the creature suddenly appeared in the same passageway.

Tymos immediately fired his stolen weapon at the shoulder joint of the Ciriote’s weapon arm, sensing he had hurt the creature.

“That weapon will not harm me,” the Ciriote claimed, using a mechanical translator to turn its clicking speech into Tymorean. “Surrender now, Tymorean and I will be merciful.”

“Talk is for cowards,” Tymos responded, echoing a statement made to his sister.

The Ciriote fired one of his weapons, an energy beam, but it reflected off Tymos’s stolen armour and was absorbed by the wall shields. It fired again, this time at the seals at the neck of the black armour. The headpiece separated and the Ciriote leapt at Tymos, dragged the headpiece off, and allowed its weight to fall on him, but Tymos was not helpless. Yes, the armour was awkward, but was no hindrance. He twisted and rolled, bringing the Ciriote under him where it became unable to do more than flail its arms.

Yet the Ciriote was not prepared to give up and Tymos knew when it began to edge its arm to a new weapon. Its mind was not thinking of the weapon itself, but watching Tymos and anticipating his imminent demise.

A flick of the metal gauntlet, and something flew at Tymos. He deflected the small vial and it broke beside the two of them, igniting in the air from the friction of the glass breaking.

Immediately, Tymos realised it was Burnfire. Some of it splashed onto Tymos's stolen armour, and the fiery glow crept along the surface, spreading to the Ciriote's armour.

It gloated, and it clicked a sentence that translated as, "You cannot stop it – it will burn you when it reaches you. Unless you remove the armour and run..."

The power that had protected Tymos from the poisons in the air outside was still buzzing in him and the knowledge of Burnfire that Kryslie had shared with him ensured that he need not fear that vicious liquid. He continued to hold the Ciriote down.

Prepared for the physical pain, Tymos neither screamed nor blacked out. As he burned like a torch within the armour, he imagined raising his arms and summoned more power to himself. The lighting in the passage dimmed, so the glow of Burnfire was the only light. With a brilliant flash, the power surged through him and quenched the Burnfire. The flames blew out and his flesh tingled with greater sensitivity. It was as if he had been cleansed, purified, his human skin burned away to reveal a newer perfect creature.

The Ciriote armour was impervious to the liquid; the Burnfire had only removed the black coating to reveal a grey metallic surface.

Tymos watched the alien as it thought it had won, and then ruthlessly invaded its mind before it thought to resist. In moments, he knew all that the alien had known. There were no noble sentiments in the creature, and Tymos wasted no compassion on it. In his mind, he felt the Guardians of Peace judging the creature and finding it abhorrent. It wasn't from mercy that he induced the mind to become unconscious; it was because he found no pleasure in watching creatures die. Leaning down he opened the facemask and examined the features. It was as ugly as the one he had seen at the Estate. The film of Burnfire found new fuel and the alien's body began to burn.

Tymos stood and watched until the flames went out from lack of fuel. His mind considered all he had learnt, all about the ship, its equipment, how it worked, how to disable it, how to access the computers, the format of the data and more that was not of immediate use. He sent a thought to his siblings, sharing the knowledge and inviting Llaimos to examine the ship.

When Tymos emerged from the ship, half of his mutant allies came forward dragging three more Ciriote bodies.

"That should be all of them," Tymos commented. "The one inside is dead. Hide the bodies – their kind will surely come looking for them – eventually. My brother is coming to examine the ship. We will stay and keep guard until he is done."

As the mutants scurried to obey his directions, Tymos stayed alert. He did not intend to assume that he had accounted for all the Ciriote.

In a surprisingly short time, Llaimos's ship, previously President Reslic's personal craft, landed nearby and uncloaked. It was still protected by defensive shields. Llaimos transmitted out and materialised in front of his brother. They wasted no time on greetings.

"Will you have time to transmit all of the data from this ship to the computer archive at the palace?" Tymos asked.

"Certainly, Tymos. The knowledge you shared with me gave me what I needed to be able to translate and reformat the data from the computer cores I have collected as well. Pyr is writing a translation program so that I can, in future, download the Ciriote ship memory without removing the core. That has been becoming more difficult lately as the Ciriote have become aware of my interference. Pyr is very quick to learn – I simply have to express my idea, and explain what I need and he comes back with a solution."

"He is our brother," Tymos reminded Llaimos. "I think he is only now being allowed to show his potential. Do you need a long time here?"

"No, I have seen ships like this before – all I must do is remove the computer core. You need not stay – I know you have many more innocents to find and safeguard. However, you

might wish to visit my ship. The President had a supply of fresh clothes in there. That is unless you intend to keep wearing that hideously uncomfortable armour.”

Tymos grinned wryly at his brother’s first attempt at teasing him. With their minds open to each other, it was no surprise that Llaimos knew of his experience with Burnfire, and how it had burnt all but the metal of the armour and Tymos’s protected self. He needed something to wear.

“I will accept that offer. This armour is restrictive, but at least it no longer reeks of alien sweat. However, I much prefer Tymorean armour, with some soft fabric between me and it.”

“Leave that armour on the ship, and I will take the cleansed armour from within too,” Llaimos decided thoughtfully. “If I have a chance to meet with Krys, I will pass them on for Jon and Kel to wear if they need it.”

“Have you some for Pyr?” Tymos suggested.

“I have done the best I could to reduce the President’s armour to fit him, but I don’t think anyone expected a child his size to need armour,” Llaimos admitted. “Go, he will be glad to see you, and he knows where the clothes are.”

Tymos faced the Aeronite officer, who was defiant even with his arms bound behind him and six miscellaneous weapons aimed at him.

“I am no traitor! I will not make deals with the enemy and I will not desert my post,” the Aeronite insisted.

His subordinates were huddled in a small crowd, facing their own weapons, now in the hands of mutants. Many were wheezing from the poisonous air, as well as being terrified of dying.

“I accept your decision,” Tymos said calmly. “However, I will give each of your men the same choice. They may stay here and die from poisoned air, or starvation, or they may return to Warlord Axec’s ship.”

“I will personally report to the Warlord, the names of any of them that desert their duties,” the officer said loudly. “And if they survive the Tymorean torturers, they will be whipped and killed by the Warlord.”

Tymos sensed the resignation of the huddle of warriors. They dared not disobey the officer, despite the intolerable situation and their own failing health.

“Have you been able to contact your superior?” Tymos asked, knowing that the answer was no.

It had been the transmissions from this group, intercepted by Llaimos that had led Tymos to them.

“Have you untainted food and water? Do you know where you can get fresh supplies? The Ciriot are making this world uninhabitable – no one will be able to survive outside the cities, and there is no room there for your people.”

The officer spat at Tymos, not wanting to admit to the truth of what he had heard. He ignored the subtle shifting of the mutants and the increase in intensity of their hostile stares.

“Your Warlord has been invited to the Temple of Dira, to discuss an alliance with us against the Ciriot,” Tymos told the officer. He did not intend to mention the Warlords were prisoners there.

“The Warlords will not deal with Tymoreans! They’ll annihilate...”

Tymos interrupted the dogmatic speech. “The outcome of that meeting is of no concern to you here. You have not been able to contact your baseship because of the interference in the atmosphere. You are the ranking officer here. The decision is yours. Will you stay here and commit your men to die, or will you give them the chance to live and fight again?”

The officer’s rigid posture slumped slightly. It wasn’t necessary to read his thoughts to figure out that he was thinking of ways to turn the apparently altruistic offer against the Tymorean.

“You promise to take us back to our ship, right now, unharmed, not tortured...how? Where is your ship?”

“I don’t need a ship,” Tymos told him, knowing the man had no idea of Tymorean transmitters.

“You just as good as said we can’t travel overland,” the officer retorted.

“I promised a safe return. I can take five of you with me at a time,” Tymos stated. “I will take the five sickest warriors first.”

Now the other Aeronites were disregarding protocol to plead with their officer to accept the offer.

Tymos added, “You may report to your superior that there are no people left around here, since I will not be staying after I have assisted you. You may also give a first hand account of the conditions and maybe they will wake up to the truth. That the Tymoreans are not their enemy, the Ciriots are.”

“Untie me,” the officer insisted.

Tymos considered him for a time then nodded at two of the mutants. Their wickedly sharp knives cut the rope bindings.

“I want our weapons returned,” the officer continued.

“Later,” Tymos told him. “And while I am gone, do not try to regain control. My allies are vicious fighters, and they do not have the patience I do to try to make you see reason.”

The officer stayed where he was, and gestured to his men to go with Tymos. Five shuffled forward, nervously, but with a trace of hope. Tymos told the mutants to return their weapons and transmitted the Aeronites to where he knew Axec’s ship to be. He had not been told the location, but the officer had known the coordinates and had thought of them when Tymos had been talking to him.

In a very short time, he was back. The mutants returned the rest of the weapons, but had others to keep aimed at the officer. They didn’t trust him. Tymos moved the officer and the remaining Aeronites into a close group and transmitted once again. The instant he rematerialised after the second trip, the officer fired a weapon at Tymos. He had an instant of shock when he saw Tymos raise a hand and reflect the energy beam back at him. Then the pain overcame him. Since more Aeronite guards were converging from all sides, Tymos transmitted away, leaving the Aeronites to care for their own.

Bordon spoke as soon as Tymos returned. “We move now? Hunt us will they?”

Tymos shrugged. “If I were them, I’d stay where they are. Where do I need to go next?”

The wiry mutant grinned, showing bunched up teeth. “Mithas’s boy Morin sent picture. Them stuck in caves. Said you know it.”

“I do, let’s go.”

When the mutants could tell him of no more Aeronites, or mutants needing help, Tymos took his companions to Ecla. He was pleased to see the city survivors working side by side with mutants to recover the dead and inter them with respect in a mass grave. The list of identified dead was being recorded for later memorial services.

Rubble and debris from bombed buildings was being cleared and piled for possible reuse. Damaged buildings were being repaired on behalf of the shocked survivors, and they were indicating empty buildings to house the refugee mutants. There was still a great deal to be done before the city could be sealed.

Tymos sent word to his sister, “I can still see the trails of the Ciriots. They have not completely faded. Their rubbish is everywhere.”

Kryslie sounded tired when she answered. “They will have left a lot of nasty surprises. If you can find any, show them to the mutants. They may be able to sense more like them, in the same way they were able to sense Aeronites. If they do, have them move any Ciriots things to the edge of the city. I can take care of them when I get back there. Where will you be going next?”

“I will petition the Guardians to lead me to any more Aeronites on this continent, and then I will go to the other continents and check there.”

Chapter 35 - Llaimos Spies on the Ciriote

The instruments in the President Governor's personal craft, now flown by Llaimos, were the very latest developed by Governor Xyron's staff. Therefore, he had no trouble detecting and tracking Ciriote air and spacecraft. Mastering the controls of this sleek fighter had taken only moments. All the knowledge he needed had come to his mind as soon as he thought about the need. His siblings had indeed given him a marvellous gift in those few moments after he had grown to adulthood. Before they had filled his mind, Llaimos had felt like an empty vessel; he had been a child, faced with a tremendous task and he was totally ignorant. Then Kryslie had touched him. When the power had flowed into him, he had known what it was but it had been almost overwhelming until Tymos had touched him and the power obeyed him.

"Pyr, in the rear storage locker there are several sets of armour. See if any of them are your size," Llaimos instructed. Now was not the time for introspection; though he could not help wondering what he had missed by being a child for such a short time. The thought brought a rush of confusing images that he firmly pushed aside. He was glad when Pyr returned and distracted him with the need to adjust the size of the armour.

"What of you, Prince Llaimos?" Pyr asked respectfully.

"I won't need it!" Llaimos assured him, finding he knew how to adjust the armour but only to a certain point. "I can't get it any smaller," he admitted worriedly.

"They don't make armour for children," Pyr commented. "I don't think it is possible to make it any smaller. This will do!" He donned the armour and took from Llaimos a small alloy box that he had found in a locker on the ship.

"Put this in an accessible pouch, it is a force field generator which will protect you at any time that you are outside the ship. It will also give me a means to locate you." Llaimos explained.

Pyr nodded that he had understood and obeyed a hand signal from Llaimos to return to the co pilot's couch. Llaimos took the controls off automatic and flew manually.

He was aware of Pyr but didn't turn to look at him; he really didn't know what the child was capable of. So decided just to ask if the child knew how to do something before asking him to comply.

"Child!" Llaimos thought to himself. "The child was almost ten— what did that make him? It was fortunate that Pyr hadn't actually seen the process where Llaimos had grown up. If he had, he would not be so trusting in the wisdom of this Great One! Llaimos pushed that thought aside also and began to hunt Ciriote.

The Ciriote usually flew in groups of at least two, so Llaimos watched, waited and learnt. Detailed pictures and computer-generated replicas were created of the different types of Ciriote craft and his computers analysed the performance of each type. When Llaimos noted an isolated Ciriote ship, he was ready to act. All the different craft had standard defensive screens, more that adequate for engagements with most other life forms. This one was no different. The pilot was not expecting trouble, for no Tymorean aircraft had been seen since that last major engagement. Even if he had been alert, the attack when it came didn't seem like more than a minor mechanical problem.

The Ciriote had never had a chance to learn that the Tymorean sciences were much, much more advanced than they could determine from their planetary scans. They had also conveniently forgotten the lesson they had been given when the Tymorean ships had first appeared out of nowhere.

Consequently, Llaimos in the President's fighter craft, watched the Ciriote craft from a distance away, gathered all the information he wanted from it and gave instructions to Pyr.

“Can you program the weapons computer to generate a disruptive pulse set at the frequency of their drive generator and a field to neutralize those defensive screens?” Pyr nodded in anticipation.

“When they have landed, I want a full coverage blocking screen,” Llaimos continued. “I want no signal to go out from that ship.”

Pyr set to work with enthusiasm. His early training had given him more than enough theory so solve that simple problem.

The Tymorean ship had a carrier field around it for the defensive screens and protective fields. The disruptive pulse was generated from a slender rod that protruded from the nose of the ship and ended just outside the range of the protective fields. Llaimos activated the disruptive pulse when he came within the weapons range. The Ciriot pilots had no suspicion that they had been attacked, it was simply as if their ship had inexplicably lost power. They acted predictably and found an open area to land in. Llaimos landed a short way away, his ship hidden behind visual distortion fields as well.

With the engines turned off, many of the alien ships had fewer blocking screens and Llaimos discovered that he could now scan the interior of the craft.

This craft was a four-crew type of aircraft and all the crew disembarked after a few ineffectual attempts to call their base. They began to talk between each other; their voices were a series of clicking noises.

Llaimos and Pyr carefully disembarked from their own ship.

“Remember,” Llaimos thought at Pyr. “While the force field will make it difficult for them to detect us, they cannot walk through us. If one of them shows too much interest in your position, stand very still; it minimizes the distortion of the air caused by the field.”

As Llaimos and Pyr walked towards the alien ship, one of the Ciriot re-entered it. It was studying a computer screen as two silent intruders walked past him to get to the rear of the ship. Llaimos was wearing goggles that let him scan through walls; he hadn't his sibling's talent to do it otherwise. He found the Burnfire storage locker and the route to the drive chamber. While Pyr maintained a lookout, Llaimos attached a small limpet like object to the back of the engine control computer. It was a transmitter/receiver device that would enable Llaimos to take remote control of the ship at a time of his choosing. The device was saturated with the carrier force that would prevent its detection. The device also carried a small but powerful amount of explosive. It was now a flying bomb.

Llaimos led Pyr to the storage locker and mentally told him to flatten himself against the wall to let the Ciriot past. The Ciriot had obviously concluded the self-diagnostic routine and found nothing wrong and was going to check the engine manually. As soon as he was out of sight, the two intruders stole the Burnfire and escaped back to their own ship, where they carefully stowed the Burnfire and discontinued the pulse. After a time the alien started the ship again, found it was inexplicably running perfectly, recalled the rest of the crew and took off. Only then, did Llaimos take off and begin to seek his next victim.

Llaimos continued in this way gradually building up his supply of Burnfire and his knowledge of the Ciriot ships, not to mention more and more sabotaged craft. The more he observed, the more he was convinced that the Ciriot were acting out of character in their conquest of this world. The scanty knowledge that the Governors had gathered about the Ciriot had all indicated that this race of pirates usually operated in groups of two to twenty ships; family groups, not a fleet of a thousand. The number of Ciriot ships that Llaimos had observed about the planet was already over that amount. He had spoken mentally to his siblings and they too would consider reasons for this unusual event. They all expressed a wish to know if the Ciriot had a baseship similar to the Aeronite ships to service the smaller craft.

Llamos had already achieved an impressive tally of sabotaged craft when he felt the call from his brother.

Even as he listened to his brother's message and shared the knowledge Tymos took from the Ciriote's mind, he directed Pyr to fly to Tymos's position. He landed as close as he dared, and once again activated the blocking field he had devised. Pyr remained in his ship watching for other Ciriote ships.

As they talked, Llamos could feel Tymos's desire to know everything about the ship; it matched his own. The Ciriote Tymos had killed had been one of some superiority, still black robed but almost as powerful as some that had purple robes. What a wealth of information they now had about their enemies and how much more would be learned from his ship's computer?

Tymos went off to get new clothes, and Llamos set to work, knowing that the Burnfire in the ship had died out from lack of fuel.

The chance to download the ship's memory banks was not to be passed up. With the knowledge from the Ciriote's mind, it was a simple process and Llamos quickly deduced how it could be done from any of the other ships via remote wireless signal.

Llamos did not delay in starting the download to his own computer, and while Pyr monitored the process from the Tymorean craft. He was aware of Tymos leaving with the mutants and rescued Aeronites, and sent a mental farewell.

Llamos did not want to stay longer than necessary at the alien ship and as much as he wished he could hide the ship for further study he had no means to transport it and hide it anywhere else. He compromised by creating a portable field generator to hide it visually, and hoped the power source would last long enough to confuse the enemy when the ship was found to be missing. If they found it, it would be apparently undamaged, and no trace of the crew would be found. A mystery to worry them!

It was impossible to transmit signals through the poisoned atmosphere for more than short distances so Llamos plotted a course to take him close to the Royal Estate so that he could transmit the data to the computers there. He knew those units were running off geothermally charged batteries, and still operating. It was not his intention to land on the Estate, though he could if he needed to, since the president's ship had the controls needed to raise selected shields remotely. He would only go as far as the maximum range for accurate data transfer, since the Estate was still a target of the avaricious Ciriote.

As he flew in that direction, shielded, cloaked and on autopilot, he let his mind consider the information Tymos had stripped from the Ciriote mind.

That alien had been more important than most of his fellows. It had been an aide to a "Ciri Prince" based somewhere on this world. The Ciri Princes, for the memory had indicated more than one, were not only seeking treasures and valuable metals but were searching for a particular person or people. The designation of the one they sought was "Prince of the Universe" a being of some superior race that lived on a world that was in legend unconquerable. To the Ciriote, this in itself was a challenge; such a race, they believed, would be rich in plunder, the people such fine fodder for their torturous rites. The challenge had done something unprecedented, and united over one hundred of the male dominated warrior tribes of nomadic space pirates.

In the Aeronites, they had found a race they could not defeat on their home world. From the Aeronite legends, they had heard of the Great Ones and a legendary Guardian Planet. They made plans to invade the world that the Aeronites had once been expelled from by such a Great One.

The Ciriote tribal leaders reported to the Princes, the strongest, hardest, and meanest of their race and the rulers of the major Ciriote clans. The Ciriote Princes caused problems with Aerdna's orbit, and then offered the Aeronites an alliance and help in defeating their enemies on Tymorea.

In most instances, the Ciriots stole their technology from other races, but there were Ciriots who excelled in understanding alien technologies and they were given instructions to develop certain devices. Using a genetic manipulation technique, they developed a hybrid that looked Aeronite and thrived on that world but reported to them. As a gesture of good faith, they presented cloning technology to their "allies", not caring what it would be used for and also gave them knowledge of the means to hide their spaceships from detection devices. Of course the Ciriots did not mention a useful flaw in the technology that permitted those that knew of it to detect the cloaked ships! While the Aeronites observed the world and prepared to invade it, the Ciriots tribes were gathering together. Unprecedented numbers of large family ships rendezvoused and docked together forming colony ships that provided a base for the smaller vessels now prominent on Tymorea. For safety only half of each tribe stayed in the colony ships, the remainder returned to their planet under the leadership of the eldest sons of the tribal leaders and Princes.

The Ciriots grew tired of the watch and wait tactics of the Aeronites and found a way to speed the process and give it urgency. Their scientists had found a way to accelerate the destabilization of Aerdna's orbit and this had been done to a point that could not now be stopped.

Ciriots forces secretly followed the Aeronite invaders to Tymorea and set up a ground base on a continent away from the populated first continent. They hid the base and watched the progress of the invasion. The apparently natural catastrophe facing their home world was a sufficient spur to the Aeronites to keep them focused. The Ciriots could appreciate the artistry of the attack which had seen damage done to the planet remain unnoticed and ready to cause vital failures when the pressures of war began. The death or corruption of the Supreme ruler's children appealed to them.

When the Tymoreans began to notice the Aeronites actions and subtle resistance began, the Ciriots had fallen into the habit of thinking of the Tymoreans as backward and slow, doing too little, too late. The setbacks to the Aeronite plans were lucky accidents. Even the inexplicable appearance of planes capable of fighting the Aeronite ships didn't do much to change their view. The ships defended well but seemed incapable of a crushing attack.

The withdrawal of the Tymorean ground forces was seen as a gesture of defeat. The Ciriots Princes gave orders for their own ships to attack. Counting on the element of surprise, they began to destroy both Aeronite and Tymorean targets. The alliance of convenience was over!

And then - their plans met serious resistance. The Tymorean Space fighters suddenly broke off an engagement with the orbiting Aeronite baseships and flew planetward, proving that they were also capable of atmospheric flight. From other places on the planet, more fighter craft appeared and began to attack the Ciriots, when before they had merely defended. The difference was staggering. The Ciriots experienced heavy losses and in the stress of the conflict had reverted to their familiar fighting tactics of fighting in tribal groups not as a fleet. The Tymorean pilots adapted quickly and maintained their supremacy. The Ciriots were forced to withdraw and wait. The Tymoreans did not pursue and instead disappeared.

The Ciriots expected further resistance but found none. For some days they were ultra cautious, fearing a trap but when no further signs of fighters were seen the Ciriots soon convinced themselves that they had won the engagement. When no defenders appeared to prevent the attacks on the cities, they declared the planet theirs.

The Ciriots were supreme! The Aeronites may have thought they'd won but they were quickly learning otherwise as Ciriots warriors were sent out to defeat any Aeronite troops they encountered. However, the Ciriots rapidly discovered that they had won nothing. They had found no valuables to plunder, no rich deposits of metals or other tradable commodities. The powerful leaders of the powerful race they sought had gone into hiding. The victims that they had found

were of less value than their ex-allies were and even under torture could not reveal the locations of the treasure houses.

Llaimos allowed himself to be amused, by the Ciriots' memory of his angry superiors. The Ciri Princes had ranted about how they had captured one of the three supreme rulers, but children had helped him escape. And that had been true, Pyr had helped, but so had Kryslie. They called her a child too. How wrong they were.

But what they regretted most, was losing the king because he had been strong in a power they sensed and craved. They had been sure he would know everything they wanted to know.

The Ciriots were aware that the power was retreating, and only a handful of children remained. That worried Llaimos – how did they know that? That was something he should mention to his brother and sister. As far as the Ciriots were concerned, that just meant that all the adults must be dead if children were the only defenders.

It was reason for them to attack the heavily defended places. Their logic told them that the treasures they wanted must be there. The Princes gave orders for the cities to be breached by whatever means possible, then searched, looted and destroyed. If they could not locate treasures, they were to question the citizens until someone revealed the desired information.

Pyr interrupted Llaimos's meditation. "I can't get the signal to the computer. There is too much interference."

After adjusting the parameters of the different scanners, Llaimos took manual control of the craft and checked the shields and cloaking.

"I am going to have to land in the hangar cavern – the Ciriots are not targeting there. I can lower the shield over the entrance and bring it back up once we are in. We should be able to access the computer from there."

Although Pyr would have relished the challenge of lining up the distant point in the mesa walls, he did not argue when his brother took control. All his experience had been on virtual image simulators, not in actual atmosphere when the weather and winds were exponentially more treacherous than normal. He admired the skill of his newfound brother, and promised himself to become as good one day. He felt the ship shudder as it slowed to enter the cavern, but Llaimos held it steady and landed it in the exact centre of the enormous cavern. He gaped in surprise at the closely parked ships around the perimeter of the space.

While Pyr followed directions for accessing the archive computer and set up files for the downloads, Llaimos linked the wrist unit into the security system and checked the Estate.

Tymos had mentioned Jordan being there, and he discovered that his lost brother, was still there.

"Jordan is here," Llaimos told Pyr. "Up a level or two."

"What about my guardian? Is he here too?"

"He is at Dira, in the Temple. Jordan is alone."

Pyr seemed to be arguing with himself. He stopped what he was doing and was staring at the touch pad. "Could I...talk to him? Tell him that I am well?"

Llaimos nodded, thinking that Pyr might help bring Jordan closer to a Tymorean way of thinking. He opened a two-way, secure comm. frequency from the ship to the security monitoring room.

Pyr couldn't contain himself when he saw Jordan. His brother was startled at hearing his name over the comm. frequency, and looked around and finally located the screen where Pyr's face showed.

"Where are you?" Jordan demanded. Relief that Pyr was alive warred with fear for his safety.

"I am with my brother, Llaimos," Pyr announced. "We are finding information about the Ciriots."

Jordan manually adjusted the view and saw that Pyr was wearing oversized armour, and was indeed with a man. He studied the face of the man and recognised the ethnic likeness to the king, and to his own image. If Pyr called him brother, he was another of the High King's get and brother to Vila and himself too. But Kellex had never mentioned this one. Was he another that was whelped on another world? He must be. The only other child Kellex knew of was an infant.

"Is he treating you well?" Jordan asked carefully. He feared that the Tymorean would punish Pyr for what had happened to the King.

Pyr told his brother excitedly how he has stowed away on Jordan's ship, followed him and met his father, and helped his father. He was more sober when he told of subsequent events, with the Ciriote, but was animated again when he told how he was helping to trick their unfaithful allies.

"What you did was wrong!" Pyr finally blurted.

Jordan was already feeling guilty about that. "Pyr, you have to believe me. Vila and I didn't know then. I'm...glad the king is still alive...and that they are treating you well."

"Jordan, Llaimos would welcome you," Pyr said, hoping Jordan would agree.

"Bro, I can't..." Jordan said, huskily. "Kellex has Vila commanding the squadron. He has discovered that he can't leave that Temple and thinks she can get him out. I can't renege on Kellex now, or he will kill Vila. And anyway, the Tymoreans will never forgive us."

Pyr's face fell and Llaimos sensed his misery. "He must make his own choice," he murmured. "I respect his concern for our sister, Vila, and his choice to help protect those who nurtured him. Tell him I will speak in his defence."

The message was passed to Jordan, who didn't respond for a long moment and when he did it was with a terse, "I am glad you are where you belong."

Jordan cut the signal.

To distract Pyr, Llaimos suggested studying the data they had collected with the aim of locating the Ciriote base. They had to have one somewhere on Tymorea. When they felt they had a good idea of its position on the second continent, Llaimos sent the location mind to mind to Tymos. Then, Llaimos had Pyr write a program to enable them to request a download from the Ciriote ships they came in range of so when the current downloading was finished, they could leave to find more Ciriote ships to sabotage.

Chapter 36 - Kryslie Seals the Cities

Kryslie arrived in the city of Hyrun in the midst of a riot. People were running, shoving each other out of the way and trying to reach the entrances to food shops. Some smashed windows, and tried to get in that way, others tore off the wooden slats where shop owners had tried to protect their premises. The air was full of shouts and shrieks from panic-stricken men and women.

Keleb nearly collapsed; Kryslie caught him and held him up, as she strengthened her own mental shields.

"I'm sorry, Kel," she apologised, as she enforced some shielding on his mind.

"What's happening here?" Jonko asked, as he noted the ashen face of his friend. "Has the city been invaded?"

"I sense fear and panic. I need to get back over there. The people have just found out that the city's shields have malfunctioned."

"Sabotage?" Jonko queried.

"Yes, and the perpetrator is probably calling his superiors right now. I need to be seen, before this city explodes into violence," Kryslie told him. "Kel, do you think you can block this out?"

"Give me a few minutes," Keleb said, his voice betraying the strain he was under. "You go. I will follow in a bit."

Jonko still looked concerned, but Kryslie distracted him.

"Jon, I want you to go to the council building and get into the room with the shield controls and see what you can do. We don't have a lot of time before attack craft realise we are vulnerable. Do what ever is necessary to get the shields working again. Do you understand?"

Jonko nodded. He knew he might have to injure or kill a few people to save the majority. He ran off at his fastest pace.

With a final look at Keleb, Kryslie transmitted to the centre of the city square – where the city guards were trying to protect the mayor from a crowd of angry people. She arrived on the platform, facing two violent agitators who had climbed up onto the platform. Both were forced backwards by the repeller field from her transmitter, and fell down amongst the other pressing people.

Kryslie was at the microphone of the public address system before the guards realised she was there.

"This undisciplined behaviour will cease!" she spoke quietly, but somehow her voice was magnified and was heard over the angry clamour. She had also projected the command to those immediately around her, and these stopped moving and yelling abruptly. The silence spread as she identified herself by rank and title. Every eye in the square turned to look at her and a murmur of awe spread out to those beyond the square and to those trying to steal enough food for a month's siege.

Silence fell and people began to return to the square. The agitators nearest her began to mutter resentfully.

"For those of you that feel that you have been deserted by Royalty," Kryslie went on, addressing that comment to the disgruntled agitators, "I am proof that you have not. Our world is at war. Many cities are worse off than this one – they have been attacked, buildings bombed to rubble, thousands killed. Nearly a quarter of the cities... so far this one has been lucky. It may not be for much longer. The Royals are not all powerful – we are mortal. We need the help of all of you."

"But the shield is down!" a man called out. "We will be killed!"

Kryslie felt Jonko's mind trying to reach hers. "What?" she sent, and she immediately saw in her friends mind the destruction in the council building. When Jonko was looking directly at the shield control panel, she had him study it.

Aloud, she was saying, "I have someone investigating them now and repairs will be underway shortly."

At that moment, she sensed malevolence and determination that the shields stayed down. She sent Jonko a warning.

Before anyone else demanded answers from her, Kryslie spoke again, "I know each city has an emergency plan, for times of emergency such as this. The district wardens will direct non-combatants – women, children, old and sick folk to the designated shelters. These will have supplementary shields to protect them. The men are to report to the district rallying points and await instructions."

Already, the level of fear and panic was decreasing. Merely her presence, and her calmness, made a difference.

The mayor had moved next to Kryslie and murmured, "The shields were sabotaged."

"I know, Mayor Penterton," Kryslie had identified the man from her father's shared memories. Quietly, she warned, "There is likely to be more sabotage to vital installations and essential services. You need to direct the local militia to guard those places. You also need to instigate stage two of the census – have some of the militia accompany the census groups and watch out for anyone with dark eyes. By that, I mean those that do not have the white around the iris. These are Aeronites, the enemy I seek. Do not kill them. If they do not wish to come quietly, disable them or stun them. I, personally, will deal with them. Offer them Royal amnesty if they help you locate all of their kind and contact their fellows to cease the sabotage."

"I cannot see them agreeing," the mayor murmured back.

"They will when I tell them certain facts," Kryslie assured them.

Keleb had quietly approached Kryslie, and now she directed the mayor's attention to him.

"This is Keleb, one of Governor Xyron's assistants. He can oversee the census follow up. If you are unsure of anyone's right to be in the city, he will judge them."

Kryslie quickly explained to Keleb that every citizen had to be listed on the census. This next step required every citizen to be spoken for by two other listed townsfolk, and then to have an indelible stamp placed on their right hand, using stamps and ink supplied by Professor Governor Xyron.

Then she inserted into his mind the special characteristics of the ink and how it changed if in contact with an alien creature. Finally she thought at him, "Some Aeronites might have managed to slip past the original census and be listed and some commoners may not have seen the reason to be listed."

Keleb murmured, "I know what to do."

Before Kryslie stepped down from the platform, she admonished the crowd, "Mayor Penterton will remind you all of the emergency procedures, and I expect everyone to do their part."

Once down at the level of the crowd, Kryslie pushed away the guards who tried to encircle and protect her. "You have enough to do, and little time to do it – start moving the non-combatants to safety. There is not much time."

Before they could protest, she transmitted into a small space at the edge of the crowd and strode towards the council building. Everywhere she looked, she checked for the tell tale trails of the Ciriote and was relieved when she saw none.

She joined Jonko in the rubble-strewn chamber. He had found some tools and was at work on the damaged control board. Tossed on a pile of fallen bricks was a bound and gagged Aeronite.

“He tried to finish the job,” Jonko told her without taking his attention from his task.

“Let me help you,” Kryslie offered and Jonko merely edged sideways a bit to give her room.

“I don’t know what all these circuits are for; I am simply matching colours and joining them when I can. I really need spare wire and circuit parts.”

Kryslie placed a hand on Jonko’s arm to get his attention and spoke softly so the prisoner did not hear, “Follow the main power conduit back towards the inside/outside connection box. Somewhere between here and there you will find the shield relay box – or rather, the master control box.”

Jonko drew in a breath to speak, but Kryslie hushed him. “Break the link to this box and reset all the green switches. Don’t touch the blue ones. And Jon, hurry. There isn’t much time – an hour – maybe. That Aeronite wouldn’t have brought down the shields if the Aeronite fighters were not close.”

Two of the city guards found Kryslie just as Jonko began his search.

“Take this prisoner to your secure holding area. I will speak to him later. And please tell our superior that I do not need an escort. I need to move freely.”

“Your highness, we were asked if you could send more healers here,” one of the two found the courage to ask.

“I’m sorry. I wish I could. What has happened?”

Kryslie read the situation in their mind. It was as she had warned the mayor. An explosion had occurred at the water treatment plant. “Your people will have to manage,” she told them with sympathy. “The best I can do is go there and look for the saboteur, though I expect he will be well away.”

Kryslie chose to transmit to the scene the men had vivid in their minds. She didn’t join the rescue workers or the healers but sought for the mind of the Aeronite infiltrator and began to hunt.

Her quarry hadn’t gone far – he was checking the effect of his work. He suddenly sensed he was not alone and spun around as he drew his weapon. He fired in a rapid movement, but instants later, he felt the energy of the beam burning him. His mind froze with pain and bewilderment. His mind could not understand how the red headed woman could be uninjured, and how the energy beam had reflected off her hand back at him. He dropped his useless weapon and tried to stagger away.

Kryslie caught him easily, and forced him to sit. For the moment, they were out of sight amongst a cluster of sheds. “You need to listen to me,” she told the Aeronite in his own language. “I know what you are and the types of thing you intend. I will not let you and your friends continue.”

The prisoner spat at her and then grimaced.

“I don’t expect you to like me, just to listen.”

Kryslie tersely explained the situation outside of the cities, and what was happening where the Ciriots were. At first, he was disbelieving, but some of what Kryslie told him resonated with his fears. He had been unable to contact his Warlord superior. She asked him to contact his fellow Aeronites, to stop the rest of the planned destruction, and give themselves up to the guard. She promised them Royal amnesty if they came freely. The prisoner merely stared back at her. She sensed he was thinking, but not ready to trust her.

“What are you going to do to me?” the Aeronite demanded.

“Take you into protective custody,” Kryslie told him. “The people in this city will rip you apart if they knew what you did.”

The Aeronite wanted to run, but his mind revealed that he was too weak both from the effects of the weapon reflection and the lack of his food supplement pills. He cursed Kryslie and let her take him away.

She transmitted him to the council building. A guard came at her call, and she directed him to take her prisoner to the holding area to join the other.

Although the other prisoners refused to help her find their comrades, Kryslie had learnt a great deal from the thoughts in their public mind. Firstly, that there were twelve of them, and secondly the location of the building they were hiding in.

After finding three more near strategic targets, hidden and watching the patrolling guards, and completely unaware that they were identified as aliens, she captured each easily and took them to the holding place. Then she went to their hide out and waited, using her power to cloak her presence.

As each of the remaining seven Aeronites returned, she remained unnoticed, and listened to their uncensored conversation. They all knew that some of them had been captured, and none had dared go near the census points or the shelters. None of them thought there was a need, for once their brother warriors entered the city, these intended to join them and they would be safe.

When Kryslie chose to reveal herself, they all stopped talking and reached for their weapons. "Who are you," one of them finally found the voice to demand. His mind revealed that he knew she was a high-ranking Royal and he was imagining the praise and rewards he would receive for capturing her. He tried to fire his weapon to disable her, but found that he could not make his hand work.

"You will listen!" Kryslie spoke in 'command' tone, and she repeated what she had told the first five prisoners.

"How do we know that we can trust you?" the group leader snarled. "I don't believe what you claim. The Ciriots are our allies, and they are not here. And now the damned Tymorean Governors have sent a mere female here to speak to us. They are cowards and fools. They won't even fight us for what is theirs."

"Call them what you will," Kryslie replied. "The Governors have not fought your people for you are not the real enemy we must face. I have seen the Ciriots – in Amik – and there they were torturing Tymorean and Aeronite with equal brutish pleasure. Your people have been used, and now discarded. I pledge to protect you, as I am pledged to protect the Tymoreans in this city. Furthermore, I intend to take you back to your baseship."

One of the other Aeronites muttered, "Voltec will have us whipped for desertion."

Kryslie shook her head. "Voltec will have no say in the matter. "Soon he will be arriving at the Temple of Dira to discuss an alliance."

"We need to talk," the leader decided. "Amongst ourselves."

Kryslie gestured for them to huddle, but she did not leave. Part of her mind was aware of their discussion, another part was warning her of imminent danger.

"Keleb!" she minded. "Tell the Mayor to sound the siren."

Moments later, the eerie wailing began. The startled Aeronites thought they knew what that meant. At first they were vindictively pleased, thinking it was Aeronite bombers that were approaching. As the noise came closer and they heard the thumping undertone, they realised the noise was unfamiliar. Kryslie drew on the aura to create a sphere of protection around herself and the seven Aeronites.

"Stay close together," she commanded them, and then she mentally sent to Jonko, "What's the hold up?"

He had a picture of a rubble filled room and his hands tossing huge chunks of fallen masonry out of the way. "A few more minutes," he thought, and even his mind voice seemed out of breath.

The first of the bombs dropped – close enough to blast the walls of the rude shelter to dust. The protective sphere did not block all of the pressure wave, and only Kryslie remained standing.

Several more bombs fell, further away before Kryslie heard, "They're up," from Jonko.

The stunned Aeronites, saw the blinding light above them as the next bombs detonated against it. When they were all again capable of thought and speech, and over the shock of their

near death experience, none doubted Kryslie's word. She had done...something... and they were all still alive when they should have been dead.

"We accept your offer, Princess Kryslie," the leader capitulated. "We will do whatever you ask of us."

"Tell me where you have other explosives planted," Kryslie asked.

After taking the Aeronites to the secure cells, Kryslie oversaw the dismantling of the bombs and other nasty traps they had set. She found Mayor Pendleton near midnight, and he insisted that she eat and rest. Keleb and Jonko were already asleep. He reported the status of the city to her and thanked her with heartfelt fervour.

"Keleb gave us your warning in time to get everyone to shelters," the Mayor told her. "The three bombs that landed, destroyed a row of warehouses being used for hydroponics, part of the recycling plant, and some old shacks. It could have been a whole lot worse. Are you sure you have all the enemy spies in confinement. My people are demanding their death."

"And I have promised them my protection," Kryslie stated, ending that discussion. "They are simply soldiers obeying orders from misguided superiors. I will return them to their baseships. They are of no further consequence and they provided me with information so I could dismantle all the rest of their sabotage."

The Mayor had to accept her word, so he merely nodded in agreement. "I did not expect you to be so competent as a fighter, your Highness," he commended her. "I cannot image your father doing so much."

"When he comes visiting, everyone is usually on their best behaviour," Kryslie said with a faint grin. "You wouldn't like to cross him. He is a formidable opponent too. However, I cannot stay here much longer, so you need to listen carefully. Tomorrow, you are going to stress to everyone living in the city, that they are to go to their homes, or sleeping places and stay there until the following day. Tonight, I want everyone – guards and citizens – off the streets while I do a search of the city."

"What are you looking for? I thought you said everything was safe," the mayor asked in consternation. "And surely my people could help."

Kryslie shook her head. "Not for this, and I will need no help. However, when I am finished, I will remove the prisoners, and activate the final layer of shielding. The city will be sealed and fully protected from all enemy activity. No one will be able to enter or leave."

"I don't understand – how long will it be like that?" the mayor protested.

"How long? I cannot say, but trust the Guardians of Peace. You need have no worries about feeding all the people indefinitely. When I seal the city, it will drop into a state of stasis. All you need remember, is that you will go to sleep tomorrow and when you wake, this useless dirty war will be over and you will find that you no longer need the shields."

Penderton nodded. "Please accept the thanks of the city for your help, your Highness."

"And I thank you for yours," Kryslie replied. "I will be off now, but I will be back in the morning."

Jonko saw Kryslie sitting watching him when he awoke. "Do you go to sleep at all?" he asked softly, not wanting to wake Keleb.

"Some," Kryslie told him. "You and Kel did great things yesterday."

"I am rewarded by your gratitude," Jonko said with mock gallantry. "Though when you said we had work to do, I never conceived of the scope of the task."

"It won't always be this easy," Kryslie warned him. "And even I did not expect to arrive at such a volatile moment."

"We arrived in time," Jonko pointed out. "Though Kel had a particularly hard time. The medic finally gave him a dose of something to make him sleep. Were you aware that during that attack alert, he was going from shelter to shelter with the census checkers and reassuring

everyone? He has assured me that everyone is checked and tagged, even the dimwits that avoided the first census. The threat of no rations was effective.”

Kryslie smiled wryly and said, “You will find all sorts.”

Keleb stirred and sat up. “I have one almighty headache.”

Kryslie moved and sat beside him. “Let me help you.” She began to massage his temples, relaxing the muscles and speeding up the metabolism of the sleep drug. “Didn’t Governor Reslic, or your guardian teach you to shield your mind?”

“They did,” Keleb admitted. “And they told me I was a better student in that subject than you were. Next time, I won’t leave a channel open to sense the emotional aura. I never expected the intensity...you must have learnt better than I did after all.”

“Ah, yes, well, Reslic took a while to convince me that I had to learn to block Tym from my mind – but he ensured I learnt it well,” Kryslie admitted, and her friends saw her blush faintly. “I am sorry you were overwhelmed. Do you need me to help reinforce your shielding before we move on?”

“Let me have a short period of meditation, and breakfast, and I think I will be okay,” Keleb considered. “You will need all your attention for what you need to do.”

“And where were you last night? After you finished clearing Aeronite traps?” Jonko asked pointedly.

“I checked the city to be sure there were no Ciriots anywhere in the city. Wherever they go, they leave a trail that is visible in UV light. I can see them.”

“So where do we go next,” Jonko asked.

When Kryslie transmitted again, she took Jonko and Keleb to Reva, one of the cities they had all been to before. This time their arrival was unnoticed for a while, and they were able to evaluate the status of the city. Kryslie glanced at Keleb, he saw the look and told her, “This place is not so bad. People are afraid, though. Can you feel it too?”

“Yes,” Kryslie admitted. “I have to go and be seen. I want you to...”

Her intended speech was interrupted by the sound of an explosion in the distance. A second explosion followed, and that one caused a section of the western part of the shield wall to light up.

“I’ll check it out,” Jonko volunteered.

“Go with him, Kel. You will know if I need you,” Kryslie directed.

As she looked around to get her bearings, her attention was caught by the rising screams of a terrified child. Without seeming to hurry, she approached the child’s mother as the other children with her began to wail.

“Hello,” she said to the mother. “Let me take the little one from you so you can reassure the others.”

“It’s all the loud noises,” the mother apologised. “He should be used to it, with the aircraft flying over and trying to bomb the city every day.”

Kryslie was quietly hushing the squalling child, and projecting calm to him and the other children. She crouched down to the level of the others. “You are all being very brave,” she commented to a boy and his two sisters, as she gently patted the baby’s back. “You will be safe if you obey your parents, and do what the city wardens tell you. There is a shield over the city to keep you safe. Have you seen how the sky lights up after the noises?”

They three older children nodded, but the boy said, “But things blow up, inside too. My da got hurt bad.”

The memory of the incident was in the boy’s memory – vivid and terrifying. His sister began to wail, “I want to go home.”

“Our home is here for now,” the mother reminded her gently.

The girl pouted and looked about to burst into tears.

“Tell me about your home?” Kryslie invited, shifting the baby to a new position. He was only whimpering now.

The little girl was distracted and began to chatter and her sibs added bits of information to what she said.

When they ran out of things to say, Kryslie said, “This war won’t last forever, and when it ends, a lot of things will be different. You might need to build a brand new home in the vales and you will all be able to help your ma and da.”

“I want it now!” the girl insisted.

“Tell you what,” Kryslie said, glancing around as if about to impart a secret. “I’d like that too, so what I want you to do is to finish this walk in the sunshine and go back to where you are staying. When you go to sleep tonight, keep wishing on what you want. Wish very hard, that when you wake up, the war will be gone, and one day...soon...it will. And if you see any of your friends, tell them to do the same.”

The three nodded solemnly, and Kryslie stood up, and handed the now quiet child back to his suddenly embarrassed mother.

“You’re...Royalty!”

Kryslie smiled and asked, “You don’t mind do you? I’m Kryslie, and I just happen to have had a fair bit of experience with loud baby boys lately.”

“Oh, yes, the little prince,” the mother remembered.

“And your name is?” Kryslie invited.

“Helena, and my children are Benny, Amy, Gabby, and the baby is Jules.”

Barely had the woman introduced her family, when Kryslie became aware of the first wave of recognition from passers by, who had not cared to come near the screaming baby. Someone was running towards her. She turned and recognised the runner.

“Tarri! Is all well with you?”

“Yes, we are fine. I told the Mayor I had seen you, but he wouldn’t believe me. Is your brother here too?”

Beyond Tarri, a group of men were trotting closer.

“No, Tymos is busy elsewhere. Do give my regards to your mother and siblings, and perhaps you might help Helena get her children back home. I see your Mayor has decided to check your story, and I do need to speak to him.”

The men were city guards, and they challenged Kryslie. “Who are you and how did you get into the city?”

“Hey!” Tarri objected. “This is Princess Kryslie! Don’t you recognise her? She was here on the King’s last tour and her brother Prince Tymos healed my mother.”

In the few moments when the guards were distracted by Tarri, Kryslie subtly changed her stance, so that when the men looked at her again, she wasn’t the friendly approachable woman, but the essence of Royal authority.

“Gentlemen, I am Kryslie, Heir Designate to his Majesty, High King Governor Tymoros, and I require an immediate interview with Mayor Hedglen.”

“But how did you get in? The roads are watched, and with the shields no one can just walk in,” one of the guards insisted.

Tarri snorted with disgust. “Everyone has been wailing about how the Royals have deserted us, when we have been safe here. Has it occurred to you that other cities might be worse off? Does it matter how she came? You are wasting her time.”

Unlike the guards, the Mayor recognised her instantly. He immediately cleared his days schedule and delegated all the important appointments to his subordinates on the council. He summoned his senior advisors to join him.

Even the most hostile of the councillors quickly realised how fortunate Reva had been, as they heard what Kryslie had to say.

As she had done in the previous city, she instructed the Mayor to activate stage two of the census, by having everyone report to their designated emergency shelters. These places were to be evacuated of all people first. Then, she instructed the supervisors of the census to be on the lookout for dark eyed people. Though Kryslie doubted that the Aeronite spies would turn up a there.

Her plan was that with people in the designated shelters, she would have an easier time seeking the hiding places of the spies.

“I will have an emergency drill,” the Mayor decided. “We haven’t had one for a while, so it might be chaotic at first. Good practice for the wardens though.”

When Kryslie had given him all the instructions, she went to join Jonko and Keleb. The Mayor had no chance to send guards with her, as she transmitted away.

Jonko and Keleb had captured two saboteurs. “They don’t want to talk,” Jonko commented as he nudged the nearest with the toe of his boot. Both males were trussed, and lying on piles of rubble from the blasted buildings. Keleb was helping rescue workers to find and extricate two trapped people.

“Take these two to the guard cells. When we have them all, I will talk to them together.”

In Jonko’s mind, he heard, “I will just help out here for a bit.”

When Jonko returned, the two men were free and Kryslie was nowhere to be seen.

Keleb wandered over, looking satisfied. “Kryslie wants us to check for sabotage. She told me a list of places. She said she was going to check the shield controls and check for signs of Ciriote activity.”

By nightfall, Kryslie was sure the city had been cleansed. The guards had ten Aeronites in their custody, and they had finally decided to cooperate. It hadn’t taken more than the attempt by the first two to escape, and their shock at finding Kryslie waiting for them. They had tried to overcome her, and found instead that the slight, not tall daughter of Tymorean Royalty, was no weak, helpless female.

They told her everything they had done since coming to the city, and were more than glad to accept her offer of liberty back on their own baseship, in preference to the hostile regard of the guards.

On her return from her final trip to Axec’s baseship, Kryslie sought out the Mayor again and explained to him what would happen when she sealed the city.

“The idea of sleeping until the war is over seems impossible,” the mayor admitted. “But I have no reason to doubt you. The Governors have provided well for us so far. It does relieve me of the worry of trying to feed so many extra people. Even with the extra harvest, I feared we would run out of food.”

“I will activate the final shields,” Kryslie stated, standing up.

Night had fallen, and the streets were deserted as she had directed. Kryslie returned to Jonko and Keleb after she had activated the final shields. They stood in the deserted city centre, and for a time, Kryslie seemed to be staring at something across the area.

When she moved again, she commented. “Tymos tells me that the six Warlords are hot footing it to the Temple, each with a squadron of fighters as escort.”

“Good luck to them,” Jonko said dismissively. “Where do we go now?”

Conditions in the cities were worsening, even in those that had so far survived the attacks and had not lost their shields. What little information was passing between the cities, on the intermittent occasions when communication was possible, was little more than rumour. But it told of destruction, and torture, and with no representatives of the Governor’s, fear was spreading.

When the news that Princess Kryslie was visiting cities spread, it gave the common folk new hope and a semblance of calm.

Jonko and Keleb were finding it easier and easier to locate Aeronite spies – those that did not risk the census. Kryslie had many tasks, starting with reassuring the town leaders and directing them to prepare for having the city sealed. She then went on to check the shield controls, and to ensure that no traces of the Ciriote existed in the city. The Aeronites still had to be convinced of her promise of safety, but went willingly back to their baselines once the situation outside the cities was proved to them. Only once, Kryslie needed to take a particularly hostile Aeronite officer, out of the city to see the situation for himself.

So far, they had encountered no Ciriote, but she knew that would not last. There was so much to do, and so many cities, that Kryslie, Keleb and Jonko simply kept on sealing one city and moving to the next, resting when they could to recover their strength.

Jonko had commented on it before, but he did not understand how Kryslie did not seem to need sleep. He was awake, in the darkest part of the night, and he could see Kryslie's eyes gleaming softly.

"Why don't you need sleep?" he asked drowsily.

"The aura of the planet refreshes me," Kryslie admitted softly. "But you and Kel need the rest."

"True," Jonko agreed, and added, "Just like you still do need to eat and drink."

Kryslie chuckled softly. "I knew there was another good reason for having you and Kel around. The mutants have been telling Tymos the same thing and Pyr is not averse to telling Llaimos when he should be hungry too."

"How many cities have we been to now? I've lost count."

"Thirty nine," Kryslie knew instantly.

Jonko did some mental calculations – one or two days in each city, times thirty-nine – they had been on the go for over two months.

"Want to stop?" Kryslie asked, aware of his thoughts.

Jonko jerked fully awake, and pushed himself up on one arm. "No. What we are doing really matters and where else would we go? I don't fancy helping Xan host irate Warlords."

"You and Kel are helping the work get done faster," Kryslie admitted.

"But I can't help feeling we should be going to the cities where the Ciriote are already," Jonko said, intensely.

Kryslie sighed. "I understand your point, but we will need days and days in each of those cities and while we are there, The Ciriote might be trying to corrupt another city. We can only do so much."

Jonko decided, that in a way she was right, and wondered if it really mattered where they went and when. Somehow, they didn't seem to be actually taking the time his mind had estimated. In all the most recent cities, the people had spoken like the Royals had only departed a week before, not months.

"We could speed this up," Jonko suggested. "You can feed energy to Kel and me like when we were accelerating the harvests. Then we wouldn't need sleep either."

"I will suggest it in the morning," Kryslie decided.

Keleb had woken and had been listening. "He's right, Krys. There is so much to do, and I am ready to go now."

"Okay," Kryslie agreed. "But I warn you, we have finished all the easy ones."

Keleb stood, and shivered when he removed the borrowed blankets. This city was already slipping into stasis. No one would notice them leaving. He folded the blanket and set it neatly on the straw filled pallet. "What's the next city?"

After a moment, Kryslie answered. “Amik. The President sent fighters there and they retook the city. They drove the Ciriots out and took the Aeronite spies prisoner, but there is still much to be done, and anything of the Ciriots to be found and destroyed.”

“Are the Aeronite prisoners still there?” Jonko asked.

“No, they were taken to a holding area on one of the uninhabited islands that had food and water. Tymos knows where they are and he will relocate them back to one of the baseships. I expect, by now, they will be grateful to go.”

Amik was still under night-time curfew when Kryslie arrived. Local civilian guards patrolled instead of fleet fighters, but none of them seemed aware of Kryslie or her companions who were standing in the middle of the city’s central square.

“The shields here are back to top strength and efficiency,” Kryslie told them after a glance upwards. Unlike other cities, this one was no longer being bombarded. “The Ciriots were here in large numbers, and they looted the main depository and many other trading places, particularly those dealing in valuable commodities. When our fighters came, they fled, leaving behind many unpleasant things, and many mind injured people and mass destruction.”

“I can feel...something...” Keleb began, struggling to describe the sensations he was receiving. “It is almost like an unpleasant smell, and a screeching sound at the limit of hearing. Or an unpleasant tingle.”

Kryslie felt it too, and looked around. The Ciriots glow trails were fading, but there seemed to be areas enshrouded in a faintly glowing miasma. Other areas were unaccountably pristine clear. The answer came to her as she began to walk around. At the place where Burnfire had touched her, the nearby buildings and street were burnt to nothing or blackened, but the miasma was not there. She pointed the difference out to Keleb and Jonko, and they were both curious to know why.

“Burnfire,” Kryslie said, suppressing a shudder. “It is a vicious weapon – terrifying, unstoppable. Even a drop – once ignited – will spread to cover half a building. It will keep burning until it is stopped by metal or stone or until it runs out of fuel. It destroys, kills painfully, all it touches.”

“You are right, there is no alien taint in the burnt area,” Keleb confirmed.

“So, if you find any untouched canisters of Burnfire, handle it carefully and bring it to me. I can turn its properties to good use.”

“To destroy anything alien,” Jonko quickly deduced. “Won’t that put one in the eye of the Ciriots – turning their own weapon against them. What will we need to do first?”

“Come to the council building. I will rouse the Mayor, and have him tell the guards to let us roam. Then we will begin to collect alien artefacts and bring them to the centre of the square. It is stone paved there. I will have the guards keep any looters away. Being dark, the Ciriots trails and the glowing air are easy to see. After that, I will tell you what I want you to do.”

Once they began searching, finding the Ciriots artefacts was straightforward. Locate the areas with the glowing miasma and delve until the cause was located. It simply took time, lots of it. When the morning arrived, Jonko and Keleb conscripted locals and guards to help them. By then, they could locate the objects by the intensity of the emanating sensations.

Kryslie prepared a holding area for the Ciriots objects, surrounded by stone and metal. The night guards had not noticed her preparing it and were amazed to see the stone blockade where one had not been the night before.

During one visit to the site to deposit items, Kryslie noted several people, dressed like the townsfolk, also placing items there. Even from a distance, Kryslie knew they were Aeronites. They in turn, were startled by seeing her red hair and moved purposefully away. She didn’t need to follow them, able instead to transmit to a point just in front of them. She summoned Jonko and Keleb to arrive behind them.

What surprised her was that the two men made no attempt to run or fight, but seemed to be resigned to be taken prisoner.

“Your Highness, we...we surrender,” the older one bowed his head. “We...we wanted to stay here and become citizens...but we are both just getting weaker and now we cannot even contact our leaders.”

The younger man, who might have been the son of the other, nodded in agreement. He added, “We could have given ourselves up, when the Tymorean fighters came, but we were afraid. We expected to be tortured.”

“You cannot stay here,” Kryslie told them, but not without sympathy.

“Please, don’t send us back. Our Warlord will call us traitors and deserters. And, when we realised that you and the others were looking for things left by those evil creatures, we have been helping.”

“As I said, you can’t stay. You will die. Your people need a substance in your diet that is not available here.”

Both men seemed to slump.

“However, that doesn’t mean I intend to imprison you. Those of your people taken by the space fleet fighters will be returned to one of the baseships. I can return you to Kellex’s ship.”

The elder man turned pale at the idea.

Kryslie felt she understood his fears. “Warlord Kellex won’t be there.”

The younger man said, “That doesn’t help. It means we will have to go back to Aerdna, and we will still die. It doesn’t seem likely that you will let all of us live here.”

“Even with the empty land we have here, the whole population of Aerdna cannot come here. Your Warlords tried to reform our planet to suit your needs, but that too is not the answer for it would have killed nearly all our people.”

Neither of these Aeronites were privy to such information, nor were they callous like Kellex.

“Then there is no hope for us?” the older asked, sounding defeated.

“There is hope,” Kryslie told them earnestly. “Aeronites were once Tymorean. We have never considered you our enemies, just misguided. All we have done is defend what is ours from your interference. The Warlords were wrong to invade here. They have wasted resources that should have been used to find a solution to your world’s problems. You have seen that the Ciriots, your supposed allies, were merely using you. We knew they were the real enemy. We have given to Xan, a plaque containing data that will help create a refuge for you people. To enable the people to survive, and not just the rich who can afford passage off Aerdna.”

The younger man looked defeated. “It isn’t just the Warlords. It is the Supreme council on Aerdna that decided to invade.”

“Then they were misled by the Ciriots, perhaps even controlled by them. When you return, you can support Xan and help him prove that the Ciriots tricked them. No one can live here now, outside of the cities.”

“Kellex made Xan a nobody,” the younger Aeronite pointed out.

“We saved him so that he can save his people,” Kryslie explained. “He has more honour and compassion than Kellex ever had. If you are willing to help him, you will be doing all of your people a great service.”

“How will you make the Warlords leave?” the older man asked.

“They will have no choice,” Kryslie told the Aeronites. “Let me take you, and any others that are still here, back to your ship.”

When daylight came and the townsfolk began moving around, Kryslie left the search for artefacts and went to where the surviving victims of the Ciriots’ torture were being treated. She spent time with each, using her mind-healing gift to lessen the effect of their horrible memories.

News of her presence in the city spread quickly, and the townsfolk drew courage from her presence and worked harder to repair the damage from the attacks by two races. Simply seeing her do hands on work, made them see Royals in a different light.

After more than a week of working twenty hours in every day, Kryslie confirmed that they had located all the Ciriote artefacts. She warned the mayor to keep all of his people away from the central square and the pile of items there, and used one small canister of Burnfire, found with other weapons, to destroy and cleanse the pile. The blaze was initially blindingly bright and inferno hot, but when the flames met the metal and stone, it stopped spreading and consumed all the fuel within the area. Kryslie tended the fire and ensured that no sparks fell outside the containing area.

Then all that was needed was to seal the city. As the air in the city cooled, Kryslie took Jonko and Keleb to the next city and found a secluded place for her friends to sleep.

Chapter 37 - Tymos Scouts the Second Continent

When Tymos transmitted himself to the second continent, he was alone. The last of his mutant companions had stayed in Ecla. The few Tymoreans that lived on this smaller continent, which was really more of a large island, had been evacuated. Most had been farmers of crops that needed a hot tropical climate. Some had been scientists, studying marine life.

However, Llaimos had discovered that a secret Ciriote base was located there. He had been unable to tell Tymos how long it had been there or give more than a general location to use to begin searching. The base was not visible to the scanners on the orbiting satellites. Nor had the arrival of the Ciriote been observed. Tymos put aside the idea that the satellites were sabotaged or the scanners needed to be upgraded. Such problems were for the future, when this useless war was over.

When Tymos arrived at the coordinates Llaimos suggested, he frowned because he found himself at one of the now deserted farms. If he had an airship, he would have had instruments to guide him, but he didn't. He was on foot. Then he grinned. If the Ciriote could hide from electronic sensors, they couldn't hide their presence from the aura. On foot, he would be able to sense their evil taint.

As he had done many times during his travels, he again concentrated on an inner sense of the aura. Into his mind came a map like sense of the area around him. He might have been a scholar examining a clear globe etched with the continents and seas. The second continent had an area marred by a pulsing reddish brown glow. His own location was a pinpoint of intense purplish blue. Another area glowed bluish green – near the coast where a tiny scientific hamlet had been. This was where captured Aeronites had been transported. They were his first concern.

No one noticed him when he transmitted there. In the instant of his arrival, he drew on the aura and cloaked himself with power. He wanted to gauge the temperament of these Aeronites. They had been prisoners of a kind. They could roam where they wished, but they had to fend for themselves in a climate that had once been hot and humid, but was now at the mercy of the corrupted terrain-reforming program. The weather had gone crazy.

All of the Aeronites had been warriors, trained to live off the land, and the sea. None had the means to contact their superiors, even if such contact was still possible. So far, the Ciriote had either not noticed them or had no use for them.

While he observed, Tymos saw signs of industry. The warriors had created baskets of woven vines. Several Aeronites approached his position, moving with slow deliberation, carrying full baskets. They were subtly deflected around his position, but he smelt the briny scent of fish. Nearer the huts, he saw racks with drying hopper skins.

Tymos allowed the cloaking of the aura to drop away. Aeronites amongst those idly walking around saw him appear as if from the air. Some called a challenge, and drew weapons. Those carrying baskets lowered them and drew knives. All began to edge closer to him, and encircle him.

"Please call all your comrades to come here," Tymos invited. "I have come to return you to your baselines."

When one of the nearest Aeronites whistled a complex tune, Aeronites erupted from huts and other nearby locations. Six forced their way through the circle of armed watchers, to confront the newcomer.

"Commander Jordan?" one demanded.

"No," Tymos said quietly. "I am Tymos."

Most of the circle of Aeronites did not recognise the name. The six closest to him did.

Another of the six announced with malicious glee, “We have one of the damned Governors’ whelps here. Kill him!”

The speaker thrust his knife at Tymos’s unprotected chest. His flashing move was stopped by a grip that seemed like steel.

Several of the others made a move to attack, but stopped, realising that Tymos was making no aggressive move of his own.

“I am not here to kill you, or to be killed,” Tymos said calmly, and loud enough for all to hear him. “I have come to take you all back to the ships of your Warlords.”

Reaction was mixed. Tymos sensed elation and relief from many of the group that was now over two hundred strong. There was intense hatred too; some of these warriors would still gladly kill him.

A few knew that should they return, they would be punished for ‘desertion’.

“What? We have won then? You Tymoreans are going to let us stay then?” one of the circle called out.

Murmured conversations amongst the crowd grew to a noisy babble. He caught snippets of each as he glanced around the part of the circle in front of him. These men were growing weak, because they lacked the food supplements they needed to provide certain essential nutrients that were lacking in Tymorean foods. Beyond the crowd, the sky was an odd orange shade, darkening with purple black clouds, as a lightning storm approached.

Tymos raised his voice to be heard over the babble. “I have come to return you to your baseships. You cannot stay here.”

The noise level increased to angry accusative shouts. Tymos waited for it to subside before he spoke again.

“You cannot stay because you will all weaken and die. Without the nutrient supplement pills, your bodies cannot utilise out plants and animals. The terrain reform program that was supposed to rectify that problem and cause all Tymoreans to die – since those nutrients are poison to us, was corrupted by your Ciriots allies....”

Again, Tymos waited until the explosion of protests and allegations against Tymoreans subsided.

“I ask you all to listen,” Tymos spoke with a trace of ‘command’ in his voice. It silenced those closest to him, and the others followed suit. “I bear none of you any animosity. You are all warriors who obeyed your superiors in good faith. You consider Tymoreans your enemies, and our leaders to be unprincipled monsters.”

Several Aeronites spat in his direction, and others shouted agreement with his statement.

Tymos ignored the spittle and the implication that he was as bad as his elders were, and continued to speak calmly. “Tymoreans are not your enemy. We defended what is ours from the unprovoked attacks initiated by your Warlords. We spared you where possible.”

Two more of the six nearest strode forward, trying to use their greater height to threaten Tymos.

“Do you call turning our minds inside out – sparing us?”

Tymos recognised these two. They had been amongst the group of infiltrators that Kellex had sent to the Royal Estate. He did not release the one who had attacked him or move to defend himself.

“What your damned Governors did to us was torture!”

“No, what your supposed allies, the Ciriots are doing to Aeronites and Tymoreans is torture.”

Slowly, patiently, persuasively, Tymos explained the situation now existing on the main continent. He told of the backlash of the failed terrain-reforming attempt, of how the Ciriots were spreading poisonous and mutagenic substances and destroying everything that was not shielded.

While many of the crowd wouldn’t care if all the native Tymoreans died, the majority were shocked by the idea of genocide – when they realised they were as vulnerable as the Tymoreans.

Silence fell as they all realised the impossibility of evacuating their highly populated home world to this one that they had fought to conquer.

None of them wanted to believe how thoroughly they had been betrayed by the Ciriote or that the great war plan had failed. However, Tymos spoke so compellingly, explaining the odd things they had observed, that they had to believe.

“Coming here was never the answer,” Tymos spoke gently. “Our scientists have created plans – ways your people still on Aerdna can survive. Your world will need every warrior to help make those plans a reality.”

The crowd was coming around, but Tymos concentrated on the six nearest him.

“I cannot make you go back to Kellex’s ship, and I cannot force you to like me. I will simply say, that I personally, did not harm you. The Governors simply removed from you a power that you never learnt to control, and by which Kellex was manipulating you. The Governors did not remove your strength or your intelligence.”

Tymos finally released his attacker’s wrist. That one’s anger had not abated, but he was aware that the majority of his fellows now wanted to leave the village and return to the life they knew.

“I don’t believe any of your fancy words,” the angry warrior spat. “You go ahead, return these weaklings to face the wrath of the Warlords. Then you and I will fight, and then we will see who is the better.”

“If you wish,” Tymos agreed. “It will be a worthy challenge.”

One of the other six shoved the angry one aside. “How will you get us back? Do you have a ship?”

“No ship. What I will do is transmit you back in groups of five or six – to whichever baseship you choose. Four of them are still grounded. Two are in orbit – I cannot reach those ones.”

“Show us how you do this,” the angry one challenged.

Tymos nodded. “Pass me that basket.” He pointed to the forgotten load of fish.

A gesture from the challenger, sent two of the other Aeronites to fetch it. They needed two to carry it. When they placed it in front of Tymos, they stared as he hefted it with ease. The six nearest him didn’t quite hide their surprise.

“Now, if you would clear a path from here to the hut near the tree?” Tymos requested.

“Do it!” one of the six ordered.

Tymos held the basket with one arm as he used his free hand to take out his transmitter. Without fuss, he vanished from within the circle and reappeared by the hut. Then, when enough people had seen him there, he returned into the circle and placed the basket down.

“As you can determine for yourselves, the fish have not become scrambled molecules. I am ready to fulfil my promise whenever you are ready to leave.”

The angry one nodded, as if finally in agreement. “I will come with you first – to Kellex’s ship. I will bring five others.”

Tymos was gratified to see that the five he picked to come with him were warriors that seemed frail and weak. Or perhaps the choice was to risk the weakest warriors, so the strongest remained to fight if Tymos betrayed them.

Even weak, the four were not cowards. Tymos warned them of what they would see and feel, had them each take a hold on one of his arms. He then had the nearest other Aeronites move back and he transmitted to within the shields of Kellex’s ship.

The big Aeronite seemed about to call for guards.

“I gave my word,” Tymos told him. “And there are still many more to come.”

The four released warriors, wasted no time trotting slowly towards the ship. The big warrior growled and ordered, “Take me back.”

On their return, Tymos asked, “I would welcome knowing your name.”

“Kalcot!” he announced tersely. Then he turned to the crowd around him and ordered, “Assemble in groups. Those who have been here longest, go first.”

Tymos knew that Kellex’s infiltrators had been there longest, but these all chose to organise the groups according to who their commander was, and from weakest to strongest. They stood back and made it plain they were watching him.

Between each transmission, Tymos drew on the aura to replace his energy. The numbers of prisoners decreased steadily, with each group consisting of four weak and one still able warrior.

Kalcot and his cronies kept the flow organised, rotating a group to go to each available baseship in turn. However, when Tymos returned from his sixth trip, he found the remaining crowd rapidly dispersing. The reason was obvious, he could hear the identifiable thump hum of Ciriote aircraft. Tymos scanned the sky; saw the aircraft coming fast, flying low. They were heading directly towards the village.

While the Aeronites ran and hid, for they had no weapons able to destroy the aircraft, Tymos stayed where he was. He sensed the air currents and the unstable energy and tried to manipulate them.

Kalcot watched from an open doorway and saw only the arm gestures. He debated going and dragging the foolish Tymorean out of sight of what he had once assumed were Tymorean aircraft. He still thought they must be, if the redhead was not afraid of them.

When forks of lightning zigzagged from the clouds, as if directed by arm gestures, and struck the airships – the thud-hum was replaced by silence.

Tymos turned abruptly and called to Kalcot. “We need to hurry. The Ciriote may send more ships. They have a base on this continent.”

Once again, the groups of people disappeared. Kalcot chose to be one of the last to leave. He still didn’t completely trust the Tymorean, and still intended to challenge this upstart whelp of one of the Governors. His other reason was that he had made himself a leader of all the displaced warriors, and he was loathe to relinquish his power. When it became his turn to leave, he grudgingly realised that he no longer hated the red head.

Twice more, Tymos had destroyed Ciriote aircraft. The second time they had been close when Tymos had returned. Kalcot had sent scouts to the crash site, and although the ships had exploded, there were enough fragments to confirm them as Ciriote. The size of the explosions when the ships had crashed told him they had been carrying bombs.

“Kalcot, I believe you wished to challenge me,” Tymos invited when only six Aeronites remained.

The warriors were all taller and more solidly built than he was, but none acted on the invitation.

Kalcot voiced his thoughts. “I no longer wish to beat you to a pulp. You did as you promised. You have proved to be more than a younger copy of Commander Jordan.”

There were many complex thoughts in Kalcot’s mind that he didn’t utter. Tymos touched the surface but did not pry deeper. He finally said, “I heard you say that the Warlords are not in their ships.”

“That is so,” Tymos admitted. “They were invited to the Temple at Dira so they could learn the truth that you now believe. Should they prove to be as intelligent as you, they will return to their ships and be allowed to leave this world with their warriors. If they are not, they will have to fend for themselves and perhaps share the fate of the Ciriote.”

Kalcot repressed shiver. Something in the eyes of this young Tymorean Prince – belied the pleasant and polite manner. “We’re ready to go,” he said quickly.

Tymos returned to the now deserted fishing village and felt for the wrongness in the aura. Once he had the sense of distance and direction, he transmitted himself and arrived amidst a forest of tall conifer trees. He looked around for signs of the Ciriote glow trails, but saw none. However, the sense of the Ciriote was very strong. It was like he had noticed in Amik - a kind of unpleasant screech just past the range of his hearing. He drew on the aura and cloaked himself to seem invisible. Then he transmitted from tree to tree, and remained unseen by keeping still at each place. Instinct directed him to the edge of a clearing. He saw nothing with his normal eyes except evidence that something had blasted down here. Trees were blackened and flattened, having fallen outwards from the centre of the circular area.

As he watched and waited with the patience of a hunter, he adjusted his eyes to see beyond the mere visible spectrum. Normally, this stretched his optical perception into the infrared and the ultra-violet, but now he realised that he could actually see frequencies beyond even those.

He was seeing a shimmer, like of an energy wall. To prove his belief, two Ciriotes appeared suddenly. They began to patrol outside this shimmering perimeter. Another pair appeared from the opposite direction, and disappeared through the barrier.

The Ciriote base was here, and had probably been there undetected, for a long time. The shields they used to hide it were far beyond the primitive and vulnerable shields used by the Aeronites. They might have provided the Aeronites with the technology, but made it flawed so that their shields looked like opaque white domes in the visible spectrum.

At night, the glow trails were clearer, and gave Tymos enough light to make his own patrol of the perimeter of the hidden base. He noted four places where the glow trails entered and left through the shield. He also found where a glow trail went from the shield, out into the forest. He would check that later. For now, he wanted to study the shields. He probed them with his adjusted sight, seeing different textures and colours as his mind probed deeper. He realised they were layered, and let information filter into his mind from the mind-meld with Governor Xyron, and the memories of Governor Reslic. Scientific studies and military encounters mainly, but augmented by psychological knowledge from his father.

The outer screen blocked all visual images. It was excellent from a distance, but flawed close up. To truly hide every non-natural thing, you would need to see the ground beneath the object – not just a void.

Tymos guessed that the screens behind that one blocked electromagnetic emanations, and various types of sensor scans. They might have a screen to deter people from wandering through the screen and seeing what was there. Perhaps that was less likely here, since the continent had only ever been lightly populated.

The four specific entrances made sense, or the Ciriote would blunder into the shields, but the question now was - did they have a screen to block energy-matter transmission?

A lot of information was in his mind about types of shields, and now, in the dark, he knew what to do to test them. He drew out one of the rocks he had collected during his patrol of the perimeter, and threw it parallel to the ground at ankle height. He counted the time between when the stone disappeared to when he saw a muted glow. The slight delay told him that the shields were spaced apart. The lack of reaction by the outer shield meant he would be able to transmit through it, into the first gap.

Tymos wasted no more time. He crouched low to the ground and 'flitted' through the outer shield into the gap. He used the power within himself to hide. The aura in the shielded area was too vile to use. In this narrow gap, there were no glowing trails. Tymos, seeing perfectly well in the dark, inched his way around the circle. He noticed the charred remains of hoppers and small birds.

That explained why his rock and the subsequent energy burst had not aroused interest. He edged closer to the next screen. Knowledge in his mind told him that if this screen would interfere with transmission, he would feel the dissonant resonance when he was close to it. He

didn't. He repeated his action, of transmitting through the screen from a crouched position, and became still once more.

One more screen existed between Tymos and the Ciriote base, but this one did not block light. The area in the centre of the shields was lit to be as bright as day. From here, the purposeful movements of the Ciriote were plainly visible. He would be seen if he moved.

Keeping low to the ground and transmitting from a crouched position, Tymos alternately watched and moved around the circle between the two shields. When he had completed a full circuit, Tymos decided that the Ciriote base was an amalgam of four huge space ships.

When he had learnt all he could from the outside of the first shield, Tymos withdrew – transmitting through all the outer shields. He narrowly missed being seen by two patrolling Ciriote. He held himself still, and they passed within inches of him. These two left the circular trail and followed the brightly glowing path into the trees, unaware of the wraithlike follower. They came to a large clearing containing what seemed like a field of large bubbles. Tymos watched as a Ciriote reached one of the bubbles and when it vanished a Ciriote scoutship was revealed. A short time later, with both Ciriote aboard, it blasted straight up until above the trees and then went to horizontal flight.

Tymos decided he had seen enough. When the time came to destroy this base, he would not be alone. He and his siblings would be fully familiar with all of the information they had gleaned about the Ciriote and their technology.

His most important concern was to ensure that no innocents remained in peril on this continent or any of the smaller landmasses.

Chapter 38 - Enemies and Allies

Finally Kryslie came to a city where the Ciriots were in full control. This was Losk, one of the cities she had visited with her father on his tour. That seemed like decades ago, not merely months. She transmitted herself, Jonko and Keleb to the open central square, and if not for her power cloaking them, they would have been instant targets. As it was, several groups of Ciriots seemed to sense something and began to turn around slowly, looking for the cause. She took in the situation and mentally spoke to her companions. "Edge aside, very slowly, when these nearest ones are looking away. Transmit to the shadows beside the two-storey trading centre. I have told you how to cloak your self with power, do that, but remember, we might be invisible, but they can walk into us."

She knew that both her friends were itching to draw and fire their disintegrators. "Not yet," she warned them. "For as long as possible, we need to be anonymous. I must find the councillors, and find out what the Ciriots interest is in this town."

From the shadows, they watched the Ciriots patrolling in groups of three, and saw the results when they took interest in a foolish citizen. One of the few Tymoreans to be seen. If the man had not died too quickly for them to help, Kryslie would have acted.

"We need a base, somewhere these beasts would not choose to be," Kryslie thought her idea. She watched two of the Ciriots forcing a young woman to carry things for them. The woman was wearing a collar attached to a chain.

Keleb touched her arm, and jerked back when he felt a jolt of power.

"Sorry," Kryslie whispered. She grounded the energy that anger was drawing to her. "What did you want?"

Keleb pictured the area of the city where travellers usually penned their animals, and parked their carriages and drays. It was dusty, low-tech, and should have no one staying there. It would also be of no interest to the Ciriots. With a hand on Jonko's shoulder, and Keleb holding her arm, Kryslie transmitted there. She looked around, with her eyes adjusted for the dark, and all her senses alert.

"We are safe for now, but don't assume we won't be seen or found."

"How can we seal this city?" Keleb asked. "The Ciriots are everywhere – like a plague of cockroaches."

Kryslie didn't recall what cockroaches were, but Keleb was picturing them – and it seemed an apt analogy. Both had hard black armoured bodies.

"What is the general feeling of the city, Kel?" she asked, making her own analysis at the same time. Even though it was night, many people were awake.

"Fear, of course," Keleb considered as he tasted the emotional aura. "Anger, determination, frustration..."

It was exactly as Kryslie hoped. The people were not defeated.

"Okay – I need to find the city leaders. Since I have met them before, I should be able to find their minds if they are alive and conscious."

"What about Kel and I?" Jonko asked.

"Find the people in charge of the resistance – look for the commoners from the Peace Corps, town guards and so forth. I also need to know where the College of Scientists are hiding. I hope they had enough warning to hide. The Ciriots like controlling scientists and stripping their minds of knowledge."

Keleb shuddered.

“I don’t intend to risk them,” Kryslie assured him. “However, before that, I need to get you both a set of protective armour, and get their help to find ways to deter or exterminate the Ciriote.”

“Won’t you need armour too?” Keleb asked. He caught Jonko shaking his head.

“I can’t draw on the aura in armour,” Kryslie told him. “Keep alert. I am going to try to find where the leaders are.” She seemed to be staring at the horse stalls opposite as her mind went searching.

Jonko quickly whispered to Keleb, “Anyone with the power to withstand a disintegrator or energy beam, doesn’t need armour.”

“Does that mean they can’t kill her?” Keleb marvelled.

“I’m beginning to think so,” Jonko admitted. “But there is only one of her here, and she can’t be everywhere at once. I’m going to watch the gate.”

Neither Keleb nor Jonko were comfortable in the dusty stabling area. It felt too exposed and they had heard altogether too much about the Ciriote in Amik. At least if they wanted to try sleeping there, there was a supply of dried grasses to use for bedding, and small pump for water. Both wondered how the three of them could succeed in removing so many inhuman monsters.

Finally, Kryslie returned her attention to her present surroundings and said, “The mayor and the surviving councillors are being held in the recycle plant in the room with the incinerators. It is hot and generally noisome.” She didn’t describe the poor state all the men and women were in. “The scientists went to an underground bunker, where they once did dangerous experiments. I reached the chief scientist, and he told me where the shield generators are for the emergency shelters. They had not finished installing them when the city was breached. They have the list of shelters and the ones with out protection.”

“Would there be Aeronites here too?” Keleb asked.

“Probably, Kel. For now, we will treat them exactly like the common people. They are all warriors, and I hope by now they have discovered the treachery of their allies.”

Despite the consternation when Kryslie arrived abruptly within the sealed dugout rock bunker, she was instantly recognised. However, it was the state of her two companions that immediately took everyone’s attention. They scarcely even noticed Keleb.

“I am going back for the other four councillors,” Kryslie announced before she and Keleb disappeared again.

In her absence, those scientists who were also medically trained began treating the Mayor and his senior advisor. The rest began preparing sleeping pallets for six patients.

After her third appearance, bringing the last two surviving councillors and accompanied by Jonko and Keleb, the senior scientist ran to her, bowed, and spoke quickly.

“Your Highness, these people need a lot of help, but we have very few supplies.”

Kryslie stopped his babble. “I cannot bring heavy equipment, but I can take you to where you can get the supplies you need. Where must you go?”

“The main infirmary, your Highness.”

In her previous visit, she and Tymos had accompanied their father on tours through many important city buildings. Every moment of that time returned to her mind and she considered the safest place to transmit to. Not the laboratories, or the scientist’s offices as the Ciriote would go there looking for information. She hoped they had not raided or wrecked the storerooms out of sheer spite or wanton vandalism. Her mind settled on a Spartan looking meeting room, where the walls seemed like blank panels when the display screens were off.

The senior scientist would have run off at once had Kryslie not held his arm.

“Where do you need to go from here?” she asked him.

He spoke directions, and had images in his mind. Kryslie sent Jonko and Keleb to scout the way. She was aware of their ‘all clear report’ and transmitted to the passage outside the

storeroom. Then when her depth perception proved it to be empty, transmitted in. Jonko and Keleb followed.

“We will probably only have one chance at this,” Kryslie warned. “And probably only a very short time, if they have found a way to watch the parts of this building.”

She knew they had, for she sensed a purposeful sense of malice and anticipation. However, while being alert for their approach, she helped select supplies and load the two trolleys they had found in the room. Then, after five minutes, she told them to keep working.

Jonko glanced her way, and wondered what she was doing. When he saw a purple glow over the door and the frame, he knew. The wooden door exploded, not inwards, but back at the attackers.

“Go. Jon, Kel, get this stuff and our friend here, back to the bunker.”

The scientist had no chance to protest her staying, but she waited only long enough for the others to leave safely before transmitting away to join them.

When the patients were being tended, the non-medical scientists gathered around Kryslie, relieved to have one of the Royals in charge. “What can we do?” they asked.

“Do you know where there might be two sets of armour?” she asked them.

The men and women seemed to glance at each other, but they were all thinking, considering.

“There might be some in the guard house – near the council building,” one of the women suggested. “When most of the Peace Corps people were recalled, they might have left some behind. All those that stayed are common born.”

“Do you know where those people are?” Kryslie asked. She needed the help of those trained fighters.

The woman shrugged, but one of the men said, “Some of our communicators still work. I will try to find something out for you.”

Word came back, some hours later, that the Peace Corpsmen were currently hiding in a warehouse on the far side of the city. They kept moving away from the Ciriots. They said they would come to see Kryslie, but did not dare move before dark.

Kryslie left the councillor that she was counselling, and asked for the address of the building. She knew where it was situated and transmitted there with Jonko and Keleb. She gave the scientists no chance to try to stop her.

As with the scientists, Kryslie was instantly recognised, and here at least, the men were used to the transmitting ability of the Royals. When they finished giving her the traditional bows of greeting, they brought to her two sets of armour, and apologised for not having more spare.

“One of us will give you a third,” Corporal Pritz promised. He was the senior ranked Peace Corpsman out of the other eleven.

“Two is all I need,” Kryslie assured him. “Jon, Kel, put these on.”

“But you, your Highness, you mustn’t risk yourself,” Pritz objected.

“I’m fine, and I don’t need armour,” Kryslie assured him, and asked quickly, “How many of you are there?”

Pritz responded immediately. “Just the twelve of us. We are yours to command. Until now, we have been doing what we can to reduce Ciriots numbers. Have you orders for us?”

“I need information first,” Kryslie began. “What is your estimate of Ciriots numbers in the city?”

“Well over a thousand,” Pritz decided and the other men nodded. “We have killed over two hundred, but the hooded aliens are onto us now, and it is getting harder to find targets.”

“Then we will devise new tricks,” Kryslie announced. “What is the status of the city shields?”

“The initial shields are still operating,” Pritz told her. “The perimeter shields were activated on receipt of Governor Xyron’s orders, but they were sabotaged by some damn Aeronite infiltrator. That is how the Ciriote came in.”

Jonko spoke up, “By now, the Aeronites will realise that they are as much targets for the Ciriote as we are. Do you want me to find them, Kryslie?”

“Later, come here.”

Kryslie checked his armour and asked, “Do you have your personal force screens on the outside?”

“Our guardian told us they were more effective there,” Keleb explained coming over from the side room where he had been donning his armour.

“Well, they work better switched on,” she reminded them.

Pritz looked on with interest. “I haven’t heard of such things.”

“There are not a lot around yet, and I haven’t any spares,” Kryslie apologised. “In this case it is just added protection. The normal armour, such as you are wearing, has a force field impregnated in the metal. It should protect you from all the Ciriote weapons we have encountered so far. Now, Pritz, what have you found to be successful against the Ciriote?”

“Their disintegrators, when we get a lucky shot, and dropping heavy bits of rubble on them. We don’t like to get too close,” Pritz told her.

“Fair enough. Now, listen carefully,” Kryslie said. “The Ciriote armour has weaknesses...” and she explained what she knew. “The trick is, getting in and out fast. They are very strong creatures.”

“Too bad, we can’t shoot poison tipped darts,” Jonko mused. “A nice quiet means of assassination. A dart would probably penetrate that joint fabric, since knives can. And if we could fire it from some kind of gun, we don’t have to be too close.”

The suggestion caused the Peace Corpsmen to go into a huddle. The audible snippets of their conversation held promise of a solution. Kryslie left them at it. Jonko caught her eye and asked, “Is there a poison that will kill the Ciriote?”

“I don’t know of any and we don’t have time to experiment. I do have another idea, and it will require the three of us to prepare the darts.”

Pritz suddenly spun around.

“You’ve thought of something?” Kryslie asked.

“Yes, we can collect darts from the drinking houses and the barracks, and we can try launching them from the gas grenade launchers – but poison?”

“Burnfire,” Kryslie told him, but needed to describe what it was.

“Yes, I know what you must mean, but it is chancy...” Pritz warned. “And I am not sure how accurate we can aim the darts.”

“I think we can iron out the accuracy problems easily enough,” Kryslie told him. “I have the idea of using syringe needles, filled with a trace of Burnfire, and covered with a light metallic seal and these will be inserted onto the tip of the darts. I will handle the Burnfire, along with Jonko and Keleb, as their force shields will protect them if the armour does not. We brought boxes of the needles from the infirmary, and can get more if we need to.”

Pritz sent off half of his men to look for darts, even though it was still daylight. The rest listened as Kryslie explained what the effect would be.

“Once even a trace of the Burnfire gets inside the Ciriote armour, the Ciriote will die, and nothing will remain in the suit. When there is no more fuel, the Burnfire dies out and the armour can be reused by others. Though I suggest that we only use this plan when our targets are outside. That way, if Burnfire ignites outside of the armour, there is less chance of other people or buildings igniting and burning.”

Pritz’s mind was on another point. “With more armour, we can let more of the commoners fight. We’ve been training them, but we will have to mark the armour so we don’t shoot our own people.”

“Do you know where all the emergency shelters are?” Kryslie asked.

“Yes, of course,” Pritz said. “Though not all have the shields installed.”

“I know where the rest of the generators are, so leave that to me for now, but the ones that have the shields, need to be checked and we need to start moving citizens into them. Previously, we have instigated stage two of the census at this point, but that is too dangerous now. If any Aeronites remain, I will sort them out later. For now, they and we have a common enemy. I am hoping they will join us.”

Pritz pursed his lips for a moment, but did not voice his distrust of the idea.

Kryslie quickly delegated tasks. Jonko went off to check the city shields, Keleb went with him to retrieve the unused shield generators, and then went to show Pritz’s men how to install and activate them. At each place, they checked for Ciriote interference, before moving onto the next. Once Keleb was sure the Peace Corpsmen had the knack, he went to inspect strategic targets for sabotage.

Pritz remained with Kryslie to liaise with the city folk, but he finally voiced the question that worried him. “Why seal the city if we wish to drive the Ciriote out?”

“I doubt they will leave. However, to them, the more strongly defended a target is the more valuable they perceive it to be. And I do not think they realise that what is of value to us, has no trade value.”

“The people,” Pritz deduced, “would only have value as slaves.”

Kryslie nodded. “Once we start protecting more places, and killing Ciriote, we don’t want them to call in reinforcements. When they discover the new shields, we will reactivate the rest of the city shields. Until then, they will think nothing has changed.”

No one expected the Ciriote to remain ignorant of the presence of new shields for long, but people were moving into the designated shelters steadily for almost a week before the Ciriote suddenly swarmed to one of the areas. One unlucky family was caught in the glare of a powerful Ciriote light source, and tried to hide behind the armoured form of one of Pritz’s troops.

Kryslie left off her efforts to help the mayor to heal, when Keleb’s thought alerted her. She went to where he was observing the situation. Jonko joined them after reactivating the city shields. Even in that short time, the Ciriote had overcome the group. Pritz’s man had exhausted power and ammunition in his weapons, and although three Ciriote lay dead on the ground, he was a limp form in the grasp of one Ciriote, and the man, woman and two children were held by others. The woman was screaming, the man struggling to reach his children, who were whimpering in terror. The Ciriote were demanding some answer from them, and poking them with one of their rod like weapons.

This situation had been planned for, and already Pritz’s men had begun to edge into a circle around the Ciriote. All were armed with Burnfire tipped darts, prepared by Kryslie.

“Jonko, move around to where the man is being held. Take that Ciriote first and then the one with the woman. Kel, go near where the children are and do the same.”

Both of her friends were wearing stolen Ciriote robes that were made of loosely woven metal, and in the dark shadows beyond the circle of light, would pass as Ciriote. The Tymoreans knew how to tell the difference.

When all her companions were in place, Kryslie transmitted into the centre of the circle of Ciriote and immediately challenged them.

“What power do you expect to get from children? Are you all cowards?”

Every hooded face turned to watch her and an outbreak of agitated clicking betrayed their recognition of her, and the circle began to close in on her until a louder series of clicking noises stopped them.

Another Ciriote strutted into her line of sight, and walked arrogantly up to her. Nearby, the captured civilians, while still being held, were being ignored.

“We’ll have you, foolish worm,” his clicks translated mechanically. He glanced around at the other prisoners and found them gone. Four more Ciriots were on the ground with a glow coming from the area of the armour’s faceplate. He spun back and aimed a gauntleted fist at the unarmed red head woman, only to feel the woman’s arm blocking his blow.

“You will tell all of your kind to assemble at the traveller’s gate,” Kryslie told the creature. “Those that do, will be allowed to leave the city unharmed.”

The sudden burst of noise from his translator suggested either amusement or anger. It shook its fist free and countered, “And you will make us, worm?”

It tried to grab Kryslie, but was jolted back. He felt the power in the woman and craved to control it. An energy beam lanced out at her, but it simply lit up a nimbus of light around her.

Then the attention of the Ciriots turned to self-preservation as the circle realised that some of them were falling to the ground. Another two dozen of their number were dead and burning within their armour and there was no sign of the cause. The agitated movements distracted Kryslie’s ‘captor’, but then it drew a knife and attacked her. He didn’t live to regret it, for Kryslie’s knife found its mark in the creature’s neck. She withdrew her knife, glanced around the scene, saw that all the guards, the prisoners and her friends were gone, and transmitted away.

Keleb found her back with the traumatised councillors.

“Dom, the guard that protected the family, will be fine,” he told her. “Only a mild concussion. The children were scared silly until they realised that you – the Princess - had saved them. The parents have some badly wrenched muscles, but are otherwise fine. How about here?”

“Improving,” Kryslie told him. She had been using her mind-healing gift on the six councillors in turn. “They have some food ready for us – you had better eat while you can.”

“I will, and I am glad someone thinks of food,” Keleb said with a look better suited to a stern parent. “I will eat if you do.”

Jonko arrived later with Pritz and the darts recovered from the Ciriots’ armour. He and Keleb had been in stealth mode – invisible to Ciriots’ sight – when they had attacked and recovered the prisoners.

“We collected most of the cleansed Ciriots’ armour,” Jonko told her. “Although some of those creatures had the sense to grab those they saw – probably to try to figure out what happened. However, we had already taken the darts by then.”

“Good. We will be able to repeat the trick again,” Kryslie said with satisfaction.

Pritz dared a comment, “Your Highness...” he began.

Kryslie interrupted him. “Call me Kryslie and forget the title.”

“Ah...Kryslie...all the people I spoke to are horrified at the risk you took...”

“It was not a risk,” Kryslie told him, meeting Pritz’s eyes until he looked down. “And I will do what is needed to safeguard the people of this town and rid it of Ciriots. Do not mistake me for something frail and feminine.”

Keleb and Jonko watched the confrontation with faint smiles. Keleb finally decided to comment to Pritz. “Nobody that has been personally coached by President Reslic is anything less than a highly trained nemesis.”

For a moment, Pritz could not connect that statement with the slight, not too tall figure who still stared at him. He saw the grace with which she moved, and thought female, not trained fighter. Jonko decided to add, “Kryslie has taken his Excellency to a draw, more than once.”

Now Pritz’s eyes widened and he swallowed convulsively. Kryslie ignored his discomfort, and began speaking again as if he had said nothing. “We have won this round and we need to keep up the momentum. They will soon work out what we are doing and we must be ready to adjust and change tactics.”

Pritz turned his mind back to the task under discussion.

“We must continue moving people to safety. For now, we leave the shelter nearest the last confrontation alone and concentrate on places the Ciriots have yet to discover. If they begin to take an interest in a place, we will create a diversion somewhere else to draw them away. I will be the diversion.”

Pritz did not protest the statement.

“What is your plan concerning the newly cleansed Ciriots’ armour?” Kryslie asked him.

“Jonko has suggested ways for us to tell the difference between Ciriots and Tymorean users of the armour.” Pritz’s eyes gleamed with anticipation. Kryslie listened to the ideas and approved. Then she went on to outline her proposed strategies. He was impressed and accepted Jonko’s offer to be transmitted back to his headquarters.

Kryslie and Keleb went to rearm the darts, going to the stone lined and windowless room. They kept the equipment they needed in there, away from accidental damage. The first batch had worked exactly as planned, because during the preparation, Kryslie had learnt a great deal about the properties of Burnfire.

In extremely clean air, the oily liquid did not spontaneously ignite. It required friction and fuel to begin burning. Tests on Ciriots’ armour stripped from an earlier victim, told them that the actual armour was either metal or a substance saturated with a protective force field – even in the flexible joint areas. The darts, like knives, were sharp enough to penetrate the fabric at the joints, and when the needle tips touched Ciriots’ flesh the Burnfire ignited. She had feared that the capes they wore over the armour might ignite it, but those capes were made of flexible, loosely woven metal threads and the dart tips simply pushed the fibres aside, and did not ignite.

The darts had been ejected with great force at the target. The scanners in the Tymorean armour, showed the bipedal shape under the capes and robes, and this gave the shooters the right place to aim. The victims had less than a second to send a warning, for the electronics in the suit burnt out quickly.

Their tactics worked for a full week, though after the third night, Jonko and Keleb reported Ciriots’ observers, who kept back from the ones trying to break the shields on one of the shelters. More Ciriots died without the Ciriots’ superiors learning anything.

On the eighth night, the scenario seemed to be the same, until Kryslie sent Jonko and Keleb out for a second scouting foray. They reported Ciriots’ reserve troops hiding in some of the abandoned buildings nearby.

“They have roughly a quarter of their remaining numbers either trying to break the shields or patrolling the streets,” Jonko told her. “I expect the rest will be on stand-by at their garrison.”

Kryslie considered her various plans. “How many more people do we need to get to shelters?”

“The west district is nearly deserted. North and south are well on the way. We haven’t been able to do much in the east since the first attack.”

“Let’s draw them away from the east then, Jon. Have Pritz and his recruits ready there. You, Kel and I will attack their home ground. It is time I gave them a final warning.”

“You intend to go into their garrison?” Keleb queried.

“Yes, and while they try to prove they are better than their current leader and capture me, you two can go and put little surprises in their ships – like Llaimos is doing. As many ships as you can – and look out for looted goods. If you find any, bring the stuff back and any more Burnfire that you find.”

“You don’t expect them to try to leave, do you?” Keleb asked.

“Not yet, we haven’t hurt them enough and they still think they can outsmart me. While we leave their actual garrison alone, they think they have a safe fall back position. When we have whittled the numbers right down, we will attack there. That is when I expect the higher-ranking Ciriots to flee. We’ll let them go in their booby trapped ships.”

Jonko snorted in amusement at the idea. "They have tried to breach the perimeter shields again."

"So you said," Kryslie agreed, and then she asked, "Have you found signs of the Aeronites?"

"No, or rather, they haven't tried to go into the shelters," Keleb reported. "I have been visiting the various shelters and reassuring the people and telling them the usual instructions. I think the Aeronites are around though, and helping."

"Ah...what have you seen?" Kryslie asked.

"Not me...Pritz's people. They have seen citizens helping people out of buildings and into the shelters, and then running off to bring more. On several occasions, when Ciriot have come a little too close, figures have been seen running off and drawing them away."

The reaction of the Ciriot became known the following night.

"Krys," Jonko called as he ran into the makeshift infirmary. The urgency of his tone brought her out of the side room. She transmitted to him.

"The Ciriot are doing a building to building search in the Eastern sector. They have a bunch of families cornered." Jonko was still catching his breath. "The Ciriot are demanding that you exchange yourself for the hostages."

Kryslie was the only one in the room that wasn't in shock at the outrageous demand. She glanced around, sensing the sentiment. Her gaze had everyone returning their attention to the tasks they had been doing.

"How many people still haven't gone to shelters?" Kryslie asked.

"Several thousand. It hasn't been safe."

"I can't imagine what they want me for," Kryslie stated with heavy irony.

"Apart from torturing you for revenge," Jonko suggested, stating the obvious first. "They are desperate. The superiors have fled in the ships and we have destroyed their garrison...if they had you, they might get more of their kind to come and help them. Or to try to break the shields so they can get out."

"How many do you think are left?" Kryslie asked. She had left most of the guerrilla attacks to others and had been concentrating on helping the people tortured by the Ciriot.

"Maybe two hundred," was Jonko's estimate.

"And how many armoured fighters do we have now?"

"About three hundred. Not all our recruits can manage the weight of the Ciriot armour. We are in the process of encircling the building. Keleb is directing our fighters."

"Have we a source inside?" Kryslie asked then.

"Pritz – they haven't noticed him and he has a communicator. That is how I got the warning. The Ciriot have guns to the heads of the women and children and are demanding the men contact you, but they have no idea how."

"Right," Kryslie said forcefully. "I want you and Keleb with me. I know some of Pritz's men are excellent shots, but you two are better." She trotted through to where they kept the spare weapons in the bunker, and selected several for her own use. "If they want me, they will have to come out to me. I intend to be where I can draw on the aura. The cowards will probably bring their living shields out to protect them. I hope you can pick the Ciriot off without harming the captives."

"What if they start to kill their hostages?" Jonko asked with concern.

"Then the Ciriot will die faster," Kryslie promised. "Come on."

Kryslie transmitted to the location Jonko provided. They were within sight of the three storey housing block, but not where the Ciriot could see them if they looked out a window.

As they arrived, Jonko stiffened, and then passed his comm. unit to Kryslie. "Listen!"

After a few minutes of listening, Kryslie handed it back.

“Pass the word to check the surrounding buildings for Ciriote. No one is to engage them, and everyone is to hold their fire until I send the order.” She waited for Jonko to begin speaking and then transmitted into a cleared space visible from the windows where the Ciriote were reported to be hiding.

In a voice that was loud enough to be heard in the building, Kryslie said, “If you cowards want me, you will have to come out.”

The first response was a volley of weapons fire from five different positions. Two were in the building and the other three came from behind. Neither bullets, nor beams touched her.

Keleb joined Jonko. “What’s up? Why is she making herself a juicy target?” He could see the purple glow around Kryslie.

“The Aeronites have just thrown in with the Ciriote. Pritz reported they were making a deal – claiming they knew a way out of the city, and where we have stashed the redeemed precious metals.”

“They were helping us!” Keleb said with resentment. “Why have they done this now? They know they can’t get out – even through the tunnels. What’s happening now?”

Jonko shrugged. “Krys still has the headpiece.”

A soft voice from nearby startled them. “They have noticed the red-head.”

Jonko spun around. He hadn’t heard the man approach. He was both a stranger and an Aeronite. The eyes were a give away clue.

“What game are you playing,” Keleb demanded in a low hiss. “We have let you be, protected you, and betray us!”

“No, that is not what we are doing. We are simply telling them what they want to hear, what they think we believe. We are not the fools they think we are, we are warriors.”

“So what is your plan? It had better not conflict with ours,” Jonko warned.

“It should not. Wilhelm will tell them that they have no choice but to come out, and use their prisoners as shields. He will say that children are too short to be effective, and the women will faint and be dead weights to handle. He will offer to replace the women and children with his band of desperate warriors; he will tell our supposed allies that we have you fooled. That your Tymorean fighters think we are ordinary citizens to be protected. They will think we are extra fighters to capture the redhead – until we prove otherwise. And while we are helping them, and guarding their other prisoners – we will actually be bringing them to safety in one of your shelters.”

Jonko believed the Aeronite, and he saw Keleb nod agreement. “Your men will be unarmed,” Jonko commented.

“Even unarmed, they are dangerous. And you will have fewer hostages to rescue. We will free ourselves.”

“How many Ciriote are inside,” Keleb asked. “We estimate there might still be two hundred or so Ciriote still in the city.”

“Twenty inside. The rest are spread around but I would say fifty in total. I see though, that you already thought of that. We have been removing the creatures for our own satisfaction too.”

“What do you want in return?” Keleb asked. He had turned back to watch the stand off in the street. After the volley of weapons fire, it had been quiet.

The Aeronite looked that way too as he said, “Sanctuary. We cannot go home, or back to our ships. Outside the city is not safe, and our home world is doomed.”

“Kryslie can take you back to your baseliner,” Jonko assured him. “And your Warlords will not be there to accuse you of desertion.”

“With respect, that would simply be dooming us to another kind of death.”

“Talk to her, later,” Keleb suggested.

“If she survives this,” the Aeronite commented. “Is she a fool? She is not wearing armour.”

Another volley of weapons fire came from the five locations. The intensity of projectiles and energy beams had increased, but whilst they burnt and chipped the stone paved road around her, Kryslie was unharmed.

“How can that be – she is just a woman,” the Aeronite muttered. “And they want her dead. They know she is behind their losses here.”

He saw Jonko and Keleb disappear when they turned on their armour’s stealth mode. The Aeronite took himself back out of the danger area.

Kryslie maintained a straight posture, not even flinching as the explosive projectiles screeched past her ears or hit the ground. Her calmness was an irresistible challenge to the Ciriots, who believed they were superior to all other races.

The Aeronite “hostages” were in the outer ring as the Ciriots emerged – each of them standing straight, even when the Ciriots fired weapons at the Tymoreans. In the inner ring, the Tymorean men who were captive were doing their best to distract their captors, by slumping in the grip and trying to get free. Their tactics were preventing these from getting good shots at the Tymorean fighters.

“I offered you all a chance to leave,” Kryslie challenged the Ciriots. “You should have taken it.”

That they did not use the excuse that their superiors had deserted them, surprised Kryslie. However, as Ciriots, probably young and less experienced, they were still claiming superiority, even in the face of strong opposition.

Kryslie seemed to be listening to the boasts and threats of the Ciriots, and making counter claims, as if intending to ensure the hostages were safe before surrendering herself. In fact, she was aware of Jonko and Keleb moving closer and taking aim at Ciriots in the centre of the circle. The Tymorean captives, when they felt their captor falling, fell with them and played dead. All then felt strong unseen hands lifting them, felt an odd sensation of light, and suddenly realised they were free and amongst Tymorean fighters.

After the first two Ciriots fell, the Aeronites began to struggle and succeeded in widening the circle. The Ciriots began firing at Kryslie or any other Tymorean they could see. Two more Ciriots died, and two more hostages vanished. The next two Ciriots to die, stayed standing as the captive obeyed a whispered command and held the victim upright.

This action was repeated for the next four, as the outer ring of Ciriots were distracted by weapons fire within the buildings nearby. Their reserves were under attack.

Then the Aeronite warriors attacked their captors, drawing out knives that had been hidden until then, and killed the Ciriots.

Knowing that all the true hostages were safe, Kryslie went to the nearest injured Ciriots and forced open its faceplate. She placed her hand on its ugly bony-ridged face and forced her mind on it. The Ciriots realised it was out powered when it could not bite down on the poison capsule in its mouth, and found itself thinking of many secret things, like the exact coordinates of the Ciriots hidden base and the means to see it. Before the mind blanked into death, it gave Kryslie a very good picture of the inside of the ship.

The remaining Ciriots were dead when she reached them. Jonko turned off stealth-mode and became visible.

“We have got them all,” he reported.

Kryslie stood up from checking the last Ciriots and saw the huddle of Aeronites. They had dropped all their weapons onto the ground and were looking at her with awe. As a group, they bowed to her as Tymoreans would have to her father. She flicked her mind to read the prominent thoughts of each of them; she sensed their sincerity to change their allegiance to her. They wanted to stay on Tymorea.

The ranking Aeronite, spoke the promise to her, and placed his men under her command.

“I am honoured by your offer of service, and that is something we must talk of later. For now, Jonko tells me we have killed all the Ciriot. We must be sure, and we must find all the things of theirs that remain in the city. He now commands you.”

The Ciriot torture victims were recovering in mind and body. All the citizens were in the emergency shelters – even those who had insisted that they wanted to stay in their homes. These had come to accede when faced with the directive from Kryslie in her role as authorised representative of the Tymorean Governors. The guards went in last.

When all the Ciriot artefacts and Ciriot corrupted materials were piled in the prepared area near the city edge, Kryslie released a small amount of Burnfire onto the pile. She watched it flare up to consume all the alien traces. The Aeronites watched as Kryslie emerged unscathed from the inferno. Every one of them dropped onto one knee and bowed their head, murmuring in their own language.

Keleb moved to Jonko. “What are they saying?”

They both listened more carefully, trying to translate what seemed to be an ancient dialect of Tymorean.

“Sounds like, ‘homage to you, Great One’ or something like that,” Jonko decided.

“She is that,” Keleb agreed. “Since the Guardians of Peace talk to her. But how did they know?”

Kryslie told the kneeling group to stand up, and made no mention of having understood their homage.

“You have told me that you wish to stay here and serve me,” she stated.

The seventeen surviving Aeronites, nodded agreement.

“That pledge, honours me. However, if I were to accept it, I would be doing you a disservice. There is no place for you here. You know that the land outside is polluted,” Kryslie noticed several of the Aeronites were about to protest. She gestured for silence. “This city will be sealed. No one will be able to get in or out until the land is cleansed.”

“But that could take...” an Aeronite began to say.

Kryslie confirmed his unstated thought of ‘ages’. “Yes, and that is why you cannot stay here.”

“But, they have silos filled with food, and all the hydroponics farms,” another Aeronite pointed out.

“I think you have realised that it will be a long time before the land can be used to grow food. You, coming from Aerdna, need a substance in your diet that is not found here. That is why you need to keep taking the food supplement pills. When you finish your supply, you have no way to get more. You will weaken, grow sickly and die.”

“If we go back to the ships without orders, we will be charged with desertion,” was the protest from one of the older Aeronites.

“My brother and I have been returning your people to the ships from wherever we find them,” Kryslie said gently. “I do not think those currently in charge would be anything but relieved to have you back.”

“Warlord Zorrec...”

Jonko interrupted, “Is with his peers in the Temple of Dira. He believes they have conquered us. Once they realise that they have in turn been conquered by the Ciriot, they will need every fighter they have.”

Kryslie spoke again. “I think you realise that we are not your enemies.”

The nods from the Aeronites were more of a shrug. They were not happy.

“The Elders of this world saw the problems of yours and our scientists have considered ways to enable the Aeronites still on Aerdna to survive. This data has been encoded in an imperishable form and will be made available to the Warlords,” Kryslie explained to this group

of Aeronites. "If you truly wish to serve me, then I challenge you to return to your ships and support those who have the welfare of all Aeronites in mind. I challenge you to promote the cause of peace."

After Kryslie answered all the questions raised by the Aeronites, they agreed to her proposal. After sealing the city, Jonko and Keleb helped to return them to their baseship. The guards around the ship, patrolling within protective shields, were spooked by shadows and fearful of the poisons in the air beyond the barrier.

They transmitted from there to the next city where the war to reclaim the City from the Ciriots began again.

Chapter 39 - Reclaiming Kin

With the defensive screens about his scout ship fully charged and the distortion fields on, Llaimos dodged unseen amongst the attacking craft. The numbers of Ciriots attacking the Estate had increased now that they realised all the cities except Ecla were sealed.

He reached the hangar cavern unscathed but he had needed to shoot down three Ciriots to clear his way into the opening. A fourth craft had hit the reinstated shields when it tried to fly into the unexpected opening. In the co-pilot's couch, Pyr sighed with relief.

"We need to get to the control room," Llaimos told Pyr. "We can start downloading of the last lot of data from there."

The thought of going into the palaces excited Pyr. Even though he knew his real father would not be there, the place should have been his home, and he recalled that Jordan had been there. He hoped to see his brother.

Llaimos transmitted directly to the security control room and looked around.

"Find a console to use, Pyr," Llaimos directed. "Make a link to the ship's computer. While it is downloading, get those programs we wrote, ready to use."

Pyr was happy to get to work, and did so as Llaimos scrolled through the security monitor images. He stilled them when they showed the ruined remains of the lesser buildings – the servants' quarters, the isolation block, the Government building. Amongst the rubble, Ciriots moved like swarms of ants, disintegrating rock when they wanted to look beneath it.

Llaimos controlled his anger. When he was ready, he would make them leave, but for now, the more that came here, meant less that were harrying the Temple. Less to be avoided by the Warlords when they left. He watched the screens until he heard Pyr's joyful exclamation.

"Jordan!" The boy was trotting in his oversized armour towards a figure standing in the doorway.

Llaimos strolled over, allowing the reunion, and feeling no need to draw a weapon. He sensed the gladness that Jordan felt at seeing his little brother safe and happy, but also his wariness and that he was watching over Pyr's shoulder.

Pushing Pyr away, Jordan turned to the tall red head and bowed as he would have to Kellex. "Prince, I do not know your name, but I wish to surrender to you."

To prove his intention, he drew out all his weapons and let them drop to the floor. "Please accept my service."

"Jordan, brother, I am Llaimos. You honour me with your pledge, as Pyr honours me with his help."

"Brother?" Jordan echoed, studying the tall man. "I knew of Tymos and Kryslie and of the baby. I did not know of you. Kellex did not know."

Llaimos grinned. All he admitted was, "I haven't been around very long. Tymos told me of you, and of Vila. I am so pleased to meet you in person. Is Vila with you?"

"No, and I have had no sense of her for many days – since the Warlords sent for her to try to help them. She managed to tell me the Ciriots were attacking, but no more. I fear that the Ciriots have killed her."

Llaimos could offer no hope. "Kryslie has gone to the Temple to talk to the Warlords. Vila is not there."

"She is not dead," Pyr suddenly blurted. "We have to find her."

"Not yet," Llaimos said quietly. "There are things we must do here first. Neither you, nor Jordan are powerful enough to fight the Ciriots. That is our fight, the reason for our existence."

There was a determined look on Pyr's face, but Llaimos was studying Jordan. "I need to know where you stand in this conflict, Jordan. You have offered your service... what do you expect to gain from that?"

Jordan swallowed and looked at Llaimos resolutely. "Vila and I recognize that we were born Tymorean. We know that you are not our enemies and we are not worthy of the power that is within us. You claim kinship to me, but it is an honour I don't deserve. I know you are not my enemy."

His little brother had obeyed Kellex, and tried to please him, Jordan realised, but he had been afraid of his guardian. That Pyr had no fear of this Tymorean spoke clearly that the Tymorean was not the kind of tyrant that Kellex always claimed.

Controlling some powerful and complex emotions, Jordan went on, "Vila and I wish to help our adopted race and we wished to gain the help of your scientists to save our planet. I had hoped to find them here."

"The information you need is here. I cannot claim the credit for it as it was the vision of Tymos and Kryslie and the work of the Elders who shared the vision," Llaimos told him.

"Princess Kryslie told Vila that you were not born to fight us and you didn't attack us as you attacked the Ciriote. Did your Elders foresee the problems of our world?"

"The Guardians revealed the problems to the Elders. They believe that your allies the Ciriote caused the instability in Aerdna's orbit to encourage your Warlords to act faster," Llaimos spoke from a memory.

Jordan felt a flash of anger. "I am yours to command!"

Llaimos smiled then, not at Jordan's vehemence, but to relax him. "Then you have just made my next task easier. Three Aeronite baseships are still grounded. I was about to transmit the information that I told you about, to each ship. I give you leave to claim that you found it here, and ask that you instruct them to take off and go into orbit. They cannot stay here."

"They won't listen to me," Jordan shook his head.

"Have you learnt nothing of command?" Llaimos chided. "One of my teachers suggested to me that if you told a big enough lie, people would believe it. That was because they would believe you would never dare to make such a claim if it was false."

The joking face of Stenn Reslic came into his mind as Pyr exclaimed, "That would still be lying." He sounded scandalised.

Llaimos nodded in Pyr's direction and admitted, "Yes, but it is a necessary lie to ensure all the Aeronites on the ships survive."

Jordan agreed with Llaimos. "If I tell them that Kellex ordered me to transmit to them anything of importance that I found..."

"They haven't had contact from the Warlords for two weeks," Llaimos murmured. "You being here, and having been near the Temple... it is not beyond belief that you might have been in contact and received orders. I think they will be relieved to have a reason to leave."

"What will happen when the Warlords leave the Temple? They will be angry," Jordan predicted.

"If they can leave," Pyr suggested.

"They will leave once Kryslie has spoken to them," Llaimos assured his companions.

Pyr dragged Jordan to a communications console and showed him how to work it. He listened as Jordan imitated Kellex and gave the orders to the baseships' temporary commanders.

When he was finished, Jordan stood and bowed to Llaimos. "The four ships will blast off. All are being attacked by Ciriote."

"Tymos has returned all the grounded warriors and fliers to the ships, and once the ships are in orbit I will activate a shield around this planet."

Jordan considered that for a time before asking, "How will the Warlords get back to the ships?"

“Those that come to a particular set of coordinates, by a particular time, will be allowed past the shield. The Warlords all have ships that can fly in air or space; they have the latest and strongest shields. The Warlords are the bravest and fiercest of Aeronite fighters, are they not?”

Jordan didn't answer that. 'Brave, fierce fighters' had a different meaning in his mind – one nearer to 'powerful and unscrupulous'. He asked instead, “You do not intend to let the Ciriot escape?”

“No,” Llaimos confirmed. “However, we will not be taking the war to the Ciriot that remained in space.”

Chapter 40 - The Warlords in the Temple

Kryslie returned at last to Ecla – the only city still not fully sealed. She found her brother, Tymos, there – working side by side with mutants and commoners. Keleb and Jonko wordlessly inserted their help. Kryslie went to see if she could help the survivors of Ciriote torture.

The Ciriote attacks on the shield were continuous. Llamos sent to their minds the information that the enemy had discovered that all the other cities were fully sealed and to their sensors, the people in them were all dead. They were concentrating on Ecla, the Royal Estate and the Temple, hoping to find the last defenders, and learn how to remove the shields.

In a brief moment when Tymos was taking a break, he sought Kryslie out. She was kneeling beside one of her patients, talking quietly. He insisted that she found time to eat and drink.

“All the dead are identified, and burial rites were performed. I have put the dead into three warehouses and placed a stasis field around them. There were too many bodies to bury.”

Kryslie brushed her hair off her sweat-streaked face, and told him, “I have Burnfire. It is the best way to... well, we will make sure that the dead are not forgotten. Dead mutants and commoners. I have stated that all those here now will become the founding citizens of the new Ecla.”

Tymos gripped his sister’s arm in silent agreement. “The census is complete – I have listed all the survivors of the city and all of the refugees from the mutant clans. All that could make it here have arrived. We should have the final cleansing rite soon. Jonko and Keleb have found the last of the alien artefacts.”

“Tonight then, and we will have the presentation directly afterwards,” Kryslie suggested.

The citizens of Ecla, mutants and commoners, gathered to watch the funeral pyre. The two groups had worked together for many weeks, restoring the town so that everyone had a house to go to. Now, it did not seem odd when a mutant, comforted a friend who was a commoner.

It seemed that all the people found peace as the fire died down, knowing that the spirits of their dead loved ones had been freed to the winds, and all traces of the enemy contagion were destroyed.

The silence broke as people began to turn to go home.

Before any could go far, Tymos called for their attention. He and Kryslie strode to a makeshift dais, drawing all eyes to them. Keleb transmitted there moments later, carrying an ornate leather book embossed with gold, and he gave this to Kryslie before departing again.

Kryslie held the book up and she spoke loudly, “In the name of the Governors, in my position as Heir Designate to His Majesty Tymoros, I present to all of you, the new charter for the City of Ecla.”

She had the undivided attention of all the people. In that moment, despite the grimy brown clothes she wore, and her red hair tied back in an untidy horse’s tail, she embodied the promise of the Governors to the people of the world.

Into the hushed silence, she read the words of the new charter, recognising the origins of the two groups that had melded into one, and the hopes for the future. Then she added, “The names of all those here today are recorded as the founding citizens of the new Ecla. When this war is over, and you can venture forth again, take this charter to the Governors to be officially recorded. With our signatures on the document, no one will dispute it.”

When the cheering finally died down, and the people finished hugging whoever was nearest, Tymos drew everyone’s attention.

“As this is effectively a new settlement, it is my role as representative of the Governors, to appoint councillors to oversee the smooth running of the city. Will the following people please join us on the dais?”

Tymos read a dozen names from the leather bound book. Some were survivors of the old council, some were leaders of mutant tribes. Others were people who had proved themselves as leaders during the long task of clearing up the damage and recovering bodies.

Judging from the renewed cheers, the choices were popular. Kryslie summoned Keleb to return the book to the glass display box in the entry hall of the council building. It was the only part of the building still standing.

Kryslie followed her brother from the dais, intending to slip away and let the city folk celebrate, but before they went far, they found a young telepathic commoner facing them.

“My father says I am to bring you to the celebration. You and Tymos, Jonko and Keleb. And you are not allowed to say that you still have work to do.”

Kryslie found the boy’s cheeky grin hard to resist. “We’ll be there, Morin,” she promised. “See that you are,” Morin tried to sound stern, but his grin undid the effect.

Later that night, as the last of the revellers sought their homes, Tymos, Kryslie, Jonko and Keleb walked from the Council building. The shield flared frequently as bombs and energy beams impacted on them, and the air temperature was already dropping after they had activated the final shields. Within hours, the city would lapse into a state of hibernation. The people would sleep until the war was over.

“What now?” Keleb asked quietly.

Tymos glanced up. “The Ciriote will soon realise the city is sealed like all the others. They will leave – probably to go to the Estate. Llaimos went there. I think I need to go and do more scouting of the Ciriote base.”

“I guess that leaves me with the task of talking to our guests in the Temple,” Kryslie remarked dryly. “They must have their chance to do what is right. They are the only vulnerable ones left, now that all their warriors have returned to the baseships.”

“I don’t like the idea of the Ciriote on the Estate,” Jonko spoke up. “Will Llaimos be safe? And didn’t you say that Jordan was there?”

Tymos reassured them. “Llaimos has been in and out of there a few times with no one the wiser. We will let Jordan have the same choice – to go or to stay. If he wishes to return to those who nourished him, we will take him there.”

“Shouldn’t we be making sure the Ciriote don’t leave any of their nasty traps on the Estate? And are you sure they can’t access the computer archive?”

“Kel, all will be fine. Just consider how I told you that the aura protects things. The Palaces will not be destroyed because for untold generations, those of us with the strongest power have lived there. And the Guardians of Peace are working with us.”

Kryslie added, “The Ciriote can sense the power there, and they crave it. I don’t think they will try to destroy it, and they won’t be able to get past it. Anyway, let us worry about that. I want you and Jonko to come with me. I think those Warlords are more likely to listen to me with two hulking bodyguards behind me.”

Jonko snorted. “If they want to get out, they will listen to you – female or not. They are a rather captured audience.”

Kryslie transmitted into the Altar chamber of the Temple of Dira. Jonko and Keleb immediately glanced around as if they were indeed guarding her. She found amusement in the idea, since she was as capable as they were of defending herself.

“The Warlords are in the lower side chambers. Only two are together. Xan is about to arrive,” Kryslie told her friends.

The young Aeronite bowed low when he entered. “Princess Kryslie, I am relieved by your safe return.”

“How are the other guests? I sense that their egos are so big that most of them need separate rooms.” Kryslie spoke lightly, sensing that Xan’s self-esteem was very low.

Xan straightened and smiled ruefully. "I think they have had enough of each other's company. Only Axec and Voltec are talking to each other, but they are brothers. However, they are all unappreciative of the honour being granted to them here. Not an hour goes by when at least one of them states their desire to be elsewhere."

"No doubt they resent being helpless," Keleb suggested.

Xan found he could smile faintly. "They have learnt, very well, that they cannot harm me – so they merely insult me at every opportunity. Kellex and Zorrec mainly. I have tried to explain matters to them, but of course, I am a traitor who should have died and I am not listened to. I fear I have failed you and Prince Tymos."

"I did not expect them to change their attitude without persuasion," Kryslie admitted. "It is not their fault that they lust for power. However, they were allowed to enter here so that the Guardians of Peace could judge their true worth. Have they made use of the communicator?"

Xan nodded. "They did at first, until they stopped being able to get messages through. Xezir sent all his people back to his ship...it is in orbit. Kellex demanded that Vila came here. He thought she could get in here using one of those hand device things – the transmitter. Axec and Voltec told their..."

Kryslie interrupted. "Did Vila come?"

Xan had to admit, "No, and Kellex is threatening to have her whipped."

"How long ago was that?" Kryslie asked urgently.

"Just after they got here...about two weeks ago, I think. None of them believe the Ciriot can be on this world."

Jonko stared at Keleb and mouthed, "Two weeks?" It seemed like two years since they had last been in the Temple.

"Go and find the Warlords, Xan," Kryslie said decisively. "Tell them that I have come and they are to assemble in this chamber. I will need to prepare. These travel worn garments are not suitable for a meeting of this importance."

"Am I to believe that you left clean clothes here?" Keleb asked as Xan walked down the stairs to the side passage on that level.

"No, however, I expect the Elders will have foreseen the need. Come on. The Governors have suites here and the attendants have a room where they keep changes of clothes for them. That's where I will go."

She heard Jonko tell Keleb, "Important people don't have time to attend to such petty details."

"Are you two coming?" Kryslie asked with a grin.

They moved next to Kryslie and she transmitted them all to a place she only knew of from her father's memories.

The room that appeared around them was austere, but had some comforts missing from the sleeping alcoves down on the meeting room level. One wall had a long wardrobe, with three sections. Without hesitation, Kryslie went to the left most of the cupboards and pulled out two black jumpsuits of the type favoured by President Reslic. She gave one to each of her friends. Then she went to the centre cupboard and pulled out a bundle of gold and silver fabric.

"Formal robes," Jonko grinned. His grin widened when Kryslie shook them out and he saw they were the feminine version. He saw Kryslie scowl briefly, and then heard her sigh in resignation. He and Keleb politely turned their backs to let her change, and they followed her example. When they heard her moving towards them, they turned and were impressed. Not only because of the formal robes, but because she had quickly brushed her hair out of the rough plait she had maintained during their months of travelling and rearranged it into a formal braid that wound around her head. Neatly in place was the simple crystal coronet of her rank as Heir Designate to his Majesty.

“Stand close behind me,” Kryslie instructed her friends, and she transmitted them back to the Altar chamber.

The Warlords were watching the two side entrances like six hungry cats at a mouse hole. They must have run up from the lower level, via the stairways at the front of the Temple, and passed the room where Kryslie was preparing as if they did not know the room existed. Two weeks of enforced idleness had given them plenty of time to explore the Temple fully, or so they thought, but they could not figure out where Kryslie was.

While they waited for her to come along one of the side passages, they muttered angrily and promised themselves to make the obscene whelp obey them.

It was several minutes before Kellex turned slightly and caught sight of Kryslie standing in front of the Altar, clad in the flowing gold and silver robes, with two dark clad figures behind her – each having the stance and alertness of warriors. He moved to face her, cursing in his native dialect. In his mind was the picture of Kryslie as a captive, young and vulnerable. He did not believe that she was any more powerful now than then.

Six pairs of eyes stared at her. Kellex’s with blazing hate, Axec, Voltec and Zorrec with avaricious greed, Wazim with scientific interest and Xezir with a neutral expression.

Voltec spoke first, demanding that she let them leave the Temple. “Any hope of mercy for the Tymorean people no longer exists. You have treated us like dirt, like vermin...”

“Silence!” Kryslie demanded, using the ‘command’ tone. Voltec’s voice was silenced, but his mouth kept moving. The others were too stunned to speak – they had each felt the power of that command.

“I am Kryslie, Heir Designate to his Majesty High King Tymoros and fully empowered to act in his name. I am also one of three Advocates of the Guardians of Peace – appointed by them to preserve the Sacred Trust given to our ancestors.”

“What rubbish,” Axec blurted. “You are little more than a child.”

“And I have the measure of your puny powers,” Kellex claimed. “Should you have the courage to face any one of us – you would lose. Your cowardly Governors would lose. And why are they not here? It is because they know we would defeat them.” He jerked around and pulled out a weapon, spinning again to fire it at Kryslie and the two men with her. The deadly beam had no effect.

From the stairway on the left, Xan remarked, “You don’t learn, do you?” He was breathing a little harder than normal, as if he had been running. “You haven’t been able to kill me in here.”

Kryslie glanced at Xan to silence him. Then she explained, “In this place, sacred to the Guardians, nothing will harm those that they protect.”

Voltec found he could talk again, he claimed, “Your Governors would not even meet us here. We own this planet now!”

Behind Kryslie, Keleb murmured, “In your dreams, you greedy bastards.”

Kryslie ignored his words and commanded, “You will listen to me.”

The Warlords felt the command go deep into their minds, and all seemed to go rigid.

“The Governors acted for the Guardians of Peace when they invited you here. Your needs were provided for, even if there were no servants to wait on you. In here, you have been protected, and the Guardians slowed time. You feel that only two weeks have passed, but my brothers and I have spent the past months protecting our cities, cleansing them of alien detritus, and returning all of your subordinates, ground troops and fliers, back to your baseships.”

Over the mutterings of what they would do to the cowards serving them, Kryslie spoke again. “You are all being intentionally blind to the truth. No one, neither Tymorean nor Aeronite, can survive outside of protective shields. The Ciriote used you, and then turned on you...”

The Warlords glanced at each other, passing messages with subtle facial gestures.

“You are trying to trick us, but it won’t work,” Wazim told her. “They cannot be here – we would have seen them.”

“I have no reason to trick you,” Kryslie told them. “When you leave this place, you will see for yourselves. The Ciriote gave you technology far above anything you knew, but they did not give you the newest technology...”

She went on to tell them facts as the Tymorean scientists had discovered them, and as the Elders had seen them. On four faces, the expression of blind disbelief remained, but Wazim and Xezir were thoughtful.

Wazim drew the attention of the senior Warlord during a pause in Kryslie’s recitation. “Voltec, the terrain reform program was interfered with. My scientists saw robed strangers. Tymoreans rescued them.”

“Gullible fools, like you,” Voltec retorted, turning back to glare at Kryslie. “Show us proof.”

Kryslie faced him calmly. “If you refuse to heed what I say, nothing that I could show you would be believed either. You have my leave to go and observe for yourself.”

Zorrec began to stride towards Kryslie, but he stopped when he saw the subtle change in the stance of the silent bodyguards. Perhaps he recalled that he couldn’t harm anyone here, or did he think the Tymoreans might have weapons that could work in the Temple.

Four angry voices demanded answers to questions. Kryslie ignored them for a moment, as she adjusted her eyes. Keleb had thought a comment at her and she needed to confirm it. She examined the energy shape of the Warlords, and in four of the six she saw a glowing area at the base of their skulls. It was bright and pulsing. It was the same type of glow that she had removed from Zacary and Stenn, only brighter and well entrenched.

The thought that she should try to remove the glows entered her mind, but a breeze of a thought told her, “They chose to accept the glow entity.” The soft mental voice of the Guardians came to her. “They will not let you remove it. Here it is not active, and cannot influence their choice. If they truly wish what is best for their people, they will be allowed to return to them. We will remove the entity. You must convince them.”

“Silence,” Kryslie commanded once again.

The Warlords moved uneasily as their voices were stilled.

“I pledge you that you will be allowed to leave after you have heard me out. Aeronites attacked Tymoreans without provocation. You have claimed that we did not listen to you, but your demands were unacceptable, unwise and self-defeating. Still, in spite of that, we do not consider you enemies. We defended ourselves and when the Ciriote came out of hiding, we defended Aeronites as well as Tymoreans. We saved as many Aeronites as we could, so that they could return to help for the survival of your world.”

Voltec tried to speak, and when he could not, resorted to stabbing the air with his right index finger as his face turned deep red. Kellex’s eyes glittered with hate.

Kryslie went on, gently, “You believe you have conquered us, but if so, then your victory is ephemeral. All of our people are safe, as yours were not. Our animals and forests are safe, but even so, you cannot expect to live here. You are welcome to fight the Ciriote and die for worthless victories. You will find that the Ciriote have conquered you – first by destroying the orbit of your world, and now by destroying your hope of coming here.”

It was obvious that Kellex and Voltec were not going to listen. Axec edged closer to his brother and Zorrec to Kellex as if they planned to attack Kryslie from two sides. Wazim wavered between the two pairs. Only Xezir stood calmly, oblivious of the frustrated jerky movements of his peers. His eyes were on Kryslie, but his expression betrayed nothing.

“You are wasting your breath,” Jonko murmured softly.

“Fine,” Kryslie breathed to herself before projecting her voice again.

“Very well, believe what you will,” she shrugged. “The six of you here are welcome to act on your beliefs and live or die by them. You are no longer of concern to me. I will save that for your subordinates – who don’t deserve to die in a useless war. They all believe that returning home is a death sentence. This does not have to be so. Instead of waging war on us, you should have found ways to preserve you planet. As we speak, my brother Llaimos is transmitting data to each of your baseships. Our scientists have assembled plans for vast underground vaults, that will be completely self-sufficient. They noticed and studied the induced perturbations in Aerdna’s orbit, and predicted that it will eventually break free of its attraction to its sun. If you leave now, and return to Aerdna, there will be time to prepare.”

“The idea is crazy,” Wazim managed to say. “Our whole population cannot move underground.”

Jonko blurted, “Your whole population could not move here. The rich and powerful would take the available ships, the rest would die.”

The Warlords were moving restlessly, frustrated by their inability to silence the Tymorean whelp, who was provoking uncomfortable ideas in their minds. Only Xezir noticed the glow that suffused Kryslie just before she spoke again.

“The Aeronite people will survive. They will live in the underground vaults for seven generations, until the planet’s surface is warmed by a new sun.”

Kellex spat at her. Kryslie was oblivious – in the throes of a powerful fore-vision. The glow about her faded, and she said, “Tymorea will need many generations before it is cleansed.”

“Your people won’t survive in the cities,” Kellex told Kryslie. “They will run out of food, even with all the hydroponic produce.”

Wazim asked thoughtfully, “I suppose the Royals have larger stockpiles?”

Kryslie ignored the innuendo that the Governors would ensure they had enough food.

Wazim tried again. “How will you ...children...cleansed this planet? If it is as bad as you say?” He was implying now that everything she had said was an enormous hoax.

Kryslie glanced up at the crystalline glass dome above her – she seemed to be listening. After several moments, she turned her attention back to the Warlords. “I will repeat this once more – you have not conquered us. You have been tricked and used by the Ciriot. They never wanted to help you control this world. They forced you to wage war on us, hoping you would defeat us, not caring if you all died. They wanted the treasures of this world, at least risk to themselves. They didn’t want to live here, so they didn’t care what they did to us, and to the land. They will not leave this world alive. There is now a shield around the whole planet. We have given your baseships orders to blast off. Those you left in charge had enough sense to obey. Each of you have a ship capable of both atmospheric and space flight. You have a choice – If you wish to save your people, and those on Aerdna, you will go to the coordinates that I give you. We will open the shield at that point and allow you to leave. The offer will not remain open for more than half a day.”

“Pah,” Voltec spat on the colourful mosaics that decorated the tiled floor. “You are still trying to trick us. We will order our troops back here to fight the Ciriot and we will defeat them too.”

Jonko lost patience with the Warlords, and shouted at them. “Were you not listening? Your troops are all safely beyond the shield. You have no troops here and the baseships will not be allowed to return. And what possible use can you have for a radioactive wasteland?”

Voltec spat again. “And how will you survive? You don’t seem to be worried about that.”

“Make your choice. The shield will only open once,” Kryslie stated.

Xezir asked, neutrally, “What are the coordinates?”

He listened and memorised the string of numbers that Kryslie recited, and noted the time she quoted.

“Thank-you. Are we free to go?” Xezir said politely.

“Yes. Keleb, send the remote signal to lower the Temple shields.”

For a brief instant, Keleb was confused. Then he heard Kryslie’s mental voice. “Pretend. The Guardians are no longer stopping them.”

Four of the Warlords turned immediately and strode from the Altar chamber, going immediately to the nearest way out – the doorway next to the large north and south chambers. They were not willing to risk Kryslie changing her mind. As Zorrec and Kellex passed the silent observer, Xan, they hissed venomously in their native language. Xan no longer flinched at their threats.

Wazim wavered, glancing after the more senior Warlords and wondering why Xezir was still standing where he had been and was staring at Kryslie. He finally chose to hurry after the others.

When Kryslie said nothing more, Xezir turned, as if reluctantly. He walked slowly to the side steps, but stopped again before beginning to descent. Hesitantly, he turned around and asked a question.

“Princess, is it true that all the Tymoreans are safe? I know of the protected forests, and the protected cities – is that where those of Royal blood have gone? And is it true that you will all survive? How can you possibly cleanse this world?”

“All will be well, Peace Lord,” Kryslie assured him, walking towards him with hands outstretched in greeting. “You have questions. Ask what you will and you will have answers.”

The man’s face slowly changed from having a look of near despair to having one of incredulous hope.

“Why do you give me such a title? Peace Lord.” He seemed to savour the sound of it. “I am unworthy of such an honour!”

“Peace Lord, the Guardians have judged you! They do not bestow honour on the unworthy. You alone of the Warlords will return to Aerdna. Your task will not be an easy one. Come with us, back to the palace, we will explain our vision to you there.”

Xezir bowed low and Kryslie transmitted five people back to the palace. They materialised in the room where Jordan waited with Llaimos. When he saw Kryslie he asked urgently, “Did you see Vila? The Warlords sent for her!”

Kryslie felt his worry and answered gently. “She was not there! The other five Warlords are returning to their scout ships.”

Jordan finally became aware of Xezir; his initial spurt of fear was slowly replaced by puzzlement as he studied the man. The former Warlord, now titled Peace Lord, was in turn was studying Llaimos and Jordan.

“Lord of Peace!” Jordan finally found the words to say and he found himself drawn to the older man.

“Commander, it seems that you too have found your true place.”

“Yes,” he said proudly. “I will fight with my kin. They are fighting to save their people, mine in fact, but they have not forgotten that my adopted people were once of their race and they found the means to save them too. Perhaps that is why I was made and adopted by Aeronites - so that you would have some one to fight for you. Though I do not think that my Guardian would like to think he’d been manipulated by some power!”

Xezir was silent for a moment. “You should know – Vila is a prisoner of the Ciriote. They took her before she could return to the temple to try to help us.”

Jordan felt his fists clench as a surge of power went through him. Llaimos placed a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“Soon we will go,” he said calmly, urging Jordan to be patient. “We cannot act until all of your adopted people are safe.”

By will power alone, Jordan quelled the rush of power. Llaimos smiled, aware of the struggle, hoping Jordan would be strong enough.

“Why didn’t you tell me? I would have gone after her,” Jordan pleaded at Llaimos. His fear for his sister was apparent.

“And you would have been killed or captured too,” Llaimos said gently. “Then, how would you fight for your adopted race? Vila is a fighter, is she not?”

“Yes,” Jordan agreed. “I should not believe she is helpless.”

Kryslie was not wasting time. She sent Keleb and Jonko off to scout the Estate, and went to the computer archive and brought up the data she had promised to explain to Xezir. Xan was her shadow as she rapidly tapped on the pressure pads.

Firstly, she showed Xezir the nature of the forces acting on his own world and extrapolating them to the ultimate cataclysm - the sun exploding, searing the surface of the world, pushing the planet away from its influence to wander in space, as a frozen wasteland.

As the data was displayed, Kryslie explained what she knew, playing down her part in the planning. She credited the Elders as having seen the reason for the Aeronite invasion and for seeing the people surviving, and for them knowing that they must work out a way for this to be so. She spoke of how the Elders and scientists had worked together to prepare detailed plans for vast sealed underground vaults, that were completely self sufficient, as this was the only way the people could survive.

Diagrams of air circulating and purifying systems, for hydroponics systems, for oxygen producing methods, water sourcing and purification, waste recycling, heating and for every conceivable aspect of life flashed on and off the screen. It had all been encoded onto plaques, sealed against damage. Jordan had taken one back to Kellex’s ship. Kryslie did not go into details.

“Will there be time?” Xezir asked astounded at the details he glance-read from the screen. It was too much to take in all at once.

“When you return to Aerdna, you will be the Senior Warlord. It will be up to you to convince the Superior Council to mobilize every resource to make this possible. You have evidence of the Ciriote treachery and the impossibility of coming here. Xan has been privy to much of the planning. He will assist you. Right now, you must leave to reach the coordinates. I will return you and Xan to your scout ship. He has a device that will let you remain undetected by the Ciriote. The cloaking devices they gave your people are flawed – so they could still detect you.”

“The other Warlords – do you intend them to die?” Xezir asked.

“I have tried to convince them that they should leave now,” Kryslie reminded him. “What happens to them will be their choice. If they reach the coordinates in time, they will be allowed to leave. However, the Ciriote will be hunting for victims.”

Some of Kryslie’s urgency affected Xezir. He wasted no time once Kryslie had transmitted them to his ship. He thanked her and began the lift off sequence. The other scout ships had already gone.

“The Guardians will be with you!” Kryslie promised as she transmitted back to the Estate.

Chapter 41 - The Ciriote in Control

Vila came back to awareness and the bitter realisation of utter defeat. At first she did not know where she was – it was completely dark. Then her memories returned – and the pain. Her whole body still throbbed from the beating, and stung like she had been bitten by hundreds of honey wasps. The slightest movement, even breathing, took her back to the threshold of unconsciousness.

When she thought back to Villeni's punishment, which at the time had felt extreme, she realised it was little more than a face slap to what the Ciriote had done to her. This was true humiliation, and she wished they had beaten her to death, but that would have been kindness, and these creatures held none of that.

To think that she had been afraid of Kellex's wrath after having to admit to him that her 'freakish power' had not been enough for her to get into the Tymoreans Temple and bring him out. She had found it easy to imagine him purple faced, and almost frothing at the mouth with rage. His words to her had been cutting. She had heard more than enough when she had pretended that her comm. signal had broken up. She didn't want to hear him order her back to Villeni again. Then, she had been glad he was stuck in the Temple indefinitely.

He was asking the impossible of her, for she had already reported her earlier failure to enter that damned Temple. She hadn't admitted the mind freezing dread that had suffused her when she had gone right to the entrance. The second time, she hadn't been able to get that close. Something had changed for whilst she had been able to fly her ship closer, through the outermost shield, she had been stopped by this new inner one.

Vila had wanted to stay near the Temple - protected from the Ciriote attackers by that outer shield. But doing so was folly. If Kellex looked out and saw her ship.... Anyway, she had no food supplies and little water.

Then Villeni's message had come through. She couldn't pretend not to hear that. The powerful baseship transmitter was capable of punching a message all the way to Aerdna, not like the primitive device Kellex had been using.

Kellex's second in command, like his superior, still believed that the attackers belonged to one of the other Warlords, and they were also trying to bring the shields down so the trapped Warlords could leave the Temple. He told her that he had ordered the rest of her flight of fighter pilots to rendezvous with her there, and they were to dig under the inner shield like Jordan had done to enter the city.

Her pilots had come close to outright mutiny. They may well have refused to become dirt scabbling labourers, except that Villeni had put the fear of the god, Jyx into them. It hadn't stopped them muttering under their breath, in her hearing. The protocol of command meant that she dared not openly agree with them. She had to keep them working hard. It wasn't that they were cowards, for they would have had to fly through the attacks of the Ciriote, travelling just above ground level, to get in under the shields. Just as she had done.

For a week, they had dug like moles, trying to dig deep enough to be below the effect of the shield. Six feet down, and the shovels still hit what felt like a solid wall. Vila had taken a turn with her subordinates, forcing herself to do more and lead by example. The men began to gain respect for her.

When she dropped from sheer exhaustion, she sometimes couldn't sleep. Instead, she felt the forces that warred in her. The hard labour of digging quelled it but as she rested, the power returned. She knew what it was now – the fabled power of the Tymorean Royals. Kellex had abducted her to spite the Tymorean Governor and maybe he had wanted a means to control her

power. Did he hope it would destroy her? She hadn't been trained to use it, thought she had learnt to ignore it, or did Kellex think using it was all instinct?

It wasn't. Ever since she had fought Kryslie, the one who had called her sister – she had been aware of the difference. That younger sister had used her power as a conductor controlled the music of an orchestra. That controlled power should have been her inheritance too.

When they had finally excavated an open tunnel under the shield, Vila had reported to Villeni. He had in turn received orders from Kellex; Vila and her second were to go and get Kellex, and bring him out. He would use her command ship, and she would return with her second.

Moments later, the Ciriots had attacked. Six of their air fighters had flown in under the shield and blasted all the grounded Aeronite ships. More of the creatures had crept up on them by foot, hidden by stealth suits until the last instant.

The men in her command had fought fiercely, she had fought like a berserker, but it wasn't enough. Ciriots came in overwhelming numbers and they were strongly protected. Anger drew power into her; the first two Ciriots to grab her had been blasted apart by a concussion of power. The next two had received jolts strong enough to stun them. After that, though she kicked and struggled, they handled her easily and were not gentle. She had watched helplessly as the Ciriots slaughtered her men. Then a cloaked figure had walked up to her. Unlike the others, it revealed its face. She recognised the eyes that blazed with hate. Zorrec's warrior, Kek, had never liked her. In that instant before Kek stunned her unconscious, she sensed that he thought that if he could not have Kryslie, she was the next best thing.

The slightest of sounds, no more than the swishing of metallic thread woven cloaks, sent her body into a spasm of terror.

The first time she had regained consciousness, before the questions began, she had realised she was completely naked. That had been the start of the horror. Then the Ciriots had beaten her for not answering their questions.

Next time, they added refinements of pain, humiliation and terror – elicited none of the information they wanted either. She simply had no knowledge of what they wanted.

Surely they knew that by now?

Vila felt the metal covered hands as if they were burning brands, and as they lifted her, the pain in her body peaked again and she blacked out.

When she woke again, she wondered if she had died, for she could not feel her body. Had she been rescued?

The hope was short lived. Kek's ugly face leered down at her, and a Ciriots brandished a wickedly sharp knife, and placed it at her throat. Hope of another kind surged in her. Were they going to kill her? Had they frozen her body so she wouldn't fight them?

No, it was worse, the knife went in below her neck and slit her open down to the breastbone. Kek placed a mirror where her eyes could only see what they were doing to her. She watched as they opened up that bleeding slit, and placed something glowing and green into her. Then they brought something glowing red hot to touch the sides of the slit, before roughly sewing it up. Somewhere during that, she blacked out again.

Vila could not guess how much time had passed since then, but now the darkness was not absolute. She could make out the shaped of things around her. Remembering the agony of the last waking, she tried to move carefully. The agony did not return as she sat up, though her body was stiff, and she barely had any strength. Slowly, she felt around herself. She had been lying on a metal floor, probably the same cell where she had been before. Recalling the last awakening, and the obscene operation, she inched her hand up to feel her chest. In doing so, she

discovered that someone had re-dressed her. Her fingers tried to open the front flap, but did not have the strength to pull the fabric open. It took long minutes of fumbling attempts before it was open enough to push one finger in.

Where they had cut her, there was a thick raised ridge, but she did not feel any dampness to indicate the wound was still healing. How long had she been unconscious this time, and why had they let her heal. Now she was conscious again, she could try to escape...

"I don't think so, my puppet," the mechanical translation of the Ciriot speech startled her. "Get up. You have things to learn."

Her mind told her, "I can't I am too weak." Her body began to move by itself, rolling over, pushing up to its knees, standing unsteadily. All the while, her mind was frozen in shock.

Even that wasn't the worst. This was torture taken to a new level. This creature controlled her body, made her do things that her own mind rebelled against.

Without her will, her hands stripped her of the uniform, making her stand fully naked again - they hadn't given her back underclothes. She walked to the leering Kek and stood while he touched her in obscene ways, and used her for his own pleasure. She tried to withdraw her mind, pretend she was not there, but the Ciriot mind held her in the present moment, enjoying her humiliation.

A very small part of her essence escaped and hid deep in her mind. The rest was forced to listen to the mind of her new master as he indoctrinated her to obey him,

Finally, he tested her obedience, telling her to dress, to eat and drink, to relieve herself, and then sit and wait for him to return.

In between those returns, she sat in darkness, seeing nothing, doing nothing, thinking nothing. She reanimated only when her master came and played with her mind again. Time lost all meaning.

When Kryslie told the Warlords they could leave, Kellex wasted no time before heading back to his ship. As he strode down the stone staircase at the front of the Temple, he was aware of the flickering of energies that impacted on the shield above. His mind still assumed that the attackers were Aeronites trying to break the shields. The faint shimmer of the wall shields, just beyond his ship, prevented him from seeing the landscape beyond. He hadn't worried about ruining the part of the garden where he landed, and the rest of the uselessly decorative Temple gardens, was of even less interest.

His mind was full of things he wanted to do, and a felling of vindication. The Tymoreans were finished. The cowards had sent a mere girl to insult their conquerors. Of course she wasn't able to stop them leaving, or she wouldn't have tried those pitiful mind tricks to seem more powerful than she was. She was probably there so the Governors could save face, and blame her for them all escaping.

His mind simmered as another thought occurred to him. If that jumped up little female whelp had been able to get in, Vila should have been able to. The wretched female he had raised, obviously hadn't tried hard enough. He'd have Villeni teach her to be thorough.

The first thing Kellex did on entering his ship, was to power up the communicator and send a message to the Aeronite attack force. He didn't want to fly from under the Temple shields and into an energy bomb. That he received no answer was irritating, but the noise of the bombardment was tremendous, and the energy discharges might be interfering with the signal. Instead of trying again, he punched a nanoburst signal to his base ship.

Villeni sounded relieved when he returned the contact, but his voice was neutral when he told his superior, "Sir, the aircraft are not ours."

Kellex had snarled, "Nonsense, the Tymoreans would not be bombing their own Temple. Find out which of the other Warlords sent them and tell them we are coming out."

“Sir, the aircraft are Ciriots,” Villeni insisted. “I did not believe at first, but many of the foot troops have reported seeing those creatures.”

“The Tymoreans have mind washed them. The Ciriots cannot be here. We would have seen their ships coming.”

“I had the mind healers test the warriors that returned here. They found no sign of mind manipulation or delusions.”

“I will discuss this when I return,” Kellex snapped, cutting the contact.

Cursing, Kellex started his engine, turned on his instruments and the cloaking field, and blasted off, just ahead of all the other Warlords.

The force wall around the Temple did not stop him. It flashed briefly as he blasted through it, flying at ground level as before, and then turning to fly upwards when his instruments showed a gap in the attacking formation.

At first he had kept his eyes on his instruments and the radar screen, but once he was high above the ships that were attacking the Temple, he began to circle and look down. The winds were strong and gusting from unpredictable directions and the turbulence was fierce. He felt the first stirrings of alarm as he saw the mile after mile of blackened and charred landscape. The destruction was interrupted by areas of glowing mauve, the protected cities and forests. He recalled the Royal whelp mentioning the terrain reformer, and considered what he knew of how it was to work. Before the Aeronite ecology could begin, the old ecology had to be destroyed. That was probably what he was seeing below, surely.

But his mind insisted on recalling that the initial scouring phase was quickly followed by the rapid new growth phase. He should start seeing that soon, but instead he was seeing areas that were glowing orange, and when he overflew those places, the radiation sensors went off the scale.

All the subtle hints, the claims of his inferiors, clashed together and Kellex’s anger grew hotter. He was forced to admit to himself that the Ciriots, supposedly allies, were here and were meddling with the Aeronite triumph. He would not admit to himself that the girl whelp’s warning had been accurate.

Before trying to reach Villeni again, he checked for messages that were auto recorded in his absence. The reports of warriors straggling back to the ship were irritations. He would teach every one of them the price for deserting their posts. Other matters he ignored, until he heard Villeni reporting that the baseship was launching and returning to the holding orbit it had achieved when it had first arrived in Tymorean airspace.

His anger went out of control when he heard the rest of the report “...following your orders as relayed by Commander Jordan.”

“He’s dead!” Kellex swore savagely as he increased the speed of his ship on the heading to where his ship had been. “Next time I see him, I’ll tear him apart. I will have him whipped into diced meat.”

After realising that his current heading was pointless, Kellex abruptly turned the nose of his ship upwards and blasted for space. Only then, did the Ciriots craft uncloak and reveal themselves.

Kellex saw an imminent collision and took evasive action. Other craft came into view and he fired his weapons. The aircraft were of a completely unfamiliar design. He wanted to believe they were Tymorean, since the twelve englobing ships were not firing at him, merely forcing him to fly somewhere.

“Weaklings,” he swore, misinterpreting the reason. This must have been why the girl whelp had let them go - so these pilots could make him go somewhere. “Very well – I will go with you and I will kill you all.”

When the Warlords left the Temple, their personal command ships were the only non-Ciriot aircraft flying. Even though the Warlords believed they were cloaked, that technology had come from the Ciriot and it was flawed.

A dozen Ciriot fighter craft converged on each Aeronite craft – remained invisible and undetected – as they observed the actions of the Warlords who were in turn observing the utter destruction that Kryslie had mentioned.

Kellex flew over mile after untold mile of utter destruction, interspersed with areas of glowing mauve that were the protected cities and forests – Kellex became savagely determined. The Tymoreans were defeated! The Ciriot had betrayed their allies, but the Aeronites would defeat them too. They had to. He could not return to Aerdna if they failed. Wazim and Xezir would have to re-program the terrain reformer. That would fix all the problems.

The message Kellex sent to his baseship went unanswered. An analytical part of his mind realised that the atmospheric disturbances were probably causing it.

The only warlord to escape the Ciriot ambush was Xezir. When Kryslie, in a Tymorean fighter craft borrowed from the hangar cavern, took him and Xan back to the Temple to reclaim his ship, the Ciriot presence over the Temple was gone. He had in his pocket, a palm sized device that Xan had told him was a cloaking device a thousand times better than the Aeronite devices. He had tested the device on the flight back to the Temple.

“The Ciriot may have left here for now,” Kryslie warned him. “But they will come back. They are following the other Warlords, probably looking for your baseships. I will follow you until you reach the upper atmosphere.”

She didn't leave her borrowed ship, and kept it ready to lift as soon as Xezir did. He had the coordinates for where the shield would open, and would head straight there.

However, to get to the coordinates of the shield, he knew he would still have to avoid hundreds of marauding Ciriot craft. Even before he took off, he had Xan activate the extra protective device that Kryslie had given him.

Kryslie knew the secrets of the Tymorean cloaking device. Her ship was able to keep track of his by tuning her sensors to look for one very rare chemical element. Once he was past the top of the atmosphere, she put her ship into a looping spiral, taking the opportunity to observe the conditions outside of the shielded places. That it also gave her more hands on experience flying a real aircraft, instead of a simulator, was a minor benefit. Thanks to the memories shared with her by the Governors, she had known how to fly it.

Xezir spared a moment to regret the destruction of the peaceful gardens that had existed when he had arrived at the Tymorean Temple, but he had a catastrophe of vastly greater proportions to prevent. He flew his craft low until he was out from under the weakened shields about the Temple, and stayed low until well away from the Temple, and in relatively clear airspace. Then he turned his ship upwards to blast out of the atmosphere. He could have shot at the Ciriot as he climbed, but that would have betrayed his presence. He simply adjusted his course to avoid them and increased his speed.

Once he was in the stratosphere, far above the Ciriot fliers, he headed for the coordinates that Kryslie had given him, and established a geosynchronous orbit in that position. He waited there, and hoped his fellow Warlords would join him. Time passed, and they didn't.

He could contact his baseship from that orbit, and the more he observed of the planet below, the more grateful he was that he had ordered his people back into space. He did not know about the other baseships, but he hoped they would survive. His smile was genuine when his crew reported that all of the baseships were now in space, beyond the new planetary shield.

To distract himself from the probable fate of his peers, Xezir asked Xan about his reasons for surrendering to the Tymoreans, and how he had managed to convince them to help. The answers Xan gave were unexpected, and made him thoughtful. He had agreed to serve the Tymorean Prince and Princess because they had helped him, healed him, when Kellex had wanted him dead. Then when Xan began detailed explanations of the plans made by the Tymoreans to help the Aeronites survive on Aerdna, the sheer scope of the project awed him.

It was flawlessly brilliant, covering every conceivable need...and must have taken decades to prepare. It definitely had not been cobbled together in the short time since the war had begun in earnest.

He hoped the Tymoreans had a way to deal with the devastation the Ciriots had dealt to them.

Jordan watched, feeling alienated and inexplicably nauseous. He wanted to search for Vila, for if what Xezir had said was true, and the Ciriots had her, he had to try to save her. She was his sister, and the closest friend he had, didn't that mean anything to these other siblings of his? They knew what the Ciriots could do to people.

He sighed and wished he had something to do. He didn't think it wise to play with the computers here, as he had during the weeks he had been alone here, waiting for Kellex to give him new orders. They would probably disapprove of his attempts to force his way into the system. He had managed to access quite a lot of data, and he knew things now that Kellex surely didn't know. He doubted that any of it was truly classified stuff, but he had learnt so much.

He was edgy, as if filled with nervous energy. He had offered to scout the estate with the two commoners, but he had been politely rebuffed. They did not have a spare personal force screen, or stealth armour, Kryslie had said, and that may well be true. Or it might have been that they still didn't trust him. It made him a little jealous that they trusted Pyr, who was still such a little child. Price Llaimos listened to him as if he were an adult. So did Princess Kryslie. And they had treated Xan as a friend, when he was born an enemy, not just made into one through no fault of his own. They had forgiven Xan though, so perhaps there was hope for him.

His belly rumbled fiercely, reminding him that he hadn't eaten since his long ago breakfast. Well, that was something he could do something about and it was more useful than watching the Ciriots desecrating the lesser buildings of the Estate. He would get food for everyone, since he had long since found the storerooms. He had eaten well of foods that would otherwise go to waste. He was thankful that all the food had not been taken to wherever the Royals had gone. He had also created a comfortable bed in the control room.

As he began to take the food from the carry basket and place it on a table, his ears caught part of a conversation between Llaimos and Kryslie. The younger Tymorean Prince was explaining to Kryslie about a program he and Pyr had created. Something he called a 'virus program' that he was going to transmit to the Ciriots ships

Not all of the ships would be within range of the signal, but as soon as the nearer ones encountered the more distant ships, the program would be re-transmitted to them. The program would spread.

Jordan had missed hearing the logic behind this move, but he liked the thought that these Tymoreans would be able to deploy the Ciriots ships to whatever location they chose. He thought of one use – and that was to clear a corridor of airspace for when they went to the second continent to confront the Ciriots.

Jordan felt a shiver down his spine. What could seven people do against the might of the Ciriots? Or even eight – if they could find Vila and she was able to fight. Feeling like a coward, he admitted to himself that he was glad he was not in charge.

Llaimos called him over. “Jordan, we would welcome any expertise you have. Pyr and I have been studying all we have learnt of the Ciriote...looking for weaknesses. Perhaps you could go through this information too?”

“They are overbearingly arrogant. Worse than Kellex even,” Jordan admitted freely. “And they are convinced of their superiority and invincibility.”

Llaimos smiled faintly. “A fallacy we can exploit,” he said as he gestured Jordan to the seat he had just vacated.

“Thanks,” Jordan acknowledged the courtesy. He mentally contrasted Llaimos’s behaviour with that of every other powerful person he had met. He instinctively glanced at Kryslie, but she seemed to have her mind somewhere far away. He returned his attention to Pyr who was showing him how to access the Tymorean computers. Suddenly his mind was dragged from its musings.

“I told Llaimos that you were really clever – smarter than Kellex let you believe,” Pyr whispered when Jordan quickly mastered the use of the highly advanced computers.

Pyr was showing him things that he hadn’t yet discovered for himself. He assumed that Llaimos must have taught him to access the computer, but what his brother was telling him now, astounded him.

He had always known that Pyr was smart...for a child...but listening to him now – he realised with shock that his little brother was brilliant. He had blossomed since he had chosen to serve Llaimos. For the first time in his own life, or what he could recall of it, Jordan felt free to use his own intellect.

Jordan returned Pyr’s grin, but still couldn’t force himself to admit the glee he felt at realising that the Tymoreans had hidden so much from Kellex and the other Warlords.

Pyr must have sensed the thought for he whispered, “Yeah!” in agreement.

Once he set his mind to studying the Ciriote, Jordan gave no more thought to how the Tymoreans could cleanse their planet and make it fit for life once again. Neither Kryslie nor Llaimos had seemed daunted by the prospect. So if they had a way – they were not mentioning it. Still...one step at a time. He was helping with the next major problem ... getting rid of the Ciriote and looking for ways to find and save Vila.

Chapter 42 - Confronting the Ciriote

Pyr went back to the hangar cavern with Jordan to prepare Llaimos's ship. As he warmed up the engines and turned on all the control systems, he explained what he knew about the ship to Jordan.

"It is so much more advanced than Kellex's ship," Pyr boasted. "It used to be the President Governor's ship."

Jordan's finger itched to take the controls, and he yearned to fly it.

At that point, Jonko and Keleb arrived in full armour, carrying boxes. As he watched them store the smaller packaged contents in space behind a wall panel just back from the cockpit, he studied the armour.

At first sight, the grey metal had seemed to be made of hinged solid plates, but as Keleb squatted down to store things at a lower level, he realised the material was infinitely more flexible than solid plates. It also had an odd purplish blue shimmer about it.

Pyr slipped out of the co-pilots seat when Llaimos and Kryslie climbed into the ship. Jordan found his eyes drawn to them. Llaimos was now clad in robes similar to those Kryslie had worn on her arrival at the estate. He recognised the type of official robes worn by the Governors. He hid a shiver of alarm, but that was quickly forgotten when Llaimos directed, "Let's go."

Jordan felt Pyr pushing him towards the co-pilot's couch, and he would have resisted, except he saw Kryslie strap herself into the navigator's couch. Llaimos in turn, gestured him to the seat he craved to be in.

"Pyr, send that program," Llaimos said as he waited for all his passengers to report they were secured for lift off.

At the communication's console, across from Kryslie, Pyr twisted his couch to access a wall screen and console. Jordan twisted to see what came up, and via this screen, which was linked to the Estate security monitors, he saw the attackers cease strafing the shields part way up the mesa rock face and veer off to left and right.

Pyr reported, "Attackers heading west. The entrance is clear."

Jordan returned his attention to the controls in front of him as the ship began to move. He realised that what ever it was Pyr had done, had caused the Ciriote to redeploy.

Llaimos flew the ship out of the cavern, allowing Jordan to familiarise himself with how the ship handled by gently holding the auxiliary controls. Once they were away from the mesa, he allowed Jordan to fly it.

Kryslie, sitting in the navigator's position, was in mental contact with Tymos. She gave the others forewarning of what to expect – such as the packs of Ciriote fighter planes, shepherding the Warlord's ships towards the Ciriote base. "Tymos is tracking them. He is hiding in one of the Ciriote ships that are grounded near the Ciriote base," she explained.

Jordan was amazed at her telepathic range. What he shared with Vila was nothing like it. He glanced at the two commoners, Jonko and Keleb. Neither looked surprised; they must have known of her ability.

"Can we help them?" Jordan asked, referring to the Warlords.

"We are one ship against hundreds of Ciriote," Pyr remarked to his brother. "Anyway, why should we? They had their chance and didn't take it."

Jordan glanced sternly at his little brother who stared calmly back. He looked then at Kryslie, his eyes still holding the question.

"The Guardians have judged them," Kryslie said in an emotionless voice. "They will protect those that are worthy. Xan and Xezir are safe and the others are still alive. Perhaps they have a second chance to prove their worth."

“The Ciriots torture their prisoners,” Jordan reminded Kryslie. “Kellex was a harsh man but he cared for us.” He was thinking more of Vila and what they might be doing to her.

“Your concern does you credit, brother,” Llaimos acknowledged. “However there are powers at work on this world that we must obey. If any of the remaining Warlords survive it will be the Guardian’s will and we will help them to return to Aerdna.”

“I don’t agree with you about our Guardian,” Pyr told Jordan. “He stole us from our rightful parents and he was not averse to a little torturing either.” Pyr glanced at Keleb who was sitting in one of the rear couches. Jonko caught the glance and nodded approval of Pyr’s remark.

Pyr was right, Jordan had to admit, but did Kellex deserve to be given to the Ciriots?

Instead of commenting further, Jordan increased the speed of the aircraft trying to catch up to the captured Warlords who were still resisting being forced to fly north.

Flying was one skill he had that he was rightly proud of. He exhilarated in the speed he was travelling and he felt he was doing something towards helping Vila - she must be at the Ciriots base, and he was getting there as fast as he could. He was travelling faster than the speed of sound. Some of the instruments were not being used, Jordan wondered if the craft was also able to travel in space. He marvelled anew at how well the Tymoreans had hidden their technology.

He asked the question of Llaimos, and the Tymorean Prince took over the controls and showed him how to take the craft up to a sub orbital flight level, and then let him have control again. Flying that high, in that craft, now meant that they would reach the Ciriots base even faster.

The dome field that covered the Ciriots base clearly visible to all of the people in the approaching craft. All had Tymorean power to some extent and this is what made the screen visible to them. Llaimos took over the controls again, and put the craft into a wide spiralling descent, giving them time to study what they could see of the Ciriots base and the area around it. He intended to land well away from the base and any grounded Ciriots craft.

When they had hidden the ship under a Tymorean protective field, Kryslie and Llaimos transmitted the six of them to Tymos’s observation position. He was in a Ciriots ship, and he was using the instruments in it to spy on the Ciriots base and monitor the transmissions. He could translate the clicking speech with the help of a box he had strung around his neck. Through an earpiece in his ear, he heard the translation into Aeronite and from that understood what messages were being sent.

Tymos grinned when he saw the others materialise, and immediately went to touch hands with Kryslie and Llaimos, and to give Jonko and Keleb hearty thumps on their backs.

Jordan stood back, and watched with a sense of anguish. There was no mistaking the closeness between Tymos, Kryslie and Llaimos. He yearned to be a part of it. They were his siblings. He had been close to Vila, but he did not even know for sure that she was still alive.

Pyr edged his way from beside Jonko and slipped his hand into Jordan’s. It seemed he could understand the conflicting emotions of his older brother’s mind.

“They are Great Ones, Jordan,” Pyr whispered. “You can sense it. This is their destiny. It was never yours or mine. Even if we had not been taken by Kellex and away from our inheritance, it would still be those three who must act now. I didn’t see it happen but the Guardians caused Llaimos to grow from child to man in moments. Kryslie and Tymos were conceived on a distant world and we were taken away as children. Llaimos told me that the influence of the Guardians in our lives is unrecognized by most people. I believe there is a reason for our existence and for all that has happened to us. We have still to recognize our destiny.”

“You are right, Pyr,” Jordan admitted. “Vila and I pledged each other that we would return to Aerdna and help protect the people we grew up to think of as ours.”

Jordan looked up and saw Tymos had come over to him.

“Perhaps your greatness lies there,” Tymos suggested.

Jordan studied this younger brother that looked so like him, then looked away. “Perhaps.”
“Vila is alive,” Tymos told him quietly. “At the times that I sneaked into their base, I could not get to her. She is in the lower level of one of the joined ships. May I share an image with you?”

As Jordan ‘saw’ the picture in his mind, it changed to appear as if he were walking there. Tymos told his mind where he needed to go from the place in that image to where Vila was a prisoner, and what dangers lay along the way.

“What if I am not strong enough?” Jordan asked himself.

Kryslie came over and spoke quietly. “Brother that you have Tymorean power is beyond doubt. It is in your favour that you have not let it control you. However, you have not mastered it. When you fight, fight to the best of your ability but if you have to call on those inner reserves, concentrate on the rightness of what you must do. When Vila is safe, you must both join Pyr in our craft. You will be safe there. You still have a transmitter?”

Jordan nodded.

“Good, now, before you go – you will need some armour. Llaimos has several sets of Ciriote stuff, cleansed and deodorised. It will protect you from their weapons, and the foul air outside, and be a disguise. Jonko will get it. He and Keleb will go with you.” She nodded over at her friends.

Llaimos got Pyr’s attention. “Pyr, will you return to our craft and be ready to lower the shield long enough for Xan and Xezir to pass. It is almost the designated time.”

“Yes, Great One” Pyr bowed as he agreed to obey. He knew he had no part in the fighting to come. He took out the transmitter Llaimos had taught him to use and went back to the Tymorean ship.

Tymos turned to collect his weapons, which were beside the monitoring console – ready for use. Kryslie moved quickly and stopped him reaching them. She gave him a deliberate head to toe scrutiny.

She glanced at Llaimos before speaking, “There is something you need to do before we take on those invaders. Can you think what that may be?”

For a moment, there was a blank look on Tymos’s face. He tried to read his sister’s mind and found it shielded. He did know she was teasing him.

Llaimos enlightened him, “I have some spare formal robes on my ship. We will fare much better if we look the part.”

Tymos grinned wryly and glanced at his travel stained clothes. “And I suppose you think we should bathe and all that too?” was his response.

“For the Ciriote? They are not worth that nicety,” Kryslie told him. “They won’t smell us over their own stench.”

With a laugh, Tymos capitulated. Both Kryslie and Llaimos were already in formal robes. “Okay, okay...I’ll dress the part of Supreme Adversary, but I think we should ditch the capes. They serve no function except decoration and could catch on things.”

Before he went to change, he asked Keleb, “Do you and Jonko know what to do?”

When Keleb nodded, Tymos transmitted to Llaimos’s ship to change.

Tymos, Kryslie and Llaimos were clad in close fitting silver and gold garments. Kryslie’s long skirt had been designed to enable her to fight in it if necessary. A physical fight was unlikely though, as the Ciriote preferred blasters and disintegrators. Even so, the three Tymoreans wore no weapons. They were going to talk to the Ciriote leaders and offer them a chance to leave peacefully. Weapons would be provocative.

For any other beings to approach the Ciriote unarmoured, and with out weapons, would be suicide. However, the Guardian’s Advocates needed neither. In each of them, the Tymorean

power was so strong that it hummed in their ears, pulsed through their veins – even the silvery fabric seemed to glow.

Together in the Ciriote ship, alone because Jonko, Keleb and Jordan had already transmitted into their waiting position, Tymos projected the image of the Ciriote main bridge to his siblings. He hadn't been there, but had obtained the picture from images pirated from the ship's computer records.

The three transmitted together, arriving unseen behind Ciriote intent on computer and monitoring tasks. By remaining still, their power cloaked them from visual observation. They observed the activity for a time before sending the command for Jonko and his companions to transmit to the lower levels and begin the search for Vila.

In this control area, most of the Ciriote attention was on five screens showing the approach of the escorted Warlords' aircraft.

One of the observers was a Ciriote wearing purple robes and armour. Tymos knew him to be superior to those that only wore black armour. None of the workers here wore the concealing brown robes, they had no need to. Most also had their helmets open showing their blue tinged faces.

As some of the workers moved around the area on incomprehensible errands, the three observers subtly deflected them around their position, even as they studied the alien features.

"I can see why they hide in their armour," Kryslie remarked mentally. "Those bony ridges and the taut skin cannot be mistaken for human or Tymorean." She had shared her brother's earlier view of a Ciriote face, but this was the first she had seen for herself.

"The Princes are not here," Llaimos told them. "They wear scarlet armour, and never show their faces. That purple one over there is an officer, or an aide to a Prince."

Knowing that Llaimos intended to challenge the Ciriote, Tymos and Kryslie turned so that between the three of them, they could observe all of the room.

Llaimos drew the attention of all thirty-five Ciriote, when his loud voice carried over the muted clicking speech. "We have come to speak to your Princes."

All speech, all motion, in the area ceased. The upright Ciriote spun around with weapons drawn. The officer spoke a loud clicking command and soldiers, those with black armour, ran directly at the intruders, and tried to grab hold of any of the three they could reach.

Only they couldn't even touch them – though they doggedly kept trying.

"Bring your Princes here," Llaimos commanded, ignoring the futile groping of black metal covered hands. The Ciriote could come no closer than three feet away, and now they found the urge to move back further, irresistible.

Clicked orders forced them to try again, but this time all that came too close crumpled to the ground. Then some of the more distant black clad Ciriote fired at the intruders. Tymos, Llaimos and Kryslie made no perceptible movement. Even when projectiles and beams seemed to be fired at their faces. The wall of force around them absorbed or deflected the weapons effects.

Now the purple clad Ciriote approached to face the intruders. He clicked more orders, and a second field of force suddenly shimmered in a circle around the intruders. This was a sickly orange in colour. The Ciriote officer stared at them a moment, and then turned his back on them. His clicking speech was translated into Tymorean speech, as he gloated at his easy capture of them.

Within the field, Tymos and Kryslie studied the effects of the forces. They had much more personal experience of such things than Llaimos.

"It won't hurt us," Tymos confirmed. Mentally, he told his sibs to join hands with him. They walked forward, through the field, and the only effect was a shower of sparks. Their own field of protection remained intact.

The Ciriote Officer spun around, and betrayed a moment of agitation, but then he controlled his fear and his anger. In his mind, if these intruders were able to kill him, they would have done so immediately.

Llaimos spoke again, this time in a passable imitation of the Ciriote clicking speech, even though the sounds were unsuited to human vocal chords. He commanded, "Summon your Princes."

This time, the Ciriote Officer ordered a subordinate to comply. He now knew these intruders were more than they seemed, and would know if he disobeyed.

Tension built in the room. All the Ciriote there knew that the Princes would resent the summons.

On the route to the prison where Vila lay, the group searching for Vila encountered many of the lesser ranked Ciriote. They were no match for the trained Tymorean warriors, Jonko and Keleb. Jordan noted that Jonko was the better of the two, but both were far superior to him in fighting with blade weapons. It was also obvious that the Tymoreans knew exactly where the Ciriote armour was vulnerable to their blades. Jonko and Keleb aimed for the body joints and totally ignored the blaster fire from the Ciriote. The beams just bounced off their armour and often reflected back with its power somehow increased, killing or disabling the Ciriote. They left no Ciriote in any condition to report to their superiors or to strike them from behind.

Finally, they stepped over the bodies of the last defenders to the door behind which Vila lay. On this door, Jordan used his Ciriote made blaster and destroyed, or more correctly, vaporized the metal door.

Through the hole thus made, they could see one of the Ciri Princes leaning over a table. Jordan moved forward knowing Vila be on that table. Then, unexpectedly another figure came into view. With an angry oath, Jordan sprang forward and knocked Kek away from the table. The Ciri Prince calmly aimed his weapon at Jordan, but Jonko was already firing his weapon with incredible accuracy. The Ciri Prince's weapon was blasted from its hand and landed as a fused lump of alloy on the floor but the creature was unharmed. Jonko continued to watch every move of the Ciri Prince while Keleb went to check Vila's condition. Kek had been only shortly off balance and he had sprung to a fighting crouch faster than Jordan thought possible and then sprung at him. Kek was unarmoured and Jordan was in the ill fitting and unfamiliar Ciriote armour putting him at a disadvantage but he fought hand to hand with the changeling Kek; holding his own, but finding it impossible to overcome the traitor.

The Ciriote always seemed to be armoured, even within their base. Jonko pondered this as he watched the Ciriote, still aware with part of his mind of Jordan's fight. The Princes were the most powerful of the Ciriote and obeyed by all the lesser Ciriote. They must have talents of a kind for this one was too calm, and this was giving Jonko a warning.

"Keleb, finish that creature" Jonko murmured softly.

His friend drew a knife and advanced on Kek, who saw him, approach.

"Another changeling, even two won't finish me!"

That Kek was himself a mixture of two races was clear in his manic expression. His features were humanoid but his eyes had the hooded look of the Ciriote.

"Changeling I certainly am," Keleb agreed amicably. "At least I am not such an abominable mixture as you; half human, half something else!"

Anger emanated from Kek in palpable waves. He grabbed Jordan and threw him aside as if he had simply been playing with him. Jordan was momentarily winded and could only watch as he sprang at Keleb who was ready for him. Keleb danced lightly away and kept moving - looking for an opportunity to attack. Kek was abnormally strong and a seasoned warrior and could hold his own even against an armed opponent. Kek totally ignored Jordan as he concentrated on Keleb. Jordan drew his force weapon, when he was able to move again, and fired it at Kek. The blast had no effect and didn't even cause Kek to lose concentration for a second. Jordan realized then, that he was wearing a personal force screen, but the Tymorean blades would still be dangerous.

Keleb had lulled Kek into a pattern of movement and he suddenly lunged with greater speed. The blade pierced the force screen, which was really only proof against force weapons. Kek screamed in agony and continued to writhe as Keleb let his power flow along the force saturated blade like an electric current. Kek stopped moving and Keleb withdrew his blade. He sensed that Kek was not dead, only unconscious.

“Jordan, take Vila and return to Pyr!” Jonko instructed.

All through the fight the Ciri Prince had watched impassively, even when Jordan carrying Vila, disappeared from sight.

“You will come with us!” Jonko spoke carefully.

The Ciri Prince did not answer. Jonko repeated his instruction. This time the Ciri Prince began to approach them but made no threatening move. Neither Jonko nor Keleb were prepared for the type of attack that came.

Into their minds came the memory of agony, so sudden, so intense that they did not have time to build a defence against it. Keleb succumbed first, made more susceptible by his empathy. It seemed to him that he was receiving the pain of a thousand tortured victims at once. His weapons fell from his hands and he dropped to the floor curled up as tightly as his armour would permit.

Jonko fought it, realizing that it was an unexpected form of attack. His defences had always been physical and he stumbled towards the Ciri Prince, intending to fight with his weapons or hand to hand.

He had his sword out and was having to draw on more and more power to overcome the attack that was slowing his movements. He wasn't aware when the Ciri Prince moved forward and took his other weapons to examine carefully. Jonko felt the concussion of power when the Ciri Prince tried to take his sword. The creature certainly felt the jolt even through his armour and force screen. It would have killed a lesser Ciri. With the touch of the Ciri on the sword, some of Jonko's power dissipated and the agony in his mind returned. He fought to stay upright as the Ciri Prince walked across the cell like room to a table on the far side that contained a control board. On one screen was the summons to the control room; he glanced at the message and moved a switch. The gravity in the room suddenly became three times Tymorean normal and Jonko collapsed to the floor, conscious but incapacitated. The Ciri Prince walked from the room as if the gravity hadn't changed.

The Ciri Prince didn't actually smile, but indulged in the equivalent rush of satisfaction at the ease with which he had overcome the intruders. These vaunted Tymoreans were powerful, worthy victims for entertaining tortures, but no match for Ciri Princes.

In the main control room, three Ciri Princes stared malevolently at the intruders and waited for the fourth to arrive. Llamos confirmed when Jordan and Vila reached his ship. Kryslie knew where the fourth Ciri Prince had been and knew that Jonko and Keleb were still there. She spared a moment to check their condition. From their minds, Kryslie knew how they had been overcome and warned her brothers.

When the fourth Ciri Prince walked into the control room, they were prepared for the combined mental attack.

Llamos knew the theory of shielding his mind, but he'd had neither the need nor the time to practice. He had not had the intense training That President Reslic had given his siblings. In the initial moments, Tymos and Kryslie had shielded his mind, giving him time to erect mental barriers, but none of his struggle was betrayed to the observers.

“Save your energy,” Llamos advised the Ciri Princes, in a voice that was calm and unruffled. No one could have guessed that mere moments before he had needed all his innate stubbornness to block his mind. “You cannot affect us that way. We came to talk -to ask you why you came to this world.”

The tense posture of the Ciri Princes relaxed subtly – as if they felt they had won some victory.

“Talk is the weapon of cowards and weaklings,” one Prince taunted.

Another demanded, “Where have you hidden your treasures?”

“What treasure do you seek?” Tymos asked casually. “Gold? Jewels? Precious metals?”

“For a start!” the same Prince agreed sharply.

“Scattered all over the world,” Tymos said truthfully. “Our people share the world’s wealth, no one place holds it all. You are welcome to go and find it – no one will stop you.”

“Where are all the people?” a second Prince asked.

“The common people are in the cities,” Kryslie answered truthfully. “Safe!”

“You lie! The cities are all deserted, or dead. There are no signs of life in any of them,” the third of the Princes claimed. “The weaklings from Aerdna told us how they had breached your cities and how they were placing traps in each to kill the people.”

“Then why have you not looted all the cities?” Tymos asked mildly. “Three Tymoreans, aided only by those weak Aeronites, defeated the garrisons you sent to some of those cities.”

It was a contentious point, judging by the nervous moments that rustled the scarlet robes over the armour. However, the Princes were not going to admit to that point. Instead, the fourth Prince, that last to arrive, claimed, “Our scouting groups have reported the weaknesses of each city. We will kill any Tymoreans or Aeronites that we find in them.”

Kryslie moved her arm in a sweeping arc across the range of her vision. “What none of you here realise, is that every one of our cities is sealed. If you think our defences were formidable before, now they are impenetrable. You are welcome to waste time and resources trying - we don’t need to go and stop you.”

The attention of the Ciri Princes concentrated on her. She was obviously a female, and guessed that they thought she would be the weakest of the three intruders. The onset of their combined mental attack was sudden, but Kryslie was prepared for it. It was never strong enough to threaten her mental shields. She saw from the glitter in their eyes and the rigid posture, that they were aware they had failed.

Llamos distracted them by saying, “You will find no Tymoreans to torture, and the Aeronites, except for a few formidable specimens, have retreated into space and are safe on the far side of the planetary barrier.”

“What planetary barrier?” the three Princes demanded. This was news to them and the fourth strode over to the nearest console and clicked orders.

Confirmation of such a protective shield around the planet angered the Prince; made him realise that the Tymoreans had tricked and outmanoeuvred him. “Remove it!” He translated the clicks into Tymorean.

“Why?” Tymos asked innocently. “If you are as powerful as you think you are – the barriers around the cities and the planet will be no problem for you. Besides, the shields were the work of our Elders. We are merely children.”

“Where are your cowardly Elders?” The Ciri Prince came to stare at him from three feet away. He had discovered that he could not come any closer.

Tymos shook his head as if disappointed in their intelligence. “Surely you don’t expect us to tell you that! But, before you can truly claim victory over us, you will have to figure it out, or expect a counter attack at any time, out of no where.”

Kryslie added her own provocative remarks, ensuring that the attention of all four Princes focussed on her and her twin. Meanwhile, Llamos used the moment to take over the mind of one of the nearby low rank Ciriots, and caused it to perform a series of tasks.

First, the creature released the ultra-grav field pinning Jonko and Keleb in place. Then it brought up on the screen and stared at – the complete security protocols of the co-joined ship. Llamos allowed his siblings to see the details through his mind. Then Kryslie sent a mental

command to Jonko and Keleb to join Jordan, Vila and Pyr in Llaimos's ship and take it to Dira. They were to defend the Temple.

None of the monitoring screens showed the departure of the Tymorean ship. It was cloaked by a Tymorean devised cloaking field, which was unlike the fields used by the Aeronites, and completely unknown to the Ciriots. Then, while his siblings kept the Prince's attention, he continued giving his pawn orders.

"Where are your Elders?" the Ciri Prince demanded again, brushing off the idea that the Tymoreans might suddenly attack them. "Our soon to be guests went to your Temple to talk to them and found no one there."

Silently, Kryslie told Tymos, "That one! That's the mind that controlled Zacary. He may have done the same to Vila – I'll warn Jonko."

Tymos nodded, very slightly and taunted, "Didn't your little toy, Zacary, tell you? Our leaders are in the Temple of Dira. Only, they are on an alternate plane – one that is out of phase with the real world...you might say...they are protected from you, from your weapons in a way that you power hungry, torturing freaks will never understand."

Kryslie continued, "You may have turned this plane of reality into a wasteland, but our people – all of them – have eluded you. The power in the aura of the planet protects them. They will return when the land is purged of your kind and all your detritus."

"Then we will have you and your puny friends for our amusement," the Prince spat a glob of bluish saliva at them, but it met the unseen barrier and vanished. He got no reaction from the silver clad trio – not even when he let them hear the command to bring the prisoners up from the ultra-grav trap.

At the same time as the Ciri Prince learnt of the prisoners' escape, Tymos remarked, "You haven't got us either."

The Prince spun around to his subordinates and demanded to know how the prisoners had got free. Anger directed at the lesser Ciriots who had been guarding the cell was futile as the security monitors showed a trail of dead Ciriots leading to and from the detention area. A remote search of the base was started and a broadcast was initiated to all Ciriots ships to look out for a non-Ciriots craft. Not one of the Ciriots monitoring the area immediately around the base saw a ship of any kind depart.

None of the Ciriots air fighters replied, but sensor scans showed them flying directly towards the base.

"We still have five Aeronite guests," the Ciri Prince hissed. "They obey us, and they know everything about your kind."

"You only have controllers in three of them," Kryslie surprised him by saying. "And any knowledge they have is a millennium or two out of date. Besides, they now know that you have used them and betrayed them. Still, they chose to spurn our protection. Do what you will with them."

The nearest Ciri Prince stalked back to talk to his peers, first with volatile clicks, and then scarcely controlled arm gestures."

"We have them frustrated," Kryslie remarked mentally to her sibs. "They must be bursting to kill us just to save face."

"You know they will hot foot it to the Temple to try to find out about that 'other plane' you mentioned," Llaimos added the warning. "I am sure the idea of alternate planes to loot and plunder will be irresistible."

"We will know where to find them then," was Kryslie's counter. "And they will be where the Guardians can judge them. Can you make those packs of ships escorting the Warlords land immediately? If they leave at once those Warlords might just make the rendezvous."

Llaimos drew a slim hand held device from the pocket of his silver and gold jump suit, programmed parameters into a prepared program and transmitted it. He used the Ciriots communications technology to pick up and relay the signal so the Ciriots pilots would believe it came from their superiors.

As soon as the Princes realised that the Warlords were getting away, they ordered the Ciriots pilots just landing nearby to re-launch and shoot them down. None of the pilots acknowledged the order. Nor did the pilots at the base when the scramble command was given.

The Ciri Prince that had spoken first, and been silent thereafter, gave an order to the nearest underling to find out the reason. A scan of the base, shown on the monitors, showed that all of the Ciriots not in the control room were moving around in a berserk frenzy.

Orders went to more distant pilots, to intercept the Warlords

The lesser Ciriots nearest was pushed aside and the Ciri Prince took over the monitor screen. He adjusted the settings and let out a high-pitched shriek of pure rage. He discovered the reason for the apparent mutiny elsewhere in the base.

The main cause was obvious; rodents in plague proportions were swarming everywhere. They were nipping heels, climbing capes and biting through the weaker joints in the armour. The Ciriots were running, trying desperately to shake the rodents loose. He moved the monitors to see where else the rodents were and he saw that swarms of biting insects had entered the base and other lesser Ciriots were running out into the chaos outside, forgetting that even they could not survive the destruction they had caused outside for very long with out full armour.

The chaos around the base intensified as random ships parked around the base exploded. Tymos had not been idle during his watching period. The explosive devices had been set off by comm. signals between ships and the base.

Tymos murmured to Llaimos, "Some of the Ciriots pilots are staying on their ships – can you make them fly to the third continent and land? And then send orders to all the Ciriots ships still on the main continent to land."

With a faint smile, Llaimos manipulated the touch controls on the palm-sized computer. To Tymos he said, "You were busy while you watched this place. What else did you do?"

"I placed explosives all around the hull. Limpet mines that will blast inwards and liberate palm sized canisters of Burnfire. I can't set them off yet. We should wait until after the Ciriots become set on their answer."

The anger of the Princes was unleashed – weapons of all kinds were activated in the control room. Beams from force weapons set high in the walls reflected off the Tymorean protective screen and bounced around the room until they were finally absorbed. Projectiles ricocheted off the walls and when some narrowly missed the Ciri Princes, they calmly sealed their armour. The gas that seeped from the chamber walls only served to eliminate the lesser Ciriots that survived the backlash of other weapons.

"If you are prepared to cease hostilities, we will permit you to depart this world!" Llaimos spoke when it was obvious to the five Princes that their weapons were ineffective.

"We don't want the mercy of cowards," one spoke as all four stalked from the room.

"I guess we know their answer," Kryslie said aloud. She spared only a moment of pity for Ciriots killed by the Princes.

The Tymoreans did not follow the Princes. Instead, they dropped their protective screen and went to three of the consoles. After carefully moving the dead Ciriots from the seats, they each reviewed sections of the Ciriots data banks. Tymos knew all they needed to access the entire system and sent the knowledge to his siblings. Their retentive ability had increased with the power building in them. Llaimos sent out another sequence of instructions to the navigation computers of the Ciriots craft. These would be relayed from ship to ship and eventually spread to them all. This last virus program would lie dormant until Llaimos activated it. Kryslie then

borrowed the palm computer, connected it to the Ciriote computers, and started downloading from the memory banks.

Tymos sought the minds of the rodents, who were still acting on suggestions given to them by Keleb. He sent them back into the deep holes that had protected them. The swarming insects had already departed. These creatures, normally treated as pests were none-the-less loyal to the aura of Tymorea and deserved to survive.

Llaimos watched the monitor screens as the Ciriote Princes departed in their ships. They were heading directly for Dira, but they would still have to contend with the hurricane winds and clouds of noxious and radioactive gases, hallucinogens and dust that they had caused to occur. It was appropriate that they should have to deal with them and maybe die because of them. They would die anyway, as they had refused their chance for life.

While they waited in the Ciriote base for the last of the aliens to die, Tymos, Kryslie and Llaimos were all aware of the power rising within them. Only when the base was devoid of life and the downloading of data was complete, did they walk out into the hurricane force winds. The base shields remained up, but they transmitted through them, and continued to the ship where Tymos had hidden before.

The poisonous air did not affect them, the winds blew around them, and the darkness from the particle-laden air did not prevent them seeing.

Behind them, the Ciriote base exploded, the force being contained within the shields until the generators went out. Then the dust-laden sky lit up as the liberated Burnfire found new fuel. Tymos, Kryslie and Llaimos trotted the last short distance to the ship. Outside, Burnfire was slowly expanding from the semi molten metal structure that had been the Ciriote base.

Tymos prepared the ship for flight as the fire drew closer. "How many of these ships have you sabotaged?" he asked Llaimos. After consulting his palm device, Llaimos gave the answer as, "About fifty."

"That should be enough," Tymos decided. "They should survive the burning from the base explosion, and we can set them off later."

In their minds was the start of a plan for purifying the planet's surface, but they did not know if they had the power needed. Yes, they knew they should be able to draw on the power of all the Royal Tymoreans, but the means was not clear – they seemed to be restrained by their physical bodies.

The Ciriote ship rose above the worst of the wild weather, but as Tymos flew it from the second continent, he still had to contend with turbulence. As they flew, the next stage of their plan began to form. They would check each of the small islands in the archipelago between the second and third continent, leaving on each a small canister of Burnfire, with a comm. signal trigger. Then, they sought out the landing coordinates of the Ciriote craft Llaimos had sent to the third continent. They overflew the ships and their idling pilots, and sent new. The ships were taken up new positions that would allow coverage of the whole continent – with the duty of looking out for Tymorean or Aeronite craft – to prevent any surprise attacks. Then Tymos landed his usurped craft at the centre of the continent, and set it to self-destruct when a signal was received on a certain frequency.

Outside, on foot again, they transmitted to the main continent – their power seeming to be unlimited, so the vast distance was no obstacle. They were feeling the pull back to the Temple of Dira, where the remaining members of three races were assembling.

The Temple was the centre of their belief in the Guardians of Peace and the portal of Dirakee where all their Royal relatives had sought refuge. In their minds was the conviction that

if the Temple were to fall, the world would be destroyed and the Royal Tymoreans could not return.

Chapter 43 - Intruders in the Temple

Jordan fought the hurricane strength winds that tossed the Tymorean craft and threatened to dash it into the ground. He swore fiercely as time after time, the controls tried to jerk from his grasp.

Without a word, Jonko came and sat in the co-pilot's seat. Even their combined strength was barely enough, and so Jonko called on more power and the craft steadied.

Keleb noticed Jordan glancing at Jonko with an expression akin to amazement. He unstrapped from his seat and walked forward, keeping one hand on a solid support as he moved.

"Pyr sits with Vila. She seems to be coming closer to consciousness," he offered as a positive thought.

"Will she be any better off in your Temple," Jordan asked, returning his attention to the dust filled air visible through the front viewscreen.

"We could ask the Guardians to help her," Keleb proposed.

"Why would they help us?" Jordan sounded depressed. "I may have been born Tymorean, but I have been an Aeronite for so long. I can feel the Royal power buzzing in me – I just can't use it. Why do you commoners have it and use it so easily?"

He didn't admit to regretting his ignorance of his heritage, and his deepening resentment towards those who had taken him from his true family, or even his craving to master the power he felt.

Keleb placed a gentle hand on Jordan's shoulder. He grounded some of the building energy. "Our power is sufficient. Without training, yours will be erratic. I have grounded some of the excess – perhaps you will feel better able to handle what is left."

He should have been angry, but his resentment eased. "Why do you commoners have power – are you Royal bastards or something?" Jordan wanted to understand. "Kellex called you commoners and Halflings."

"Sounds like him," Keleb agreed. "We have Tymorean antecedents a generation or two back, and normally, we would not have this power. As to why we do...no one knows. We can only suppose that we were created to support Tymos and Kryslie."

"They are very young," Jordan commented. "Kellex calls them illegitimate? Are they?"

"All I know is that they are truly the children of His Majesty," Keleb said. "And they grew up on Earth."

Jordan fell silent and went back to concentrate on flying the ship. He was quiet until they were approaching the City of Dira, seen as a mauve coloured glow, and the glow split into a large and a smaller glowing area.

"Will we be able to land this through the shield around the Temple, or must we land and transmit in. Vila tried to fly in and couldn't."

"The Great Ones sent us here," Jonko said with confidence. "If it is the Guardians' wish, we will land near the Temple – under the shield. It is after all, the legendary fortress of our people."

A quiet voice behind them asked, "Will our father be here?"

"Vila!" Jordan glanced around, but still kept his hands on the flight controls. "Are you alright?"

She was very pale, almost bluish in colour. "I...think so."

Keleb edged aside so Vila could see out the viewscreen. Something about her was making him feel edgy. It was like his reaction to Zacary. Still, he spoke gently to her, knowing that the torture Kellex had submitted him to was only a fraction of what the Ciriote had probably done to her.

“You will not see His Majesty. He has already entered Dirakee with all the other Royals. Only the Great Ones, Tymos, Kryslie and Llaimos, can open the portal. Jonko, Pyr and I could not enter.”

“The Portal is in the Temple,” Vila asked, as if just realising the fact.

Keleb nodded, and she went on, “So that is why I saw no one when I was there. When I was in the grounds, I expected the area to be crowded with Tymoreans. Instead, the Ciriote caught me.”

“They were within the shield?” Keleb asked sharply – suddenly alarmed.

“When I went there first, the shield was further out. That time, I transmitted into the protected area but could not enter the Temple. The second time, the inner barrier was about one hundred feet from the Temple itself, and I could not get through it. The upper shields were still over all of the garden. The Warlords had room to park their command ships close to the building. We had only dug under that shield, but not gone to get the Warlords out, when the Ciriote attacked. They must have flown in low like we did.”

Jonko took full control of the aircraft and slowed its speed. If they were going to crash into the Temple shields, or bounce off them, it would be better if they were travelling slowly.

He needn't have worried. He flew close to the ground, under the upper shield and circled the shimmering inner barrier. He landed at the rear of the Temple, where he knew there was an area of flat ground, and kept the cloaking field active.

His exclamation of dismay drew the attention of Keleb. They had both seen the magnificently landscaped gardens around the Temple during their visit, but what they saw now were flattened, blackened trees and the gritty ash that swirled into the air after they flew over it. Neither voiced their apprehension as they tuned monitors and sensors to study the Temple.

The building perched on the peak of a low hill; the gardens at the front had been built up to be level. To walk up to the Temple from Dira, one had to climb a steep stairway to reach the garden and another to reach the Temple entrance. Pyr came to join his older companions, and he looked out at the scene and his face paled.

“What do we do now?” he asked, unable to look away from the desolation. “Do we go into the Temple?”

“Can we?” Keleb asked, glancing at Jonko. He thought the two of them should be able to, but he wasn't sure about the others.

“We can stay in here,” Jonko suggested. “The monitors are not picking up any life forms. If they come and look like they are trying to get into the Temple, we will have to go out.”

“Then we should get Vila some protection,” Keleb suggested.

“There is some more Ciriote armour in the storage cubicle,” Pyr announced. “I'll get it.”

Time passed, and they all took time to eat and rest. However, they didn't have time to get bored. An alarm chimed and Jonko went to see the cause. He fiddled with the scanners.

“What in the Guardians name are they doing?” he exclaimed.

“What?” Keleb asked, rising from the couch he occupied.

“There are five ships coming here. Aeronite command ships - are they insane? We gave them the chance to escape; I thought they would have headed up to the coordinates to get through the planetary shield.”

“Well, it is probably too late for that, unless Pyr knows how to open the shield again to let them out,” Keleb glanced at the boy.

“I did it for Xezir and Xan,” Pyr admitted. “Llaimos only said it could open once.”

“I don't fancy encountering Kellex,” Jordan admitted. “Particularly if he knows I used his name to make the baselifts lift off.”

“Nor do I,” Vila said with a visible shiver. “I failed to get in there to help him get out.”

“You can stay here,” Jonko offered. “I doubt that the Warlords or the Ciriote will be allowed in.”

“What if they do?” Keleb murmured to Jonko. “No one should have got through the outer shields, but we did and so did Vila and the Ciriote that captured her. I think that the only shields remaining are the ones keeping the atmosphere breathable.”

Jonko shrugged very slightly. “If they go in, we do.”

“I will too,” Pyr insisted, defiantly.

Jordan started to protest, but stopped himself.

“You would be advised to attack by stealth,” Jonko said calmly, tacitly agreeing with his determination. “Your opponents will all be bigger and more experienced.”

Pyr nodded, accepting the advice. He turned his attention to the monitor screens, to hide the fear he felt. He used to manipulating of the parameters to settle his nerves. He managed to find a way to track the Warlords and a sixth ship that had to be Ciriote.

Five distinct roars of a jet engine flew over the cloaked Tymorean ship, causing it to shake. The scanners showed them fly past the Temple, before veering around to come in to land on the far side of the Temple. Then five small moving dots, showed the Warlords walking up the stairs to the ornate front entrance.

“Of course they would,” Keleb said ironically. “Those arrogant sorts would never think of sneaking in at the servant’s entrance.”

Jonko gave him a quick grin. “Maybe that is why I landed back here, out of the way? Though if I were them I wouldn’t have come here at all.”

Jordan spoke up, “Kellex refused to believe the Ciriote were here. He simply denied all the evidence. He won’t give up on trying to find where the Governors went, so he can try to kill them. He wants to be in supreme control here, I think.”

“Hey, the signal on that Ciriote ship has vanished,” Keleb exclaimed. “It was almost here, and it just vanished.”

“Probably cloaked,” Jonko suggested. “They either came after us, or the Warlords. They probably want an advantage. They are cowards, fleeing their base. Tymos meant to destroy it, and these rats escaped.”

“They won’t have seen us leave. We were cloaked,” Pyr stated positively. “They won’t know we are here.”

“If we leave the ship, they will know,” Jonko warned. “I will have to leave it unshielded so we can get back to it quickly if we need to.”

No one wanted to point out that running back to the ship was retreating.

“We could look for atmospheric disturbances from their landing rotors,” Pyr suggested. “Or I could try sending a virus program Llaimos and I wrote, to make them uncloak.”

“Send it,” Jonko directed. “I want to know where they are. And while I don’t like the Warlords, it is only fair that they can see their opponents.”

Pyr kept watching the sensor screen, following the five bright dots as they walked around the outside of the Temple. They seemed to be stopping at each door or window and trying to get in by using their various weapons on the obstruction.

Vila looked at the direct view screen and magnified the picture. “There is Kellex – he is walking along that covered passageway this side of the south chamber. I couldn’t even get that close.”

Jordan came to look too. “Persistent,” he muttered.

The figure of Kellex finished trying all the rear windows on the south side, and walked behind the Altar room to try those on the north side. He kept on going around to the front.

After a while Pyr noted, “One of the other Warlords has stopped. At the rear entrance near the north chamber. He must have brought the shield down for the other four dots are inside now. They got in the front door.”

Jonko stood up and adjusted his armour. “We’re going in. Who is coming?” He was looking at Jordan and Vila and they both nodded resolutely. “Full armour. Take spare weapons and be careful. The Ciriots are around. We can see their ship, but not the creatures themselves.”

Keleb, the last to leave, sealed the ship after him.

It was eerily quiet in the blackened gardens. Maybe it was because everything there was dead, or maybe it was because there were three mutually antagonistic groups in the area, each intent on defeating the others.

Jonko knew that whatever he said over the suit comm. could be heard by the others, but he wanted to speak just to Keleb. He thought of using Earth English, and needed a moment to recall it.

“Kel?”

“Yes.”

“We can’t let them into the Altar room, Warlords or Ciriots,” Jonko found his native language coming back to him. “I don’t know why, only that we have to keep them out.”

Keleb instinctively answered in the same language. “I have had that feeling too. And the idea that if the Altar room is destroyed, no one will be able to come back. But there is only two of us.”

“Five if we count Pyr and his siblings,” Jonko countered.

“Pyr is only a child. The other two have not been trained as we have and I don’t completely trust Vila. She might intend to stand with us, but if she has become like Zacary, the Ciriots could make her betray us.”

Jonko was quiet for a moment. “We will have to watch her. You are right to be fearful. I did not want to think she was controlled – she is so like Kryslie.”

They were nearing the entrance where one of the Warlords had stopped. Jonko moved ahead to scout and spoke a quiet warning into the suit comm.

“He’s dead,” Jonko reported, gesturing the others forward. “Be careful.”

His companions climbed carefully down the sloped section of garden to get to the door. Jonko had already entered the side passage along the north chamber and checked it for lurking Warlords. Jordan looked at the dead Warlord, whose legs were the only part in sight. He would have pulled the body out to check it for life, but the pool of blood around the head was evidence that they could not help him.

“I think it is Wazim, he always tended to wear that shade of greyish blue.

“Let’s keep moving,” Jordan directed. “That one was killed by the Ciriots.”

“How do you know?” Vila asked in a whisper.

Keleb answered. “The sensors in our suits can pick up the glow trail they leave wherever they have been. It is all over you, too.”

“Kel,” Jonko broke in. “The shields are down. All of them. This place is wide open.” For the benefit of the others, he went on to explain, “There are two levels inside – three if you count the Altar room. Four Warlords went in the front entrance on the lower level. They may still be down there or they might have come up the front staircase and be on the upper level where we will be going in. Both levels have small side chambers opening up from passages that run behind the row of arched openings. On this level, there is a bigger chamber off each side with smaller rooms off the rear wall and a large area on the front side. As you go along the upper passageway, you can look down over the large meeting area on the lower floor. It is open between the arch supports.”

“So we need to check every side room then,” Jordan spoke aloud to request confirmation. “What if we meet the Warlords or Ciriots?”

Jonko and Keleb exchanged looks, but Jonko answered. “Our absolute priority is to protect the sanctity of the Altar room. If we encounter Ciriots, we will kill them. The Warlords have

refused all offers of peace, but we will disable and secure them if we can, or kill them if we must.”

Once inside, Jonko directed Jordan through the Altar room to the south side, while Keleb led Vila and Pyr along the north passage. He then activated the stealth function of his suit, and stood where he could look down on the meeting room and see some the opposite side balcony. If he were visible, his position at the waist high barrier would have been suicide. However, from there he could see faint traces of Ciriots trails down in the meeting area. He reported this sighting to the others over the suit comm.

Keleb had learnt to sense the Ciriots whilst travelling with Kryslie. He did not need to be told they were around. However, he could not identify their exact locations, and so he maintained high alertness as he helped Vila scout the passage. Although he was uneasy around her, she was an excellent scout. Pyr was learning to move stealthily, and he had a weapon out, ready to use.

The child was determined to help defend the Temple that was sacred to his kin. Keleb hoped that the boy would not need to kill.

They soon developed a routine – two searched each room, whilst the third watched from the doorway. Keleb kept alert for Ciriots traces, but found none on this upper level. His empathic senses were warning him of a deadly evil but he had seen neither Warlord nor Ciriots.

In the large side chamber, they continued to move carefully. Here Keleb forced open a window to look out along the outside walkway. Across from the windows, he could see the black desolation through the arched openings. When he pulled his head back in, he reclosed the window. They checked each of the smaller rooms, finding kitchens and pantries. In a third they found another body– freshly dead from a slashed throat.

“Axec,” Vila murmured.

When they emerged once again onto the balcony passage, they crouched to stay hidden by the waist high parapet. Vila took over the lead position.

From behind them, Pyr made a gagging sound. Keleb turned, sympathetic, but they had to keep moving.

“Take deep slow breaths,” he advised the boy. Then he added, “Don’t think of it. That man is beyond help and we need to stay alert.”

He didn’t add, “Or we might meet the same fate.”

Pyr controlled his stomach, and they moved on. They neared the front of the Temple, another arched entrance to a small room. This one had the privacy curtain shredded. Pyr waited without as Vila and Keleb went in. It took them longer, for this chamber was bigger than the ones they had scouted so far.

“This is where one of the Governors sleep when they are here,” Keleb explained. He didn’t explain that it was the room his guardian used, or that he had recognised subtle details from the furnishings and colour scheme. Oddly, the room did not look disturbed.

The next chamber was equally large and Keleb knew this one was the room the Tymorean President used. This too was still neat and tidy. Not that it was more than sparsely furnished.

Beyond that was a facilities room, also untouched. Then they came to the top of the staircase, and only one more room lay between them and the front of the building.

“The Ciriots have been in there,” Keleb warned Vila and Pyr. Through the suit comm he heard Jonko ask, “Where are you?”

“The comm room, south side front,” Keleb reported. He had continued to enter the room and now he added, “The equipment is totally smashed and the Ciriots glow is everywhere. They are not still here, even cloaked. Otherwise they would have attacked us.”

Before going down the stairs, Keleb followed the upper balcony around to the front. There was a huge archway here, opening to the outside. Normally it would let light through to the huge

stained glass mural window. Now, instead, the light was dull due to the particulates in the air outside.

Keleb's attention was on the glass picture, which depicted the visitation of the Guardians of Peace. He was distracted by Pyr's exclamation of horror. On the tiled floor was another body, or rather part of one. The left side of the body from shoulder down had been disintegrated – blood and gore spilled from what remained. This time, Pyr turned away, opened his helmet and was quietly sick.

Vila stared at the bloody tiles. Whoever had killed Warlord Zorrec had done so in the centre of a circular design. She recognised it as being like those in the Tymorean beam-in chambers, only there was no generator here.

Hearing Keleb reassuring Pyr, recalled Vila to their current situation. "You should have stayed on the ship, Pyr. This is no place for you."

Before Pyr could protest, Keleb suggested, "Just up ahead is the attendants' room. Jordan should have checked it by now. You can hide in there, and we won't think less of you."

"Please," he pleaded softly. "But I will come if you need me."

Keleb gripped his arm gently. "I know."

Vila spoke softly into the suit comm, "Jordan? Can you hear us?"

She heard no answer and glanced at Keleb with concern.

"He is as good at skulking as you are," Keleb reminded her. "And a good fighter."

Nodding agreement, Vila followed Keleb to the other front corner room.

The room used by the Governors' personal attendants was sparsely furnished. Three rough beds, currently stripped to the mattress, were in a neat row, with a chair beside each. A table was pushed into one corner, and along one wall was a long wardrobe, divided into three sections. Spare garments for the three Governors, hung from hangers or were folded into drawers.

"Hide in here, Pyr," Keleb suggested. "Stay behind the hanging clothes. I will move the beds closer. To stop the doors opening fully, but I will leave enough room for you to slip out."

Pyr hurried to hide himself. He felt safe in the dark once the door had shut. He didn't hear Keleb and Vila leave the room.

Once out of the attendants' room, Keleb and Vila moved slowly along the south side balcony. They heard noises from below, as if people were fighting – grunts and muffled curses. They edged to the balcony wall and slowly raised their heads to peek over.

Vila drew back quickly, recognising Kellex as one of the combatants. The other seemed like a shadow – just barely perceptible. A guilty conscience was telling Vila to go and help her erstwhile Guardian, but her mind told her Kellex would resent it if she did, and it would not make him less angry with her. The 'don't get involved' voice won.

Then she heard a sharp cry from behind. "Pyr," she exclaimed softly, and before Keleb could caution her, she was trotting back past the two curtained alcoves, to where they had told him to hide.

With a curse of his own, Keleb ran after her along the balcony passage. He was passing the first alcove when the attack came without warning.

A solid blow caught him on the back, and in that instant he realised that he was visible. The stealth function of his suit was not working. He fought for breath as he turned to face the unseen attacker, and by sheer instinct, blocked the next blow. While scrambling backwards, Keleb turned on more of the sensors in his suit, and began to see a glowing shape moving forward with a heavy metal bar poised to smash down on him. He pressed a section of his chest plate and the figure in front of him became fully visible. The low EM pulse had disrupted the other's stealth field generator as Keleb rolled out of the way of the blow.

Keleb's opponent was taller and wearing Ciriote style armour. He recognised the creature he had fought in the Ciriote base. The Ciri Prince had called it Kek. Without conscious thought, Keleb drew his own knife and parried the left-handed thrust that Kek made with his knife as he thrust the beam aside. He might not be Jonko's equal with weapons, but he excelled at defence and needed every bit of that skill now to prevent Kek from breaching the vulnerable places in the Tymorean armour. The other danger was that of being pitched over the waist high wall of the balcony, onto the stones below.

He observed that Kek was aiming for the places where Ciriote or Aeronite armour was weakest – and that unfamiliarity with Tymorean armour was saving Keleb from some nasty injuries. However, he had no illusions that the situation would last.

He scrambled to his feet and drew his sword and tried to keep Kek at a distance. The Ciriote creature seemed to ignore his sword, as if it wasn't a threat. Certainly he wasn't able to wield it effectively in the narrow space, but Keleb was desperate, and slashed at Kek's armour, drawing sparks from the metal. He recalled his lessons from Jonko and drew on his power to help him. He felt strength coming into him and when his sword again struck metal armour, Kek gave an involuntary screech.

Keleb sensed that the touch of his sword had jolted Kek, like he had struck with electricity. The creature intensified its attacks and forced Keleb backward along the balcony to where the south chamber opened up.

The larger area would give both opponents more room to move, and it was away from the balcony edge.

Kek cursed every time Keleb's sword touched his armour, even if it was a glancing blow. He began to force Keleb further into the room, as if wanting to corner him. Keleb sensed that he was being positioned for something and risked a glance around. He saw no obvious dangers and fought off another attack from Kek. In the corner of his eye he saw movement, but Kek gave him no chance to see what caused it. Then he heard a hum, growing in intensity and he ducked and twisted instinctively.

Something flew through the air, spinning so fast it was only a blur. It was the source of the loud humming and it had felt dangerous. He could hear it circling, but he dared not look for it. It was all he could do to stop Kek finding a way to kill him.

He heard the humming getting louder again, and ducked as before. This time it wasn't low enough. Something struck the headpiece of his armour, as Kek found the gap between the plates of his armour. His knife sliced through the flexible joint and set his side on fire. Keleb fell forward, his head seemed to have knives in it too.

He fought off the blackness of oblivion, but was unable to move. Kek was kneeling on his back, trying to yank off the headpiece of his armour. As the protective helmet was dragged free, Keleb heard Kek's triumphant laugh and another blow struck his head.

Vila did not realise that Keleb had stopped following her. She ran back into the small chamber where Pyr had hidden, and saw the beds were dragged away from the cupboard, and her little brother was unconscious on the floor. She opened his armour and felt for a pulse in his neck and to see if he was breathing. He was alive, and sheer relief made her momentarily weak. She glanced around to ask Keleb a question, and only then realised he was not with her.

Not sure of what else to do, Vila gently lifted Pyr and lay him back in the cupboard. With the door closed again, she hoped the attacker would forget about him.

A sense of urgency made her go to see where Keleb was, but as she began to move, her mind was invaded by an angry, evil presence. Her body quailed, recalling the treatment the Ciriote owner of the mind had given her. It was a presence she hoped she had escaped from, but now she knew that she never could. It owned her; it controlled her mind now, making her walk - not to help Keleb, but to go in search of her brother. Her inner mind quailed, and tried to rebel, but her body betrayed her and took her to betray her brother.

In the Altar room, Jonko used all the sensors in his armour at the highest sensitivity, to check for presences in the chamber. He was relieved to see no traces of Ciriote glow trails, heat sources or air disturbances. He was alone in the room and it seemed no one had come there yet.

Last time he had been in that room, he had sensed the power of the Guardians, seen his friends Tymos and Krysle and Llaimos, bathed in light from some source he had not seen. He could still sense the power in the room and as he moved around, he became sure that the source was the Altar. His movements made the flames of the two oil fed lamps flicker.

He was so sure that he had to defend that room, that he could not help but wonder why the Ciriote had not come directly to it. He thanked the Guardians for bringing him there in time, and set about studying the room in terms of defending it. The first thing he did was move the stone benches from near the rear wall to across the top of the stairs at an angle. It would help slow a rush up the stairs. He moved two more to the front of the Altar.

That was all he could do, so he turned his attention to listening for movement in the balconies near by and in the lower room.

He watched Jordan come out of the side chamber, and move further along the balcony. On the other side, he saw Vila scouting, and knew Keleb was near her. He and Pyr were cloaked, though Vila wasn't.

Some sense warned Jonko that Jordan had been on one of the Royal suites for a long time. He was becoming concerned when a figure emerged from that room and went into the next.

Keleb reported finding another dead Warlord at the front, spilling blood on the beam-in focus. Ciriote work, killed with a disintegrator. Mentally, Jonko counted – three dead Warlords. There were two more around somewhere, and the killers. He whole-heartedly agreed when Keleb suggested that Pyr should hide. The child did not belong in this fight.

He heard through his suit comm, and with his ears, Pyr's cut off shriek of terror. From Keleb's muffled oath, he knew Vila had run back to help him. His attention went back to the fight below between Kellex and the shadowy figure, until he heard Keleb's grunt of pain.

His next instinct was to go and help his friend, but just as he began to move a premonition of great intensity came on him. He knew – knew – that he must not leave the Altar room unprotected. The premonition waned, and he knew he had to trust Keleb could stay alive. He wasn't the best fighter with blade weapons, but he had been tutored by Krysle in defence.

Mentally, he cheered Keleb on, hearing only grunts and breathing through the suit comm. Then there was silence.

He heard a triumphant laugh over the suit comm., and was immediately overcome by guilt for not helping Keleb. Then the guilt turned to an intense lust for revenge. He barely restrained himself from racing out of the Altar Room to find the killing beast. A cold knife slice of logic overcame the hot fury. Tymos had said, that no one who fought to protect the Temple, could be harmed here. Jonko sent a silent prayer to the Guardians to look over Keleb, keep him alive and help him to heal.

Chapter 44 - The Temple Destroyed

Jonko saw the Ciriote moving along the south balcony towards the Altar Room, as well as a scraping sound. The sound stopped, the armoured form crept up the stairs and looked around. Jonko began to move forward to attack when the figure retreated and the scraping sound began again. A short time later, the figure returned dragging something that scraped and clattered on the stairs. In the small space between the stairs and the first bench, the armoured figure stopped to study the placement of the benches, and to examine the room in detail.

Standing still, Jonko watched the newcomer. The flames on the altar were steady and this lack of flickering seemed to reassure the other, as he bent down and picked up Keleb's armoured figure. Jonko watched as the figure walked around the stone bench, and was ready to block his way to the Altar, but the figure dropped his burden on the circular tiled mosaic, on the floor in front of the Altar. He stared down at it as blood from Keleb's bleeding head wound spread onto the design.

Nothing happened. Perhaps this Ciriote had expected something. It jerked around as if savagely angry, leapt easily over the stone bench and stalked down the stairs.

Jonko went immediately to his friend. He did not open his armour, but used the suit sensors to reassure him the Keleb was still alive. He looked around, assessing the safest place to put his friend. He saw the flames on the altar flickering and froze for an instant. Then he saw that some kind of breeze was ruffling Keleb's hair. A cold tremor raced down Jonko's spine, and at that moment, he also saw a flicker of light go from the Altar to the blood on the tiles, and then it arced up to Keleb, forming a mauve glow around him. Jonko stood immobile, feeling that the power in the room was stirring. He glanced at the floor, and the blood on the tiled design had gone.

The mauve glow faded, and Jonko found he could move and did so, deciding to put Keleb next to the side wall, out of the way of any future fight. His friend was looking better, and the head wound had stopped seeping blood. For extra protection, Jonko reactivated Keleb's cloaking field.

Jonko turned his attention back to listening for enemies. He glanced down at the meeting room where Kellex had been fighting. The figure in emerald green lay in a crumpled heap, blood soaking into his robes, turning them brown. His blood was defiling yet another of the tiled mosaics.

Many disjointed facts came to his mind – the Warlord dead on the Temple threshold, where his blood had seeped around the tiles that had a simple leaf and tree design. Decorative, rather than religiously significant. However, the shields preventing entry had failed.

Another Warlord dead in the north chamber and a third on the beam-in mosaic, and now Keleb on the Altar room mosaic and a fourth Warlord on the mosaic below. There were at least two unseen killers – probably more – intent on defiling the mosaics.

What did they expect blood to do? What was the significance of blood on the mosaics? He felt he was on the verge of an answer, but he could not grasp it. Instead, the knowledge that he had to protect the Altar returned to him and he went to stand in the centre of the mosaic there.

Knowing that the enemy were cloaked, he concentrated on using all his senses, particularly those honed by Kryslie when they had worked together on the harvests. He sensed the energies within the Temple. The aura was strong around the Altar, and in a bubble around Keleb. He let his mind sense further away. There was a bubble of strong aura in the nearest Royal suite on the north side.

Jonko felt the stirrings of alarm. He had seen Jordan come out of there... hadn't he? He recalled the memory. No. The armour had tricked him. In the poor light, he had not realised that

the Ciriote armour had not lost its enamelled outer surface. That was a real Ciriote he had seen come out...where was it now?

Another bubble of power two suites down...Pyr. Where was Vila?

Jonko sensed all around the upper level of the Temple, and then on the lower level. He had a sense of 'dead' in the antechamber between the stair cases – near the front entrance. The last of the Warlords. Nearby, a sense of someone – flickering between 'evil' and Tymorean.

"Vila?" he questioned softly, speaking over the suit com on the Tymorean frequency.

The answer didn't come immediately. "Yes. Where is Jordan? I can't find him."

He was about to tell her, but a sudden premonition made Jonko cautious.

"I have lost communication with him," he told her. It was the truth. Jordan had been silent since he had entered the first of the Royal suites. That should have alerted him to trouble.

"Where are you now?"

"Front entrance. Voltec is here...dead."

That agreed with what Jonko had sensed. "Be alert. I am sure of at least two Ciriote presences. One may be visible – one isn't."

Vila didn't reply. Jonko continued his mental scan of the lower level. His suit sensors showed the Ciriote trails – more of them than before. His own extra senses warned him of the evil down there. He steadied his mind and concentrated. Four evil presences waited near Kellex's body, one was near the front entrance, one was going down the north stairway.

A voice over the suit comm. startled him.

"Jon?"

"Kel?" Jonko turned to look where he had placed his friend. He heard a soft scuffle as if someone was standing up. "Can you fight?"

"Yes," Keleb hissed. "I don't have my weapons, but I don't need them. Kryslie taught me, remember? And I have a score to settle with Kek. He is the one that got me. He had a star blade. I think that is what hit me."

"I saw him bring you here. I think he expected your blood on the mural to do something. However, the rest of the Ciriote are cloaked."

"I used a low range EM pulse," Keleb said tersely. "I got tired of fighting shadows. Where are the others? Vila went to help Pyr."

Jonko quickly checked again and interpreted what he sensed. "Jordan is heading down to the meeting room. Vila must have told him she was there. There are five Ciriote down there. Pyr is coming around the balcony – this way."

"I will go and meet him – bring him back here," Keleb offered.

Keleb warned Jonko when he was returning, he and Pyr were both cloaked.

"Where are Jordan and Vila?" Pyr wanted to know. His voice was not loud, even over the suit comm. Jonko told him what he knew, and Pyr went to look down into the meeting area.

Jordan was down on the lower level, and he was cautiously approaching Kellex's body. He knew he was in dangerously open ground, and there were many alcoves from which he could be being watched. He didn't seem to hear Jonko's warning. His suit comm. may have been damaged.

Kek came from the side passage, and was on his victim so quickly that Jordan only had microseconds to react. The reflexes of one gifted with Tymorean power saved him. He spun around to defend himself and to try to kill the Ciriote spy.

Up in the altar room, Pyr asked, "Where is Vila? Why doesn't she go and help him?"

"Pyr, Vila might be being controlled by the Ciriote. She was their prisoner for a long while..."

"NO! Never! She would never betray Jordan, or me."

Scuffling sounds betrayed Pyr's dash around the stone bench to the stairs. Keleb cursed, as he recovered his balance after being shoved by Pyr.

"Pyr, I'll go," Keleb offered, but the boy probably didn't hear his unamplified voice.

Jonko flicked open his visor. "Go after him, Kel."

Jonko controlled his fears. He had doubts that Jordan would be able to defeat Kek, even with help. Pyr was a child without any real fighting experience, and Keleb was unarmed.

He felt more hope when he heard Keleb's voice on the suit comm. "I found my weapons and helmet. Kek is overconfident. And I think Pyr took a weapon from one of the dead Warlords."

He needed all the hope he could get, but Jordan was fighting, and being pushed to his limits. He showed flashes of Tymorean power, but none were sustained. Kek was scoring on Jordan more often than the reverse.

His sense of where the Ciriots were told him that the other five 'evil' presences were simply watching the fight. Two watched from within the side passage, hidden by one of the archway pillars. The other three were in the meeting area, invisible and keeping out of range of the fight – until an energy burst nearly struck Kek. Then those three began to separate, as if looking for the source.

A second energy burst came from another direction, and a short time later a third. Jordan scored twice on Kek, as he was distracted.

"Kel?" Jonko queried through the suit comm.

"Pyr's trying to divert attention," Keleb replied tersely. "I'm going for that Aeronite bred, Ciriots spy."

Jonko warned him of the watchers, but he sensed the Ciriots were not aware of Keleb's position. They moved further apart, as if seeking.

Before Keleb could begin his attack on Kek's rear, the three Ciriots became visible, and he only had Jonko's brief warning to know that he was too.

The Ciriots had no weapons out, they simply trapped Keleb in the small circle between themselves.

Jonko heard, via Keleb's suit comm., the translated Ciriots voice. "It's one of the Halflings. The one that our weak creature said he had killed. That is twice it has survived."

Then Jonko heard an exclamation of agony, followed by muffled curses. "You rotten bastards are not going to get me that way again," Keleb forced himself to say.

That told Jonko that the Ciriots were trying to overload Keleb's empathic senses.

Another burst of energy hit the shield of one of the Ciriots. The subsequent conversation in the Ciriots' clicking speech was untranslated.

Keleb fell to his knees, hands trying to press on the sides of his helmet. Jonko sensed that one of the Ciriots was standing over him. That one was possibly the source of the mental agony Keleb was trying to shield against. Jonko began one of the meditative chants, speaking in an undertone through the suit comm. and hoping to help Keleb. At the same time, he was trying to locate Pyr and watch the progress of Jordan's fight. It seemed like Jordan was getting the upper hand.

One of the Ciriots moved quickly towards the edge of the room, just after another beam of energy hit Kek. Jonko paused in his chant to warn Pyr, and he had a glimpse of the boy running past the pillars of the arched side of the walkway. He was running towards where Jonko guessed Vila to be. He had deduced that one of the Ciriots' presences he was sensing was Vila. He hoped Pyr's belief in her was true.

One of the Ciriots still watching the fight between Kek and Jordan, spoke derisively. "How long will it take you to finish that Aeronite foundling?"

Kek, panting, retorted, "This one is stronger than its elders, but mere bravado won't save it."

Another voice impinged on Jonko's suit comm. "I know you are here, spawn of weak minded fools. Do you think you will survive when all of your kind are dead? Show yourself and you can serve us and live."

There was a Ciriote moving slowly along the back passage, looking into each small sleeping cubicle. Pyr was in the same area and Jonko wanted to help him, but dared not leave the altar room undefended.

A new movement down in the meeting room distracted him. He saw Vila race towards Jordan. For an instant, he thought she was going to help him, but instead, she ran into him, knocking him down. Kek threw her aside, and rapidly thrust his knife into two weak parts of Jordan's usurped Ciriote armour – behind each knee. Jordan thrashed around, but Kek stepped back and dispassionately watched as Jordan realised he could no longer walk.

Jonko watched in horror, and missed seeing where Vila went. He heard more of the clicking speech, and then Pyr's voice over the suit comm. "Vila!"

"Are you alright, Pyr?" That was Vila's voice.

"You have to help Jordan" Pyr told her.

"He's doing fine," Vila claimed.

"Vila? What are you doing? Vila!" Pyr's voice rose in fright. Moments later, Jonko saw a struggling child sized figure being dragged into view. Vila had him in a tight grip, and was surely obeying Ciriote commands.

"Is that all of them?" a translated Ciriote voice demanded.

"No, there is one more of them – in the altar room, upstairs," Vila revealed, unable to lie to her new master.

There was more of the clicking speech, and two of the Ciriotes pointed – one at the stained glass mural at the front of the Temple, the other at Jonko's position.

They would be coming to the Altar room now, Jonko knew, but what did that glass mural mean to them?

Images of dead Warlords, with their blood defiling the tiled floor murals returned to his mind. Were they just wantonly defiling images that they thought were sacred to the Tymoreans? Trying to defile the Temple?

Kek was staring directly at him now, Jonko realised, and holding weapons taken from Jordan. Behind Kek, unobserved by any of the Ciriotes for a moment, Keleb was inching backwards and staring at Vila. He seemed to be daring her to mention the movement. Pyr was still struggling futilely.

Keleb began to speak softly into the suit comm. "Vila, let Pyr go. He doesn't belong in this. Pyr, when you get free, come to me."

Vila was staring at Keleb, her face contorted; she flicked a glance at the Ciriote, and saw their attention was elsewhere. Keleb kept speaking softly, calmly, and persuasively. "Vila, I know what they have done to you. This is not your fault, and if you release Pyr, you will be thwarting them, resisting them. You don't want them to torture him too, do you?"

"You will have to kill me," Vila spoke back. "You must. I can't defy them. They control my body. I never wanted to betray you, and my brothers."

Keleb reached for a weapon, but found again that he had been disarmed. His movement, slight as it was, alerted the Ciriote nearest him. He felt the pressure of that vile mind, trying to dominate him again; trying to overwhelm him again with sensations of death and torture. The alien saw Keleb seem to slump again, but had no idea that Keleb was no longer helpless. He had won the fight to shield his mind.

"Finish that business," a Ciriote directed Kek, and pointed at Keleb.

Kek drew a knife and approached, thinking Keleb helpless. He wasn't.

Jonko warned Keleb as Kek began his death stroke. Keleb erupted from his kneeling position, initiating moves that had been well drilled into him. Kek suddenly had another fight on his hands as Keleb spoke into his suit comm.

“Jon, stun Vila. Pyr run in behind me.”

Keleb’s plan was suddenly clear to Jonko. He obeyed his friend’s request, instantly. Vila fell, her body disabled by the stun. Pyr wrenched free, and came to cling to Keleb who ducked an attack from Kek and vanished. Moments later, the pair materialised in the Altar room, and Keleb grabbed Pyr to stop him running back down to the meeting room.

“I’ve got to help Vila and Jordan,” Pyr insisted.

“I only stunned Vila,” Jonko assured Pyr.

“She can’t disobey those monsters,” Keleb continued. “Her mind wants to, but her body can’t. Unconscious, they can’t use her and we have four Ciriots and their traitor, Kek, coming here. We have to stop them desecrating this place.”

Pyr seemed mutinous. Then he let out a howl of denial and twisted from Keleb’s grasp. He went to look down to the lower level. Keleb looked too when he felt the boy’s grief. Vila lay in a pool of her own blood.

“Kel – they are almost here. Two each side,” Jonko warned. There was no time now to grieve. He tossed a weapon to Pyr after the brief warning to ‘catch’. “Kel, have my spare knife.”

Pyr caught the disintegrator, and his face took on a look of determination and he stood straighter.

“Find a place to stand, out of the way,” Jonko told him. “If you stand very still, the power here will hide you. Aim for the armour joints. You will be our secret weapon. They will think, that because they disabled our cloaking fields, that we cannot hide from them. These Ciriots are about to find out the difference between mere Aeronites and true Tymoreans.”

Keleb moved to be ready to defend the north entrance to the altar room, as Jonko was doing for the south. Into the suit comm., he spoke to Jonko, but realising that he didn’t want Pyr to hear what he had to say, he switched to his native Earth English.

“The Ciriots killed Vila. Pyr saw, I think. There is blood spreading over the stones down there.”

“I had hoped they would forget about her,” Jonko admitted. “I had hoped that when Kryss and Tymos got here, they could help her.”

“They need to get here soon,” Keleb said. “No matter how good we are - we can’t hold them forever. Those creatures are strong, and well protected.”

“Don’t forget that we can draw on the power here to sustain us,” Jonko countered. “We have to stop them desecrating this place. I don’t know what they are trying to do, but it is something about blood, on the tile murals. They tried by killing the Warlords.”

“Aeronite blood is irrelevant,” Keleb noted.

“And ours. We are commoners,” Jonko added.

They had no more chance to think, both of them suddenly had two opponents.

Pyr spoke on the suit comm., “Where is the other one? He’s got Jordan.”

He got no answer; neither Jonko nor Keleb had any concentration to spare. The Ciriots were deadly fighters, even though these four Ciri Princes usually preferred others to fight for them. Yet, for all their skill, the Princes were too egocentric to fight as a team. This weakness was used against them.

Time lost any meaning as the two defenders fought to keep the Ciriots from entering fully into the Altar chamber. Early in the confrontation, the Ciriots realised that beam weapons were ineffective against the fighting Tymorean furies. Swords and knives were the only weapons that could penetrate the force shields. Their own armour was vulnerable to knives, and to well-aimed bursts of their own disintegrators.

Pyr followed Jonko's advice, and was effectively invisible. Even when his accurately aimed bursts took away pieces of Ciriote armour, the aliens could not see him to retaliate. Each burst, distracted them from trying to dodge past the defenders.

Jonko and Keleb kept fighting, knowing they were the last defenders, and they were not unscathed. Every blow from their opponent, every knife thrust that hit their armour, felt like solid blows to their flesh. But they doggedly fought on, praying that Tymos and Kryslie and Llaimos would come soon.

The coloured glass window behind the altar shattered with deafening suddenness. Both Jonko and Keleb reacted to the new threat, only for a second, and then Pyr was firing at the figure that was climbing in. He stopped abruptly, realising that the traitor, Kek, was using an unarmoured Jordan as a shield.

Keleb's momentary distraction had given one of his opponents the opening needed to get past him. He reacted quickly, spinning around and giving that Ciriote a kick to the elbow joint, and an excellent reason to keep his attention on the fight.

Jordan was not a completely helpless victim, even with his legs useless. He was struggling, and making it hard for Kek to hold onto him. Keleb, glancing that way, realised that Jordan's wounds were no longer bleeding. He hoped that the power in the Temple was healing him.

Jonko's opponents continued attacking him with single-minded determination. When Kek appeared, they were aware of Jonko's reaction, but not quick enough to gain advantage. Instead, they began to play their mind games on him.

"You've lost. You've no hope. Our creature will spill blood on the mural. This place will be despoiled – your so called fortress – the portal through which your cowardly elders fled – will never again open to let them return."

Jonko resisted the insidious voice, the projected emotion of despair. "You tried that! It didn't work," he retorted.

"Aeronite trash and Halfling discards," the Ciri Prince countered. "Blood like water. But our creature has one with true Royal blood."

That was true, Jonko realised, succumbing to the terror. He looked over his shoulder towards Kek, heard Pyr's scream of anger and outrage. His opponents overpowered him.

Kek had Jordan prone on the mural, about to thrust his knife into the Tymorean's heart. Keleb was still fighting, but as he turned and tried to make a dive for Kek and his weapon, his opponents grabbed him.

The light in the Altar chamber began to grow in intensity. Jonko tore his eyes from the suddenly still Kek, and looked at the light, seeming to hover above the altar. Vaguely, he could make out three figures, beginning to materialise. His mind yelled, "Krys, Tym, Llaimos...HURRY!"

The Ciriote saw the figures too, and all four drew their disintegrators and fired at the energy outlines, even as they held their struggling captives.

Kek's poised knife vanished in a fifth disintegrating beam; he tossed the useless hilt aside and drew another.

A Ciri Prince spoke urgently, and his translator box issued, "Hurry, kill him now! On the Altar! The Altar! Not the picture!"

Jonko increased his desperate struggles. He could no longer see the three shapes in the light, or feel the nearness of his friends. Pyr became visible, scrambling from his position atop one of the stone benches, to throw himself at Kek. He jumped, landing on Kek's shoulders, but he might as well have been a rag cloak. Kek reached behind him, plucked the boy from his shoulders and tossed him aside. He did not stop dragging Jordan to the Altar.

Before Pyr could launch himself again, Kek had tossed Jordan onto the marble-topped stone. Jordan was unconscious now.

Jonko and Keleb drew on the power around them, broke free and tried to reach Kek, to stop him. They failed. Blood spurted onto the white marble.

It seemed in that moment, that the very air within the Temple solidified. The sudden silence seemed louder than the noise made by the Ciriots tossing their prisoners aside.

“You precious Tymoreans are finished,” one Ciri Prince claimed loudly. He began to make an awful clacking sound, as he grabbed Jonko’s helmet and yanked it off. “You failed. It doesn’t even matter if we kill you or not – you can’t stop us now. We will become masters of all worlds.”

In spite of the crushing sense of failure, Jonko still resisted. He didn’t want to think that Tymos, and Krysle had been destroyed, but he forced that thought aside. Some perverse part of his human heritage wanted to spoil the Ciriots’ victory. “You haven’t killed all the Tymoreans. The cities are safe.”

“A momentary situation. We will have those commoners as slaves.”

“The animals are safe,” Keleb added. His helmet had also been yanked off.

“We do not need vermin for food. When we destroy the protections, they will die. This world is polluted beyond recovery. Your own fault for hiding the treasures from us. You last puny specimens will not outlast the thousand or so years that it will take for the poisons to break up.”

Pyr pushed himself up to stand and added his own defiance. “You will die here too, you cowards. You let all of the other Ciriots, the ones that served you and expected your protection, you let them die. But none of you can leave either. There is a shield around this world – like that around the cities.”

He drew the attention of all four Ciriots, but did not flinch as they moved menacingly closer. “You will tell us how to remove it.”

Calmly, although Keleb knew he was terrified, Pyr stated, “It is too late. You have unleashed a power that you cannot comprehend.”

The four Ciriots began the weird clacking sound. One spoke down at Pyr. “We have won. Your elders knew that blood spilled here, desecrating this Temple, would destroy the portal to that other plane. The cowards should have stayed to fight and not left the defence to children. We are supreme. We stand in your Temple. I think your claim of a planetary shield is nonsense. You are merely a lying brat of a child – full of bravado.”

Kek spoke up, turning so everyone saw he was spattered with blood. “If such a shield exists, the controls will be in their palace. I know where...”

“You see,” one of the other Princes spoke maliciously. “We will live – you will die or be our slaves.”

Pyr edged closer to Jonko when the Ciri Princes moved away from him. Like Jonko and Keleb, he stood straight and defiant – all were expecting death.

Then they each felt power building in the Altar room, but did not look around as the Ciri Princes were beginning to do. A high-pitched shriek was growing in volume.

“We cannot be harmed here,” Jonko stated his belief, defiantly. He was no longer sure – Jordan and Vila had died.

“You think you destroyed the Great Ones, but you haven’t.” He wanted desperately for that to be true.

The Ciri Princes laughed louder than the shrieking noise.

Keleb nudged Jonko and shrugged a shoulder at the Altar. Jordan’s body was beginning to shimmer and glitter. Kek saw the direction of their attention and strode back to his last victim. His armoured hand swiped at the body, passed through it and sent gold and silver flecks into the still air. He spun around, sensing danger and suddenly screamed as he became a blindingly bright pillar of incandescence.

The sight silenced the Ciri Princes, but even as they drew breath to continue their malicious taunting, they began to shriek too. Four more incandescent torches formed as the chamber filled with blinding light.

The Altar exploded.

Chapter 45 - Power Unleashed

The Great Ones, drawn inexorably back to the Temple had only moments to understand what was happening there. Fighting to maintain their sense of themselves – they looked to each other like shimmering outlines. Power was continuing to build inside them, the power they would need to cleanse and renew their world.

They knew the Ciriots were in the Altar Room and that Jonko, Keleb and Pyr were resisting them – giving them the time they needed to understand their new form.

When the Ciriots fired their disintegrator beams at them, the final and crucial piece of knowledge came to them. It showed them how to free the energy bonds holding their physical shapes and how to reshape themselves if they chose. They let themselves become energy beings, and merged their minds into a single entity. Their fragile human shapes could not wield the world's power that was now building to a crescendo in the Temple, but the three-fold mind of their energy shape could.

Whatever legends told of the mythical Tymorean fortress, they fell short of the real truth. In that other-dimensional place – the Guardians' power, shared as it was between all the Royal Tymoreans, became available to the chosen ones.

In times past, this power had been bound as the murals were shaped, back at the dawn of each Great Age. The information that the Ciriots had gleaned from Aeronite minds, was several millennia out of date. The last Great Ones, had bound the power within the Altar. To free their power, the Altar had to be destroyed.

Jordan, lost brother of the Great Ones, would be the sacrifice. His mind when they touched it was proud to serve life – even if it meant his death. Better that it was him, tainted and corrupted by enemies, than his innocent brother, Pyr. As Kek made his killing stroke, he heard, “You will not be forgotten. Your blood will help seal the power again, once the world is cleansed. Yours, and Vila's.”

As Jordan's blood spread over the altar, like oil over water, it began to change, to glitter in gold and silver flecks. His body became insubstantial as the power of the Guardians began to push through the Altar – as water does through cracks in a dam.

The Great Ones in their new energy form, could now comprehend the full truth.

The alien Ciriots had not won – they were paying the ultimate price for their betrayal of the Aeronite race, and their hubris for thinking they could defeat the power of the Guardians of Peace.

In desecrating the altar, the Ciriots had broken the bonds of the world's power. They had been burned away. The loyal Tymoreans were untouched. These three, Halflings and foundling, had proved their courage, their worth, their purity of belief.

Healing energy touched the three unconscious forms. Jonko began to stir first, feeling like he had been thrown against a wall. He remembered the Ciriots burning up and the brilliant light coming from the Altar. It was gone now. He slowly pushed himself to his feet and nearly tripped on chunks of stone as he turned. The chunks glittered with gold and silver. Then his mind recognised that the Altar had exploded, and somehow he had survived.

Before despair overcame him, he felt a familiar presence in his mind. “Jon, you Kel and Pyr have to leave here. Go to the ship.”

He tried to call back to Krys and Tymos, but his mind seemed to echo the chaos outside of the Temple walls. The air inside was beginning to smell foul and he knew he would need the headpiece of his armour. He began to crawl over the rubble to where he had been standing before the explosion.

Instead he found the legs of Pyr, and with the power of desperation, he tossed pieces of rock off the smaller figure. He didn't realise he was crying, incoherent tears of utter failure until he heard muffled sobs from the still figure. Pyr was alive. His armour had protected him.

Jonko helped Pyr to his feet and in a moment of relief and concern, hugged the child. Their armour made it awkward, but it helped him to reaffirm that he was alive.

The child pulled free and looked around. He pointed to a broken section of the parapet. Jonko remembered Keleb and went to the gap. Pyr was pointing down, and he opened his helmet.

“I can see Keleb, but where are Jordan and Vila?”

Jonko recalled all that had happened. Keleb lay on the rubble in the meeting room. A short distance from him, Kellex's body was partly hidden by the rubble. The bright green of his robes showed under the cream coloured stones.

To one side, the rubble was flecked with silver and gold, like the altar, and Jonko realised that place was where Vila died. The answer came to him. “Jordan and Vila chose to fight with us – their bravery has been recognised by the Guardians. They have taken their spirits into their aegis. The sparkling rock is all that remains.”

Pyr went very still and Jonko was concerned for him, but after a moment he said, “Yes, you are right. They are free...and happy.”

Jonko saw Pyr relax, and spoke to him. “We need to help Keleb. If my transmitter still works, we will transmit down. For that we need to be close together.”

“I think we need to hurry,” Pyr agreed. “I can feel this room trembling.”

On materialising on the lower floor, Jonko returned his transmitter to its pouch and began tossing rubble off his friend. The tremors could be felt through the floor here too. When the Altar exploded, Keleb had been thrown over the parapet and stones had fallen on him. Once his head was clear, Pyr pulled his hands from his armour gauntlets and touched Keleb's face. Deathly pallor was replaced by a pinkish tinge. Jonko kept removing rubble, wondering if Pyr had something of Tymos's healing gift. Keleb groaned and tried to sit up.

“Lie still until we get the rest off this off you,” Jonko said.

“We've got to get out of here,” Keleb muttered.

“I know. We have to get to the ship.”

“Where would we go?” Pyr asked. His eyes were wide with fear and were moist with unshed tears.

“To the forest,” Keleb answered, not needing to think. The idea had come to him with a fleeting sense of Tymos. “We are alive. We must trust the Guardians and the Great Ones to protect us.”

Pyr looked around the Temple as if he preferred to stay there. Keleb sensed his fears of going into the chaos.

“The last of the shields have gone from here. The air is mixing with the foulness outside. If we stay here, we will have to breathe that poison. The ship has untainted air. We can fly it to the forest where there are plants and animals that are protected from the poisons and corrupting influences.”

Keleb was glad that Pyr didn't ask whether they could enter through the shields of the sealed forests.

Jonko had his transmitter out again and asked Keleb if he still had his.

“Yes,” Keleb confirmed after checking.

“Okay, let’s all stand together. Kel, we will activate them at the same time and try to go out to near the ship,” Jonko directed. “Hold your breath, and Pyr, close up your armour.”

The safeguards built into the transmitters aborted the process, causing them to materialise under the rear colonnade of the southern chamber.

The miasma of glowing dust, hanging like a sickly fog, told them all they needed to know. Transmitting through that would be fatal.

Keleb trotted back into the chamber and returned in a few minutes with two water soaked towels. He handed one to Jonko. “We need to put this over our heads – to filter out some of the stuff from the air. Pyr will have to guide us.”

“I’m ready,” Pyr said, straightening at the trust given to him.

Jonko and Keleb took a careful look at the first stretch – the steeply rising terraced garden, before covering their heads. This part they could manage by feel. After that, Pyr would have to take a hand of each of them and lead.

They ran, trusting Pyr to guide them over the flatter ground. Both Jonko and Keleb breathed sparingly, for even with the wet towel filtering the air, the smell of it was nauseating. At the ship, Pyr released them and activated the airlock opening. It was a tight fit for three armoured figures, but they needed to save all they could of the air on the ship. Pyr closed the hatch after them and flushed the air from the lock before opening the inner hatch. Jonko and Keleb were gasping for air, and collapsed onto the floor. Pyr took the air hose from his armour and gave them each a forced burst of air. He was relieved when they both began to breathe normally.

Even as he relished the untainted air of the ship, Jonko forced himself to stand and walk to the cockpit. He started the engines and looked at all the gauges. Fuel was low. He hoped it would be enough to get them to the nearest forest.

Keleb and Pyr activated the sensors and the navigation computer. The view screen had been targeted to the Temple, and as the picture formed on the screen, Keleb saw the glass dome roof of the altar room shatter and begin to fall. He could still feel the trembling of the ground through the floor of the ship.

“Strap in,” Jonko yelled a warning, distracting Keleb from wondering if the whole Temple would collapse.

He and Pyr had barely obeyed, when Jonko blasted upwards on the landing jets, just enough so that he was off the ground before accelerating level to the ground. As he slowly climbed to what was once tree top height, he used his instincts to head for the nearest forest. The compass was no help, as it was gyrating wildly.

Keleb at the nav computer could do little to help. He gave a course to follow based on stored coordinates, but there was no way to check their heading as he could not get a signal through to the orbiting satellites.

“Kel, I need your help,” Jonko said after a few minutes.

Keleb forced his way to the co-pilot’s seat and took hold of the spare controls. He added his strength to Jonko’s to hold the shuddering craft steady.

Pyr subsided into a state of shock. He had seen Jordan and Vila die. They were the only family he had known and loved. The Great Ones were also his family, but he didn’t know where or what they were now. He was probably going to die and would never get to know his real father. The ache of loss and longing overcame him.

The journey was tiring, even with two pilots using their full strength to maintain control. Jonko was trying not to dwell on his perceived failure to prevent the Temple being destroyed. He had sensed Kryss telling him to get out, but she might have been a ghost. The Ciriote had seen her and her brothers beginning to materialise, but their disintegrators had frayed the shimmering forms into strands of energy.

Keleb shared his frustration – wishing he could have been as good a warrior as Jonko and Tymos. Not only that, he could sense the injuries of the world in the planet’s aura and suffered with it. Unconsciously, he began a low voiced meditation chant to calm himself. After a while, Jonko began to echo him, to push his own negative thoughts aside.

Pyr heard them, and a trace of hope entered his mind. He wasn’t alone. He still had friends in Jonko and Keleb. And his other siblings were alive – or he would have sensed their ghostly essences as he had those of Jordan and Vila.

The aircraft came to rest on the nearest piece of flat ground to the forest. The fuel gauge had been reading empty for a few minutes. The ship would go no further. Regardless, Jonko turned off every system, except the air circulation, and even that showed a dismal reading.

“What now?” Keleb asked. “Do we stay here until the air runs out or run for the forest and hope to get in?”

“There is only a few days air left,” Jonko told him. “And no fuel to run the engines to charge the batteries to purify the air. I don’t think we have a choice – we have to trust the Guardians to preserve us.”

“Yes!” Pyr agreed, standing straight and meeting the eyes of the older Tymoreans. “We have done everything we could...we are not like the Ciriote or Kellex and his kind. ..” his voice trailed off.

“You are right, Pyr,” Keleb said. “If we were meant to die, why did we survive and the Ciriote burn up? I helped Tymos to set up these havens. I think he might sense us here and come...”

Jonko was thinking of what they would need. “Pyr, we need any portable air supplies, do you know if there are any?”

“Yes.” He trotted to the rear of the ship.

Jonko took spare weapons from a locker and began to check them. Keleb went to get the last of the long life rations they had stored on the ship before leaving the Estate as well as something to carry them in.

Pyr returned hefting two spare air cylinders and went back for more. He returned finally with two spare helmets for the armour.

When they had divided the equipment, attached the spare cylinders to the armour and checked each others armour was air tight, only courage was needed to leave the craft. If this venture failed, they only had a few days left.

Outside, the winds were fierce. They could feel them buffeting the craft, and when they emerged, they needed to hold onto safety lines that they had tied to each other. But even standing together, they were blown off their feet. Rather than try to stand again, they crawled inch by inch until they reached the shimmering barrier.

Jonko and Keleb kept Pyr between them and mustered all their knowledge and intuition about protective screens. Their attempts to enter, by merging their power with that of the screen failed. A concussion of power knocked them back. They tried again with the same result. As they rolled over to try again, they heard Pyr gasp over the suit comm. They glanced at him and then looked in the direction of his outstretched arm.

A firestorm, the like of which they had never seen before, was approaching them with such speed they could only stare at it like stunned hoppers. In a moment they reacted, reaching the ship again was not an option, the only chance they had was to crouch as close as possible to the barrier and with Pyr between them again reaching for power to preserve them.

The leading edge of the firestorm seemed to hover before them, the sky flashing and brilliant. Kryslie stood before them as their eyes recovered from a particularly brilliant flash.

“Hurry,” she urged as a seam appeared in the force screen of the forest. Her friends obeyed, noting that her unarmoured form was even then fraying back into pure energy.

The forest screen closed behind them; their ship, if it had survived, could not be seen. A wall of brilliant light passed over the forest as they collapsed to the ground in relief and to collect their thoughts. After a while, Keleb opened his armour and took a deep breath. The peace of the forest, the vibrant life and the undisturbed twitter of birds and insects brought peace to his soul. Jonko and Pyr followed his lead and each found it was easy to forget their worries.

Pragmatically, Pyr announced, “I’m hungry!”

His companions laughed – as they suddenly realized that it had been far too long since they had last eaten. Although unpractised, they had learnt how to live off the land. It was now time to practice and Pyr had a lot to learn. There was no way of knowing how long they would need to fend for themselves.

Chapter 46 - Great Ones

The separate minds that were once Tymos, Kryslie and Llaimos had merged into a single united consciousness, a living force that was bodiless like the wind. The radioactive residues that were poisons in the air and sickly glowing patches on the ground and in the oceans could not harm them. The creeping, dense poison clouds of chemical origin were blown aside by their passing. More subtle damages that had been done to the world were discerned by ripples in the planet's aura.

For a time unmeasured, the living force circled the world, feeling the aura, gaining power, learning how to wield such unimaginable force. They waited for the subtle guidance of the Guardians of Peace who had made them what they were.

The living force hovered over the ocean, knowledge coming to it of the life still surviving in the depths that were threatened by the poisons circulating in the shallower levels. In their lives as mortal humans, they had been unaware of the life there yet the Elders had known. A whole civilization existed there, independent of the civilization that lived on the land: almost completely separate – except for a few meetings over many, many centuries.

The living force merged into the water and dove into the depths, learning the nature of the oceans. This ocean civilization was the reason why the Tymoreans seemingly ignored the bounty of the seas and relied on lakes, dams and water storing plants for their moisture needs. The living force reached out to the consciousness – their form was of little importance as communication with it was possible.

Yes, the ocean consciousness was aware of the poisons in the ocean and had felt the tumult in the aura of the world. No, the poisons had not reached the depths yet, they were in the shallow waters, trapped by a cold, almost frigid layer – the water layers had not mixed.

Yes, they sensed the nature of those with whom they were communicating. The lore of their kind told of their ilk; trusted their benevolence.

“What of the dwellers in the shallows?” the living force asked.

“Those lesser entities were already doomed,” the ocean consciousness replied. “Our juveniles retreated when the first traces of poison were sensed and we can survive in the depths without harvesting the shallows. It has been told in our lore that in times before most of the lesser beings perished, but the eggs of new beings survived to grow when conditions were right. It will be so again!”

“You are still learning wisdom,” the ocean voice had an ancient feel to it now. “We felt the power seeping into the oceans from the land. The cold layer is rich with power; it protects us. The ocean could freeze and we would still survive in the depths.” There was a sense of millions of years of life and evolution, but time was no longer binding on any of the beings that conversed.

“Thank you,” the living force communicated, knowing now that whatever had to be done to cleanse the planet would not harm the ocean consciousness which was truly one of the great treasures of Tymorea. Without formal leave taking (for none was needed or expected) the living force rose from the depths.

Above the water, the temperature of the air was rising, and the surface of the water was evaporating. The hurricane force winds became multitudes of individual whirlwinds – over land and over the oceans. Power fed the winds, and they began to whirl faster, drawing in air, water, surface soil – everything above the protective layer, that wasn't fixed firmly to the ground.

Day became night, and after some unmeasured time, darkness blanketed the whole planet. Clouds heavy with moisture that would not fall, trapped dust, poisons and radioactive particles, and began in turn to glow.

No structures, except those of metal or stone, or those protected by Tymorean power – survived. Anything still alive outside of the protected places – died. Then the whirlwinds began to merge back into large hurricanes – until there was no longer anything to sustain them. Near the planet surface, there was an almost perfect vacuum.

The living force, needing no air to breathe, moved over the planet's surface, seeking any remaining traces of poison.

Heavy black clouds reached up high into the stratosphere, all over the planet. They began to swirl and mix, but still did not dissolve into rain. Lightning flickered from point to point in the clouds. At the planet's surface, the temperature began dropping.

The living force became part of the dark clouds – aware of the potential energy waiting to be directed. Lightning forked from the clouds – not in random surges, but in accurately directed strikes. Some hit the alien aircraft where they lay after being thrown around by the winds. The craft exploded, the remaining fuel igniting and burning until the weapons in the craft reached critical point. One of the weapons was Burnfire and once freed, it spattered in a circle around the fiery inferno and began to crawl along the ground. It became a creeping red glow in an ever-expanding circle. The low temperature and scarcity of air controlled its virulence, but not its insatiable hunger for organic fuel.

More lightning struck the myriad of places where the Great Ones had cached canisters of Burnfire stolen from Ciriot ships and garrisons. This too began to burn in expanding circles. It licked the surface soil, cleansing it of poisons. It could not burn through the soil layer protected by Tymorean power.

Occasionally there was a 'flare' of flame as the Burnfire found fuel or pockets of poisons, but the slow onward creeping continued relentlessly over land and frozen ocean. It took time days, years, decades or centuries – there was no way to know and when the whole planet glowed with the redness that was Burnfire, it finally began to rain.

When the water/dirt/air falling as frozen drops landed on the glowing surface it flared into brilliance. The living force waited, slowly circling the planet. They sensed a protected place, rich with power, high above the rest of the land.

There they hovered, half way between energy and human flesh, needing neither food, nor water nor air – aware of their separate parts, but also part of the world beyond the protective shields.

An itch began in the minds of the Great Ones, they sensed human minds in one of the protected forests. An overwhelming yearning for companionship and contact with their physical kind, drove them to seek the people out.

They left their protected place and ranged in their combined energy form until they found the sleeping people. Finally, the living force slowed, merged with the energy of the protective shields and slipped through them. They let the energy drain away and the controlling minds separated as they reached the ground – reforming into their human shapes and feeling then like a very, very minute part of the universe.

Each took a deep breath of the clean air of the forest and felt the vibrant life surviving within the shields. Their work was not finished yet. The world outside the shielded places must be made like this again.

Loathe to wake their friends, Tymos, Llaimos and Kryslie sat nearby and waited.

Pyr awoke first, immediately aware of the presence of others. He looked around, and with a cry of elation ran to hug his siblings. His cry woke Jonko and Keleb and they scrambled to their feet with equal enthusiasm, relieved that their friends were still alive.

Great Ones they were but the simple joyous embracing brought tears to Kryslie's eyes and her brothers were not too proud to betray tears of their own.

“I never thought we would be human again,” Kryslie admitted. “What we were – I don’t know what we were or how long it’s been. I think you are here to remind us of our true form.”

“We tried to keep track of the days,” Keleb admitted. “When it grew dark we had no guide and it seemed that when we slept it was many days between awakenings.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Tymos told them.

“Have you finished your work?” Jonko asked, wishing desperately that he could talk of his failure.

“For now,” Llaimos answered. “The land and sea are being cleansed, the process will continue without us. When the Guardians wish it, the planet will regenerate. We must simply wait.”

“How long?” Pyr asked.

“Years, centuries?” Kryslie suggested. “I don’t know.”

The prospect of such a long time appalled Pyr. “Will I ever see my Father again?”

Kryslie felt her brothers’ minds merging with hers – without conscious communication – their thoughts completely attuned. A brilliant light began to illuminate the trees – pushing aside the darkness. Figures began to appear in the light, which was the portal of Dirakee. Pyr looked awed, then he seemed to recognize one of the figures – he pulled on Tymos and Kryslie trying to bring them into the light.

“No, little brother,” Tymos said softly. “We must stay here, you must go!”

Without further urging Pyr ran forward and into the embrace of his true father – Tymoros. No further proof was needed that he was worthy to enter Dirakee.

“Go Jon, go Kel,” Kryslie gave her friends a gentle push but they resisted and she sensed the cause of their reluctance.

“Jonko, there is no blame attached to you or Keleb. You stalled our enemies until we were ready. The Temple had to fall to free our power. The Guardians work in strange ways; even our enemies were used without mercy. The Ciriote thought they had achieved our final destruction. Instead, they were our liberation. The most potent weapon they had for destruction, Burnfire, is even now cleansing this world.”

“Go Jon, go Kel,” Tymos repeated. “Look you are being called and we cannot maintain this gate much longer.”

Slowly at first and then with resolve, Jonko and Keleb moved forward into Xyron’s embrace. As they turned for good-byes the forest was fading.

The Great Ones watched their friends moving into the light. One figure still stood near the interface of Dirakee and the forest. President Reslic met their combined gaze, bowed to them, and then smiled with intense pride at the beings they had become. Then he turned and followed his fellow Governors.

There was no speech through the portal but the mental touch of Tymoros reached them; full of praise, full of wonder and overwhelming love; finally the stirrings of a Prophecy.

“Children will come at the beginning of the New Age.”

The brightness faded once more as the Portal of Dirakee closed - leaving the Great Ones alone. A feeling of total weariness overcame first Kryslie then Tymos and Llaimos and they fell into a deep sleep.

Time passed.

The forest was full of life, burgeoning like springtime. Tymos lay awake, relishing the sense of new life until he realized that the shimmering barrier was no longer over the forest. He was looking up at a pure azure sky with no clouds. He leant over and shook his brother and sister awake. In one mind, they stood and ran to the edge of the forest and looked over a completely barren landscape!

Llaimos knelt and lifted a handful of dirt and let it trickle through his fingers.

“The land is waiting,” he told his siblings. “Waiting to be reborn.”

“The animals can leave the forest,” Tymos noted. “The plants can start spreading.”

Kryslie disagreed. “No! Not yet! There is no wind or weather cycle; nothing can live out there!”

“There must be a catalyst,” Llaimos considered. “We drew power from the aura to preserve the seeds in the ground for the rebirth and to seal the cities. The power of all our Royal cousins was freed for us to use when the Temple of Dira was destroyed...”

“Then we must return there – to Dira – to bind the power again and find the catalyst for life to start,” Tymos completed the thought.

The three Great Ones joined hands and merged their consciousness so as a single force they teleported into the Temple of Dira, materializing amongst the rubble that remained.

The picture of the Temple as it had been was in their mind and indeed the basic structure remained, though the balcony walls had collapsed and fallen to the lower level and the roof, all over the Temple had shattered into glass and tile shards.

Kryslie and Tymos knew every part of the Temple. They shared their memories with Llaimos who had seen only a small part of it. Incredible power still obeyed them and they called all the broken glass and tiles back into their original shapes. Three merged minds lifted the solid matter back into place and sealed it in position. Now they could explore the Temple once more to see what other changes had occurred and perhaps learn how they must act to bind the power again.

Burnfire had cleansed it too, since all the shields protecting it were gone. The bodies of the dead Warlords were gone – all that remained was solid puddles of the metal from their armour. Other things were gone, burnt away – the privacy curtains from the sleeping cubicles, the wooden benches from the meeting room and the furniture in the smaller rooms, the wooden doors of cupboards and all the things once stored with in.

The lack of foodstuffs did not concern the Great Ones, for their power sustained them. Each did share the thought that fresh clothes would have been welcome. Anything they had once carried was gone, unless it was in the pockets of the brown travelling garments they wore, and those garments showed the wear and tear of their previous tasks.

Llaimos was intrigued by the circular tile murals on the floor of the different sections of the Temple. He studied each of them, noting details that his sibling’s memories had not given him.

“Have you really looked at these?” he asked Kryslie, who was crossing the lower meeting room. “They have incredible detail.”

“Yes, the Elders spoke of them when we came here for the first time. They portray events from the distant past. The Elders all had a different interpretation of their meaning,” she called over her shoulder.

“There are three of them, or four if you count the glass mural near the beam-in point upstairs,” Llaimos thought aloud. “Do you know why they are here? In each of the rooms of the Temple?”

“That was something the Elders did not mention,” Tymos realised. “But they still thought of us as children then.”

Kryslie stopped to look at a part of the stone floor. A number of the stone slabs forming the floor were speckled with silver and gold flecks. She crouched down to touch the surface, and a vivid image came into her mind. She saw the final moments of her elder sister’s life and sensed her brothers shared it.

“Vila died here,” she told them. Her voice sounded odd in the still air.

“The Guardians freed her spirit,” Tymos murmured as understanding came to them, in a whisper from the Guardians of Peace. “She chose death, to protect Pyr. Her true essence remained pure, in spite of the Ciriots and their control of her.”

“This rock is sacred,” Llaimos said with awe. It had been touched by the Guardians. “We should make it part of the Altar room.”

Tymos glanced up towards that highest part of the Temple, as Kryslie stood up, still looking at the changed stone.

Ideas flowed between three minds, as they realised that the Altar room had not been restored when they had cleared the other rubble. Knowledge came to them.

“The Altar was destroyed when our power was freed,” Tymos spoke slowly. “The Altar was the focus – the capstone – and Royal blood was spilt there.”

They recognised the need to go up to the ruins of the Altar room and teleported without needing to use the metallic devices.

The remains of the Altar, mostly hand sized pieces of marble, glowed with mauve light. They were rich with Tymorean power, and were also speckled with gold and silver. They had found where Jordan had died.

Kryslie did not touch the rock this time. The truth of events was apparent to them.

“The Guardians used him,” Kryslie acknowledged. “He was truly of Royal blood, and he had to die for our power to be freed.”

An idea began to form in her mind, of a monument to recognise his sacrifice. Now Kryslie began moving the glowing speckled rubble into a pile. Her brothers came to help her, and they shared ideas between them. They would use this sacred rock to form the new capstone, a new Altar.

As they worked, the round tiled mosaic in front of the Altar was cleared. Tymos and Kryslie recalled the Elders speaking of the picture worked into the design. The artist had been greatly skilled, working in tiny tiles of a myriad of colours. It showed three figures with a mauve aura outlining them looking at a column of bright light as other figures knelt in homage.

Yet as they looked at the picture, the figures seemed to move – as the images did in the room of the Seven Ages, in the Royal Palace – but now the three tiny red headed figures might have been themselves. The figures vanished, and others replaced them, as a picture emerged of what had happened here, but in reverse, from when the Great Ones arrived in the rubble-filled room back through the time when the Ciriots became incandescent torches, the light erupting from the centre of the planet emerging through the altar, Jordan’s death. It showed Jonko, Keleb and Pyr, fighting to keep the Ciriots out of the Altar room, centuries of peace, flashes of dark and colours of people passing, then again three distinct figures, two blonds and a redhead – building the Altar and creating the mosaic they stared at.

Understanding came as a sudden revelation. Those they saw now were previous Great Ones who bound the world’s power as they created the Altar. They had not created the mosaic, but restored it – for their power had been freed when this mosaic had been defiled.

The new Great Ones sent their awareness out into the other parts of the Temple – sought the other mosaics and felt the fading residue of death and blood on them.

“It makes sense,” Tymos murmured. “The Aeronites would have had old legends of this world. The Ciriots would have learnt about us from them. No doubt they believed they could destroy us by destroying the Temple – and achieve that by defiling the mosaics.”

“But our predecessors changed the power focus to the Altar,” Kryslie mused. “Was it deliberate? Or did the Guardians plant the idea with them?”

“It is not important – that change confused our enemies for long enough – for us to understand what we became,” Llaimos concluded.

The image of the intact Altar came back to them, reminding them of the need to rebind the world’s power. Yet it did not fit with the feeling shared by the Great Ones. Yes, they must rebuild the Altar, but...

Tymos stepped up to where the Altar had been and considered the picture memory of the bright light blasting through the stone. Now, the only light was from the repaired roof and the unglazed window behind the Altar. He saw a circle of glassy, fused rock. He adjusted his eyes to see the energy patterns and saw a faint wash of mauve light over everything except that circle. At that point, he had the sense of a very deep hole. Curious, he went to study the mosaic, and realised that the tiles covered another circle of fused rock. Once, that area had been a power conduit too.

Kryslie interpreted the picture in Tymos's mind and spoke aloud. "The energy is now spread throughout the world – in the air, in the ground, in the protected areas and the protective shields. We cannot gather it to return it here. We must find another place to draw it back to. Somewhere outside, since we can feel the aura more strongly by touching the ground."

"I would prefer to use these stones elsewhere," Llaimos admitted. "Jordan died here, and while I know his sacrifice was necessary, if we were to build a new altar with them, changed though they are, it will seem like remembering his death, not his life."

"The marble is attuned to our power," Tymos pointed out. "It will attract it and ground it."

"Then we can use it to bind the power...but in a different place and a different form - something that would also embrace and celebrate life," Llaimos insisted.

"We still need an Altar," Kryslie pointed out. "As a place to focus and attune the minds of our people to the Guardians' wisdom. But I too share your view. What if we use the stone from below. Vila died to give Pyr a chance to live on. Creating the new altar from where her blood touched – will be a way of remembering her life and sacrifice."

"Yes, in that way she will be a part of our victory too. It feels right," Llaimos decided. "Let us bring the stone up and build the Altar first."

Piece by piece, the three Great Ones lifted six huge slabs of flecked slate from the floor of the meeting room and transmitted them to the Altar Room. Two roughly semicircular in shape and one nearly square were placed against the back wall. The others would form the base of the Altar.

Kryslie and Llaimos held the largest slab on the circle of fused rock. Tymos held his arms around the slab, felt his siblings join their power to his, and then felt the rock moulding itself to the picture in his mind of a four-foot high circular column, that melded itself with the fused rock. From the two other slabs, they created two more supporting pillars – not as wide – and placed these on each side of the first.

After that, Tymos, Llaimos and Kryslie each lifted one of the last three slabs and balanced them on the supports. They merged minds again and became semi-solid figures as they moulded the rock pieces into the shape of an elongated oval – by breaking and reforming the atomic bonds within the rock structure. When they separated again into their individual physical forms, they saw that the brown slate had been bleached to the colour of marble, but still sparkled with the gold and silver flecks.

Llaimos went to where two oil lamps lay on the floor – battered and broken. He returned, placing one at each end of the Altar. The oil reservoirs were empty, the glass reflectors broken, but when he set them on the Altar a flame ignited in each.

The Great Ones each bowed to the presences they sensed hovering around the Altar. They recognised that the essence of the Guardians of Peace had returned...watching, approving, not interfering – merely waiting for their advocates to take the next step.

The vast power of the aura of the planet was a part of them, but now they needed to draw it back from ranging freely in the atmosphere – into the soil and rock and water of the planet's surface.

Pictures, images, ideas flowed between the minds of the Great Ones.

"Let's study the mosaics," Tymos suggested.

Kryslie summarised their impressions from them, “These did indeed previously bind the power. Each tile as it was laid in place, bound more and more – like bricking up a doorway. The Altar too, was formed originally, stone by stone.”

“We don’t want to wall it away from us – we still need it to stimulate and nurture the new growth and create weather,” Llaimos contended.

The idea had been there, and now it flowered. “We take the stones from the old Altar, outside...use them to create the focus. We can build a fountain, and bring water there to nourish a new garden...”

“And mix the static power protecting the planet’s surface with the free power, get both to begin circulating...”Kryslie continued.

“What of the portal of Dirakee?” Llaimos considered. “I know we are the portal – but should there not be a structure to symbolise that...for our kin?”

“Yes...” they all agreed. Then, without further delay, they went outside.

The black ashy soil puffed up and settled as the Great Ones scrambled up the terraced section of the dead Temple gardens. They paused where the ground flattened on the level of the Altar room. Instinctively, they kicked off the worn out footwear and felt the aura in the ground with their bare feet. The protective layer, existing some six inches below the surface, felt warm. Around them, the blackened and burnt soil stretched for miles – broken only by the light stone of the Temple and the mauve glow about the City of Dira. Moving instinctively, they walked to a place between the Altar room and the south chamber. They had the sense of ‘here’.

They looked around with the vision of their new structure in their minds. As they faced the south chamber, the arches and pillars along the outer walkway slowly, gently, collapsed.

The Guardians of Peace had shared their vision and approved – withdrawing their power from the protections on the Temple structure and giving them the means to create their vision.

Thinking and acting as one, the three Great Ones lifted the columns and arches, and erected them in a new position. When they had moved all the parts, they had created a roofless, hexagonal structure of pillars, topped by the arches, surrounding an area of ashy ground twice the size of the Altar room.

With their vision still not complete they returned into the Temple, carried out all the stones from the old altar, and arranged most of them into a roughly circular shape. Once again, they moulded stone as if it were clay, forming at first a circular slab that was six inches thick and then they separated the circle into six, elongated oval petals around a circular centre. Each part was then recessed into a bowl and they formed a hole in the very centre.

The Great Ones stood back and considered their creation, seeing the gold and silver flecks glinting in the sunlight. Then, standing to one side, they again became one consciousness as they dove down deep – past the central hole in the rock fountain, past the layer of ash, through the protective layer of static power –drawing on it, stirring it to life and taking it down through the layers of rock. Following cracks and fissures, the combined consciousness moved within the deep places of the planet until they found a trickle of water seeping down from one of the high mountain water storage lakes. The water, placid under a layer of power, stirred and seeped faster, following the will of the consciousness as it retreated back and back to the central hole in a new rock structure. Pressure from the water in the high lake sent the trickle spurting six inches into the air. The drops fell to fill the central bowl, to overflow into the petals, and then to the ground around the new fountain.

The overflow soaked down into the soil, turning black ash into rich brown loam, until the nascent garden within the hexagon looked to be created of newly turned soil.

In the minds of the Great Ones was a vision of what the garden would become – lush and self supporting, full of evergreen plants and colourful flowers.

The last of the glowing metallic flecked stones became stepping-stones from each of the six arched openings, to the fountain. In time, the stones would be hidden, but the Great Ones would remember.

“This will become a garden of Peace,” Llaimos predicted, as the faintest of breezes ruffled his hair and cooled his face.

His siblings felt it too, and as one, they adjusted their eyes to study the energy patterns around them. The aura was beginning to coalesce and swirl outwards from the garden. The final knowledge they needed came to them.

As they had done before the Cleansing, they did again. Each Great One faced a different direction and drew gently on the free energy, causing an area of low pressure about them – air began to move towards them, and then to swirl gently. Then the three separated, imaged distant locations, and began the process again and again.

As they travelled, they were again beings part flesh part energy, and when they finally returned, they had formed breezes that were evaporating water from the oceans, and the vapour was rising to form clouds, and with the rotating of the planet, beginning to swirl.

Once again, the three merged their essences, and circled with the free energy, hovering unharmed amongst the moisture rich clouds as lightning and thunder grew in intensity.

A touch of power, and the clouds began to rain – not heavily as in a normal storm, but gently, to wash the ash from the soil, to soak it, to caress the sealed and hidden places like a mother caressing her child....Kryslie.

Power touched the land, waking up the sleeping soil creatures from the very tiniest, to the worms and insects, making it ready with the instinct of one who must provide....Tymos.

Dormant seeds roused, felt the warmth of the sun, the moisture, the nutrients and obeyed the will of one who had experienced swift growth from youth to maturity....Llaimos.

Then, as the Great Ones circled the planet once more as beings of living energy, a filmy veil of greenness followed them. Black ash, turned to rich soil, grasses sprouted first – trees and food plants would follow, as other dormant seeds roused and other seeds spread on the winds from the forests.

The living force paused over the City of Ecla, and felt the power of the Guardians at work there, doing miracles. The mutants now sleeping there, once unfortunates with unstable DNA, were being changed one last time. When they woke, the constant changes that caused their sometimes violent and unpleasant behaviour, would have stopped. Many would still be unattractive to look at, but they would be serene. Most importantly, they would no longer be outcasts, and they would be able to recall with pride that they had helped save their world.

Finally, the living force was drawn to the tall mesa, where the sun glinted off the Royal Palaces, making them seem as if they were embossed with gold. The relief that their home was still intact, drew the living force closer. They separated into three pillars of brilliant light, and then became entities of flesh as they collapsed onto the flagstones of the Royal Court. The power that had made them as light as air and as powerful as the strongest winds, diminished.

The Great Ones felt themselves become solid and for a brief moment, they each felt bereft. They had been for a time, something more than human. Now they felt drained, as if something of themselves had been lost. Instinctively, they drew on the aura around them and felt it refresh them. It came from the stones of the palace and the flagstones under them. They realised that it would always be there for them to use. The power of generations of Royal Tymoreans had seeped into those stones.

When they stood up again, they saw that they were in front of the High King's palace and the doors were open – welcoming them. They glanced around at what had once been ornate gardens, and even here the grass was sprouting. With fresh eagerness, they ran inside – only to pause on the threshold as they realised the Palace was still deserted. They felt the touch of the Guardians of Peace, drawing them up two staircases to the Room of the Seven Ages.

Here weariness overcame them, and they sank to the floor – falling asleep within moments. In the last instants of consciousness, they knew that they had fulfilled the reason for their creation.

Around them, unperceived, a new mural was being created. History was being recorded – heralding the Eighth Great Age. Those of Royal Tymorean blood would need to remember, to learn, clearly and in detail, what had happened. In that way, they would know to guard against it happening again.

Epilogue.

No one perceived the cycles of time that the Great Ones slept, and the Guardians of Peace came and delicately restored the fragile ecology – to return the world of their chosen ones to its original vibrancy.

They had given the Tymoreans a trust, and the Tymoreans had not failed. The Guardians did not neglect those who worked for Peace.

In time, the barren lands would become lush with new growth. The power holding the cities in stasis would seep back into the ground. The people in the cities would wake to find the shields gone and become aware that it was safe to emerge. They would send children to summon the Guardian's Advocates. The three Great Ones would in turn re-open the portal of Dirakee and recall the Tymoreans of Royal Blood and the Tymorean missionaries would once again spread throughout the universe working for peace.

The Great Ones had restored the Guardian planet but there was still work for them in a universe, just returning from the brink of total chaos.

The End

If you enjoyed Great Ones, please consider leaving a review on your preferred e-book site.

Other works by Margaret Gregory

Short Stories:

[Graffiti Girl](#) - Valerie has become known as "The Graffiti Girl" but she is more than just a street artist. She sees and paints life her way. In Valkyrie, the second story, Valerie, blinded by an explosion, must learn to paint and see again.

[Ghost Writer](#) - Edwina is a ghost with a mission - to find out why she died. Only to do so, she must first help another girl.

Series:

[The Tymorean Trust Book 1 - Power Rising](#) - The Tymorean Trust - When peace rules Tymorea - Peace reigns in the universe.

Chosen to be the Advocates of the mystical and incorporeal Guardians of Peace, twins Tymos and Kryslie must first learn to control and use the power rising in them - or it will destroy them. On Tymorea, only the ruling Triumvirate Governors are powerful enough to guide the strong-willed alien-bred twins until they have mastered their power.

But even as Tymos and Kryslie are pushed ever harder to learn skills and wisdom, alien infiltrators are secretly finalising plans to undermine and destroy the ruling Royal elite, enslave the common people, and reform the planetary terrain to suit their own needs.

To achieve this, the alien Warlords have already corrupted susceptible Royals, and learnt that Tymos and Kryslie are two of three who are destined to protect the Tymorean Trust and thus thwart their plans.

However, Tymos and Kryslie must leave the protected Royal Estate to begin to learn of their other gifts and to come to understand their destiny, even though this will place them in deadly peril.

[The Tymorean Trust Book 3 – The Return to Earth](#)

Even before the war on Tymorea, the Elders foresaw that Great Ones Tymos and Kryslie would have an imperative mission on Earth.

But as the Tymoreans prepare to build an Earthbase to support them, they discover that specifications for two vital protective shields are missing.

Tymos and Kryslie must find the work of a missing Tymorean scientist and build the generator before the base is found.

Then, as the missionaries are transported to Earth, the Guardians of Peace step in and send Tymos and Kryslie back in time.

[The Tymorean Trust Book 4 – Earth Mission](#)

On the eve of their graduation from the prestigious WSRA Washington University, Tymos and Kryslie Ward deliberately disappear without a trace.

When the elderly coordinator of the Tymorean missionary descendants is near death, he has a vision foretelling that the new missionaries will come under attack and be killed.

It was time for the true work of the Tymorean Great Ones to begin.

After linking up with the remaining missionary descendents, the Great Ones soon realise that the leader of the Imperium, Abdul bin Halil, is well advanced in his plans to use technology to undermine the United World Nations.

The Great Ones must protect both the new and the descendant missionaries and keep the Tymorean Earth base from discovery and destruction, while working to prevent a deadly war between the Imperium and the United World Nations and the ascension of bin Halil as a despotic world leader.

[The Tymorean Trust Book 5 – Alien Contact](#)

Tymos and Kryslie Ward, hide their Tymorean intelligence and abilities by working for the WSRA as low ranked technicians at the Earth's first lunar base.

Their anonymity is compromised when Kryslie races to push a VIP from the path of a careening shuttle. Her incredible speed draws worldwide attention and she becomes a target for the saboteur who is causing escalating system malfunctions on Lunar One.

While Kryslie and her brother, Tymos, work to identify the saboteur, an even deadlier danger is approaching. An alien ship arrives at Lunar One, pursued by a powerful enemy who will stop at nothing to get what he wants. Only the two Tymorean Great Ones have the knowledge and abilities to overcome him, but to do so they must risk their sanity, and their souls.

[The Tymorean Trust Book 6 - Invasion](#)

Great Ones Tymos and Kryslie know that the Genesis 1 deep space mission is vital to Earth's future, so when Ciriote pirates capture the Earth ship, they act.

However, the pirates have discovered Earth's location, seeing it as a planet ripe for exploitation. At first they act covertly, infecting humans with control devices, making them unwitting traitors. When they invade in force, the Great Ones must reveal themselves so that Earth can gain vital help.

As Tymos leads the defending space fighters, Kryslie works to remove the Ciriote devices from prominent humans and in doing so, becomes infected. For as long as she can, she resists the pull of the devices and hides her condition from her brother. When she is convicted of treason, and the Tymoreans repudiate her, she still strives to hold to her vow - to serve the cause of peace 'to death and beyond'.

Great One Tymos, bereft by the severing of the deep twin bond, is flung into the depths of grief. The link which had been his greatest strength, is now his weakest point. Can he once again take up the burden of Great One, and guide Earth's recovery from the invasion?

[The Wild One](#) - She was human, Jai Cassidy insisted, no matter what the creepy lizard-like Atapi claimed. Understanding their barbaric language, in her head, must be a human talent.

How could they be her kin? How could escaping from some perverted monster who thought she was a vulnerable female, or rescuing a helpless child from death make her a traitor?

Having fled the restrictive expectations of her own family, Jai was not willing to stay a captive of the Atapi Sorcerer. She uses her natural perversity and cunning to escape, but this catapults her into the middle of a feud between the Atapi and their deadliest enemies, the Kumatan.

At least the Kumatan Slave Master owed her for saving his son, and despite her mixed blood, willing to keep her alive.

In the hidden Kumatan village, despite the prejudice of the Kumatan and the provocation of the captured Atapi slaves, Jai tries to maintain her human bred values. As she learns more about herself and her unknown biological mother, she realises that she has inherited her mother's talent for sorcery and was conceived in the hope of changing the Atapi's barbaric nature.

Before she can even imagine what that means, Jai must overcome the Sorcerer using only her human guile and stubbornness.

Even when the sorcerer was dead, Jai wasn't free. Now she was suddenly responsible for all the surviving Atapi. She was their new Sorcerer, and now the Kumatan had more reason than before to want to neutralise her power. They had a duty to protect Earth's innocents from Atapi sorcery.

Though she proclaims her humanity, the Kumatan intend to take her to Korvu when they return. Her destiny is there, but to be free to act Jai must master her own talents and escape the Kumatan.