

# OGATU

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# PROLOGUE

Millennia ago, when dinosaurs walked Earth and man was just beginning to climb out of the sludge, the Scather civilization flourished. Seekers of knowledge in all its forms, the Elders, rulers of Skathia, expanded their minds as far as possible within the limited confines of their galaxy. Ever searching, they went out to other galaxies to continue their quest for knowledge. So insatiable was their thirst, so driven and focused were their minds that they began to ignore what they considered the boring and unimportant duties in life. Duties such as building cities, growing crops and processing food were suddenly unimportant. In time the Elders ceased doing all physical labor of any kind. To the Elders, the search for and attainment of knowledge was more important than anything.

So, to free themselves of these insipid responsibilities they applied some of the vast knowledge they had gathered; DNA from the far parts of the galaxy were combined and used to create a race of mindless creatures. Creatures that would do the physical labor the Scathers felt beneath them. Unconcerned by the morality of this; the Scathers rationalized that these were merely 'flesh and blood' robots. In order to be cost efficient the Scathers designed their 'robots' with the ability to procreate; thus guaranteeing that there would always be a fresh supply of workers. They called them Ogatu; and for centuries the Scathers used these workers in maintaining their society.

But, for all their super-intelligence, the Scathers failed to remember one basic truth; all living organisms grow and evolve with each generation. After sixteen hundred years under the Scather's mentoring, a portion of the Ogatu became aware and began to learn; and what they learned they did not like. Their so-called Masters were not the great beneficial Gods they had thought them to be. They were cruel emotionless slave drivers who used these poor creatures, as though they were animals. Those who understood hid themselves from the eyes of their Scather masters. They began to study them - and their spaceships. In time their eyes were opened to the world around them; and soon followed the desire to be free. Free themselves they did, to the total surprise of their masters. Insanely raging at the insolence of these 'animals', the Scathers vowed to hunt them down.

On the run for a century, the Ogatu finally found and settled on a planet two galaxies away. They lived in peace and prospered; but knowing their former masters as they did, they prepared for what they knew would come. When the Scathers finally found them they attacked with a ferocity unheard of only to find themselves on the receiving end of same. The Scathers took a terrible beating at the hands of what they considered inferior beings. Astonished and frustrated at not being able to destroy these 'animals', the Scathers took out their fury on all who had helped them - destroying planets and murdering millions in the process. These heinous and unspeakable acts were seared into the mind of every Ogatu. They fully realized the price of friendship with other worlds. To prevent a repetition of this ever occurring again they cut themselves off and refused contact with all Outsiders.

Even so, the Scather Elders' hatred went beyond all reason. They say there is a fine line between genius and insanity; the Elders sailed over this line without even the slightest thought as to whether it was right or wrong. They simply could not accept the Ogatu as sentient beings; nor would they allow them to exist.

**So they began a project that would insure the total annihilation of their enemy. Taking DNA from several worlds, they combined these to make a smaller, more lethal version of Ogatu. An army of this prototype would be programmed and used to infiltrate and attack the hated Ogatu on their home world.**

**Fortunately their plan was never completed; for at the height of their experiment, when the fruition of all their work was about to bear fruit, a mysterious ship dropped out of hyperdrive. Larger than anything in the known universe it de-cloaked above the asteroid belt where the Scathers had hidden their secret lab. Without warning the ship obliterated the entire asteroid belt, the facility included. When the dust cleared all that was left were small boulders drifting in space.**

**The Scathers never again attempted to play God.**

**Twenty-four years later an Earth ship on a mission of discovery came upon the colorful green planet and attempted contact. After many hails the 'Earthers' received a rather curt answer from the planet telling them to leave the area; the inhabitants wanted no contact with 'Outsiders'.**

**The Ogatu did not know that the tenacity of the earthmen equaled their own.**

**A standing order was set in place by the Space Guild that any passing ships were to attempt hailing the planet. And that's the way it continued until forces came into play, which caught the attention of Commander Duncan Wayside's ship, the Phoenix.**

**After that everything changed.**

# CONTACT

**Commander Duncan Wayside was a hard man to serve under. Standing 6'3" in a taut muscled frame; his tan face belied his 44 years. His reddish-brown hair was slightly graying at the temples, and he wore it long, tied at the base of the neck. He did not follow what he considered 'silly' rules and regulations onboard his ship. He did however stress discipline in performance of one's duties, and proper conduct towards one's fellow shipmate; male or female. He had a personal policy of acknowledging all in his command and could call each man or woman by name. He took great care of his crew; worked along side them, ate with them, and fought with them. On his ship, it was the united effort of all that made the difference and paid off many times over. The Phoenix was sought out by many to serve on; but only the best made it to her decks.**

**Once she had been the finest battle cruiser of the fleet, the Nelson. At the Battle of Regis IV she had been all but blown apart; Duncan and his crew had barely survived themselves. Their refusal to give up had won the day, but the cost had been the ship herself. Maybe it was sentimentality, but Duncan could not give her up; not after the beating she took and the way she had kept going against all odds. He and his crew had asked for and received permission to refit her and bring her back on line. Duncan considered it a small reward for saving the World and quite possibly the Galaxy.**

**At Duncan's direction she was transformed into something else. His engineer, Chief Swanson, had gone to work on her and done things unheard of in engineering fields. He had reconfigured her engines and reshaped her warp drive; when he was finished she worked on two distinct levels. Her laser cannons were reshaped and rewired to work on a cycling wave; thus producing a beam that could cut thru any known material. He also reworked her proton cannons and gave them an extra 'kick', as he liked to put it. She was faster than anything in the fleet, and much more maneuverable. Her shields were laid out in layers around the ship and operated on an oscillating frequency. As a result, she was impenetrable, the only ship of her kind. Duncan renamed her the Phoenix, a fitting name for the noble lady he thought, beautiful and deadly.**

**In the five years since being re-commissioned the Phoenix had been exploring new worlds as a representative of the Guild. Duncan and his crew had become very adept at diplomacy and all it entailed. The ship had begun a Library of sorts and he filled it with the knowledge they discovered on these journeys. Each planet was catalogued, their people and their customs, their languages, history, and technology. The work was very exciting and the crew of the Phoenix learned to expect anything on each new world they made contact with.**

**Sontui , a green rain-forested planet turned out to be a favorite planet of the crew; its inhabitants were a peaceful reptilian-like race that loved to party. There was always some kind of 'event' going on, and the lovely females of this world seemed to be fascinated with the 'Earthers', and their mating rituals. Needless to say, the crew was very accommodating, thus making the Phoenix always a welcomed guest. This was not always so with other visitors.**

Duncan had made a strong friendship with Tua, one of the scientific leaders of Sontui. They shared a love of Rhouku, a chess-like game and he enjoyed matching strategy with her. During these games they had many discussions about the different worlds in the area. She would describe the inhabitants and their customs in great detail, and Duncan would commit all to his famous memory for later recording.

Tua was quite beautiful in her own way, and very intelligent. Her sleek blue-green skin was soft and sensual to the touch. Her form was lithe and Duncan found, very similar to Earth females. She had ample breasts and a trim waist, and a long sleek tail that could perform miracles. She was extremely sensual in everything she did.

Now to be honest, not all their time together was spent on talk. Tua was definitely interested in Duncan and made no bones about it. They joked about it on many an occasion, but one time she made an overt advance; one which Duncan knew he could not ignore. To her surprise he happily complied and 'jumped in' so to speak, sweeping her off her feet. By the time he was finished he had actually gotten her to 'sing'; a feat no other had ever accomplished. As a result many of the females sought him out and would give him no peace until Tua stepped in and declared Duncan her 'claim'. Their friendship endured right up to the present, and she still sought out his company whenever their ship returned to the planet.

In their many discussions Duncan learned that her knowledge included the Green Planet. The Sontuians had made brief contact, but were told that contact with 'Outsiders' was not wanted. Tua explained that no one had ever landed on that planet (that she knew of), and no one had ever even seen the inhabitants. The leaders of Sontui all agreed it was best to give the Green Planet a wide berth.

She did recall however, that once, about fifty years ago, there was a report of some kind of battle going on near their planet. It was very fierce and many ships were destroyed on both sides. The inhabitants of the Green Planet were fighting off an attack by Scathers, an ancient race of insect-like beings; a very unpleasant race she added. Usually the Scathers stayed in their Galaxy and did not venture beyond - except where the Green Planet was concerned. There seemed to be some kind of unholy war between the two, and no one in the Galaxy wanted to get involved in it.

She relayed that one Aquarian Captain told her of an encounter he was witness to. A Scather ship crossed paths in space with a sleek Silver ship. Reaction was swift and deadly on the part of both, but the Scather ship lost and was utterly destroyed in seconds. Other than that, no one had heard anything from either side for several years now. She often wondered if they had killed themselves off.

**Eighteen months later, and well into the third week of a game of cat and mouse, Duncan was losing his patience; weary of playing. Something was showing up on their screens as a quick ‘blip’ and then disappearing. Every hour or so it would register for a nano-second and disappear just as quickly. Something was hiding out there, and it was acutely aware that it was being shadowed by the Phoenix. It had led the Phoenix to a nearby asteroid belt and quickly disappeared among the large spinning rocks.**

**Only four parsecs from the ‘Green World’, Duncan made the decision to ignore the standing order of ‘contact’ and forego any attempt. Yet he couldn’t help but notice the path of their ‘ghost’ ship. Duncan rose and went up to the navigation bridge and looked at the map laid out before him.**

*Our friend showed up here, he thought to himself as he traced the way with his finger and followed the track. Hmm... Lets see where you are headed my elusive friend.*  
**Duncan followed the track and quickly saw that he was right, the ship was slowly making its way towards the Green Planet. Well now, isn’t this interesting?**

**“Sir,” his concentration was broken and he was brought back to the present. The tactical sensor navigator continued; “we have company, big company,” the last said with emphasis.**

**Duncan’s senses immediately went on alert. He went to the sensor display and watched the screen as a large blip appeared.**

**“They just came out of warp sir,” said Lt. Plummer, the sensor operator. “They’re cloaked, but not effectively so. I think they want us to see them; they appear to be very interested in our elusive quarry.”**

**“On screen,” ordered Duncan returning to the Captains chair.**

**The alien ship de-cloaked and was like nothing they had ever seen. Shaped like a series of large balls stuck together on a long sleek pipe. Reddish in color, it had a series of thick cables linking the balls together. Although bulky in appearance, it glided through the asteroid belt with surprising ease.**

**“Sir,” the navigation pilot asked, “do you want us to follow it in?”**

**“Let’s just watch for a moment Ensign Cooper,” Duncan answered, “slowly bring us about for the best advantage should things get nasty, but not close.” Duncan hit a button on his console and the comlink came on line, “Alexei, report to the bridge.”**

**A few minutes later the door slid open and Alexei stepped onto the bridge. Tall and wiry, his muscled frame was often overlooked. He was the ship’s Tactical & Security Officer. His sandy brown hair was worn long, often in a thick braid at the back of his neck. His chiseled Nordic features and charming wit were a favorite with the ladies; but his pretty-boy features and charming personality hid a razor-sharp mind. He was extremely intelligent and had a photographic memory; nothing got by his keen eye.**



His favorite past time was Chess; he loved outsmarting the computer when they played. The A.I. was not too fond of playing him. His intuitive mind proved itself many times over in saving the Phoenix and her crew. He quickly looked around taking everything in; and then went directly to Duncan.

“Ah, I see our company has finally revealed itself,” he said surveying the screen before them. “I knew there was another ship out there; it was obvious our small ‘ghost’ was being chased.”

Duncan filled him in on all that had been taking place in the previous hours. Alexei listened to every detail and asked a few questions.

“So, what do you think?” asked Duncan knowing full well that Alexei had already made his own deductions.

Just then the large ship fired into the asteroid belt and their elusive quarry was suddenly very visible. The small ship darted between the larger asteroids trying to evade the continuing fire.

“I would say if that ship wanted to, it could destroy that puny little craft quite easily. I would also venture to guess that they are after whatever is in the smaller ship.” Alexei answered and added, “...and they want it alive.”

“I’ve been doing some calculations of my own,” began Duncan, “our friend out there hasn’t changed course. I’ve got a pretty good hunch I know where he’s headed.”

Alexei knew from experience that Duncan’s hunches were not to be ignored, “Go ahead,” he urged.

“I think that whoever or whatever is in that ship, is trying to get to the Green Planet. We’ve been following it for weeks, and in all that time it has not deviated one bit from its main direction.” Duncan watched the screen and then continued, “This might be a chance for first contact; that is if we intervene.” He looked at Alexei and grinned, “What say you?”

“It’s a risk Duncan; but the payoff, whew, it would outweigh the risk. I believe we are faster than our cloaked ‘friends’; and I would say evenly gunned.” Alexei stared at Duncan and then a smirk played its way across his face; “Only question left to be answered is, who is doing the chasing?”

Their question was answered suddenly when the large vessel hailed them.

“Sir,” called the communications officer, “they’re hailing us.”

“Shields,” ordered Duncan quickly.

“Alexei, I want you on this, listen carefully and give me your impressions. Everyone behind me move out of the viewers scan.”

**“Ok, put it on screen Lt. Womack,” ordered Duncan, “narrow band on their end.” Duncan didn’t want his unknown adversary to see anymore than was necessary.**

**Alexei whispered quickly, “Short concise answers to their questions, Duncan.”**

**The being on the screen was unlike anything that the Phoenix and her crew had ever encountered. They were insectoid, Duncan guessed, similar to giant ants or termites; maybe even a close relative of the mantis, but in trimmer bodies. From what they could see, the ship had a honeycombed like interior... very unsettling. There were several of the things in the background at long consoles with flashing lights, and a screen showing the Phoenix and her interior.**

**“I am Commander Duncan Wayside of...” Duncan began and was interrupted almost immediately.**

**“Earther,” the creature spat out the word in a whisper-like voice, “we have no quarrel with you or your kind. This matter does not concern you.” There was a series of clicks and then a brisk order, “It would be wise for you to leave this area and not interfere.”**

**Duncan quickly replied, “Sir, we do not take lightly...” The screen went dark.**

**Duncan looked at Alexei who smirked and said, “Bad-guys... definitely!”**

**Lt. Plummer warned, “They’re powering their weapons Commander.”**

**A blast shot out of the ship and obliterated several of the asteroids in the belt. The small ship suddenly increased its speed and made a run for a planet on the outside of the belt. The larger ship was having difficulty following the smaller faster vessel out of the asteroid belt. They sent out several missiles and one sideswiped the smaller ship’s engines, slowing it down considerably. It began to emit black smoke as it made a beeline for a landing on the desolate planet. Two scout ships exited the large ship and pursued it.**

**“What planet is that,” asked Duncan quickly.**

**“Sir,” called Lt Skaggs, a newcomer manning the com-center, “I believe the smaller ship sent a message, sir. It was very fast, but I’m sure of it.”**

**“Thank-you Lt Skaggs;” Duncan looked around the bridge, “I want to know what planet that is out there... does anybody know?” he raised his voice slightly.**

**“R-421 sir,” said a shaky-voiced Lt. Womack.**

**“Calmly Lieutenant, take a breath,” Duncan said in an even voice.**

**“Sir, it’s a dead world sir; what’s left of a civilization that nuked itself out of existence; potentially dangerous for us. Low level radiation is still emitted from the ground; inhabited by mutants; cannibals sir.”**

**“Hmm... Ensign Cooper, lay in a course for that planet. Alexei, I leave this in your capable hands. If our insect friends make a move, engage them.” Duncan ordered as he gave up the Captain’s chair to him.**

**“And just where the hell are you going,” Alexei asked, already guessing.**

**“Why, to make contact of course,” laughed Duncan as he left the bridge.**

**He entered the elevator tube and headed for the docking bay. He made one call on the intercom; he had no intention of going down to that planet unarmed. Rayne was waiting for him when he entered the dock.**

**“You know it’s very inhospitable...” Rayne said sardonically, “We might not have much time down there before the inhabitants zero in on us. From what I understand they are very aggressive; and they eat what they catch.”**

**“I have a feeling that you would stick in their throats; besides this won’t take much time,” Duncan answered climbing into the runabout.**

**“And if company shows up?” Rayne asked.**

**“I am sure you and K’nada can handle it,” Duncan said smiling into her violet eyes and patting the sword she carried across her back.**

**“I think I’m being used again,” she commented dryly as she climbed into the runabout and strapped herself in.**

**Duncan did the same and then checked all the systems. He pushed a button and the small craft came to life.**

**“Duncan,” she leaned forward and held on to his shoulder, “you really think he’s trying to get to the Green Planet?”**

**“Yes I do, and those bugs are very anxious to prevent that from happening. They want to take him alive, and for some reason they’re willing to sacrifice a few lives to get him.”**

**Duncan gave the all clear and the docking bay doors slid open and the small ship rose up and then descended thru the opening and headed towards the dark brown, dry, dusty planet.**

**“He certainly knows how to fly that ship, managed to out-maneuver two of the scout ships.” Rayne noted, “Look, he forced one of them into an asteroid where it blew up.”**

**Duncan threw a couple of switches and the runabout entered the thin atmosphere of R-421. “They could have pulverized that small ship, but they didn’t.”**

Scanning the land below Rayne saw where the ship had crash-landed.  
“Ah, I found him, there's his ship; he's injured Duncan, dragging himself towards a cave. Damn, all this noise is bound to catch the attention of the inhabitants.”  
She kept up a running commentary keeping him informed as he brought the small craft down on the other side of the mountain.  
“The bugs landed near the crashed vessel; six of the ugly critters are looking for our ‘friend’.” Rayne spit and cursed, “Katala!”

Surprise showed on Duncan's face, Rayne rarely showed emotion at all.

“The Eloi do not like the insectoid species; refused to do business with them; said they were very dangerous and untrustworthy,” she explained. “I don't think they know which way he went... ah, no they don't. See, now they're heading in the opposite direction, towards a gorge with caves running up and down its length. Another group is headed for the other side of the mountain.”

Duncan adjusted his helmet and checked his gloves, “Fifteen minutes you say?”

Rayne removed K'nada from his case and held him in front of her.  
*We dance again old friend*, she whispered almost reverently then slid him in a holder that was made especially for her space suit.

“Do you think they know we are here?” Duncan asked no one in particular.

“We are not a credible threat to them yet, so they will ignore us.” Rayne explained as she and Duncan left the runabout and headed up the ravine towards the large cave.  
“They'll ignore us until we get in their way, or create a problem for them; and then it's anybody's guess.”

Once inside the large cave Duncan quickly scanned the back wall, “You stay here at the entrance, out of sight if possible,” Duncan turned and flipped on his helmet light, “I'm going to say hello to our friend.”

“Make it fast, I don't fancy being lunch...” she said as she watched him descend deeper into the cave.

Duncan headed towards the interior of the cave as quietly as possible, listening to every sound. The rock was grayish and dull, almost like granite. There were several twists and turns on a downward slant and then a long almost straight pathway that appeared to lead to a large open area. As he rounded the corner he heard it; a scuffle of some sort further ahead, and a grunting sound. He headed towards the sound and rounded a large boulder just in time to see three of the insectoids fighting with their unknown quarry. They had him pinned on the ground and one was kicking his injured leg. Duncan took out his stunner, set it on high, and stepped into the opening.

“Three against one,” he said sarcastically, “now that’s just not a fair fight boys.”

The creatures turned their heads in surprise at the sound of his voice, just as he fired. Two of the bug-like creatures fell; the third leaped up onto a ledge startling Duncan for a split second; then he fired again. Two more suddenly appeared and too late Duncan realized that there was another opening into the cave, on the backside of the mountain. They were on him in seconds. Duncan managed to stun one and was wrestling with the other bug when two more jumpers came in. The large one slammed him good, knocking the air out of him. He was pinned by four of its legs when the injured man took out a small scythe-like blade and swiftly sliced thru its midsection. It fell with a loud thud, oozing gray-green blood all over Duncan’s spacesuit. The last bug ran for the opening as Duncan rolled and grabbed his stunner and stopped him. The ‘man’ shakily stood and looked towards Duncan in surprise.

“Thank you for your assistance Earther,” he said in a gruff voice, “but his friends will be coming shortly, in far greater numbers. I suggest we leave the area quickly.”

“My sentiments exactly,” answered Duncan as he quickly looked the ‘man’ over.

His helmet was darkened, so he couldn’t see his face. As he stood up, he towered over Duncan by at least four or five inches. He had two legs, two arms, and his space gloves had five fingers. Duncan could see there was an open wound on his leg as dark red blood was staining his suit and he was holding his side where the ribcage was located. Duncan stepped forward and offered his shoulder to aid him in standing. It was hesitantly accepted and they both turned and slowly retraced Duncan’s path from the cave entrance.

*Damn he’s heavy,* Duncan thought as he heard Rayne calling.

“We’ve got company, Commander; it appears three of the inhabitants are looking for a meal,” she reported in an emotionless voice.

As they rounded the last corner they saw the entrance before them; Rayne was taking K’nada out of his sheath. Duncan felt his burden stiffen for a moment as they watched. Rayne moved a step backward and took her stance; Duncan knew better than to continue for the moment.

“It would be wise to wait until Rayne is finished,” he told his burden, “it won’t be long.”

Both men watched as three large mutants filled the cave entrance. Faces and bodies misshapen, no doubt from constant exposure to the radiation of centuries past, they had several open oozing sores on their bodies. They barely resembled men anymore as they came at Rayne snarling and drooling. She backed up a step, turned and pirouetted in one graceful motion slicing thru the first creature.

She spun and vaulted into the air taking the arm off of the second one; it fell in a heap still clutching the club it had held. She landed lightly and leapt again; turning gracefully in mid-air she removed the head of the third, spun and landed on her feet. As she did so she swiftly took the head of the one-armed monster who was trying to stand again. Turning to the men she swept her hand towards the entrance.

“Gentlemen I suggest we get the hell out of here!”

Duncan moved forward as Rayne approached the other side of the injured man and offered her shoulder. He was hesitant at first but she grabbed him and began to move, so he allowed it. They headed down the mountain towards Duncan’s runabout.

Unknown to Duncan or Rayne, their unseen ‘friend’ was grinning at the display he had just witnessed.

On board the Phoenix, Alexei was busy himself. The insectoid ship was not too happy when Duncan’s runabout left the ship and had turned their guns on the Phoenix; though the shot was merely a warning, more like an admonishment by an adult to a small child misbehaving. Alexei answered it quickly and targeted their engines. Had he been able to observe, he would have seen surprise on the faces of the insectoids. Their ship was hit hard, their main engines thrown off-line; the large ship began to slow down. Clearly surprised by the swift action of the earth ship, they brought all their guns to bear on the Phoenix. Again they were unprepared; for the Phoenix’s unique maneuverability quickly allowed her to sidestep their laser cannons, thus further frustrating them.

“Sir, we have more company,” Lt Plummer called to Alexei. “A very large ship just came out of warp; and it’s headed straight for us,” his voice betrayed his fear.

“Another insect ship?” asked Alexei, obviously pissed.

“No sir, this, this one is very different.” Lt Plummer was giving Alexei a running commentary, “The Insectoid’s have spotted it; they’re trying to move away under impulse power.”

“On screen lieutenant,” Alexei ordered curious. The screen came to life showing a large sleek silver ship maneuvering itself between the Insectoids and the planet below.

“They’re hailing us sir,” said the lieutenant as he opened the Com-link.

**“Greetings Phoenix; we thank you for your aid to our Lord Tarak. It was most gracious of you, but be advised; this fight is between the Scathers and us. You must not get involved. It would also be best to get out of range quickly.”**

**“This is Captain Alexei, of the Phoenix,” he answered. “Thank you for the ‘heads-up’ warning; we shall move aside.”**

**The Phoenix quickly moved away and lined up closer to the sleek ship and the planet. The Insectoids ship was trying to flee the area, not getting anywhere fast as its main engines were still off-line. In desperation they fired a beam at the silver ship, but its shield took the brunt of the blast, and extended itself to cover the Phoenix. The Scathers fired twice more, to no avail. And then a beam shot out of the silver ship that was so bright, so intense, those on the Phoenix’s deck had to shield their eyes. When the beam ceased, and their vision returned, the Insectoid ship was nowhere to be seen.**

**Down below on the planet Duncan, Rayne, and their mysterious ‘quarry’ had made their way out of the cave and down to Duncan’s runabout when the injured man stopped.**

**“Halt humans, I am being hailed by my ship.”**

**His voice was deep and held a commanding quality to it. He was silent for a moment as if listening to someone.**

**“They have arrived and destroyed the Scather’s ship; they are sending a craft for me.” He disengaged himself from Duncan’s grip.**

**“I will not forget what you did,” he said as he took Duncan’s forearm and held it in an iron grip for a moment. Then he raised his dark shield and Duncan looked up into the face of his quarry for the first time.**

**Large almond-shaped hazel eyes stared back at him; honey colored fur about his face and head was all he could see. Duncan couldn’t see too much more inside the helmet. *Wolf-like, or is it cat-like; hard to tell,* Duncan thought to himself.**

**The man turned with great difficulty and bowed slightly to Rayne.**

**“Our Queen is also of the Warrior Clan. You have grace and great skill female; I am in your debt as well.”**

**Rayne, not missing a beat, bowed her head in return and looked up at him with her violet eyes and said softly, “It was my honor sir.”**

**For a moment Rayne swore she detected surprise in his eyes as he stared at her and then nodded. He turned to Duncan with a slight bow.**

**“Once I present myself to my Queen and give her the intelligence I have obtained, she may wish to thank you herself. May I ask that you to remain in this area for a short time?”**



**Duncan nodded, “May I ask who I am addressing? I am Duncan Wayside, Commander of the Guild ship, Phoenix.”**

**“I am Lord Tarak, First Order to Queen Naria,” he answered as he placed his hand across his heart and bowed slightly, “of what you humans call the ‘Green Planet’. Know you well by reputation do I; pleased I am to meet you in person.”**

**He smiled, at least Duncan thought it was a smile, and turned around and pointed above. “My ship comes for me, I bid you good hunting, and I hope to see you again Duncan Wayside.”**

**He slowly made his way towards the landing ship. Four men came out of the ship and quickly ran up the hill to his side. They half carried him to the ship and were soon gone.**

**Duncan and Rayne returned to the runabout and left the inhospitable planet far behind them. As they rose to the Phoenix, they got a good look at the sleek silver spaceship. It was unlike anything Duncan had ever seen. They docked with the Phoenix and saw Alexei waiting above for them on the docking bay ramp. They went thru decontamination, got an okay from medical, changed their clothing and left the medical bay. They climbed the stairway and found Alexei anxiously waiting at the top.**

**“So, did your hunch pay off,” he asked Duncan quickly.**

**Rayne walked by him, “Feline-wolf race,” she said as she walked off.**

**Alexei turned to Duncan, “Feline-wolf race?” he queried.**

**“From what I could tell, definitely wolf-like, maybe feline even,” Duncan replied. He filled Alexei in on what had happened in the cave and the reaction of their quarry as they made their way to the Captain’s quarters.**

**“So, they are in our debt,” he said. “They owe us, hmm...” Alexei was thinking. “... you are going to hang around as he asked?”**

**“What do you think,” Duncan smiled, “we may just get a chance to open a dialogue and eventually negotiations with them. Find out what is so special about that damn planet.”**

**“And our dearly departed bug friends,” Alexei looked at Duncan, eyebrows raised, “just what do you think they are going to do when they find out we had a part in the destruction of one of their vessels?”**



**“We’ll handle that when the time comes,” Duncan answered tersely. “I’m still going over what he said and the way he said it; very polite, especially to Rayne; seemed intrigued by her actions in the cave.”**

**“To Rayne,” Alexei asked in surprise.**

**“Yes, very solicitous, said his name was Lord Tarak,” Duncan thought more frowning his brow, “said he was First Order to the Queen. So that means he’s somebody important; maybe that will be something good for us.”**

**“Well I hope so,” said Alexei, “I wouldn’t want to be caught out here by a slew of those bug ships.”**

**“We’ll give it two weeks,” Duncan sighed, “after that we continue on our way.”**

Lord Tarak was taken to the Sword, the large silver ship that had destroyed the Scather's ship. Her Captain was waiting when they docked; concern on his face.

"Lord Tarak, you are injured; my sickbay has a very fine doctor. Let me escort you there."

"Thank you Captain Pittan, but I must return as fast as possible. The Queen must know of what I found." Tarak reached out and put his hand on the Captain's shoulder, "Please make your way home with all haste, it is of the utmost urgency."

"Yes my Lord," he replied as he went to the bulkhead and pressed a button on the intercom. "Bridge, this is the Captain, make for home quickly; all speed." Then he turned around and took Tarak's arm. "Now you will come with me to see the physician."

Tarak laughed, "Alright, alright, lead the way my friend."

Two hours later a small silver runabout left the large ship and made its way towards the planet. As it entered the atmosphere it cut its engines and extended its sleek wings at a wider angle and coasted towards the earth. It soared over the planet and made its way past the forest of stately 400-500 foot trees; past a large crystal clear lake, and continued on towards a city located on the edge of a mountain range.

The pilot flew like he had done this many times before. In fact he was part of a cadre of special fliers who had learned to soar the thermals of this planet. Their job was to ferry crews to and from the Sword, always a dangerous task if not skilled in the art of Soaring. The pilot lined the ship up and coasted to a landing on a strange looking runway. A huge hook caught a rounded bar on the rear of the craft easing it to a stop.

Lord Tarak stepped out of the ship with a temporary cast on his leg and two rather large men on each side. He was met by a delegation from the Queen and was immediately taken to the palace and the Queen's private chambers. With the aid of two of the Palace Guard's he was led into the large room. He was taken to a large chair and his leg was placed on a stool with several pillows underneath for comfort. The Queen rose when he entered, a sign of great respect, and there was obvious concern on her face.

Her beauty, and her resemblance to his late wife, Serena, always took Tarak by surprise. Her honey-colored fur, interspaced by streaks of white about her lovely face was where the resemblance was most striking. But where his late wife had been almost dainty in appearance, Queen Naria had a strong muscled body. She was a warrior no doubt, and yet she held a hint of regal grace and femininity that charmed all who met her. She swiftly made her way to his side.

**“My Lord,” she cooed to him, “we were most concerned for your welfare. Our heart would have been deeply saddened if we had lost you.”**

**“My Queen, you are too kind. It was my honor to serve you in this endeavor,” Tarak answered and winced as he tried to rise and bow.**

**“Nay my Lord, stay where you are,” the Queen came forward and laid her hand on his shoulder. “We all know of your loyalty and honor. We have been informed that you were injured badly; several cracked ribs besides the injury to your leg. We would have been greatly distressed to lose you...” her voice trailed off.**

**Sitting forwards quickly Lord Tarak tried to protest, “It is not too serious...”**

**Waving her hand she silenced him, “Do not pretend otherwise, you will be taken to medical and my Healers will see to your wounds. Do not argue on this matter.”**

**“But first my Queen,” Tarak reached under his armor and retrieved a disc, “Take this and give it to your scientists. I believe the information is vital to our world.”**

**She took the disc, turned and handed it to her Prime Minister, “Be off with you Gordon, learn what you can and report back to me.”**

**“Yes my Queen,” he said as he made a short bow and left the room quickly.**

**“Now my Lord Tarak, off to medical with you. We will continue this discussion later.” She bent and gently caressed the side of Tarak’s face with her hand and whispered, *“It’s good to have you back, my friend.”***

**She stepped back and motioned to her guards; they moved in and took hold of Tarak and carefully carried him to a large wheelchair. From there they took him to the medical wing of the great palace where the Queen’s Healers were waiting for him.**

A week later Queen Naria watched as Lord Tarak stiffly made his way into the conference room with the aid of a cane, (which she had sent him as a gift). He bowed slightly to her as he took his seat.

Her healers had informed her that he had suffered two laser burns to his lower back, three cracked ribs, and a definite break in his right leg. He also suffered a nasty cut to his left upper arm, and he had a deep lash across his shoulder blades that would leave a scar. He had been in a heated hand-to-hand fight just making his way to his ship. The journey home had been extremely difficult as he was in excruciating pain from his injuries. Had the humans not intervened, Lord Tarak would have succumbed to his enemies. Only now did Naria realize that the cost had almost been too dear to obtain this information.

Prime Minister Gordon, a large jovial man, leaned over and addressed him, “My Lord Tarak, you are looking rested and in much better spirits. Will your leg eventually heal?”

“Yes Prime Minister, a week on the cane will allow the bones to knit and heal fully. I thank you for your concern. Your wife, Lady Amela, visited me in medical and brought flowers from her Hesta garden; it was most thoughtful and greatly appreciated. I am sure the fragrance added to my healing. Please give her a special ‘Thank-you’, from me.” Tarak knew that Lady Amela prided herself on her beautiful garden.

“Thank you Lord Tarak, I shall do so this evening, she will delight in your graciousness.” The Prime Minister bowed to Lord Tarak and then cleared his throat, “Now, my brothers and sister, let us get down to business. The information you brought back my Lord confirms what we have suspected. The Scathers are arming for another try at invasion; this time they plan to use a biological weapon on us.” He looked about the room at the seven Lords, “If they fail to penetrate our defenses they plan to drop a powerful explosive device with the bio-virus built into it.”

There were a number of expletives from the assemble Lords at the table.

The Prime Minister sighed. “The fools still refuse to believe that their technology will not work on this planet. All they will succeed in doing is dropping another metal devise to the earth; and we will pick it up and put it with all the others in the lava pit.”

“There is no chance that the device would crack open and release this virus,” asked Lord Boras.

“We do not plan to give it a chance,” Lord Tarak answered quickly. “When they release the device, the Saber will target it and destroy it before it enters the atmosphere.”

The Queen sat up and asked, “And when they realize they have failed again? Will they direct their frustration and anger at the Earthers? Will they make their way to their world and destroy it as they did the others?”

She looked around the room at the seven Lords. There were seven regions, or Holds, on the planet; each ruled by a Lord, who looked to and oversaw the population in his care.

**Lord Dorsal** was master of Sea Hold; his people built the large fishing ships that fished the large seas and provided food for the different Holds. He also oversaw the shipping lanes of the planet.

**Lord Mantel** was master of Field Hold; his people saw to the planting and harvesting of the many different crops that fed the People. He also grew the grapes that provided the sweet wines of Aura.

**Lord Justin** was master of Tailor Hold; his people provided clothing for the population; seamstresses and tailors for the different Holds.

**Lord Gustav** was master of Knowledge Hold; he kept the Hall of Records of the People and provided the teachers for the different Holds. He was the Keeper of the Laws and he also manned the Grand Library.

**Lord Nardo** was master of the Medical & Science Hold; his people trained those in the art of healing and medicine, and the application of same. The other half of his Hold was dedicated to the study of the sciences of the universe.

**Lord Tarak** was master of Security Hold; he and his people trained the warriors that protected Aura. He also trained the pilots that flew the starships, Sword and her sister ship, Saber. He was in charge of security for the planet.

**Lord Boras** was master of Armory Hold; his people were the mineworkers and makers of the swords and other arms used on the planet. They made many other things, but Boras was obsessed with arms.

“We all took an oath when we assumed leadership,” the Queen said looking about the room, “need I remind you what it said?” She stood, assuming her role as leader, “Never again will a world die because of us.” the Staff of Office rang loud as she stomped the floor. “Are we to allow this innocent world to be destroyed; simply because they helped Lord Tarak in ignorance of the situation?”

“Maybe the Scathers are unaware of the role they played,” said Lord Boras haughtily, “we may not need to get involved with Outsiders.”

Lord Tarak answered quickly, “When fired on they replied in kind, Boras; their Commander killed three of them while rescuing me. Oh, I think the Scathers know what their involvement was.”

“Then it is settled,” Queen Naria, said forcefully, “we must find a way to help this unsuspecting world. I shall instruct my scientists to try to come up with something.”

Turning to Lord Tarak she smiled, “Lord Tarak, I want you to invite this Duncan Wayside and the Lady Rayne to your Hold. I want you to show him around, answer his questions, tell him of our history. Find out what you can about their world and its people.”

The Queen walked about the table as she spoke, “I want you to get to know him, to see what kind of a man he is. Use your judgment as to how to best inform him of the danger his actions placed his world in.”

“I object!” Lord Boras rose and slammed his fist on the table. “The Law states no Outsiders on the planet.”

“I would think this situation falls under extenuating circumstances,” answered Lord Gustav, “it is not outside our covenant.”

“Lord Boras calm yourself,” cooed the Queen, “the human will be at Lord Tarak’s Hold and nowhere else. What is it you fear?”

“I fear no one, least of all a human,” Boras answered with disdain. “But I do fear contamination of their culture with ours. This will only lead to negotiations with his world, and then diplomats will want to come, and you know the rest. It has taken us a long time to reach where we are, and I don’t want our society influenced by another.”

“Do you not trust the intelligence of our own people? Do you not believe our resolve is strong enough than to allow ourselves to be influenced by another race?” Queen Naria spoke with great passion. “We have come far and endured many hardships, I do not think we are going to throw all we have away. Have faith in your people Lord Boras.”

“My Queen,” Boras stood and bowed, “please accept my apology for speaking in haste. I shall rely on your wisdom in this matter.” Turning to Lord Tarak he said, “I meant no harm Tarak; I know you are a man of utmost discretion.”

“No harm taken, Lord Boras,” Tarak nodded, but he filed away Boras’ words in his memory.

“My Lords, this meeting is adjourned.” The Queen struck the Staff of Office twice signaling the meeting was over. The Lords rose and began to leave the conference room.

Queen Naria caught Tarak’s eye, “Lord Tarak, please walk with me.”

Tarak came to her side and followed her into her private chambers, clicking his cane on the marble floor. They walked slowly and made sure all had left the room before speaking.

Once inside her quarters she turned and placed her hand on his arm, “My Lord,” and then more softly, “Tarak, handle this carefully. I believe Lord Boras is looking for an excuse to challenge me; he could become a problem. He is quite passionate in his feelings towards Outsiders; it borders almost on fanaticism. And of late, I find that I do not trust him.”

**“My Queen,” Tarak replied in a low voice, “Naria,” he said patting her hand, “I have not trusted Lord Boras for several years now. Not since I saw him torturing a captured Septack beast; he was almost delighting in the poor animal’s suffering.”**

**Naria’s furrowed brow indicated angry surprise.**

**Tarak continued, “That small dark side to his personality led me to believe that Lord Boras only shows a small part of his true self to any one person. He hides himself well - why the need I asked myself? I believe he has designs on your throne; but he is too much of a coward to take it openly. He could be dangerous if provoked”**

**“So we are in agreement then?” she studied Tarak’s face for a moment and then continued; “I can count on you for support if the time should come to call his honor into question.”**

**“Of course you can, Naria; you know that I trust your judgment,” he patted her arm gently and keened a low guttural purring sound. “But be very careful to surround yourself with loyal troops. I do not trust Boras in regards to your safety.” He sighed deeply and whispered, “I have no proof of any of what I suspect Naria; but he is not to be trusted.”**

**“That is a serious allegation to bring up, even in private company, Tarak.” Naria said.**

**“When I have proof I will place it before the Lords, along with Boras’s body.” Tarak smiled at Naria, “until then I will keep my own council on this matter. I mention it only to make you aware that your safety is my concern.”**

**“I thank you Lord Tarak for your council,” Naria smiled coyly; “I think I shall change my Palace Guards to include my female Order of Light Brigade.”**

**“A wise decision my Queen,” Tarak laughed and then cleared his throat; “Now, as to this Duncan Wayside; he has a reputation of being his own man. He is honest and forthright, can’t be bought. He gets straight to the point in discussions; I will not have to mince words with him.”**

**“And the female... is she really that good?” Naria raised her eyebrow and tilted her head coyly, “she certainly seems to have impressed you.”**

**“What I saw was astounding for one so small,” he answered soberly.**

“Commander to the Bridge, Commander Wayside to the Bridge,” came over the intercom.

Duncan put his coffee cup down and headed out of the Mess Hall. Alexei met him on his way to the Bridge. As Duncan stepped out of the lift the communications officer called to him.

“We’re being hailed Commander,” Lt Womack’s voice was raised, “they want to talk to you, sir.”

“Calm yourself Lt Womack,” he said as he went to the Captain chair. “Ok, put it on screen.”

Lord Tarak’s face appeared on the screen. “Commander Duncan, it is good to see you again. I trust you were not too badly injured in our recent encounter.”

“Lord Tarak, it is indeed a pleasure,” Duncan answered nodding slightly, “my wounds sir were nothing much, I was lucky. I hope your wounds were not too serious and have healed.” Duncan’s face showed no emotion.

Tarak nodded, “Thank you for your kind concern; I have been attended to and am on the mend. Commander, I should like to extend an invitation to you and Lady Rayne to visit my Hold. I must thank you properly for your assistance in my time of peril, and we have some matters to discuss concerning your world.”

Duncan chose his words carefully, “You do me great honor Lord Tarak. Lady Rayne and I would be delighted to visit you. If you will give me the coordinates...”

“That won’t be necessary Commander. Your ship would plummet to the earth the minute it passed thru our atmosphere. I will send a Glider for you in two of your hours.” He turned and motioned another man forward. “My First, Kai, will escort you to my Hold. By the way, it is very cold here so you best dress appropriately. I look forward to seeing you again; Tarak out.” The screen went dark.

“Well now,” Alexei began, “I see what you meant when you described them. They definitely have feline and wolf attributes, almost a mixture of the two species. And something else mixed in too I’ll bet; and you’re right, they are big.”

“And very polite in their speech patterns; did you notice?” Duncan replied.

“Yes, yes, but there was something else going on there. You have ‘matters to discuss’; now what do you suppose that is about?” Alexei’s mind was racing.

“I guess I’ll find out in two hours,” Duncan smiled. “Lt Womack, get me the Guild.”



Duncan spoke to the Space Guild and gave them a detailed rundown of what had taken place. To say they were overjoyed would be putting it mildly. They agreed that Duncan and Rayne should comply with the request, and asked that Duncan learn as much as possible about this new race and their world. They implied for him to use their fascination with Rayne as an advantage. Duncan sat back in his chair for a moment and wondered, *what is their fascination with Rayne?*

He left his quarters and headed for the gym where Rayne was working out. He halted for a moment, leaned against the wall and watched her. His thoughts drifting back to when he first made Rayne's acquaintance... it started with the Eloi...

The Eloi were a race of strange shape-shifting creatures, masters of illusion, and considered the finest assassins, and fiercest fighters in the Galaxy. Having nothing of value on their planet, they offered their services as assassins to the highest bidder. But even then, they were very discriminating about whom they served. For that reason alone the Gatonen, a nasty race of brutish thugs, hunted them for sport. To 'bag' one was considered a high honor by the Gatonen, who hunted them on their home world where the young Eloi were trained in their skills.

Passing by their planet on a routine mission, the Phoenix had picked up a strange energy reading. Duncan decided to investigate. He and five men landed on the planet to have a look around; it was a lush green world, similar to Earth's rain forests. Everything seemed quiet at first, but then they heard blasters off in the distance. Heading towards the sound they came upon two Gatonen firing at what look like a small child. Duncan tried to intervene but was told it was none of his business. That the creature he saw was not what he perceived; it was a shape-shifter, a killer, and it must be destroyed. Duncan studied the 'child' and made eye contact for a brief moment. What he saw in those eyes was a frightened panicked child; his gut told him that the Gatonen were lying. When they raised their weapons again and took aim at the child, Duncan quickly reacted and the Gatonen were no more.

The 'child' slid to the ground and began to whimper piteously. Duncan approached it and went down on one knee trying to comfort it. Suddenly, the 'forest' around him came alive with beings like nothing he had ever seen before. Long and graceful, silvery sparkles that took on a humanoid appearance; they formed a circle about him. One stepped forward, it seemed to blur in front of him. Duncan closed his eyes and rubbed them for a second. When he opened them, a tall beautiful raven-haired woman of about thirty-five stood in front of him. She thanked him for saving the 'child' and asked why he intervened with the Gatonen. Being a man of few words, Daniel replied that what the Gatonen were doing was wrong, and he could not allow it. She told him that because of his protective act, he would always be considered a friend of the Eloi.

Years had passed since that incident, so he was surprised when they hailed his ship and asked him to come down to the planet. They insisted he come alone as they had a matter of extreme importance to discuss with him. Curious, Duncan agreed, (against Alexei's advice), and took a shuttle down to the planet.

Once there they explained that some eighteen years ago a scientific vessel had crashed on their planet; the only survivor was a small baby. Normally they would have simply walked away and let nature take its course; but a female Eloi had just lost her child to poachers. She took pity on the baby and claimed her as her own. The nametag on the uniform of one of the dead bodies was Rayne. So they named the child Rayne and raised her in the Eloi fashion teaching her all they knew. She was now of adult age and needed to return to her people and learn their ways. They believed the girl was of human lineage. They asked Duncan to take her under his protection and teach her human ways. Eloi never ask for favors so Duncan considered it a mark of trust that they would request this of him.

What they brought him was a tall, 5'9", lithe young woman with a sweet face, curly red hair, and cat-like violet eyes. She was an unassuming beauty with a highly volatile personality. The Eloi instructed her to obey Duncan as she would her Teacher. Duncan soon found he had big trouble on his hands; the Eloi had indeed taught her well. She was a master at the art of illusion and had the ability to hide in plain sight; something the crew found very unnerving.

Duncan needed a way to harness her abilities and control her unpredictable nature. So he introduced her to the ancient way of the Samurai and their disciplined way of life; she took to it like a duck to water. Now, seven years later, she was a very poised, headstrong, young woman. Her worth had been proven many times over. (Duncan smiled) And he loved her like a daughter.

Duncan went into the Gym; he always enjoyed watching her go thru her routines; she was grace in motion. Her form was perfection, no fat on that body, just pure lean muscle. Each of her movements were flawless, she worked in time to her music, Gregorian chants combined with rock. Duncan almost laughed the first time he heard it, but after watching her, he understood; the music centered her.

"Rayne," he called to her, "we're going to take a little trip."

"Ah, they called," she said with a smile continuing her movements.

"Sure did, they requested I and 'Lady Rayne' visit their Hold."

She turned, parried and slugged him in the arm, "Lady Rayne may not want to go."

Without missing a beat he spun and shot out his leg and swept her off her feet. She went down in a thud, laughing. "You're getting good..."

"I've had a good teacher. Seriously, you know you want to go as badly as I do," Duncan assured her extending his hand. "They'll be here for us in two hours. Lord Tarak said it was very cold, so bundle up."

Rayne stood and grabbed a towel hanging on a bar, and wiped her sweaty face.

"Well then... Lady Rayne had better get ready; see you in an hour."

She was out the door with Duncan right behind her.

Duncan went to his quarters and packed a bag, he didn't know how long their visit would be, so he planned for three days. He picked some books from his private library, and also an Atlas showing their world. He grabbed some discs, but then put them back. Duncan went over everything in his mind that Lord Tarak had said; he suddenly smiled and got up and went to a cabinet and took a beautiful teak box and put it in his luggage. He discussed tactics with Alexei, and also transferred all the security codes over to him.

Two hours later the intercom buzzed, "Commander, we have a ship headed this way."

Duncan hit the intercom button, "Prepare for docking. Tell Alexei to meet me in the docking bay." Duncan grabbed his heavy coat and bag and headed for the bay.

Rayne was already there when he arrived. She was dressed in a long tan leather cloak with fur on the inside for warmth. She had on a long skirt and a turtleneck sweater and boots. Her long red hair was loose and laid about her face. Her violet eyes were flashing in anticipation; she looked almost cat-like herself.

Alexei was waiting for him, "Any last orders Commander?"

"Alexei, you can run this ship just as well as I can. Keep your eyes alert in case our buggy friends return."

There was a loud clang and all heads turned as the door to the hatch began turning.

Duncan addressed the docking crew, "Utmost courtesy men, these people pride themselves on being very polite."

The door opened and a tall, well-muscled, somewhat hairy being stepped out; he looked about the room slowly with cat-like eyes. The crew stared at the large man in astonishment. He was light brown, his fur (if that was what it was), was long about the head and shorter on the face area. He had a definite wolf-cat like face, with fewer whiskers than Tarak; maybe that comes with age, Duncan could only guess. His ears were similar to a wolf's; there was a definite mix of the two species. He had on a shirt with wide arms that narrowed at the wrist; the shirt wrapped about his trim waist and was held in place by a very wide belt. He wore breeches that were tucked into big heavy boots.

Duncan immediately thought; *he looks like a pirate from old earth movies.*

Duncan studied his face and recognized the man as the one he saw previously on the screen; Lord Tarak called him his First, his name was Kai. Duncan took a deep breath and stepped forward.

"Welcome to the Phoenix, First Kai, I thank you for coming for us." Duncan extended his hand and the startled man looked at him. Duncan took his forearm as Lord Tarak had done to him.

Recovering quickly the young man greeted Duncan, "Commander Duncan," he gripped his offered forearm, "I am truly honored to meet the man who dared do battle at my Lord Tarak's side. He has requested that I see you safely to our Hold." He bowed slightly.

Duncan nodded and then extended his hand to Rayne. She came to his side, eyes downcast. "May I present Lady Rayne of the Eloi."

Rayne raised her violet eyes and smiled slightly up at the large man. Shaken for a moment, Kai stared back at her with wide hazel blue eyes and made a sound like a loud guttural purr. He cleared his throat and bowed slightly, reaching for her hand as he did so. "My Lady, I am honored to meet one of the Warrior Clan," he took her hand and pressed it to his forehead.

Rayne raised her eyebrows up and down and made a face at Duncan over the bent man. When he stood she looked up at him and replied in a voice dripping with expectations, "I am honored to meet the First of Lord Tarak."

That seemed to please him to no end as his eyes widened even more and a smile played its way across his face. He turned towards the open docking door, "This way please, the Glider waits."

Duncan turned, saluted a goodbye to Alexei, and then followed the large man thru the hatch.

Lord Tarak had called it a Glider, but it was more like a cigar with a small engine. The inside was sleek with six large seats facing forward, two on each side and one in front. The pilot was seated at the command console on a platform one step up; in front of what was a large window spanning the front of the ship. It gave an unobstructed view of space. They were led to their seats and Duncan observed that they had reconfigured the seatbelts, as Duncan and Rayne were a lot smaller than their hosts.

Duncan was given one of the solo seats, and Rayne was seated directly behind him. Kai saw to their seatbelts and made sure they were properly fastened. He then took the seat next to Rayne and told the pilot they were ready.

The ship released the docking clamps and slowly moved away from the Phoenix; when she was about 500 feet out she turned and headed towards the Green Planet at a fast pace. Just before they entered the atmosphere the pilot cut the engines and extended huge 'wings' from each side of the ship. As they passed beyond the atmosphere they began to freefall, Duncan asked Kai to explain.

"It is really quite simple Commander; technology does not work on our planet. There are no scanners, no machines, no stunners," Kai turned to Lady Rayne and smiled, "nothing that operates on any kind of a power cell will work on our world."

"But you have space ships unlike anything I have ever seen," argued Duncan.

**“Yes we do, but they were created in space above the planet on a floating science laboratory;” Duncan began to protest but Kai held up his large hand, “it is cloaked Commander. There are a few things that do work; we have some electricity, which we obtain as your forefathers no doubt did, thru water energy. Small combustible engines power some vehicles, for shipping and hauling. But that is about it.”**

**“How have you managed for so long without technology,” asked a bewildered Duncan.**

**“We have what we need when we need it. The Scathers deny this; their egos are so great that they will not allow themselves to be bested by the likes of the Ogatu.” He held up his hand and made a fist thumping his chest, “That is what we call ourselves Commander; we are the Ogatu.” There was definite pride in that last statement.**

**“I have a million questions young man,” began Duncan.**

**“Sir, I have been told to tell you that my Lord Tarak will answer them all when we arrive.”**

**Rayne had been looking out the porthole by her seat as they were soaring to the planet below. She called and asked, “First Kai, please come here, I have some questions.”**

**Kai’s eyes flashed and he grinned, “I would be happy to answer them, Lady Rayne,” he said as he unclipped his seatbelt and moved to the seat next to her. He leaned forward and asked, “What do you wish to know my Lady?”**

**“We’re passing close to the forest that we see from space; over there,” she pointed, “I can tell even from here that those trees are gigantic, exactly how tall? Also they seem to be bunched together so that one cannot see into the forest itself. Is this for protection?”**

**“That is the Ohmu Forest,” he said leaning close to her as she looked out the window, “most are between 400 and 500 feet tall; and yes, they protect a city. We will pass by the other side, much closer, see there,” he pointed, “now look between the trees, towards the middle,” Kai leaned close.**

**Rayne leaned forward and looked.**

**“That is the Winter Hold of our Queen; no doubt you will meet soon.” He smiled as if knowing something they didn’t.**

**Rayne strained to see and then remembered her training. She relaxed and gradually she began to discern the difference between the large trunks of the trees. “It’s an optical illusion; there’s an entire city hidden in the trees,” she whispered excitedly. As they passed she got an even better look, there seemed to be two distinct levels hidden in the large trees. “It’s immense; and very well hidden.”**

**“Yes, actually there are two levels, the Queen’s Hold and the Winter Holds of the Lords are on the first level. They shield the People on the second level; where the homes of the rest of the population are located.”**

**“Winter Holds...” Rayne’s mind raced ahead; “I take it then that the winters here are very harsh.”**

**“Yes Lady Rayne, for three moons of our year the outer regions are too cold for any man to survive,” Kai explained. “The Holds are closed and everyone moves to Ohmu. Aura is a very beautiful world, but as with all worlds she has her seasons; and winter on Aura is the time when she renews herself.”**

**They glided past the forest and headed north passing over a large crystal clear lake. Rayne strained to look below. The water was so clear that from above one could see right down to the bottom. Several strange species of fish could be seen swimming about. “Duncan, look below,” she called excitedly, “isn’t it stunning!”**

**“That is Lucent Lake, the waters are clean and fresh and the fish are edible.” Kai continued with a running commentary on the different landmarks they passed over. Rayne admired a huge mountain range covered with flowers of various colors; commenting that it was beautiful in the sunlight; which seemed to please him very much.**

**Kai leaned forward and told Rayne, “If you look to your right, far out towards the horizon, you can just about make out the beginning of the Queen’s Hold, deep within the reeds.”**

**“Sir,” called the pilot, “I am about to line up for a landing, please make sure that everyone is safely seated and buckled in.”**

**Up ahead they could see a long runway coming into view. Duncan felt a small quiver beneath his seat as the pilot began turning a lever and he rightly guessed that the pilot was lowering the landing gear. The man was very adept and seemed to know his craft well; he had obviously done this many times before. Duncan thought they were coming in too fast, but the pilot did not seem to be worried. The craft came down and bounced once at the outer edge of the runway and then all of a sudden they were thrown forward as the tail hook was grabbed and the craft slowed.**

**Duncan turned to Rayne and winked as the craft jerked once. Just as suddenly they were released and the craft coasted to a landing dock and came to a stop. Duncan could see out a porthole that a group of men were waiting for them beyond a long walkway.**

**“I hope the ride was enjoyable Commander Duncan, Lady Rayne,” said the pilot as he stood up and bowed slightly.**

**“It was a thrilling ride sir,” said Rayne removing her seatbelt. She turned to the pilot and nodded, “thank you for the experience; you are a very skilled pilot.”**

**Duncan came forward to thank the pilot also, and Kai introduce him as Master Altar, one of the best pilots in the fleet. Duncan further praised his skill and the man was grinning from ear to ear at the praise he was receiving from these important guests of Lord Tarak.**

**Kai went towards the back of the craft and unlocked the door; there was a hiss and the door opened. Fresh, sweet, cold air rushed in.**

**“Commander Duncan, Lady Rayne, welcome to Aura. This way please,” he gestured and they followed him out of the craft.**

**They stepped out of the ship into very crisp cold air. The sky was a brilliant rich blue color, and the earth all around was a deep reddish-brown. Way off in the distance there appeared to be snow on the surrounding mountains. There were trees here as well, although they were not as tall as the ones in the Ohmu forest. There was a cold sweet smell to the air, but Duncan could see no flowers anywhere in view.**

**Kai led them down a long hallway and they came out into a large open area. It was almost a circle, with large stone arches all about curved inward; Lord Tarak was standing there waiting for them. Kai stopped, and then he stepped forward and bowed formally striking his chest with his large fist. Tarak turned and faced him.**

**Now that she could see him, Rayne’s eyes appreciated the sight before her. A tall man, very good looking, well proportioned, there’s hard muscle under that fur, if it is indeed fur. He carried himself with great authority and seemed to garner respect from the men around him.**

**“Lord Tarak, as you requested, may I present Commander Duncan and Lady Rayne from the Earth starship Phoenix.”**



Tarak stepped forward and bowed in return answering Kai's salute; he then turned to Duncan and held out his hand, "Duncan Wayside, Lady Rayne, on behalf of Queen Naria, I welcome you to Aura."

"Lord Tarak," Duncan began as he reached for his forearm and held it for a moment, "on behalf of the Space Guild, and the people of Earth, I am honored to be here."

Lord Tarak turned and bowed to Rayne, "Lady Rayne," he began as he took her hand and touched it to his forehead, "you grace us with your presence, and now that I can see you properly, with your beauty as well."

"Lord Tarak," Rayne nodded slightly, "such compliments shall make my head spin." She squeezed his arm slightly and gushed, "I must tell you that what I have seen of your world takes my breath away; it is truly beautiful. Your First Kai, has been very kind in answering our questions."

"Aha, you have very good taste Lady Rayne. Now come," he said heartily grabbing their arms, "we must be off to my Hold and a warm mug of Tesh. We do not want to be caught out on the plains after dark. Kai, will you escort Lady Rayne to the carriage while I walk with Commander Duncan."

"Yes, my Lord," Kai answered smiling.

He offered his arm and Rayne laid her hand on it as they walked towards an archway. It lead to a ramp going downward and at the bottom was a large carriage with two huge horse-like animals harnessed to the front of it.

"Oh they are magnificent," Rayne exclaimed as she went towards the front of the carriage.

"My Lady, no," Kai shouted running after her, "they are Hausa, wild and unpredictable, they do not take to people, other than their handlers."

Rayne stopped and stood in front of the animals. She closed her eyes and made a cooing sound and then a grunting noise. Both animals lowered their heads towards her sniffing. Before Kai could stop her she removed her gloves and reached up and patted their large noses. They neighed loudly and lowered their heads and nudged her gently, allowing her to pet their heads. Kai was stunned, as were the animal's handlers.

"Oh they are beautiful First Kai," she said in a soft breathless voice, "and I bet they're fast too."

"Lady Rayne they're very unpredictable," Kai insisted, "please come away."



By the look on his face, Rayne could see he was truly distressed; she took pity on him and followed him to the coach. He opened the door and held her hand as she climbed in. He took a seat beside her, pulled out a blanket and laid it across her lap.

“What were you thinking?” He admonished her in a tightly controlled voice, “Those beasts could have killed you.”

“They wouldn’t have hurt me Kai.” She smiled up at him and explained her reasoning, “It’s a matter of communication; just let them know you are not a threat. Just because they’re so large doesn’t necessarily mean that they’re aggressive; I find them to be very docile and gentle.”

“Lady Rayne, I am charged with your safe-keeping while you are here.” Kai laid his hand on her arm, “should anything befall you, I will be held accountable, with my life.”

Rayne looked into his hazel eyes and now understood his concern.

“First Kai, I am sorry that my behavior has distressed you so. From now on I promise not to do anything without consulting you first.” She patted his large hand, “There now, does that make you feel better?”

“Yes Lady Rayne, it does,” he said stony-faced, lost in her violet eyes.

From the walkway ramp Lord Tarak observed all of this with amusement. He looked at Duncan questioningly.

“Is she always this headstrong, and in possession of this remarkable ability?”

“Rayne is definitely one of a kind Lord Tarak,” Duncan decided not to say anything about Rayne’s origins just yet, “she has always had a special way with animals.”

“Very interesting,” he turned to Duncan, “wait till we arrive at my Hold, my guard Taks will no doubt catch her attention. Also, I must admit, my warriors are curious about this human female who managed to slay three of the mutants to save their Lord.”

“Well, Rayne does seem to create a bit of a stir when she and K’nada battle,” answered Duncan sarcastically.

“Ha!” Lord Tarak howled, “So it is true; she names her sword!” He stared at her for a long moment, and then suddenly nudged Duncan in the ribs, “She would be a fine catch for any man! See there, my First is quite taken with her.” He slapped Duncan on the back good-naturedly. “My men will be fighting with each other before long to get her favor.”

Duncan stopped him, “Hold on Lord Tarak, Rayne may excel in some areas, but she is not experienced in some of the other... complexities of life.” Duncan suddenly regretted not pushing Rayne to sample some of the pleasures of life. “She is not up for grabs.”

**“I understand your concern Lord Duncan; you are very protective towards her,” Lord Tarak laid his hand on Duncan’s shoulder, “it is only natural. But fear not, my First has no designs on her; he already has a mate and is quite smitten with her. As for my men; they will treat her with great respect.” He stopped and turned, “Your fatherly concern is quite understandable; you have raised her well since the Eloi placed her in your care.”**

**Surprise showed on Duncan’s face, “Since... you know about Rayne, and her origins?” Duncan quickly guessed that when they scanned his ship they must have scanned his computers as well.**

**Tarak smiled and nodded, “The Eloi are the finest fighters in the known galaxy. They trained her to perfection in the warrior mold, and you have taught her discipline and control; blend the two together and you get a deadly warrior. Ha, but now she must wade out into life and experience it first hand.”**

**Duncan started to protest but Lord Tarak laughed, “Ho, don’t be offended, we know all about every member of your crew. We scanned your ship’s computer when you first hailed us; it was very informative.” He chuckled and slapped Duncan’s back good-naturedly, “That is why you are here, we like your style, Duncan Wayside!”**

**They climbed into the large carriage and were off in a matter of minutes. Duncan’s mind was going over everything when he looked up and noticed the interaction between Rayne and Kai and Lord Tarak. Rayne was behaving totally unlike the person he knew. She was almost sultry and inviting in her actions and observations. Both men appeared to be enchanted with her. Duncan couldn’t figure it out, but he had to admit that as strange as it sounded - he felt a certain ease with these people.**

**Hours later Duncan was seated in a large comfortable chair in front of a huge raging fire. To say it was chilly on this world was an understatement. The warm drink and the warm fire helped his body and mood defrost.**

**Lord Tarak had been very gracious on the ride to his Hold. Though it was very cold for humans, (the blankets were a welcomed relief), Lord Tarak took their minds off the cold and pointed out the various vegetation and wild life they encountered on the journey, giving a detailed history of each. The large animals had started off at a slow gallop, but their speed increased until the coach was speeding along at a fast clip. Duncan could not help but notice that they were going in a constant upward direction. They went over many small mountains and thru many green valleys, but always in an upward direction. The red earth gave way to green vegetation in spotted areas, and after rounding a corner they came out onto a beautiful green grassy plain. Duncan could see farms off in the distance, large enclosed areas where farmhouse and barn were located, and fields of plantings laid out like the spokes of a wheel. Lord Tarak pointed out each and the crop they grew. Hours later they came over a rise and Duncan saw it off in the distance, a huge mountain mesa jutting up out of the earth with a walled city strategically placed on the top. The advantage of the Hold was obvious, surrounding areas could be observed for hundreds of miles in all directions.**

**“Welcome to Warrior’s Hold!” shouted Tarak above the clatter of the slowing carriage. “As a direct descended of one of the ‘First Ones’, it has been my family’s hearth for generations.” The last was spoken with great pride.**

**The carriage stopped in front of two enormous gates made of a wood unlike any Duncan had ever seen. The driver stood and took out a large horn and trumpeted twice. A few minutes later the large doors began to slowly open and the carriage proceeded through into the Hold.**

**Once inside, Duncan could see that it was city, a huge city with paved roads. Both he and Rayne leaned forward and peered out the carriage window. Their eyes took in many homes off small lanes; small gardens and parks nearby; shops off side streets closer to the main building. Colorful flags adorned large spires at each home; and beyond Duncan could see children running and playing. Rayne commented on this and both smiled; an observation that seemed to please Lord Tarak.**

**They came to the main house at the center back of the city and Duncan guessed correctly that this was the Lord Holders home. A dozen of Tarak’s men lined both sides of the walkway and Duncan noted the variety in their appearances. Some had thick black fur, some black and brown; and others still were brown and white. But all bore the same general features as Tarak.**

**The group was ushered thru the courtyard into Lord Tarak’s home and Duncan noted that all the warriors eyes were on Rayne as she passed by. He noted nods of approval passed silently among them.**

**As the party passed thru the great entry doors they found a female waiting in a large room just off the hallway, in front of a roaring fire. There were several chairs and sofas about the room, and large tapestries hanging on the walls. She came forward and Duncan finally got his first look at the female of this curious species.**

**To say she was beautiful was an understatement. She was a smaller version of the men and her face held soft, cat-like qualities; her hair was a soft blond-brown color about her lovely face. She had a high widow’s peak, and her hair began at this V-shaped forehead and flowed like a lion’s mane down her back. Most startling were her eyes; they were stunning almond-shaped violet orbs that absolutely held one mesmerized.**

***Her eyes are the same as Rayne’s, he thought.***

**She came towards Lord Tarak smiling, with a tray of large mugs.**

**“Ah Mistress Sera, you read my mind dear lady,” he said half-bowing. Turning to Duncan he continued, “Lord Duncan, Lady Rayne, I would like to present my House-Lady, Mistress Sera; she is also the mate of First Kai.”**

**Kai stepped forward and gently caressed the side of her face with his hand; Duncan could hear them exchanging soft purring sounds.**

**Duncan half bowed as Lord Tarak had done, “I am honored to meet you Mistress Sera; forgive me for staring, but your beauty quite takes my breath away.”**

There was an immediate low guttural growl from Kai as he spun around, hand on his sword.

“I meant no disrespect First Kai,” Duncan hastily explained, “In our culture it is considered high praise to compliment a woman on her beauty. I apologize if I have offended your wife.”

Kai stood down and stepped back immediately.

To Duncan’s surprise, a soft silky voice answered, “I thank the gracious Lord for his compliment; my mate has no reason to call you out as your remark was innocent.” Quickly changing the subject Mistress Sera added, “I am honored to meet those who came to my Lord’s defense, and I must admit, a little curious.”

Rayne chuckled and Duncan couldn’t help but smile at her remark.

Rayne looked up at her, “Forgive my boldness Mistress Sera; but I shall be happy to fill you in on all the details. I look forward to getting to know you better.”

Turning to Rayne, Mistress Sera smiled sweetly, “And I have been looking forward to meeting you also Lady Rayne,” she purred in a soft voice. “We will talk more later I am sure; right now you both need to freshen up and rest in your rooms.”

She held up a dainty hand, “No discussion, the air here is a thinner than you are used to, and you will need a short time to acclimate yourselves to it. We hope the rooms suit your needs. There is a warm mug of Tesh in each room, and I ordered the fires lit.” She smiled sweetly, “We will sup in three hours; we shall call for you then.”

*A real take-charge type, thought Duncan and Lord Tarak defers to her judgment.*

Turning to Kai, Mistress Sera asked, “First Kai, my mate, will you kindly show our guests the way to their rooms?”

Bowing politely he replied, “Of course Sera, I would be pleased to do so.”

Looking at Lord Tarak she said, “I have been cooking all day and am planning on having a succulent roasted Kuyou as the main course.”

Kai was heading for the large staircase when he quickly turned around, “Roasted Kuyou! Ah, nothing could keep me away from a meal like that. Sera, I hope you have enough, for my appetite is very large.”

She laughed softly and the tones seemed to echo about and caress Duncan’s ears. He found himself being drawn to the beautiful woman.

*The women here are something else, Duncan thought to himself grinning.*

Kai’s strong voice called to him and broke him from his daydream, “this way Lord Duncan.”

Lord Tarak could be heard chuckling loudly as they ascended the staircase.  
“What do you think Sera? Is she not a treasure?” Tarak was most unlike himself.

“She is so small,” Sera answered, “it is hard to believe she slew three of them, my Lord.”

“I wouldn’t believe it either if I hadn’t been there myself.” He sighed, “and she has a good demeanor about her.”

“Aha! So that is it, she has taken your eye and you are curious now.” Sera challenged him, “Best be careful my Lord, else she trap you with her strange earthly ways.”

Sera stared solemnly at Lord Tarak and then both burst out laughing.

“She is the one who should be afraid,” chuckled Tarak as he entered his study.

To say the rooms were huge was not an exaggeration; the Ogatu liked big open spaces, it was reflected in the architecture of all the buildings and the rooms. The bed could have held four humans very comfortably. And the fireplace Mistress Sera spoke of was raging when Duncan entered his room; but it was most welcome, as the cold seemed to permeate everything. Retrieving his journal, Duncan took time to immediately write down his first impressions on everything. He acknowledged that he felt completely at ease, and safe with these people. He also included his observations of Rayne’s interaction with Tarak and Kai. The warm drink, Tesh, was tasty and he guessed, intoxicating.

So here he was, sitting in front of the fire warming up and catching up on his notes. He began to go over everything since their arrival in his mind.

*The climate does not seem to bother Rayne in the least, but I must admit that the thin air had slowed me down at first. My body seems to have adjusted, and I noticed the air has a very sweet aroma about it.*

*On first impression this Lord Tarak seems to be a very open fellow; I find that I like him. He has indicated that the ruler here, Queen Naria, just might agree to see us.*

*Rayne has indicated a feeling of genuine openness by these people; apparently my action was the opening they needed to make contact.*

*Rayne has also indicated that she feels at complete ease here; on a side note; they seem to hold her in some high regard.*

*Lord Tarak has taken her to see his Taks, some kind of guard animal; and we all know Rayne and animals...! She will no doubt create a disturbance.*

Duncan closed his journal and leaned back, staring at the large Tapestry hanging above the fireplace. Considering their culture, to be hanging here in a place of honor meant it was very important. He began to study it carefully; *there’s a story here...* he thought to himself as he followed the pictorials woven into the material. He could see that great care was taken as to color and form.

As he gazed, a story began to unfold.

**Twelve hundred miles away, in a dark Hold built into the side of a rocky mountain Lord Boras was seething about the stranger's arrival.**

**"How dare she allow outsiders here!" he raged. "We have no need for contact with others; she oversteps her bounds; she goes too far!"**

**First Matai had never seen his Lord so enraged. True he complained about everything Queen Naria did, but even for him, this went beyond all bounds. He would have to warn the men that he was on a tear and keep them out of his way until he calmed down.**

**"Has there been any word from our spies?" Angrily Lord Boras raised his leather switch, which he always carried on his person, and tapped Matai.**

**"First Matai, I am talking to you," he snapped, "have we heard from our spy in Warrior's Hold yet?"**

**"No my Lord, he has not sent word yet," Matai hastily lied, "but I am expecting a message any time now."**

**"Inform me the minute you hear anything." He stormed off down the long hallway.**

**Matai breathed a sigh of relief. He only hoped the boy would send word soon. When he was first sent to Lord Tarak's Hold his messages were very descriptive and filled with much information. As time went on they became less and less so. Lately they were few and far between and filled with unimportant information.**

**Six months was way too long to be exposed to Lord Tarak's Hold.**

Lord Tarak led Lady Rayne and First Kai along a walkway that angled past the Warrior Quarters, and overlooked what was obviously their training arena. All the buildings were made of a concrete-wood blend that gave it a reddish tone to the eye. They were laid out in typical barracks formation. Below, in the arena, Rayne could see the different training areas. The archery range, with bows as large as her; swords lined up on a stand with shields that she doubted she could even lift. Strange-looking spears were lined up on the other end of the arena; spears that reminded her of the Assegai welded by the Zulu warriors of old Earth; only these were twice their size.

“This is where my warriors train to hone their skills,” Lord Tarak explained.

“Very interesting,” murmured Rayne, her eyes darting about the arena; “but who do they fight?”

“Scather raiding parties,” he replied, “every four or five months they show up and try to create as much havoc as possible. They are relentless and don’t seem to mind losing half of their force just landing on the planet; they are fanatical fools!”

“Or maybe misled fools...” Rayne murmured as she continued to follow him.

They continued on along the walkway until they came to a tall iron gate, (with several locks), that barred the walkway. Beyond, Rayne could see the walkway continued on around the entire Hold. There was no guards posted, and Rayne guessed why - the Taks; this was their territory.

“Please remain here for a moment Lady Rayne,” Lord Tarak ordered opening the gate and closing it behind him, “I will show you something even you will not believe.”

He walked some twenty feet further and suddenly two of the fiercest creatures she had ever seen were racing at him snarling and growling. They were the size of a cow but moved with speed and grace. They came at him baring their fangs. They were covered in black and white thick, thick fur; their ears were large and long wisps of white hair flowed from them. They had huge heads with piercing black eyes, and jaws that held rows of razor sharp teeth. Their legs were muscled and she could see sharp claws just above their paws. Used for tearing and rending their prey, she guessed. She stepped back and laid her hand on K’nada.

“That will not be necessary Lady Rayne,” First Kai said quickly, “just watch.”

Recognizing him they slowed and came up to Tarak with heads bowed and tails wagging, like large friendly dogs. Rayne watched fascinated; Tarak roughhoused with them, patting their sides and scratching their large heads and they responded by slobbering over him in friendly recognition. Rayne stepped closer to the gate smiling, she watched Lord Tarak with envy.



**“They are called Septaks,” Lord Tarak called to her noting the look in her eyes. “They are indigenous to this planet, and there is nothing fiercer or more deadly. If you can find one just after birth, and impress it when their eyes first open, you have a friend for life.”**

**First Kai added, “They have a heightened sense of smell and hearing, and they love the cold weather; they make perfect guards for the Hold.”**

**Rayne watched the animal’s interaction with Tarak and her face showed her enjoyment. She reached for the latch on the gate and Kai quickly laid his hand on hers stopping her.**

**“No Lady Rayne, they only respond to Lord Tarak,” he warned. “If you went in there; they would rip you apart in seconds.”**

**Disappointed, Rayne stepped back and looked over the gate at Lord Tarak just as he turned his head, smiled a wicked smile, and winked at her. Before Kai could move, Rayne took his dare and vaulted over the gate landing lightly on her feet.**

**The ‘Taks’ stiffened and raised their heads towards her. Their jowls retracted displaying a row of razor sharp teeth; they took a step and their claws suddenly appeared over their paws. The hair on their backs stood up as they advanced towards her growling.**

**Rayne stood her ground and slowly lowered to a crossed legged position.**

**The Taks came closer, growling in a deeper tone.**

**Rayne bent her head and began to keene in a soft lilting tone.**

**The animals cocked their heads to the side and listened.**

**Rayne began to rock back and forth continuing the sound.**

**They advanced another step, but they were no longer growling.**

**Lord Tarak watched in curious fascination, grinning, *just as I thought.***

**Rayne continued keening as the animals came closer and closer. Then one approached and began to sniff her head; the other followed suit when the first began to keene along with her. Pretty soon both were loudly keening with her. Rayne slowly lifted her head and stared into their yellow eyes holding their attention, still keening with them.**

**Tarak was nodding his head and smiling; Kai was watching with mouth agape.**

**Rayne slowly raised her hand and stroked the body of the one nearest her. It had thick wiry fur, and she could feel the taut muscles beneath. She moved her hand back and forth within the thick fur, all the while leaning her head against the large beast, keening softly. She continued to rub him and slowly made her way to its large head. Suddenly the first animal turned and licked her head and nudged her, knocking her over. She laughed and the animal lowered its head to her and made a sound like a bark. The second animal wanted to be a part of this so he came forward also and she repeated the same process with him. She received the same acknowledgement and soon both were slobbering all over her. She continued to pat their heads and keene to them as she slowly rose. It was then that she realized for the first time just how big they were; they came up to her chest.**



Excitedly, she turned and grinned at Tarak with such innocent joy that he was momentarily taken aback. And to his surprise, felt the beginnings of a stirring he had not felt in many years. Rayne threw her head back and laughed and stroked the animals without fear. Her bright red hair framed her glowing face causing Tarak to think of things he hadn't thought of in a very long time. The Taks were overjoyed at the extra attention, and they reacted to her favorably. She was not in the least bit afraid; for some reason Tarak was proud of that.

Tarak finally gave a signal and both animals ran to him. He gave them both a tidbit from a pouch at his side and then on a signal they both ran off down the walkway. He turned and led Rayne back thru the gate and locked it. Then he spun around and grabbed her.

“Ha-ha!” he shouted loudly, picking her up by the waist and swinging her around, “I knew you could do it! Your training does you justice little one!” Rayne laughed loudly with him.

Unknown to her at the time, the walls and windows around were filled with warriors watching the entire incident. None of them had ever dared approach the Lord's guards; their reputations for destruction were well known. Aware of Rayne's reputation, they were in awe of her abilities.

Suddenly there was a loud uproar as the warriors all yelled out a guttural shout of acceptance, stomping their feet and pounding their shields with their spears.

“U-WAH (stomp), U-WAH, (stomp) U-WAH!” resounded around the arena.

“They salute you, Lady Rayne,” explained Kai, “none of them would dare do what you just did.”

Rayne turned and scanned the entire surrounding area; then she stepped forward and bowed to the assembled group, striking her chest once, as she had seen First Kai do. At this small gesture they exploded in thunderous shouts once again. She turned to see Tarak smiling at her in a strange way.

“You have won the hearts of my warriors,” shouted Lord Tarak loudly, “nothing less than I would expect from one such as yourself.”

Duncan was deep in thought when they all entered the room laughing good-naturedly. He looked up and observed how Rayne was at complete ease with Tarak and Kai. *Almost like a family*, he thought. Rayne spotted him and rushed to his side.

“Duncan, you have to see these animals,” her excitement was obvious as she babbled on. He asked some questions and then she continued, “They are so fierce looking, but Duncan, they are just like great big puppy dogs. Oh and they are so beautiful; they have thick, thick fur, and big giant paws.” She rambled on until Mistress Sera called them to dinner.

They were ushered into the next room where there was a very large round table in the center of the room with chairs about it. The table was laden with all sorts of food, and Mistress Sera and another man, obviously a cook, were bringing the main dish into the room and placed it in the center of the table. Roasted Kuyou was similar to a side of beef being roasted on a pit and placed on a large tray. Mistress Sera took the seat between Kai and Lady Rayne. Lord Tarak sat between Duncan and Lady Rayne.

Lord Tarak stood, and Kai and Mistress Sera lowered their heads, Duncan and Rayne followed suit.

“We thank you Father of All for this sumptuous feast. We thank you for our new friends; may we embrace in understanding; By Your Leave...”

“...By Your Leave!” was echoed by Kai and Mistress Sera.

Mistress Sera stood and removed the large knife from the center of the meat and handed it to Lord Tarak. He stepped around the table to the Kuyou dish and began to slice the meat into large portions. Mistress Sera began to serve the other dishes with explanations of each.

“Now this,” she began holding a plate with one hand and a large spoon with the other, “is similar to your earth potato, we call it a Yumata tuber; we mash it also and sprinkle it with Tyra salt. Taste a small bit Lord Duncan,” she said handing Duncan a spoon of the Yumata.

Duncan tasted it, “... mmm, this is delicious, the spice is similar to our garlic,” he looked to Rayne, “try it Rayne, it’s very tasty.”

The meal was delicious; there was a dish similar to green beans, one almost like yellow squash and very tasty with a cinnamon flavor to it. A large loaf of ‘bread’ was served with honey and Duncan found himself enjoying it immensely. Water was served in huge crystal goblets and it was cold, sweet, and fresh. After the meal Duncan praised Mistress Sera saying he wished he had such a talented cook and could he steal her away from Lord Tarak. She seemed delighted at this but politely refused saying she would never leave Aura. But, she promised to give him some of the spice, Tyra, to take with him when he left.

At Lord Tarak's request, they adjourned to his study.

The study was typical of all study's - a large desk dominated the room; made of a wood similar to Teak wood from Earth. Simple and strong in design it had a huge chair to match. The walls were covered in bookcases filled with books, huge toms, on three of the walls in the room; they ran ceiling high. There were several other bookcases about the room, and large comfortable chairs. Duncan and Rayne each took a seat and waited for Lord Tarak to continue.

"Now down to business," he began, "after studying the data I brought back, Queen Naria, her scientists, and the Council have all decided that you must be informed of the danger which you may have placed your world in, Lord Duncan. Your act of compassion in helping me, and believe me I am very glad that you did intervene; but it may have placed you in a precarious situation."

"Please explain Lord Tarak," questioned Duncan.

"Retaliation," said Rayne quickly.

"Yes," answered Lord Tarak. Duncan looked at Rayne and then Lord Tarak. Tarak raised his hand and explained, "let me answer all your questions straightforwardly Lord Duncan in the easiest way possible."

"The Scathers are an ancient race; they are from a world far beyond this Galaxy. In fact it is beyond the next two Galaxies. They were seekers of knowledge; they traveled their Galaxy and then went beyond it to the next in their obsessive search for knowledge. So focused were they in their pursuit that they neglected their own world. Their time was taken up in the constant search for knowledge and the application of such. They used some of that gained knowledge to create a race of workers; mindless creatures that they could direct to do that which they found unimportant.

Using DNA collected from their many searches, they spliced genes together and created slave workers to do their mundane tasks. They gave them the ability to reproduce so they would have a constant supply on hand. But in their rush they forgot one thing. As with all creatures, large and small, generations of breeding will produce changes, and evolution of the species is inevitable.

Over time, a few of these so called 'mindless' creatures became aware. When the first creature spoke and asked 'why'; pandemonium reigned. At first it was an oddity that needed to be studied; but soon the Scathers began to see the far-reaching ramifications of this. In their emotionless intellect, they decided the best way to handle this new situation was to 'purge the herd' of these oddities. From then on, the Ogatu, as the Scathers called them, were purged every hundred years in hopes that the problem would not reappear. They neglected to purge the breeder females, considering them useless except as suppliers of fresh workers. Big mistake, (he chuckled), for you see it was the females of this species that evolved first; it was the females that understood what the Scathers were.

**“Fearing annihilation, the Ogatu females closed ranks and hid themselves from the laser pit and the eyes of their so-called, ‘Masters’. They alone saw the danger in speaking out, so they began to confer only with each other. They watched over each birth; sought out the little ones who showed an ability to learn, taught them and kept them well hidden. These children grew and in turn taught their offspring; generations went by, and with each, their intelligence and awareness grew. But it was the females who continued to evolve at a faster pace; secretly watching everything their Masters did.**

**It was always the females who pushed the others to learn - to be aware of the world around them. They taught themselves to read; and clandestinely plundered the Scather’s library for more knowledge. They read everything they could get their hands on and soon learned all about the world they lived in - and about their ‘Masters’. It was then they decided to flee this world; for you see, with this newfound knowledge came a strong desire to be free.**

**They discovered the docking bay and the Scather’s spaceships. Focusing their attention on the ship manuals, they taught themselves to pilot the giant spaceships. They found star charts and carefully studied them, learning of other planets and other galaxies. When their numbers reached 200 they knew that it was inevitable that the Sachers would find out about them. So they secretly made their plans and waited for the right opportunity to present itself.**

**The day came when the Scathers decided the herd was once again too large, and set plans in motion to purge half the Ogatu population. The females reluctantly decided to use this information - and the mindless ones. They knew how much these creatures feared the laser pit, so they whipped them up into a riotous frenzy, and in the inevitable panic that followed, made their way to the docking area and waited. When the Scathers came for the herd they were confronted by a mob of panicked Ogatu, and reinforcements had to be called to get them under control. This left the way open for the group to board a ship and take off.”**

**Lord Tarak took a long drink from his mug and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He looked at Duncan and Rayne and continued.**

**“Understand that over generations, the females had secretly studied all the books of the Scathers, learned all about their ships and how to operate them. They taught all of the advanced ones everything they learned; they prepared well in advance of this undertaking. When they left the Scather world, they knew exactly where they were headed...out of the Galaxy, and beyond. By the time the Scathers realized what had happened they were long gone.”**

**“And the reaction of the Scathers?” asked Duncan, already pretty sure of the answer.**

**“Their anger at what these few ‘upstarts’ had managed to do was terrible, even for them. They annihilated every Ogatu; every man, woman, and child that was left on their planet. That they dared to keep secret their advanced intellect, that they planned and executed an escape plan, was unacceptable. When they were finished they took to the stars and began to hunt them down.”**

Duncan looked at Kai, and then at Tarak, "...you are the descendants of these people."

"Yes Duncan, you are correct; we are the descendents of those original Ogatu. In the years that followed they hunted us mercilessly; but we were always one step ahead of them. We would stay for a short time on different worlds and then move on. We never stayed longer than twenty years on any one given planet. And we always tried to hide our existence from the planet's indigenous population.

"In the generations that followed we began to understand that those who ruled the Scather's society were truly insane, and would never give up. They simply could not allow themselves to believe that we were a sentient race. After all hadn't they created us out of spliced DNA? No, there was no way they would ever accept us as a sentient people."

"Two Galaxies away from our home world we found refuge on a small green planet." Lord Tarak smiled, "Agria, a beautiful world with mountains, lakes, and a peaceful gentle people. There was such beauty and peace on that planet. They allowed us to settle in the northern regions. Their chief scientist made friends with our leaders and after time he was told our story. He told us of this world, and assured us we could find lasting peace here. When we learned that the Scathers were in this Galaxy we knew what we had to do. We left Agria with our abiding thanks and made our way here."

Lord Tarak took a long breath and another long swig of his drink before continuing.

"One hundred fifty years after we left the Scathers found us. During that time we were not idle, we prepared well for their arrival. You see we had no doubts that they would continue the search until they found us. I will not go into details about the battle that ensued; it is sufficed to say we crushed them to dust."

"We could not, however, have imagined how this would affect them," continued Tarak. "Loosing to us drove them to new lengths of savagery, even for them." Tarak shook his head back and forth, "You see they took out their anger on the world that had helped us." Lord Tarak was silent for a moment. "Such a terrible, terrible waste; you can understand how deeply this affected us all."

Lord Tarak sat forward and stared at Duncan, "That world you found me on Commander Duncan; that was Agria." Tarak paused to allow this to sink in, Duncan's eyes went wide and his brow furrowed.

"To prevent that from ever happening again, we made a pact amongst all the Lord Holders that we would never again have anything to do with any Outsiders. Now do you understand Duncan, do you see what the Scathers are capable of?" Tarak rose and walked about the desk, "Queen Naria, her council, and I fear for your world, Duncan. We have our scientists working as we speak on something that we hope will protect it."

Duncan sat back and digested all that Lord Tarak had said. Deep in thought, he was oblivious to Lord Tarak rising and talking to him.

Rayne placed her hand on Tarak's arm, "Lord Tarak, he is deep in thought analyzing all you just said," she explained. "His mind is computing everything."

"Ah, I understand," Lord Tarak smiled at her, "you seem troubled Lady Rayne."

"I keep wondering why you didn't just destroy their world and be done with it? They are obviously insane; I mean to have carried this war on for so long; it makes no sense." Rayne shook her head. "You have the capability; why have you not put an end to this insanity?"

"Because little one, then we would be no better than them," Lord Tarak slammed his fist on the desk for effect, "and we are better. Besides, we have reason to believe that their population has been manipulated; we are pretty certain they do not know the truth."

Duncan stirred, "How much time do we have?" he asked in a tight voice.

Lord Tarak turned towards Duncan. "If they follow their usual pattern, six months at the least, a year at best," he replied solemnly.

"You understand Lord Tarak," Duncan said holding his gaze, "I must report all this to the Space Guild as soon as possible."

"We knew you would want to do so, but," Lord Tarak laid his hand on Duncan's shoulder, "give us a week Duncan, we should have a solution by then."

Duncan thought for a moment, weighing all the possible outcomes. His 'gut' told him that he could trust these people; if there were a way they would find it. He sighed, "All right, a week, but no more."

"Your thoughts," asked Lord Tarak scrutinizing his facial expression.

"As to your origins... I have no problem with it. You are a sentient race with a thriving society regardless of 'how' you came to be. I believe that you know how to handle these maniacs thru years of practice. I believe you are sincere in wanting to help us."

Duncan looked at Tarak and then cocked his head to the side and continued, "I think that it is their loss, and they are fools for not wanting to make peace with you."

Tarak was glad he was right in his judgment of this Duncan Wayside.

"From everything you said, these Scathers are very dangerous and extremely unpredictable. The Guild has quite a few ships out there, and I am concerned about our people running into an ambush. I would like to get a message out to warn them."

"We already thought of that Lord Duncan," added Kai quickly, "and we believe we can assist you with that problem."

Duncan turned to him, "In what way?"

**“We have a device that we can install on your ships that will increase the shield power to repel any Scather blast.” Kai turned to Lord Tarak and received an affirmative nod; “And we can also install a weapon that will destroy any Scather ship that attacks.”**

**“You seem to have thought of everything,” Duncan retorted stonily.**

**“Believe me Lord Duncan;” began Lord Tarak, “we truly regret that you were pulled into this. We have learned the hard way over the centuries to be ready for anything where the Scathers are concerned. We will do our best to find a way to protect your world.”**

**“I believe you Lord Tarak. And just for the record; knowing all this changes nothing. I would have still done the same thing,” Duncan struck his chest; “I never would have left you to their mercy.”**

**Tarak nodded and returned the salute.**

**Duncan smiled, “I will defer to your judgment where the Scathers are concerned.”**

**“Good! Now, let us retire for the evening,” Lord Tarak offered, “Our day starts early around here, tomorrow I will take you to the communications center and you can contact your ship, Lord Duncan.”**

**Kai excused himself and left the room. Rayne saw him link up with Mistress Sera in the hallway and then they both left, holding hands; she was smiling.**

**They returned to their rooms, and after going over their notes, Duncan said goodnight to Rayne and retired to his own room. He was more tired than he let himself admit and was soon sound asleep.**

**The next day was spent with Lord Tarak showing Duncan and Rayne around the Hold. They were very impressed with the obvious good will the people felt for their Lord. He was open and warm to all and praised many in their craft calling them by name. Duncan was very impressed with the different crafts that were displayed in the various shops especially considering that all were made by hand.**

**The Hold Stables housed about thirty of the beautiful Hausa, and while Duncan and Tarak engaged in conversation with the stable master, Rayne went to each offering the tubers from their feedbags. Master Seatac, the stable master, enjoyed answering her questions and explaining the animal’s heritage and traits to her. Although the animals towered way over her, he was very impressed that she showed no fear, and noticed the animals seemed to take to her quickly. He also noticed that she was aware of every move and word that his Lord made. She was curious, he noted, and smiled at the thought.**

**The thin cold air, combined with the daylong hike around the Hold, tired both Duncan and Rayne. By the time they returned to the main house it was dusk and the night air was very cold. An enjoyable dinner, some pleasant conversation, and they were soon off to bed.**



Noise... loud noise... clanging... a horn was blasting thru the night.

Rayne sat bolt upright in her large bed. Automatically reaching for K'nada, hanging by the headboard, she listened and then leaped out of bed. Still wearing her black silk pajamas she slipped on her black slippers, flung open the door and ran into the hallway.

Lord Tarak was running down the hallway shouting orders to several warriors. Kai and Mistress Sera were behind him. He saw her standing there and stopped for a moment, staring at her.

“Scather incursion, stay with Mistress Sera,” he shouted as he and Kai ran to the stairs.

Duncan came out of his room disheveled holding a bloody saber and his Bowie knife. He ordered the two women into an adjoining room.

“Alarm woke me up just in time; one of those damn things was trying to get into my room,” he explained as he shut the door.

Mistress Sera informed what was happening. “A Scather raiding party,” she shivered for a moment, “there are so many of them this time; they are in the compound already,” her high-pitched voice told Duncan she was close to panicking.

“Lord Duncan, I am not of the warrior mold, may I seek your protection? They will surely seek me out.”

Duncan noted her fear and felt there was something else she was not saying. He held out his hand, “come with me,” he said as he pulled her into the small study. She pressed herself against the corner wall and Duncan stood in front of her. They could hear a great scuffle going on just down the stairway and outside the main doorway.

Rayne went to the door, “Duncan, your leave please; I can’t stay here and do nothing. You can see to Mistress Sera without me. This is what K'nada and I was trained for.”

“You have my leave to do what needs to be done,” he could see she was grinning as she turned and left, and he shouted out, “Restraint Rayne, restraint!”

She ran down the stairs to the main hallway and could hear shouting just beyond the door. Suddenly it burst open as Warriors and Scathers plowed thru the door engaged in a pitched battle. Quickly surveying the scene, Rayne chose her targets, and then leaped into action. She soared over the warriors and came down behind two of the Scathers neatly slicing them in two. Then she moved forward slicing and cutting her way towards the warriors, (all the while keeping her attention on her rear). She searched the crowd of men looking for Lord Tarak and could not find him. Five Scathers lay dead on the landing, warriors panting at the ferocity of the encounter.

“Where is Lord Tarak,” demanded Rayne of a young warrior near her.



**“He ordered us to hold this area,” answered the warrior panting heavily, “Lord Tarak and First Kai went to the heart of them.” He looked about the dead bodies and then back at Rayne with wide eyes. “He took a company of warriors with them Lady Rayne.”**

**“Come, show me the way,” shouted Rayne turning and running down the corridor.**

**They came to the landing and Rayne had a view of the courtyard below; it was awash in Scathers and Warriors battling. Rayne spotted Lord Tarak in the midst of several of the creatures. He and Kai were back to back, holding their own; the fighting was savage and brutal.**

**A commotion near the entrance to the Hold drew her attention; she could see two rows of warriors lined up facing fifteen to twenty Scathers. They had their shields before them and were holding their large spears above them. In unison they moved forward, stomped their feet, and then banged against their shields with their spears shouting loudly.**

**“U-wah!”**

**Step, stomp, bang, “U-wah!”**

**Step, stomp, bang, “U-wah!”**

*Using psychology to unnerve the enemy, thought Rayne smiling, very impressive, indeed.*

**The bugs began to retreat a little at a time. The Warriors held their ground each time one would lash out looking for an opening. They banded tightly together; if one warrior fell another would fill in the gap quickly. So intense and engrossed were the bugs that they did not see two lines of warriors form behind them, cutting off any way out of the compound. By the time they realized their mistake it was too late. The Warriors began to tighten the field and began stabbing out at the huge monsters. Rayne could tell that Lord Tarak had trained his warriors well; they were confident and prepared; they knew exactly what to do. She left them to their work and concentrated on Lord Tarak and Kai.**

**Suddenly the young warrior with her shouted, “Behind you, a jumper... watch out!” He rushed forward with his spear and shield at the ready. What happened next, the young warrior would talk about for years.**

**As if in slow motion Rayne leaped, turned in mid-air and landed beside him. She ran forward and then threw herself down and slid under the larger of the two insects. All the while she held K’nada up, blade facing forward. As a result, the bug was cut neatly in half, lengthways. It quivered and jerked once, and the two halves split open like a book and fell to the ground covering Rayne in a grayish liquid.**

**Emboldened by this, the young warrior attacked and slew the second bug quickly with wide stabbing motions. Taking its head, he held it up and shouted triumphantly, “U-wah!”**

**Rayne stood on the landing and peered below, searching the mob for Lord Tarak.**

The courtyard seemed to have shrunk in size with the large creatures milling about. There appeared to be too many bugs and not enough warriors. As she watched she began to see their strategy and understood.

She turned to the young warrior, “Your Lord said you were to protect the main house; go and do your duty. You are a very good fighter, young warrior, I trust you to protect Mistress Sera and Lord Duncan.”

Smiling the warrior raced down the hallway after wishing her ‘good hunting’.

Rayne spotted Tarak and Kai in heated swordplay with several of the large bugs. Tarak raised his head for a second and their eyes met. She dove off the landing, to his horror, and into the fray. As she came down she gracefully turned and sliced thru two of the monsters. She leaped again and took two heads in one fluid motion. The Scathers broke ranks looking about; searching for this new threat. Again Rayne soared thru the air and this time she landed beside Tarak.

“Need some help?” she asked with a grin to his surprised look, and was gone in seconds.

Tarak watched as she took out two more neatly slicing thru their mid sections. She slew bug after bug, leaping and gracefully turning in mid-air only to come down in the midst of them swinging her sword with devastating results. As a warrior trained in the proper use of the sword he truly admired her graceful motions; her even thrusts of the mysterious sword she carried with her. It seemed to have a life of its own as it neatly sliced thru the Scathers bodies. Even in battle she was ethereal, as he remembered, her muscles about her face showing the intensity of her thrusts. A high pitched keen brought him back to reality. The Scathers were in full panic, searching about them frantically to find where this new threat was coming from. Suddenly realization dawned on their leader as he watched Rayne leap and remove the head of one of his men. Fear and panic seized him as he screeched, “Eloi!” in a high-pitched voice. There was a loud shrill collective clicking sound as word spread thru the force. The smell of panic was high in the air. The leaders called for a retreat by making a strange sound, almost like a cicada, and all turned in unison to run.

Unfortunately, Tarak’s warriors blocked their rear; and those in front took advantage of the Scather’s panic and surged forwards. It was a savage bloodbath after that; no quarter was given, the warriors quickly began dispatching them one at a time.

Lord Tarak fought his way to Rayne’s side, “You are full of surprises little one. I am pleased and grateful for your aid.”

“Only too glad to help my Lord,” she shouted happily as she sliced thru the mid section of an ugly one. She let her guard down for a moment as she smiled at Tarak.

His face suddenly showed alarm, “Look out,” he shouted as he gutted one before it could complete its run at her.

As the last one fell Lord Tarak surveyed the area and looked to his men. Many were injured, but none had died at the hands of the monsters. He took a report from one of his lieutenants and learned of the deaths of his beloved Taks.

“My Lord,” said the lieutenant, “if it is of any consolation, they took eight of the Scathers with them. We backtracked and found ten more hiding in the woods; the trees have new fertilizer.”

“Good, good,” Tarak stood on a step and shouted out to his men, “you are all Warriors of the First, and I am truly proud of you.” They answered with loud shouts as they beat their spears against their shields.

Rayne unexpectedly felt a prickly sensation on the back of her neck. Lord Tarak turned to say something and was startled by the look on her face.

“What is it little one, what is wrong?”

“I feel,” she looked at Tarak strangely, “I can hear... there’s...” she said softly raising her head and looking above to the main house. Her eyes suddenly went wide as she shouted; “Duncan! No...!” She ran towards the landing with Lord Tarak and Kai behind her.

In a split-second Rayne had ‘seen’ a vision of Duncan and a very large Scather locked in combat; and she knew Duncan was no match for it. She didn’t know how she was able to do it, but she saw it. If she lost Duncan, besides losing her best friend, her only control would be gone, and the possibility of that spurred her on.

They burst thru the front doors and headed towards the stairs. The warriors inside the house were fighting a very large Scather barring the way. Tarak had never seen one this large and knew it had to be an ‘old one’. Loud noises could be heard coming from the room upstairs. They couldn’t reach the stairs as long as this Scather barred the way; and Rayne’s fears for Duncan were growing with each passing minute. Shouting, she leaped forward and once again K’nada sang out, and the Scather fell. They dragged it off the landing, and Lord Tarak and Kai rushed up the stairs behind Rayne, with many warriors following.

They ran for the room flinging the doors open. The scene before them was surreal; a very large Scather lay on its side, its head all but severed; Duncan lay beneath it, face ashen, a rapidly expanding pool of bright red blood under him.

The room looked as if an explosion had torn it apart. In a corner under an overturned chair they could see Mistress Sera crouched. She was crying softly, holding her bloody arm. Several warriors rushed forward and rolled the creature over and off of Duncan; Lord Tarak pulled him away.

Kai ran to Mistress Sera and lifted the chair off of her and threw it across the room. She fell into his arms sobbing hysterically; he calmed her and they both walked over to Duncan.

Rayne had never seen Duncan beaten down before, and it frightened her. “Duncan,” she dropped to her knees by his side, “you damn fool, you know better than to try to face one of these monsters?” Fear for him, and anger at his attempt showed in Rayne’s voice, “this is my work, Duncan.” She bent over him, leaned close, and softly said, “Duncan, please speak to me.”

“Shoulder, Rayne... shoulder blade;” he winced, his voice reflecting his pain, “came out of nowhere. Speared me and tossed me aside like I was a rag doll.” He winced from the pain again, “then the damn thing made a beeline for the lady.”

“Don’t talk Duncan, save your strength,” Rayne begged.

He patted Rayne’s hand and smiled, “Couldn’t let him get away with that, could I? You should have seen me Rayne...” he winced as Tarak checked his wound; “you would have been proud. I used some of those Eloi moves you taught me; seemed to have surprised the hell out of him when I slit his throat.”

Mistress Sera picked up the story from there, “He was so brave Lord Tarak; a true warrior, he stood his ground, he would not give an inch to the Scather. It tried several times to get at me,” she looked down at her bloody arm, “but Lord Duncan stopped him each time. He... he protected me.” She turned and buried herself in Kai’s arms.

Kai held her tightly to him and whispered, *If I lost you, especially now, I don’t know what I would have done!* Looking at Duncan he added, “I am in your debt Lord Duncan.”

Tarak shouted to one of the warriors, “get a healer in here quickly!” He turned to Duncan, “It seems we owe you yet another debt, Duncan Wayside.”

“Had no idea they got so big... mean as hell... you were right Tarak,” the use of his first name was noticed by all, “they are truly insane; even in its death throes it tried to lash out and gut me.”

Tarak picked Duncan up easily and carried him to a nearby sofa where he gently placed him and called for a towel to put on his wound. Rayne took the towel and pressed it to his back. The Doctor came in, pushed everyone away, and went to work examining Duncan.

“Take him to his room please,” he quickly ordered, “I can work on him easier there. His injuries are not fatal, but they require immediate attention.”

A large warrior came forward, “May I have the honor, sir,” he asked Lord Tarak. At a nod from Tarak the big man lifted Duncan effortlessly and headed for his room with the doctor in tow.

“Doctor,” Tarak called, “when you are finished will you kindly attend to Mistress Sera, she received an injury to her arm and she is quite emotional right now.” He stressed the last part and the doctor nodded understanding Lord Tarak’s meaning.

Three hours later everything was calmed and order restored. Mistress Sera's arm was stitched up and bandaged. She was given a mild sedative and she was now sleeping under the watchful eye of her mate, Kai. Duncan was wrapped in a series of bandages and also mildly sedated. Guards were posted around the Hold; Trackers were sent out to search for signs of any more Scathers; and Lord Tarak sent urgent messages warning other Holds to be on the alert.

Rayne retired to her room to shower and clean herself of the Scather blood that covered her. After a rather long hot shower, she put on a white linen caftan and settled herself in front of the fire. She took a cleaned K'nada and began to hone the blade with a whetstone. After its sharpness returned, she began to rub the blade with a piece of soft leather till it shined brightly. She heard the wind howling as it whipped itself about the walls of the Hold; it seemed a storm was approaching. She opened the doors to the balcony and went out to view the rapidly approaching storm. The wind whipped the caftan about her and her hair flew wildly about.

Just as she stretched out her arms as if embracing the storm Tarak knocked and stepped into the room. His eyes were riveted to the scene on the balcony and the sight of her moved him so deeply that it took great strength to keep his control.

She turned around and saw him there and felt a stirring also; she wanted to feel his hands on her body, caressing her. The intensity of these feelings surprised and scared her; and she too fought for control.

Tarak cleared his throat, "Please excuse this late call, I just stopped by to inform you that Lord Duncan is resting. The physician stitched up his wound and gave him a light sedative. No vital organs were damaged. He will sleep deeply, in the morn he will wake feeling rested, and find his wound almost healed."

Rayne calmed herself and returned to the fireplace and continued to polish K'nada. She thanked Tarak for his care of Duncan, and asked of his warriors.

"Two died, four wounded badly, not sure they will make it." Tarak sighed, "Six more with other wounds, but they will recover. This was the worst attack in almost ten years."

Tarak watched Rayne's movements as she polished the sword. He noticed it was done almost lovingly, as if she were caressing the blade. He found it somehow erotic, as though she were enticing him.

He asked in a velvet voice, "May I see your sword?"

Rayne raised her head and looked at him for a moment; nodded, rose, and laid K'nada in his hands. She found herself suddenly aroused, feeling extremely sensual as she watched Tarak caress the blade. He turned the sword over several times and inspected the blade and the hilt. He held it and weighed and balanced it.

"Though too small for me, it is a very fine weapon. It is balanced to perfection, and the blade is as sharp as a laser. Why do you name your blade?"

“It is the custom.” Rayne said in a soft voice, and continued, “The sword was a gift from my teacher after I completed my training with the Samurai Masters. It is over 1000 years old, it belong to a great warlord. It was made by a master blade maker, there is none finer in all the world.” She smiled remembering; “My teacher said it was fitting for me to weld it since I embodied all that he stood for.”

“It was a high honor then?” asked Tarak staring into her violet eyes.

“Yes, I believe so,” she gently removed it from his hand and placed it in its sheath. The touch of his hand almost burned hers.

*What is going on here?*

“These swords were made by master sword welders. Each was created specifically for the original user and meant to last for generations. Since he never married it had been sitting in a museum for centuries.”

Tarak stared at her as she backed away, yearning to put his hands on her.

*Control yourself man!*

She went to her bed and hung it on the headboard near her pillow. She turned and slowly walked back over to Tarak... *I feel so strange.*

She stood before him for a moment, raised her hand and hesitantly touched the side of his face, almost caressing it. Her entire body quivered involuntarily.

Tarak’s eyes flashed, he growled, and her face took on a softness he had not noticed before. The touch of her hand on his face burned and he noted her reaction.

“My Lord...” her voice was coarse, she wanted to tell him that she liked him, no; admired him, no; it was something else. *Damn, I can’t think.*

He rose and looked down at her, using the velvet voice again he asked, “What is it, little one?” Her scent was intoxicating.

Rayne almost swooned; *I have to get control of myself...*

She knew with a certainty that she wanted him to touch her, and she was fighting against the overwhelming urge to touch him.

“I guess I’m just a bit tired, that’s all.” *What is wrong with me?*

Just then the wind blew the doors to the balcony open. She rushed to close them with Tarak right behind her. The wind blew her caftan about her, outlining her body; her hair swirled wildly in the tempest. She grabbed a door and the wind ripped it out of her hand and threw her back. She found herself pressed against Tarak’s body and for a split second she could feel the tautness and strength of him.

As if in a dream, suddenly it seemed she could actually feel herself in his arms; his hands going over her, it was overpowering. *Oh God !*

**Tarak also felt it, and he knew if he didn't leave soon, he wouldn't be able to. The urge to touch her filled his mind.**

*What is happening, after so long... why now?*

**He found himself strongly drawn to her and trying to understand why. He reached over her and grabbed the doors and pushed them closed, and locked them. Turning to her he caught his breath for a moment.**

**“You are right my Lady, you are tired, and it has been a very eventful day. Sleep will do us all some good.” He reached for her hand and touched it to his forehead, “sleep well Lady Rayne.”**

**He turned and left the room quickly.**

**Rayne stood there and watched the door close behind him, his voice echoing in her mind. *He feels it too!***

**She smiled as she went over and climbed up into the massive bed and snuggled under the covers. She lay there for a long while thinking about all that had happened. Her mind went over every detail, and soon sleep overtook her. She had many dreams, bright lights, stainless steel tables, and long dark hallways. Then the dreams filled her mind with large hairy men, savage, sensual, masculine and alive; she smiled in her sleep.**



Tarak retired to his own rooms, showered, and sat by the large fireplace for some time. His mind kept replaying the vision of Rayne on the balcony. In all the years since his beloved had died he had never felt interest in any female. Queen Naria was always trying to match him with someone, but he just wasn't roused. And yet now, this small strange human took his breath away each time he saw her.

From the moment he set eyes on her, in the cave on Agria, he was taken with her. Her violet eyes were the same as Ogatu females; and they held that same quality of enticement. Watching her movements as she fought the Scathers stirred him deeply; he found her enticing; almost erotic to watch. He hadn't had that feeling since his wife died. It took every ounce of his strength to leave her room just now. The urge to touch her, stroke her, hold her to him was almost overpowering. He would have to watch himself in the future when around her.

He leaned back and stretched out his frame, *those eyes of hers... just like our women.* An idea began to form; perhaps the Eloi got it wrong; he was sure she wasn't entirely human. There was something about her; he couldn't put his finger on it, but he could 'feel' it. Her reaction to him just now was proof enough; she was behaving in the classic Ogatu female way.

Maybe the scientists on the ship that crashed weren't her parents. Maybe they were just taking her somewhere. When the ship crashed everyone was killed except her; it was natural that the Eloi would think she was human.

As Tarak lay there an old buried memory came bubbling up.

*Wait, 20 or so years ago we received word of a new Scather experiment, some kind of hybrid experimentation. But, we tracked them down...didn't we?*

Tarak bolted up as the memory spilled out.

*Yes, we tracked them to that asteroid belt where they supposedly were hiding a laboratory. But when we arrived all we found were large rocks swirling about; it had been totally destroyed. No one seemed to know who had done it, and the word that was spreading about was that the Scathers seemed to be frightened - if that could be believed. One thing for sure, the Scathers abandoned any further experiments of this type.*

Suddenly everything seemed to come together and Tarak smiled.  
*I must watch her carefully and see if what I suspect is true.*



Tarak rose early the next morning and checked on his warriors. He went to the infirmary and saw to his injured warriors. He praised them for their courage and gave a particular one his hand in thanks. It was the young warrior who had aided Rayne during the Scather incursion. Tarak had seen the young man attack and kill the Scather that had come at Rayne's back. He gave encouragement to the young man, and made him feel he was a vital part of the Hold defense system.

He received messages from the other Holds and discovered that several had had incursions also. But none with the ferocity like the one here. He made his rounds and returned to the main house to check on his guests.

Lord Duncan and Rayne were coming down the stairs when he arrived. Duncan was pale, but appeared to be in good spirits, Rayne was aiding him. Tarak asked Mistress Sera to show Rayne around the Hold and introduce her to the many merchants and their shops. He would take Duncan with him to the communications center so he could contact his ship.

After the women left the Hold, Tarak took Duncan down a long hallway towards the rear of the Hold. They came out to an area reminiscent of earth garages; Duncan saw several machines parked there, they resembled hovercraft.

"These will take us to the communications center." Tarak saw the look on Duncan's face, "Yes they work, don't worry Duncan, I am a very good driver."

Duncan laughed, "I bet you are Tarak, I just bet you are."

They headed north across the frozen tundra towards a very large mountain. As they approached they swung around the side and Duncan saw a large opening. The vehicle eased thru the opening and descended within the mountain to a docking area; Duncan saw an officer waiting for them. They climbed out and he bowed slightly and saluted with the traditional fist to chest gesture.

"Lord Tarak, Lord Duncan, I welcome you to Com-Center One; I am Captain Kayne. I understand you had an incursion last night my Lord;" he said turning to Tarak, "I am glad to see neither of you were seriously injured. If you will come this way, gentlemen," he indicated with a sweep of his arm.

Duncan and Tarak were led down a long archway deep into the mountain. It opened up into the largest communications center Duncan had ever seen. The huge room had steel-like glistening walls, if it was steel; and an array of computers across the vast expanse of the room. On one wall was a huge screen showing Duncan's ship, the Phoenix. On another wall was their spaceship, the Sword; and on another wall, a smaller screen showed open space; Duncan was impressed.

**“Captain,” began Tarak, “have any of the other Holds reported any more raids?”**

**“No reports as yet passed thru our center, my Lord.”**

**Turning to Duncan he continued, “Lord Duncan, I hope you will not mind, but we have been having the most interesting conversations with your Captain Alexei.” Duncan understood that Kayne was trying to let him know that he was open and not keeping any secrets. “He is quite intelligent, and has a most peculiar sense of humor. I believe we have become friends.”**

**“I do not mind at all; I have every confidence in Alexei.” Duncan answered. “Besides, he has an insatiable curiosity and I am sure he would have contacted you himself eventually.” Duncan looked around the large room, “how does all this work on the planet, I thought technology won’t work here?”**

**“Our scientists found a way; it was quite by accident.” Captain Kayne grinned slightly, “A misstep by a very green officer led them to discover that the cloaking device on our ships somehow shields the mountain from the planets’ force. Inside these walls it moves us outside the range of whatever it is on the planet, and allows us to communicate with our ships.”**

**Before he could ask, Lord Tarak continued, “And yes, we tried it elsewhere; it only works here with communication devices.”**

**“Lord Duncan,” the young officer called, “over here sir, you may speak with your ship here. We will leave to give you privacy.”**

**“That isn’t necessary, I have nothing to hide,” Duncan replied promptly flipping a switch. “Phoenix this is Duncan, come in Phoenix, over.” Lord Tarak was smiling behind him.**

**“Phoenix here Commander, nice to hear your voice,” Alexei promptly replied, “how are things there, over?”**

**“Have much to tell you when I arrive, but for now I need you to send out a warning to our ships...”**

**Duncan briefly related what Tarak had told him and the solution to the problem. Alexei quickly went to work calling the ships of the fleet and putting them on the alert. Then Duncan called the Space Guild and reported the same making them aware of the situation. They agreed with his plan and issued orders to the fleet to proceed to the planet for re-fitting. Duncan refrained from mentioning the danger to Earth, giving Lord Tarak the week he had asked for.**

**Tarak smiled knowing he was right to trust him; Duncan’s conversation with Alexei and the Space Guild had just confirmed it.**

Back at the Hold, Rayne and Mistress Sera were walking down one of the streets in the main plaza when Rayne stopped and commented; “When we first came into the Hold I saw a lot of children around the homes. Now, I noticed that there doesn’t seem to be any about. What happened to all of them?”

“Oh there are many children here,” she answered cheerfully, “the school day starts early in the Hold, that way they are free for the afternoon chores.”

Rayne stared at her for a moment and then inquired, “May I ask a personal question Mistress Sera?”

“Of course my Lady,” she quickly answered, “What is it you wish to know?”

“Is this your first child, or do you and Kai have others?”

“You know?” Mistress Sera had stopped and turned to Rayne in surprise.

“My training allows me to observe many things, and the aura of a pregnant woman is a beautiful sight to see.” Rayne saw her distress, “Oh, I hope I haven’t offended you.”

“Oh no, it’s just that we haven’t said anything to Lord Tarak yet.” Her face took on a note of sadness, “We want to make sure that I will be able to carry the child. You see I, I have lost two before.”

Gently touching her arm Rayne continued with confidence, “You will carry this child; your aura is very strong and filled with much love.”

Involved in their conversation, neither woman noticed the small little man a half a block away staring at them in disbelief. So overcome was he that his step faltered, and he began to fall. Before he knew it a strong pair of hands caught him and stopped his fall. It was Master Seatac, the head stable master, who happened to be passing by.

The women never noticed and went on with their conversation.

“Lady Rayne, I, I know that you were raised by the Eloi, and...” she hesitated as she went on, “and they taught you many strange things; we hold you in high regard because of this; but not even you can say such a thing for sure. Only the One who made us all has that power.”

“You believe in a God? Even with knowledge of your beginnings... no insult intended here Mistress Sera... you still believe in a God? I ask out of curiosity, you understand?”

“We believe that somewhere in the process that the Scathers started, God stepped in and said, ‘these are my children also’, and he breathed awareness into us,” she looked at Rayne and smiled sweetly, “we became sentient beings from that moment on.”

**“Amazing! Your people have incorporated this into a religion as part of your beginnings,” Rayne continued excitedly, “this way it explains to the young ones where you came from and also eludes to Divine Intervention.”**

**“The Scathers have no God; or at least none that we ever found. They are cruel, heartless, unfeeling killers.” She shivered and rubbed her arms, “Oh, they make me tremble so.”**

**“Why are you so frightened of them, Sera?” Rayne wondered, “I mean, you are very safe here, they can’t hurt you.”**

**“It is not that Lady Rayne; you see they have a keen sense of smell and we Ogatu women give off a particular scent when we are with child. The Scathers zero in on that scent and hunt us down. A raiding party’s first priority is to hunt and kill any female with child. That is why that beast fought so hard to get to me. They do not want us to increase our numbers.”**

**“These creatures, for all their supposed knowledge, are nothing more than thugs,” Rayne said indignantly. “They really need to be eliminated.”**

**“Let us change the subject my lady. Now, may I make an observation?” Mistress Sera asked.**

**“Of course Mistress Sera,” Rayne replied, adding, “I hope that we can become good friends.”**

**“Oh yes, I would truly like that very much.” She leaned close and whispered, “I believe that Lord Tarak is quite taken with you. His beloved wife was killed ten years ago, and he shut himself off completely. But I have noticed a change in him since your arrival.”**

**“Really? I hadn't noticed,” Rayne replied quickly, “Besides I believe Lord Tarak considers me a bit of a nuisance.”**

**“I truly think not, Lady Rayne,” she countered smiling.**

**“Oh my, look at that blouse,” exclaimed Rayne changing the subject, “can we go in and see if they have it in my size?” Mistress Sera laughed and both women went into the shop arm in arm.**

**Arriving back at the Hold hours later, their arms laden with packages, Mistress Sera and Rayne were oblivious to the men gathered about the table. Embarrassment showed quickly on her face as Mistress Sera realized the time.**

**“Oh my goodness,” she exclaimed, “please forgive my absentmindedness my Lord. Lunch will be ready in minutes.”**

With a quick apology about neglecting her duties, Mistress Sera returned to the kitchen issuing orders for lunch, and admonishing the cooks for not having the sense to begin on their own. Soon a light lunch was prepared and served.

Lord Tarak jokingly teased her throughout the meal until Rayne kicked him under the table (much to his surprise), and hissed at him to stop.

After the meal they adjoined to the study and Lord Tarak went over plans for the rest of the day. He offered to take Duncan and Rayne with him as he inspected the surrounding areas of the Hold. With winter only weeks away, crops were being harvested and stored. Tarak, Duncan, and Rayne mounted several of the Hausa, horse-like animals and left the Hold. The land to the far north was very cold and the mountain peaks had snow on them. Lord Tarak explained that they had arrived just weeks before the start of the winter cycle. To the south there was a remarkable change in the land and the temperature. The soil was rich and fertile and there were many farms with rows and rows of crops being harvested.

As they stopped at one farm, Rayne noted that Lord Tarak did not sit high above and observe; instead he climbed down and greeted the farmer warmly. Tarak inspected the crops getting down in the dirt with the farmer. The crop was grapes, or something very similar to grapes. The fruit was large and a deep purple color, and to Duncan's surprise, very sweet to the taste. The farmer boasted proudly that he grew the sweetest Tesh fruit in the entire realm; he even supplied the Queen's Hold with the tasty fruit. Duncan genuinely congratulated him on his ability, which seemed to please him to no end.

Rayne observed Tarak with growing respect as they went to several other farms and all were greeted in the same way. The farmers held their Lord in high regard, and he accorded them great respect. It was no wonder that his Hold was so friendly and its people so caring.

At one farm the Lord stripped down to his work pants and helped a farmer pull out a rather nasty root that was trying to take hold in his field. Both men struggled to remove it; Tarak's muscles rippled in his arms and upper shoulders as he pulled and tugged the massive root free.

As Rayne watched she suddenly found herself reveling in the thought of those arms around her, holding her down. Aroused, she fantasized even more; unaware of what was happening to her. As he turned around, Tarak caught sight of Rayne astride the Hausa, totally mesmerized, in a classic female trance. She did not notice the look of surprise on Lord Tarak's face, nor the wry smile that followed.

A runner interrupted their journey late afternoon with word that a runner from the Queen's Hold had called. Duncan was commanded to the Queen's Hold for a private audience the next day.

They returned to the Hold and Lord Tarak began to give them a crash course in Ogatu protocol. He explained how each little gesture had a meaning to it. Upon entering the room Duncan would find a landing, he was to stop there, at the top of the stairs, so as to be seen by all. When the Queen nodded to him, he was to proceed down the stairs and walk to her throne. He would wait for Lord Tarak to introduce him to the Queen.

Tarak turned towards Rayne and explained that women do not enter the court unescorted, so he would accompany her. He also explained that the way he held her hand would indicate many things. If they held the two fore fingers entwined, it meant they were mates; if the lady's hand was inside a full palm, it meant they were involved; and if the lady's hand rested on top of the extended hand, then she was free and merely being escorted.

Rayne commented, "Why can't I walk with Duncan?"

"Because Lord Duncan is the one the Queen commanded to her Hold...he walks alone," began Lord Tarak.

"And what am I... a servant to follow at three paces...?" seethed Rayne in a huff, "I am not to be treated as a child, I do not need to be escorted; I can walk ..."

"Rayne!"

She stopped immediately and turned towards Duncan with wide eyes.

Duncan continued in a firm voice.

"You will conduct yourself as asked!"

He stared at her firmly, and Tarak observed a battle of wills ensue.

"We will follow the proper protocol of this planet when meeting their ruler,"

Duncan ended in a deep stony voice, "do I make myself clear?"

"Yes Duncan," answered a sedate Rayne.

Lord Tarak was impressed with the pull that Duncan had; a raised voice and she immediately pulled in her reins. Then he remembered the Eloi had placed Duncan as her mentor; she had to obey him.

He smiled and continued with the lesson as though they weren't interrupted. He informed Rayne that all women wore long gowns when attending the court; to do otherwise would be considered an insult. He suggested she speak with Mistress Sera in regards this matter; she would be better able to discuss these things.

Rayne and Mistress Sera retired to Rayne's rooms where she quickly explained that she possessed no such garments. Mistress Sera called the Hold seamstress and tailor straight away to create a gown for her. She also brought over several of her own gowns so Rayne could get an idea of what was acceptable at court. Though beautiful to the eye, Rayne found that she could not move about freely in them as they was too heavy and too constrictive. So Rayne quickly went to work and designed a simple gown for herself and asked Mistress Sera if it would be acceptable. To her delight, the tailor gushed over the design.

By late nightfall, Rayne had an emerald green gown in a light velvet-like material in a simple design that draped about her. A beautiful brocade bodice highlighted the gown, and the sleeves ended with small amounts of lace protruding at the cuffs. She also had a holder for K'nada made and a lined cloak of the same color to protect her from the cold weather.

The seamstress and tailor were astonished at the simplicity of the gown and asked if they might use her design as they were sure that after her court appearance they would be inundated with requests for gowns of a similar design. The Tailor promised her an entire wardrobe if the orders came in as he expected. Rayne agreed saying she would be honored, and also asked if she could stop by their shop with more designs. The tailor and seamstress jumped at the chance to outshine the court Tailors.

The next morning was a hive of activity in Warriors Hold. The Hold tailors were summoned along with Lord Tarak's dress uniforms; there were fittings and adjustments to make. Trunks were hauled out and packed with all the finery that would be worn that night at the private audience with the Queen. Black shiny boots with silver buttonhooks were the norm for the event.

The family sword was taken down from its place of honor, polished, and placed with the Lord's clothing.

Duncan practiced a short bow and the speech the Guild had given him, over and over until Rayne made the comment that he should just be himself.

"Duncan, she's a warrior Queen," she explained, "but still a warrior. All this kind of pomp and ceremony are probably not enjoyable for her, if you get my drift."

She suggested he be short and concise, and give her a gift, something useful from her prospective. She would be surprised at his audacity, but secretly look with favor on him. Duncan took her comments to heart.



At the Queen's Hold, Naria was deep in conversation with Gordon, her Prime Minister, in her private chambers. Both had decided that Lord Boras was not to be informed of the meeting between the Queen and the so-called 'Outsiders'. He was too volatile on the matter and the Prime Minister agreed with the Queen that it was prudent to keep both parties apart as long as possible.

"You are sure that Lord Boras has left for his Hold, Gordon; I cannot afford to have him wandering about when our guests arrive."

"My Queen, I personally watched from the top Guardhouse as his entire party rode off early this morning," Gordon assured her. "Unless he sprouts wings and returns, I seriously doubt that he will be aware of the meeting at all."

A curt knock on the door interrupted their conversation.

"Come," an irritated Naria called out. It was Altera, the First of her Light Brigade; her personal guards which she had placed in charge of security for her Hold. The black haired beauty strode into the chamber like a lioness defending its young. She walked up to the Queen with a confident swagger, her muscles taut and toned to perfection. She was very good at what she did and took great pride in her friendship with Naria, but never misused it for personal gain.

Queen Naria watched her approach and thought back to the first time she had laid eyes on Altera. She was a young girl of 14 summers, badly shaken by the loss of her entire family to a Scather raid. Naria and her troops had arrived too late to help them. She had scooped up the girl and taken her with them as they continued on tracking the raiding party. When they found them the girl begged for a weapon; she had the right she shouted hysterically; Naria gave her a sword and watched. The girl went for the largest bug in a rage and sliced it to pieces before slumping to the ground in a heap, sobbing. Naria was impressed and took the girl under her wing teaching her how to wield a sword properly. Over time the two became as close as sisters, each confiding in the other. Each had a passion for their home world and her people, each seeing the need to correct the lax security on the planet. Naria would discuss and dissect the politics and politicians of the day and Altera would listen and learn; both agreed that change was needed, and needed quickly.

Altera was at her side some years later when Naria made her play for the throne; her loyalty was without question. It was Altera who had given Naria the idea for the Light Brigade – an all female personal guard.

Kneeling on one knee, giving the fist to chest salute she said, "My Queen, news you should be made aware of."

"Speak," answered Naria sitting forward and listening intently.



**“It has been observed several times, a young maid of this floor speaking with Lord Boras’ First, Matai. They seemed very cozy last night; and yet Matai made great effort to keep himself in the shadows, concealed from others eyes.”**

**Naria leaned forward and listened intently.**

**“My ‘Seeker’ has kept him under constant surveillance. She is very good at what she does, and she is also an empath. She followed Matai afterwards and spotted him speaking with Lord Boras almost immediately; both were smiling. She got the distinct feeling that the girl was being used.”**

**First Altera raised her head and looked Naria in the eyes without faltering and continued, “I had her investigate the girl thoroughly my Queen; she believes with certainty that the young girl is totally unaware that she is being used for nefarious purposes. She is totally loyal to you; but being young and inexperienced, she is overwhelmed by Matai’s amorous attentions.”**

**“Just like Boras to use an innocent for his dirty work.” Naria thought for a moment, motioning Altera to stand. “I hear what you’re reporting, Altera; I trust your judgment implicitly. Let’s keep the girl under surveillance for the time being.”**

**“As you wish my Queen; I have also sent a ‘Seeker’ throughout the Hold to make sure Lord Boras and Matai have indeed left for his Hold. I do not trust him,” she cleared her throat. “Please excuse me if I am being rude my Queen, but I fear he has devious plans in motion.”**

**“All in this room think the same Altera,” Naria informed her. “We are being very careful where Lord Boras is concerned. Continue what you are doing and report any changes to me immediately.” Altera saluted, turned and left the chamber.**

**Gordon watched her leave and turned to Naria, “We are lucky to have her on our side my Queen; she is a very shrewd judge of character. I believe her presence keeps Lord Boras at bay for the time being.”**

**“He wouldn’t dare make a move while they are here in the Hold. But I believe Altera is correct; he has designs on my throne.” Naria slammed her fist on the arm of the chair, “He thinks he comes from a superior line, better than everyone else, and he alone should be on the throne. He is a self-centered Ousa!**

**“My Queen, every couple of generations we get a throwback; a mix up in the DNA resulting in a godlike personality.” Gordon patted her arm, “Don’t get so upset, we will take care of him as our people have always taken care of these troublemakers. Besides, you insult the Ousa...” he looked at her over his horn-rimmed glasses, smiling.**

**Naria chuckled and then burst out loud at this, “Oh Gordon, this is why I keep you around.” She leaned forward and put her arm around his shoulder, “You keep me from acting on my whims.”**

Gordon's fur about his face rose in embarrassment, "My Queen, please... I am just a loyal servant to our people."

"That and much, much more, my dear friend," she squeezed his arm once.

When Naria claimed the throne by right and overthrew the previous Regent, she found a loyal friend in Gordon. He happily and unabashedly guided Naria through the political process. He took time to educate her on the current politics; inform her of the state of their treasury; and gently pointed out Lord Boras as the only real threat she faced. She soon found that this shy little man, whose timidity was the butt of many jokes within her Light Brigade, had the finest mind in the realm. His far-thinking abilities had kept them prepared for the Scathers each time they attacked. She trusted Gordon completely.

"Now, down to business," smiling, she sat and asked, "Are you sure the box cannot be opened? I want to make sure that they cannot open it, or duplicate it. We are giving them a very powerful device; granted it is for the protection of their planet, but I still want to make sure they cannot tamper with it."

"Not to worry, the scientists have been briefed thoroughly, by me." He sat beside Naria, "They will make sure that the Earth scientists know that any attempt to open the box, scan it, or x-ray it, will result in the box self-destructing. And then their entire planet and her people will be at the mercy of the Scathers."

"Excellent, Gordon, excellent!" She rose and they began to walk towards her garden arm in arm.

"Now about this Duncan Wayside..."

Lord Tarak, Duncan, First Kai and Lady Rayne piled two of the hovercraft high with large trunks, and set out for the Queens Hold by mid morning. It was a two-hour dive over changing terrain with Tarak pointing out areas of interest. The land became very green and forested as they approached her mountain hold. There was a lot of game and Rayne even saw signs of Septak tracks, which she quickly pointed out to Lord Tarak.

The small party was met by the First of the Light Brigade, Altera. She was polite but not overly friendly towards the outsiders. She was however, very friendly with Lord Tarak bantering with him good-naturedly. She guided them thru the palace underground and they came up on the second floor.

Lord Tarak asked if she had suffered any casualties from the Scather attack while at the same time informing her of the attack on his Hold. Altera was very interested in his description of the battle, especially Rayne's involvement in it. There were stories circulating around from Lord Tarak's men about her fighting ability and upon finally seeing her, Altera seriously doubted them.

*No one this small could have the strength and abilities that they claimed.*

She led Rayne to her room and as she was entering Altera asked for a word with her. "Please forgive my bad manners Lady Rayne," she said with a slight nod, "I know you were aware of my staring at you. It is just that I find it very hard to believe the reports that you slew three of the mutants on Agria, let alone many Scathers in the recent attack on Lord Tarak's Hold. You are quite small, and there is not much muscle on your bones."

Rayne smiled sweetly up at Altera, "We Eloi do not need muscle." Altera's face showed surprise. "I have no need to prove myself to you or anyone; but I would be glad to spar with you anytime to put your fears to rest."

"I have no fears my lady," Altera seemed ruffled, "but I accept your offer - one hour in the practice yard." She half nodded, and left Rayne standing there. Walking briskly down the corridor she thought to herself, *we shall soon see what it is that impresses Lord Tarak so.*

Rayne watched her go and then went to Duncan's room and informed him of what had taken place. He called Lord Tarak to his room and all three conferred.

"Is she testing me for the Queen?" Rayne asked Lord Tarak.

"No, Naria doesn't work like that; if she were curious, she would call you out herself. No, I think this is Altera's own curiosity at work here. She probably finds it hard to believe that you are capable of all my men claim." Tarak laughed, "She has a reputation of being the best there is, and killing the most Scathers at one time. You, little one, broke that record without much effort; I am sure that does not sit too well with her."

"So I don't have to hold back with her," Rayne walked towards the door, "I can go full strength; short of killing her of course."

**“Rayne,” Duncan called after her, “be nice; remember we are guests in the Queens Hold.”**

**Rayne smiled devilishly, “Oh Duncan, I’m just going to play with her a little.”  
Turning to Tarak with a glint in her eye she asked, “Lord Tarak, would you please point out the direction of the practice yard.”**

**Tarak started laughing as she left them, “What I wouldn’t give to see this meeting, unfortunately it is in the Light Brigade’s quarters and we are not allowed there.”**

**Duncan was shaking his head back and forth, “God help us all.”**

**Rayne went to her room and laid out her clothing for the evening. She changed into her workout robes and pondered what to do about Altera. After centering herself she meditated on it for 30 minutes. Satisfied that she had a plan she left her rooms and headed for the courtyard. She was there waiting, when a surprised Altera arrived. Word had spread thru the Queen’s Light Brigade of Altera’s challenge. Other than the Queen herself, there was no one who could best Altera. There was great anticipation and curiosity among the Brigade.**

**Word reached the Queen’s ears also just before the match started. Naria casually made her way to the balcony overlooking the courtyard and got her first view of Rayne.  
*By the gods! Tarak have you gone mad? This small creature is no match for Altera. Look at her in her little baggy pants.*  
Naria started to say something and then she decided to hang back and watch.**

**Rayne took out her practice sword and bowed to Altera. Altera questioned this and Rayne explained it was a sign of respect to honor ones opponent. Rayne explained the philosophy behind this and Altera understood and accepted it.  
Then Rayne began to move, with lightening speed she leapt and twisted – landed a blow on Altera - and leapt again. Her lightening fast movements did not allow Altera to get a fix on her; yet Rayne had ‘scored’ several blows to her body. She was besting Altera causing her to become angry and frustrated, and loose face in front of her troops.**

***Interesting, very interesting, thought Naria as she watched from above, she is just playing with her. And, I think she wants Altera to know this. Naria watched for a bit longer and was truly impressed when an old memory surfaced. She watched with a different eye now and understood. Amazing agility and speed; no wonder the Eloi are considered the finest fighters in the galaxy. Altera is getting her ack kicked by this little human, if indeed she is human.***

**After a bit Rayne landed and bowed again signaling the match was over. She asked if Altera had a specific practice she wished to do. Altera said swordplay would do and drew her sword, taking a stance. Rayne commented that she was not aware that they were to use anything other than wooden practice weapons.**

Altera countered that she could change to a wooden practice sword if Rayne was too frightened. Sensing that she was merely trying to save face, Rayne said she would use the wooden sword. They parried for a bit and then Altera increased the strength of her blows.

Rayne quickly realized she had a choice to make here; either allow Altera to appear to win, or humiliate her by showing off her Eloi abilities. Knowing what her Sensei would have advised and understanding why, Rayne made it appear that she lost her footing from one of Altera's blows and she went down. There was an immediate cry of elation from the members of the Light Brigade for their Captain. Altera offered her hand and helped Rayne to her feet amid loud stomping from the assembled women. Smiling for her troops she waved and leaned-in close to Rayne.

"You let me win," she hissed under her breath, "I am well aware that you could have taken me at any time; why the deception?"

Rayne faced her and answered, "Beating you accomplishes nothing; I cannot help where I was raised and what I was taught. My goal is not to humiliate you in front of your own troops; I do not want to be your enemy Altera; I would like us to be friends. After all, we fight a common enemy."

Rayne laid down the wooden sword, and offered her hand to Altera. Altera looked at her for a moment and suddenly understood the gesture.

"You're right little one; we do fight a common enemy. And to be honest, I am a bit jealous of your abilities."

Altera offered her arm and Rayne took it in the manner of warriors and held it. The Light Brigade all hooted acceptance and stomped their feet once again.

"The Eloi taught you to fight well Lady Rayne; you must show me how you move so fast."

Above, Naria let out a sigh of relief. The situation could have gotten nasty; but her faith in Altera once again proved to be well founded. Naria had recognized what Rayne was doing before Altera; and she hoped that her First would see thru the ruse also. She was going to have to get to know this strange little human better.

Down below Rayne was explaining, "I don't know if it can be taught, I was a mere baby when they found me; and my mother says that our way of fighting is something one absorbs as one grows up."

"Ah, I understand," Altera handed a towel to Rayne as she wiped her own face and neck, "may I ask a boon Lady Rayne; when there is time, will you join my troops and me for a day of training? They would consider it a great honor."

**“Of course,” Rayne replied quickly, “I would love to join you and your troops; I could use a good workout,” she answered earnestly. “I will check with Lord Tarak and Duncan and get back with you.”**

**“I have another question,” she added with a smile, “Lord Tarak said that you named your sword; is this true? And is this because you think it is alive or something?”**

**Rayne laughed, “Everyone is so damned interested in K’nada; I don’t understand why. Naming one’s sword is a tradition, and a point of honor to the one who first wielded it many centuries ago.”**

**“Ah, I understand now, like his spirit is in the sword.” Altera looked down at Rayne and then abruptly shouted, “Ha! I like you little one,” and with that Altera swept Rayne up in her arms in a bear hug. “And my Queen will like you also.”**

**Leaning close she whispered, “Now tell me, who is the handsome man with you, a lover or a friend? He is very distinguished looking and my Queen has asked of him.”**

**Now it was Rayne’s turn to laugh. “No, no, Duncan is not my lover; he is my mentor; he was given charge over me by the Eloi. He is the Commander of the Phoenix, single and very available.”**

**“Ah, good, good, my Queen will be pleased.” Altera slapped Rayne gently on the back in jest and both women broke out in riotous laughter.**

***Duncan, I hope you are prepared for this, thought Rayne devilishly.***

Tarak stepped back and looked himself over in the large mirror. He turned to the left and then to the right. He straightened his long coat, checked the knot at his waist, and smoothed back his long mane. He bent and buffed the silver on his boots once again. He took his ceremonial sword and slid it into its scabbard, turned and opened the door. *Well, this will have to do*, he thought to himself as he stepped into the hallway.

He knocked on Duncan's door with two quick raps. Duncan opened it immediately and bade him enter.

"Well look at you," said Duncan as he entered, "I must say you look very impressive; every bit the Lord of the Hold. Is that silver on your boots?"

"Ha, I hate all this formality, this pomp and ceremony." Tarak looked Duncan over carefully. "Yes, all formal attire is either silver or gold. Well now, you're impressive yourself Duncan. Is that the uniform of your Science Guild?"

Duncan nodded; he was in his dress blues. His pants were the standard with gold braid down the side. The coat was complete with gold buttons, gold braid on the sleeves and of course gold epaulets at the shoulder. He wore a chest full of medals, which impressed Tarak, who asked about them.

"Medals from prior campaigns, you know, all the same ceremonial crap that you love so well. I was simply doing my job," Duncan explained.

"Queen Naria will ask you about them just to gage the type of man you are by your answer. Short and to the point works best with her." Turning he asked Duncan, "What is in the box you carry, and what kind of wood is that?"

"It's a gift for your Queen." Duncan turned the long rectangular box around and opened it. "This is a Bowie Knife, a very formable weapon when used properly. The wood the box is made of is called Cedar; it gives off a pleasant odor."

Tarak looked at the knife and approved; "she will be very impressed with the blade," he laughed, "she collects blades from all over the galaxy." He held the box and looked it over. "I think she will be more so with the box the blade comes in. Now come, we must collect Lady Rayne and make our appearance."

Two doors down they came to Rayne's door. Just as Duncan was about to knock she opened the door and stepped out. Lord Tarak's eyes reflected his appreciation of the vision before him.

"Lady Rayne," he said in a deep voice, "you are a vision to keep."



The deep emerald green dress was of a light velvet type of material that draped about her form and seemed to flow with her as she walked. The dress complimented her violet eyes and red hair. She wore her hair back, braided on each side and pulled back with the mane flowing freely. Her makeup was done in the same style as the women of the planet; or so Tarak thought. She had a holder made of the same material as her dress tied about her waist with a gold braid, and K'nada rested inside it. Her cape swirled about her as she walked beside them.

“Rayne,” Duncan agreed, “you outdid yourself kid, very nice.”

“Aw gee... thanks guys,” she said making fun of them.

Duncan and Tarak laughed at her as they continued down the hallway. As they came to the landing leading downstairs, he led them off to the left. They went down another long hallway to two huge doors guarded by two members of the Light Brigade. They opened the doors when they saw the party approaching and bade them enter the private quarters of the Queen. There was another long hallway that they followed and found it opened into a large room.

Duncan took everything in quickly and saw the landing Tarak had spoken of; he made his way down to it and stood still. He looked about the room at the small amount of people gathered there, he estimated between 30 and 40. He spotted the Queen sitting on a throne towards the center back of the room.

*Well now, he thought to himself, this is something new. Hmm... she is quite the beauty. Duncan went over her with his eyes like the scanner on the Phoenix. Violet eyes, honey colored mane with white thru it, very attractive, very striking. Little taller than me, well proportioned, trim and fit. She sits on that throne with regal bearing; not many can pull that off, you have to be born to it.*

Naria watched as Duncan entered the Hall, did not hesitate, but went straight to the landing and waited for Tarak to enter. She nodded slightly in his direction and he picked up on it immediately and proceeded down the stairs. She nodded to Tarak as he entered and followed behind Duncan. She watched as Duncan approached, walking with a bearing of great self-confidence; a man used to bearing the weight of command. She noted his eyes fixed on her as he came across the room, they never faltered, even as he stood in front of her.

Lord Tarak approached with Lady Rayne, her hand resting on top of his. She seemed to glide across the room beside him in a gown that all the females were staring at with envious eyes.

Naria went over her gown and cloak with her eyes. *Aha, there it is, she brought that sword of hers with her, she thought with a slight smile.* She nodded slightly to Tarak to continue.

Lord Tarak stepped forward; “Queen Naria may I present Commander Duncan Wayside of the Earth starship Phoenix.”



Duncan stepped forward and bowed from the waist with a sweeping gesture. He brought forth the beautiful shiny box and held it before him; smiling he raised his head and stared Naria in the eye with his best, "I want you" smile.

Naria rose in a graceful motion and held out her hands, in a velvety soft voice she welcomed them; "Commander Duncan, on behalf of the people of Aura, I welcome you to this court. Your bravery on behalf of our Lord Tarak has our warmest thanks."

"Queen Naria, on behalf of the Space Guild and the people of Earth, I thank you for inviting us." Duncan rose up a step and held out the beautiful box towards her. "Please gracious lady, accept this personal gift as a small token of mine for your hospitality." Duncan opened the box.

Naria's violet eyes lit up when she saw the Bowie knife, there was a short intake of breath; "Aah!"

This told Duncan immediately that Rayne was correct in her assessment of the Warrior Queen, and he was glad he had listened to her council.

Naria stepped forward and took the box from Duncan, covering his hands with her own as she did so.

"This is marvelous," she purred in an excited silky-voice.

She held up the blade to the light, balanced it on her hand and spun it about. She looked at Duncan with enhanced violet eyes and smiled; Duncan noted a pleasant odor suddenly enveloping him.

"Commander Duncan, your lovely gift is accepted with my heartfelt thanks. Please come and sit by me," she offered him the empty seat beside her, "we must get to know one another better."

Duncan gave a slight bow and as he started to ascend the steps he heard an altercation behind him. He turned quickly, his hand on the sword at his belt.

Lord Boras suddenly burst into the room fighting with two members of the Light Brigade, shouting loudly he brushed them aside. Altera made a move towards him and was stopped by a growl from Naria.

"What is going on here," he demanded in a haughty voice. "Why was I not informed of this meeting?" He stormed down the steps and headed towards the Queen shouting loudly, "I demand to know why these Outsiders are here! Why wasn't I consulted about this; how dare the Queen's court entertain Outsiders!"

Duncan watched Naria's reaction become more and more agitated as Boras continued shouting. She uttered a low guttural, growling sound from deep within her throat. Her eyes flashed and she bared her teeth in a snarl, gripping the Bowie knife tightly in her hands.

And then, in a flash, she was across the room, Lord Boras pressed against one of the columns in the Hall - the Bowie knife caressing his throat. Duncan had never seen anyone, move that fast, not even Rayne.

The man looked surprised, as though he did not expect this reaction. The rest of the court was silent. Duncan noted Rayne's hand on Tarak's arm as she peered over his shoulder.

In a tightly controlled voice all heard Naria's rebuff.

"How dare you burst into my private chambers... my private chambers?"

She slammed him against the wall again.

"You dare make demands of me, your Queen? You presume much Lord Boras!" she growled again. "I answer not to you, but to the people of Aura!"

Boras froze realizing he had made a grave miscalculation; he had gone way too far. He attempted to correct his error. "My Queen... please, forgive me, a mistake... My concern was for our people; I was led to believe..."

"Agggrrr..." a loud growl erupted from Tarak and his hand went to his sword. Rayne stepped back and looked at Duncan who signaled restraint, with his hand. The entire court held its breath at this confrontation.

"Do not speak!"

Naria's wrath was tightly controlled, and Duncan had the feeling that if it was turned loose she could easily rip the man to shreds.

She released him and he dropped to the floor. He tried to stand up with some dignity but Naria wasn't finished with him yet.

"You remained in my Hold in secret... For what purpose I wonder?"

Lord Boras looked about the room for help and his eyes landed on Lord Tarak. Duncan noted that both men seemed to exchange daggers; there was true animosity between them. But Tarak did not provoke him with a smile of triumph; he simply stared back with indifference.

"You would spy on me in my own Hold...me... your Queen?" Naria's voice took on a distinctly lower tone as she paced. "You take dangerous liberties sir!"

"Please, my Queen, let me explain..." An alarmed Boras was trying to salvage some bit of credulity from this mess. "I never intended..."

"Must I now worry about what other things you have been up to?"

Naria now played her trump card. She whirled around and taking a stance with her hands on her hips and faced Boras. Tilting her head slightly she asked in a cold dead voice,

"Do you challenge me Lord Boras?"

Boras noted her tightening grip on the strange looking knife she held in her hand.

"My Queen, no..." he blurted out all too quickly, "no, not at all... I... I meant no harm."

**“It may be that you speak the truth Lord Boras, but due to your actions,” Naria stepped back, “how can I know this for sure?” Now in a softer voice she continued, “You have lost my trust Lord Boras, and deeply injured my respect for you.” Boras looked as tho’ he had been physically slapped.**

**With a hurt look on her face Naria turned her back to him and whispered, “I thought I could rely on you of all people...” Boras looked crushed and hung his head (in shame).**

**She sighed deeply and then quickly changed her tone calling out in a deep voice, “First Altera!”**

**Altera stepped forward, her sword in her hand, “Yes my Queen?”**

**“You will escort Lord Boras to the main gate of this Hold and see to it that he and his party return to their own Hold.” Fist to chest in salute, Altera moved towards Lord Boras, flanked by two of her Light Brigade members.**

**Her back still to him and in a voice now dripping with contempt Naria angrily ordered, “You are dismissed Lord Boras!” He was quickly led out of the Queen’s private chamber.**

**Watching the confrontation, Duncan took everything in and quickly understood Naria’s actions. She could have taken his life, but that would have caused other problems. Instead she was giving the man a way out. He admired the way she handled the difficult situation, keeping herself in tight restraint.**

*She’s a fierce one all right, he thought with admiration, but smart, very smart.*

**Lord Boras left the Hall with a sigh of relief and as much dignity as he could muster; Naria had left him precious little. He had never seen her like this; he had truly thought she was going to kill him. He knew of her ferocity, although he had never witnessed it himself until now. He sincerely believed he was lucky to get away with his life. He would have to rethink his plans.**

**The look on his Lord’s face told Matai that things did not go well. He felt it prudent not to speak and remained silent on their long ride back to Lord Boras’ Hold. He did however note the smile on Altera’s face, and it did not sit well with him. One day he would have to call her out, but today was not that day.**

Back in the Hall, Naria took a deep breath and turned around and smiled. She smoothed out her dress and as she made her way to her throne, she stopped in front of Lord Tarak and slightly nodded.

“Thank you for backing me up Lord Tarak, I knew I could count on your loyalty.”

“My Queen, always,” Tarak bowed and then took Rayne’s arm pulling her forward, “may I present Lady Rayne, Eloi Warrior for the starship Phoenix.”

Rayne nodded respectfully, smiling at Naria, ignoring Lord Tarak’s instructions.

“Lady Rayne,” Naria extended her long delicate hand, “come please. My, my, so much strength for one so small; I believe we may have much in common,” she smiled at Rayne and continued, “come, walk with me.”

Rayne had an instant feeling of comradeship for the tall woman; something about her so familiar yet they had never met before.

As they made their way towards the throne Naria called to Duncan with a wave, “come, we will all adjourn to the Dining Hall.”

Silently she thought; *I could use a drink after that.*

She turned to Minister Gordon, “Prime Minister Gordon, would you dismiss the court and join us for a light lunch. We have much to go over with Lord Duncan.”

“Certainly my Queen,” he replied and he quickly gathered up everyone present and dismissed the court. He offered apologies to some and explanations to the trusted; most sided with Naria understanding. He personally saw to it that everyone left the court.

Naria steered them thru two very large doors and into the adjourning room where a large round dining table, laden with fruits, cheese, and bread, dominated the room. She walked over and took her seat in an ornate chair. She motioned Duncan to sit beside her on her left, and Lord Tarak on her right. Rayne sat next to Lord Tarak. When Prime Minister Gordon entered the room, he shut the doors behind him, and took a seat beside Duncan.

“My Queen, Lord Boras is starting to stir the waters?” Tarak had never seen her loose her temper like that before, especially in front of the whole court. “No criticism intended; I only ask out of concern for you. Lord Boras is getting much to bold; I worry for your safety.”

“I am fine Tarak,” she answered with a smile, “Lord Boras was simply testing me and the court’s reaction. He needed to be reminded of his place; but you are correct, the pretentious little Ousa is becoming a problem.”

“I would have gutted him,” Rayne remarked in an emotionless voice, “he means you ill.”

Queen Naria looked at Rayne in surprise; Duncan stared at her with daggers in his eyes; there was dead silence in the room; suddenly broken by Naria's loud laugh.

"Oh Lady Rayne, you do get to the point." She slapped the table, "Believe me, nothing would have given me more pleasure, but there are other noble houses and considerations of Law that I must adhere to. Oh, but I like your style, little one!"

Tarak and Gordon joined in her laughter; Duncan glared at a smiling Rayne. Altera slipped into the room and went over to Naria and whispered in her ear. Naria smiled and bade her join the table.

"I suppose," began Naria leaning towards Duncan, "that there is also much intrigue on your home world, Lord Duncan."

Duncan laughed, "Queen Naria, there is always intrigue when men play with power."

"Good answer!" Naria's eyes flashed as she rubbed Duncan's arm.

Laughing, she rang a small bell on the table and servants appeared out of nowhere and began placing drinks beside each place setting. She reached for the platter before her and speared several pieces of fruit and something that resembled cheese. She then passed the platter to Duncan with a smile. The basket of bread was still warm when Tarak took a piece and passed it to Rayne.

"So, Lord Duncan, tell me, what do you think of our little world?" Naria asked sweetly.

Duncan looked at her and knew she would gage him by the answers he gave.

"I like the feel of it; your people are very friendly, and they seem happy and contented. When we first landed I noticed that the air was sweet and fresh; the planet itself is a beautiful place, Queen Naria. Your world is run very efficiently; you make use of everything, and there is no pollution. There is a certain 'feel' to the place, can't explain it, but it's just right. I hope we can become friends."

Naria looked at Gordon and raised her eyebrow. Gordon nodded and added, "Well spoken Lord Duncan."

"All right then," Naria began, "let's drop all of this formality and get down to business. Duncan, you don't mind if I call you Duncan do you," she purred, "my scientists tell me that they have come up with a device they can install above your planet; it should provide the shielding you will need to repel a Scather attack."

"Yes, yes," Gordon joined the conversation, "it will do the job nicely. But Commander, they must not attempt to examine it in any way." He shook his finger back and forth.

"Why so Prime Minister?" Duncan asked.

**“If they scan it, or x-ray it, the device will shut down; and you can guess the results. I bring this to your attention for a reason. We do not mind sharing the device to protect your world, but the technology is very advanced. We do not know your people well enough yet to entrust them with such power.”**

**Naria added, “You understand the reasons why we make this demand, don’t you?”**

**“I do completely,” he replied instantly, "and I would have urged you to do the same." Duncan had half expected some kind of stipulation. “But, to be perfectly honest, our scientists can be obstinate; they will want to look the device over. And we have some security people who will not trust you or the device. They are more of a threat than the scientists, as they will want to take it apart. I will have to find a way of impressing on them the importance of not messing with the damn thing.”**

**“I like your candor Commander,” replied Gordon, “maybe we can come up with something together to aid you in this quest.”**

**Duncan looked at Gordon and smiled, “Any help will be appreciated, sir.”**

**Naria reached over and patted Duncan’s arm, “Don’t you worry yourself Duncan, we will find a way. Now,” she turned towards Rayne, leaning to the side and brushing against Duncan’s arm, “tell me little one about this sword of yours that has a name; I have heard all kinds of strange rumors.”**

**“K’nada seems to have captivated everyone’s imagination, and to be perfectly honest I do not understand it.” She pushed her chair back, rose and pulled K’nada from its holder and held it before her.**

**Altera rose quickly, Naria raised her hand and motioned to her that it was okay.**

**“K’nada was gift from my Sensei Master after completing my training at the Samurai Academy on Earth. It is very old and belonged to Lord Kanada. He was an ancient warrior, a Shogun, who ruled Japan with wisdom.” She turned the blade over several times. “My Sensei presented it to me saying he believed I embodied all that Kanada stood for, and therefore I should not let it lie idle in a dusty museum.”**

**Queen Naria stood and looked at the shining sword. “May I...?” She asked extending her long graceful hand; Rayne placed the sword in her hands. Naria turned it over inspecting the blade. She held it in her hand and made two quick strokes, spinning the sword about. She studied the hilt and balanced it.**

**Looking at Rayne she asked, “And this is the weapon you used to slay the mutants, and the Scathers in their recent attack?”**

**Rayne nodded, “It is.”**

Naria handed it back to her, "It is a precise, well-balanced, and beautiful weapon. With great power comes great responsibility; but I am sure you already know this."

Rayne smiled, "I bow to your wisdom," she put her hands together and bowed in the ancient way; Naria was touched by this action.

"So tell me little one, what do you remember of your beginnings? Did the Eloi preserve your heritage for you?" Naria watched Rayne's face as she answered.

"There was nothing left to preserve; the ship crashed and I was thrown free. I was a baby, barely able to walk. The Eloi are all the family I knew until I came of age. That was when my mother told me the truth and what little they knew of my beginnings. They placed me under Duncan's charge to learn of my heritage."

Rayne put K'nada away and looked at Naria, "Why the interest?"

"Just curiosity, little one," Naria answered quickly. "We get very few guests, and I am naturally curious of everything concerning the Eloi; I find them to be a fascinating race." Naria smiled, "We must spar sometime; I would like to see what they taught you."

"Queen Naria, no disrespect, but one does not spar with one's equal," Rayne declared in a deadpan voice. "But I will fight at your side."

"Ah!" Naria slapped Rayne on her back, "Spoken like a true warrior."

Tarak was shocked at this open display from Naria; he had never seen her like this before. He could only assume that she saw something in Rayne. And he had to admit that Rayne looked stunning; she put the other women to shame. It was then that Tarak noticed the similarities between Rayne and Naria. The makeup was the same; even their hairstyle was alike. An idea began to form, an idea he was sure was too crazy to be taken seriously.

"Now come, come, let us eat and make merry. Duncan, you must have some amusing stories from your adventures traveling thru space that you can regale us all with. And please, the bawdier the better!" She took a large swig of her drink and slammed the goblet down on the table.

They all laughed, and after one of Duncan's stories the ice was broken. The rest of the afternoon was spent in laughter and ruckus behavior. Duncan had them all laughing at numerous adventures; and as he continued with other tales he found himself being drawn to Naria. They bantered back and forth with much flirting and sexual innuendo. To his surprise, Duncan found himself wanting to be alone with her; and when Naria winked at him and rubbed his leg under the table; he smiled devilishly in reply. She returned the smile, squeezed his arm and turned to Lord Tarak.

"Lord Tarak," she purred in a sultry voice, "why don't you show Lady Rayne about my Hold; especially our gardens, I am sure she would enjoy them."



Naria stared at Tarak, flared her nostrils, winked and quickly turned away. Tarak got the message and offered his arm to Rayne. They excused themselves and headed towards the garden walkway.

“Commander Duncan, if you would come with me, I shall show you some of the swords in my collection,” Naria purred in a silky voice, “They do not rival this beautiful Bowie knife, but you will find them interesting nonetheless.”

Naria rose without further ado and took Duncan’s arm. Just before they left the room, Rayne noted Duncan had a silly grin on his face and both she and Tarak laughed.

“He will be good for her, I think,” Tarak offered, “she gives much to this world and denies herself too many pleasures.

“Ha, she will be good for him!” Rayne countered, “He’s denied himself for far too long.”

“And you?” Lord Tarak asked with a raise of his brow.

“I am just fine,” Rayne smiled, rose and changed the subject, “now let’s go see those gardens your Queen spoke of.”

They spent the afternoon walking about the lovely gardens, stopping at a waterfall to sit and talk casually; passing the time by getting to know one another. Rayne found herself being drawn to this strong man; she liked the way he looked at things.

She listened to him describe the beginnings of this Hold, all that it embodied, and was fascinated. While he went on describing the various laws of their planet fantasies swirled about in her mind. Fantasies about her and this unique man - and it frightened her.

**Rayne spent the next few days at Lord Tarak's Hold, disappearing every morning before the others rose. She explored every street of the Hold, and then went out into the surrounding forests and discovered the creatures in them.**

**She took to secretly following Tarak on his daily rounds; using her Eloi abilities, she observed as he worked out in the arena with his warriors every day. She liked the fact that he treated his warriors with respect and built up their confidence. She noted him working with one of the warriors and showing him where to place his feet, etc. for a particular move. All the time he praised the young man for his efforts; in the end the warrior learned the move and executed it with great confidence. She never suspected that Tarak was aware of her presence the entire time.**

**She caught herself daydreaming about him several times and it upset her. She had never been interested in, or aroused by, a male before. She discovered that she liked this new feeling; liked the way it made her senses come alive inside. She wasn't sure if it was good or bad; and the indecision upset her.**

**She also found that she felt completely at ease on this planet, it was almost as if she had come 'home'. She found herself doing things the Ogatu way, even though she was not familiar with their customs. She spent many hours in meditation pondering all this, the result of which was the formation of an idea that she kept to herself; not even discussing it with Duncan.**

Across the plains First Matai was raging after reading the latest message from the so-called, 'spy' in Warrior's Hold. His reports were lacking any important information at all. It seemed his fears were correct; the boy had been in Tarak's Hold too long,

*And he had been with Lord Boras since plucked from a Scather raid as a young toddler, he thought to himself angrily.*

This happened all too often to their spies. Once away from Lord Boras' control, they would fall prey to other influences. Seeing the world from another viewpoint, they would refuse to return to Miners Hold and its harsh way of life. He really couldn't blame them; sometimes he envied them. Long ago he had made his choice; and that choice had allowed him to rise up to become First to his Lord. His fate was entwined with that of Lord Boras; and he would follow it to its inevitable end.

Matai found Lord Boras to be a pretentious, arrogant ass who thought himself above anyone else on the planet. Boras' family bloodline flowed from the Original Ones, and his family had spent generations keeping the line 'pure'. Marriages had been arranged carefully, and at great expense, to ensure the line flowed purely. Still some produced monsters that conveniently "died" in childbirth. Many of the young females in these 'arranged' marriages ran away after first birth. Others killed themselves rather than go thru another pregnancy; few wanted to bed with Boras after the first time. The few who agreed to stay and live in this nightmarish place were greedy and evil; and soon their excesses caused their own downfall. There were many secrets in Miners Hold and Matai knew them all.

Lord Boras took in orphans, all the orphans he could under the pretense of caring for them. In reality he wanted a large army under his control, manned by strong loyal men. And only the strong survived in his Hold. If any of these traumatized young boys managed to survive to adulthood they were rewarded with a commission into Lord Boras' army. Most of these boys became little more than thugs who did his bidding, which was exactly what Lord Boras wanted.

Lord Boras' hatred of the Scathers was matched only by his fanatical view of Outsiders. Matai had listened to his ranting long enough to know that the man was as close to insane as they come. But, he was a 'blender'; he showed the world outside the Hold a different face. No one knew the real Lord Boras, he had everyone fooled, even Queen Naria.

The only one who really knew Lord Boras was Lord Tarak, and he was keeping his own council, revealing nothing. There was no love lost between these two, and it went way back into their youth. Matai could never learn what had caused the breach between them, but it was there. Matai also knew something else, something his Lord had no idea he knew; Lord Boras was afraid of Lord Tarak.

Three days later Prime Minister Gordon came up with a solution to Duncan's dilemma that would guarantee no one would mess with the device. Once the device was in place and turned on, any touch would arm a safety mechanism and the device would self-destruct. Duncan also learned that Prime Minister Gordon and two female scientists would accompany him to Earth with the device. From what he understood, most of the scientists were female, (it seemed females excelled in the sciences). Lady Killian and Mistress Tara had designed and created the device. They had tested it already and assured Duncan that it would protect Earth from the Scathers. How this was accomplished, he didn't ask.

Duncan called the Phoenix and filled Alexei in on the news giving him time to prepare to receive their travelers. Duncan felt it prudent to send along the statistics on their guests; and their dietary requirements.

Alexei made arrangements for special quarters for the three guests and two guards that would accompany them. Two days later Alexei had their quarters ready, complete with beds to suit their size. He acquired a list of foods that would be agreeable to their guests and asked for it to be shipped up to him along with their luggage. Alexei reported to Duncan that he and his crew were very curious to meet the group, especially the females.

*The trip home is going to be very interesting,* thought Duncan with a smile on his face as he packed his things. His reverie was interrupted by a knock on his door; he could tell it was Rayne. He knew something had been bothering her for days now. He knew she would come to him when she was ready.

"Come in Rayne," he said casually, "just packing."

"Yes, I see," she said nervously. "Duncan," she walked to the window and looked out not really seeing anything; then she turned around. "Duncan I don't want to return to the Phoenix with you," said in rapid fire wringing her hands. "I want to stay here while you're gone."

"Well now, this is something new," Duncan had half expected this, "explain."

She turned and began pacing back and forth unconsciously. "Something is happening to me," she was twisting her hands, (very unlike herself Duncan noted), "things are surfacing. I have feelings of déjà vu about this planet - I'm sure it has something to do with my past. I believe my only chance of finding any answers is if I stay. You do understand, Duncan."

Duncan merely stared at her waiting. *There's more...*

"I want to explore where it all leads." She paced again, "I find myself drawn to this world in a way I don't understand. I wish I could explain it better," she said in exasperation, "but I cannot explain what I do not understand."

Duncan could see her obvious uneasiness at admitting all this; she was always in control, always strong and sure of herself. These changes had affected her more than he had thought. She always confided in him, but this was the first time he saw her unsettled by it. He went to her and took hold of her hands.

“Rayne, you’ve always questioned your heritage. Hell, we always wondered about that crashed ship; where it really came from. There was never any record of any ship of ours in the area; and no ship was ever reported missing. Darlin’, I understand your need; if there is a chance you can find out, then go for it kid.”

Duncan noticed she seemed almost relieved that he understood. He wondered if he should say anything about his suspicions, but then decided he would wait and see.

“Just do me a favor kid, keep an open mind, whatever you find out. You know you are dear to me, and no matter what you find out, that will not change. Believe me Rayne, nothing will change the way I feel about you.”

She threw her arms around his neck spontaneously, quite unlike herself.

“Thank you Duncan, I knew you would understand.” She stood back and asked, “You’ve been feeling it too, haven’t you? There is something palpable here. ”

“I’ll admit that I have been feeling something; Naria managed to twist me around her finger without much effort. I’m not complaining mind you,” he chuckled, “she is one hell of a woman; and at the time it seemed like a mutual thing.” Duncan smiled remembering his afternoon in Naria’s quarters.

“Why Duncan, I believe you’re blushing...” Rayne teased and Duncan laughed with her.

“Seriously, I don’t know what it is either, but there is definitely something going on here. And Rayne, part of that ‘feeling’ has something to do with a kinship to these people, I’m sure of it. I find myself feeling close; I really like them. You go and find out what you can, and watch your back.”

“Thank you Duncan, I won’t forget this.” She left his rooms with a smile on her face.

Duncan watched her go and sat back for a moment.

*After what she just said I am sure now than ever before; somehow, someway, Rayne is one of these people!*

Rayne left Duncan to his packing and headed for Lord Tarak's study. As she came down the stairs she saw the door ajar and Tarak at his desk going over some papers. She stood at the door for a few seconds and watched him, feelings and emotions racing thru her body. *I have to stop this!*

She knocked lightly on the door, "Lord Tarak, do you have a moment?"

He looked up from his papers and smiled, "I always have time for you Lady Rayne."

Rayne entered the study and took a seat in front of his desk. Tarak noted, to his surprise, that she seemed nervous. She took a deep breath and began, "I would like to make a formal request Lord Tarak."

"Ah, this is serious," he leaned back and watched her. "Very well Lady Rayne, please continue."

"I do not want to return to the Phoenix with Duncan tomorrow; I wish to remain here, on Aura." She waited to see his reaction; he simply smiled asked her to continue.

"I can only say that I feel a very strong call from Aura. It is almost as if I had been here before. I find myself feeling things that are strange and yet familiar at the same time; and I know it has something to do this planet." She stressed the point forcefully and then in a softer tone continued.

"I would like to explore these things, find the truth, if there is any. I have already spoken with Duncan and he has agreed to my request, if you allow it." She sat forward placing her hand on his desk, "Be assured, I will not be an idle 'guest' Lord Tarak. I will work, and help in harvesting the crops for winter; and help Mistress Sera with the packing. And I will agree to any limits you place on my presence when we move to the Ohmu Forest." She waited, hoping he would agree to let her stay.

Tarak sat forward and smiled, "I half expected you to ask to remain here Lady Rayne; I saw it in your eyes yesterday when Duncan spoke of returning to his ship."

He ruffled some papers on his desk and held up several. "I have already received permission from Queen Naria for you to remain if you desire it. She too saw our planet casting its spell on you. But you will be limited to my Hold for the winter months when we are in the Ohmu Forest. Queen Naria is going to accept your stay as an act of good faith while Prime Minister Gordon and his party are visiting your planet." He leaned forward and placed his hand on her outstretched one. "Lord Boras could use this as an excuse to cause trouble. Queen Naria is going to inform him herself of your presence in my Hold; he wouldn't dare object."

"Thank you for understanding Lord Tarak," she smiled, "and my thanks to Queen Naria also." She rose and turned, "Now, if you will excuse me, I'm going for a ride, I need to sort some things out." She turned back and leaned over the desk, squeezing Tarak's forearm whispering, "Thank you Tarak, this touches my soul."

Tarak watched her go and smiled to himself. *And now we find out the truth.*

Rayne grabbed her coat, headed out the front door, and made her way to the stables. She looked for Master Seatac. The old stablemaster was not surprised to see her as she had been riding the last few afternoons just before the evening meal. Arms extended the great bear of a man greeted her warmly with a big hug.

“Ah my Lady, I was expecting you so I saddled up Patton for you. He’s been enjoying your evening rides very much, but you’re spoiling him for everyone else! Ha, ha! Yes, indeed!” Master Seatac held the reins as he walked Patton out of the stable pen.

“You are very kind Master Setac,” Rayne leaned forward and kissed the rotund man on his cheek, “I truly appreciate your taking such good care of me.”

The man’s face broke out into a large grin and he began to laugh as he nimbly lifted Rayne up and placed her on the large animal. He had taken to her from the moment they had been introduced by Lord Tarak. He marveled at her ability to ‘speak’ to his animals.

“What you need young woman, is a man to see after you. You better watch out Lady Rayne, or I am going to court after you myself.” The large man laughed heartily, “Lord Tarak must be blind to pass up a beauty like you.”

Rayne laughed with him, “I can see I’m going to have to watch myself around you, Master Seatac, you randy old devil you!”

“Ha, ha, ha; right you are Lady Rayne!”

Several of the young men began snickering also and Seatac quickly called them to task for it. “You show respect to the Lady or I’ll bash your heads,” he chastised them. All cowered knowing his reputation.

“Seriously my lady, stay to the western side of the Hold from now on; we are expecting our first cold front to move thru soon. The weather here changes in a matter of minutes, so you best keep alert.”

He walked her to the side entrance near the stables, and slapped Patton on his rump.

“Good riding!” he called as she galloped out of the Hold to the plain below.

Master Seatac looked around the stable and then raised his eyes up towards the main Hold House. He spied Lord Tarak on the balcony, watching Lady Rayne ride away.

*Well now, maybe he’s not as blind as I thought.*



Rayne gave the large animal its freedom and it took off already knowing the path to take. She sat casually atop the beast enjoying the cold air; there was something familiar about the flowery fragrance. As she rode along she began going over the details of the dream she had the night before. She had not discussed with Duncan the strange feelings and dreams she had been having since arriving on Aura. They had told her many things about the planet; and she found that as the information flowed it was almost as if a memory had been recaptured. Just last night she dreamt of a beautiful paint pony, waiting on a hilltop for her. In her dream, the Paint had seemed very familiar, like an old friend.

Now here she was looking for the herd of Hausa that camped on the side of the Hold each night. In the dream the Paint she saw was on a hill over-looking the main herd, and the wind was blowing hard, and the silken longhaired horse was reveling in the cool breeze.

As she came out of the forest, the plain opened up before her. There in the distance, she spotted the Hausa; they had begun gathering for the evening. The closer she got to the herd the more excited she became. There in the distance she could see a figure standing on the hilltop overlooking the Hausa. Patton stopped at the bottom of the small hill; Rayne dismounted and started towards the top.

*Okay, this is getting downright spooky. There he is, just like in the dream.*

The beautiful Hausa neighed and shook his head up and down several times, but he held his ground. Rayne crested the hill and reached into her pocket and pulled out a couple of carrot-like tubers and held them out for him to see. She began to speak to him in a soft velvety voice. He remained where he was, but he watched every move she made, his muscles taut and ready for flight. She laid the carrots down on the grass about five feet away and then stepped back.

Neither moved...

Ten minutes went by and nothing...

It was a stare off...

Rayne tried coaxing him; but to no avail.

She gave up and walked down the hill to Patton; he lowered his leg and bent his body so she could climb up on him. As she prepared to head back to the Hold, she glanced up the hill one last time and to her surprise the Paint pony was watching her – with the carrots in his mouth!

*Gottcha! Rayne thought to herself in triumph. You are going to be mine, you sweet beauty.*

For the next two days she raced up the hill each evening with carrots for the pony. She studied his markings, and noted the way the brown and black colors met over his forehead forming a perfect star shape. She decided then and there to call him ‘Star’; he seemed to take to the name right away as he looked up at her whenever she called him by name.

On the third evening as she headed back to the Hold and the stable where Master Seatac was waiting for her she decided to ask him about the Hausa. She waved and indicated she wished to speak to him.

**“Master Seatac,” she called to him and he came over. “What do you know of the smaller Hausa? I’m slowly making friends with one out there; he’s a real beauty.”**

**“Ah... good luck with that my lady. Although having seen you in action with my other beasts, you may stand a chance.” He took the reins from her and continued, “They are a wild breed; shunned by the regular Hausa. They are either a throwback, or an evolutionary jump in the species; personally, I think it is the latter. They are faster, much more agile, and much smarter than their contemporaries, but they do everything by their own will.”**

**He unsaddled Patton, handed Lady Rayne a large brush and took one himself. Each began brushing Patton while Master Seatac continued with his thoughts.**

**“I’ve heard tales from the farmers on the outer plains regions. These smaller Hausa have been known to seek out a farm and make contact, especially if there are little ones in the family. There are reports of them rescuing lost children and bringing them back to their families. It has been said that they are very gentle with young ones; and it is not unheard of to see the children riding about on one. If adopted into a family on the rim, they are said to be very loyal and hard working. They consider the family to be one of their own ‘herd’ and will protect it with great ferocity.” He shook his head up and down.**

**“And,” he held up his large finger and whispered in a low voice, “there is one known case of one hunting down and attacking a Scather raiding party that landed in its territory.”**

**“They sound like a perfect partner to have when about on the plains. I’m trying to make friends with him Master Seatac; I want him to get used to my scent. I’ve been giving him some of those orange tubers.” She laughed, “He’s a bit standoffish, but he eats them and appears to be looking for more.”**

**“I see, well, you might want to try some of those apples,” he pointed out the barrels of apples in the back of the stable. “They are sweet, and most Hausa like them very much. Tell me Lady Rayne, when you finally win him over what are you going to do with him?”**

**“Train him to be my personal ride. I think he would be better suited for me than Patton; he is more to my size. He seems a little skittish right now, but I am hoping to calm his fears. I just hope I can accomplish all this before we move to the Ohmu Forest for the winter.”**

**“Ah don’t worry yourself my lady; we never go before the first snowstorm. That gives you about 3 to 4 weeks, and I’ll wager you will have him in ten days time,” Master Seatac slapped the wooden beam in the stable door and laughed. “Yes indeed!”**

**Suddenly he leaned close and put his hand on Rayne’s arm. “Do me a little favor my Lady; make sure you let me know every time you go out, just in case. You can never be too prepared this time of year, the weather changes radically in a very short time. If you got caught out there you could freeze to death in a matter of minutes.”**

**She promised she would tell him when she went out and then gave him a hearty ‘thank you’ hug. She left and made her way to the main house.**

**At the evening meal she was jovial and engaging telling Mistress Sera all about her plans with the young Hausa. She and Mistress Sera also made plans for the coming week and the packing of the household.**

**The next week was a flurry of activity. Rayne rose early each morning, took one of Tarak's warriors with her at Master Seatac's insistence, and made her way to the fields to help in the reaping of the different crops. At first she was received with less than grand enthusiasm, but she soon changed their minds with her hard work. She even offered some ideas to make things easier on the pickers, which was received and implemented with grateful thanks. Tarak's warriors were soon vying to be the one who would accompany her each day.**

**When finished at one farm, she would then move on to the next one. Soon word spread and each farm looked forward to meeting this strange 'Eloi warrior-woman'. Her engaging personality and many questions about their work made the farmers at ease and they accepted her quickly into their fold after a day of hard work.**

**And after each evening she was faithfully out at the ridgeline, coaxing the paint pony ever closer with tempting delights.**

**Lord Tarak was kept advised by Kai, of her whereabouts at all times. His reports on her were very positive; he noted that the warriors held her in high regard. She was busy helping the farms along the ridgeline in the reaping of their crops, and the farmers spoke of her in glowing terms. She had earned the respect of all by her hard work. When she returned to the Hold, she would help Mistress Sera wherever she was needed. Then, after dinner each night, she would go for a ride on Patton. Master Seatac spoke of her with great admiration and a hint of protectiveness.**

**Tarak was secretly pleased that his people were taking such a shine to her. It would ensure an easier transition when they moved to the Ohmu Forest for the winter months. And he hoped that it would ensure their protectiveness of her. He did not want to give Lord Boras any reason to question her presence in his Hold.**

Towards late afternoon a young runner knocked on Tarak's study with a request from Master Seatac asking for a meeting. Tarak put his papers away and decided an evening walk to the sables would be nice. He found Master Seatac on the West wall of the Hold observing the countryside thru his binoculars. Looking out he saw what interested the old stable master. Rayne was on a small rise about a half trek from the Hold; she was with one of the smaller Hausa.

"Master Seatac, good to see you keeping an eye on our guest," Lord Tarak greeted him, "she is not yet fully acquainted with all the dangers out on the plains."

"My Lord," he replied nodding. Reaching down beside him he pulled out another set of binoculars and handed them to Tarak, "thank you for coming." Tarak looked out towards the hill as he continued, "I don't worry about her any more; she can hold her own."

*A high compliment coming from Master Seatac, thought Tarak.*

"My lord, take a look at the Hausa she is with; look at its markings."

Tarak looked and quickly lowered the glasses staring at Master Seatac, "You don't think it's one of Starchasers folds do you?" He looked again, "Could it be possible after so long? No one has seen him since he ran off after Serena's death."

"I thought the same thing and believe it may be so." Master Seatac shifted himself and turned to Lord Tarak. "Forgive me for saying so my Lord, but Lady Rayne reminds me so much of Lady Serena; she has that same spark of adventure in her. And though' she is small in size; she emanates a powerful life force. And she has the 'gift'; the animals all sense it, that's why they take to her so quickly."

"Believe me Master Seatac, I have noticed..." Tarak murmured in a deep voice.

"There is another thing I have noticed my Lord," Master Seatac watched Lord Tarak's face as he continued, "Her eyes sir, they are as violet as our own women's eyes; and I've observed her doing things our way, without any instructions. I think the Eloi got it wrong; I believe she may be one of us."

Surprise showed in Tarak's eyes, he thought he was the only one who suspected, "Explain yourself, Master Seatac."

"Ach, there are so many little things, my Lord," Seatac scratched his head. "From the way she approaches the Hausa, to the way she saddles them; and then there's the Densi. We both know they only respond to Ogatu females. For centuries they have favored our Hold with their presence. I saw her on the hill last night holding two of them in her arms, babies; and the mother was curled up in her lap. If that doesn't tell you something, nothing will!"

Tarak knew the reputation of the protectiveness of the Densi mothers towards their young. The ferocious little beasts could rip a man to shreds in seconds.

“There are many other things I have observed these past several days, my Lord” the stable master continued, “she does things our way without realizing it; things that only an Ogatu would know to do.”

Tarak was almost relieved that someone else had finally seen and guessed what he had seen and questioned.

Master Seatac smiled and bowed his old head to Lord Tarak, “My Lord, if I were younger I would go after her myself. You cannot deny that she would make a powerful mate for your house.”

“Old man you go too far!” shouted Tarak in a deep voice. The old man held his ground and smiled back at Tarak, who finally laughed. “You are the only one I would allow to speak to me in this manner old man. But you are right; she would be a jewel to any Hold. And yes, I have eyes to see too; but there is no way to prove any of it.”

Master Seatac had known Tarak since he was a baby and had served his father and now him. The old man knew he was stepping out of bounds, but still he persisted; he had seen the look of longing on Tarak’s face when he was with her.

“You well know there is one way; talk to Denair. He could spell out the truth and put an end to our speculation.” Tarak turned away at the mention of the old seer’s name. Seatac took a deep breath and blurted out, “The Tarak I knew would move heaven and hell to get the woman he wanted; I’ve seen him do it!”

Memories of Serena came flooding into Tarak’s mind, he sighed deeply and replied, “You’re right old man, and I know it.”

“Why don’t you seek council of Denair on this; he helped you when you went after Serena. Besides, if any one knows the truth of all this it would be him. I saw the look on his face when he saw her for the first time; that’s what got me to thinking. You go speak to the old seer; he’ll set you straight.”

“You know old man; sometimes you have too much wisdom for your own good.” Lord Tarak frowned and huffed, “I will consider going to see Denair; now good night!”

Tarak left the walled area and made his way back to the main house; he wanted to be in his study before she returned for dinner.

*The less contact the better for all right now.*

Rayne had spent days coaxing the Paint closer and closer with each meeting. She finally had the animal at ease enough that it allowed her to brush him. Master Seatac said that the Hausa loved to be brushed. And he had suggested that she calm the animal by brushing it as it ate the treats she brought for it. She also sang to him, and talked in an even, soft tone. And now tonight, it had come down and met her as she began to climb the hill. She was sure the animal had finally accepted her.

She looked up towards the Hold and could make out Master Seatac and Lord Tarak watching her. They appeared to be arguing about something. She hoped she hadn't gotten the old stable master into trouble with Tarak. She had tried her best to stay out of Tarak's way these past few days. She doubted he noticed, as he seemed to be preoccupied with something.

Since that night she had almost lost control she had made a point of not being alone with him. She didn't want to chance something. She knew if the opportunity happened again, she would be sorely tempted. Staying away seemed the wisest thing to do.

Two days later as Rayne left the Hold the Paint was waiting for her just outside the gate. He neighed and pawed the air as she emerged. She slid off of Patton and ran up to the animal offering it a large juicy apple. It took the apple and pranced about in a circle; then to Rayne's surprise, it folded its front leg, as it had seen Patton do, and lowered its self down.

"Offering me a ride are you?" asked Rayne as she approached and gently climbed on the animal's back. He stood immediately, turned and began a slow trot to their hill as Rayne began humming an old Eloi tune.

From the Hold-wall Master Seatac was collecting on several bets.  
*Ha! I knew she could do it; she has the touch all right!*

Tarak watched the same scene from his study window. There was a longing filling his mind that he hadn't felt in a very long time. He watched for a moment more and then turned and left the study making his way down the backstairs and out to the quiet streets of the garden district.

*Maybe old Master Surtac was right; maybe Denair has the answer.*

Long ago Tarak had blamed the ancient seer for Serena's death; he had said things, accusatory and hurtful. He was out of his mind with grief at the time, lashing out at everyone. He had almost lost total control of his senses before Naria stepped in and brought him back from the brink of madness. It was a particularly ugly moment in his life that he didn't enjoy remembering. Time had taught him that Serena would have found out about the Scathers attack anyway; she would have acted on her own quickly before informing him or anyone. The realization of this finally sunk-in and he released his blame of the little seer; but he still avoided any contact with him because his presence brought back too many memories of Serena.

Now however, time and circumstances had changed, he had put those memories behind him. He needed to confirm what he suspected about Rayne before he made a move. All his instincts were clamoring for action; but he held back, unsure if she were feeling the same. Denair could put an end to the guessing. He went down a side street and found the seer's small house amid a grove of fragrant Lucama trees. He took a deep breath and rapped once on his door.

A small thin female opened the door almost instantly, "Lord Tarak, Master Denair is expecting you," she said in a soft voice as she glided across the floor, "please follow me." He followed as she led him thru the house to a sitting room in the back facing a large garden.

"Lord Tarak, welcome to my home," said Denair in a velvet voice barely above a whisper.

The ancient little man sat in a large chair, his diminutive frame almost hidden among brightly colored pillows and blankets. The study was small and cozy, one wall had shelves from ceiling to floor and each was filled with books of all sizes. Tarak noticed a faint outline on the wall; a large picture had been recently removed.

Serena had loved this little man; consulting with him on many things. He was a constant fixture at the main house while she was alive. It was he who had 'seen' the Scather's coming attack; and several visions later he had the actual landing area. An ominous feeling of death accompanied the vision and he made the mistake of telling her, (an error he regretted ever since). Serena had assumed it was Tarak and the knowledge forced her to take matters into her own hands, which resulted in her death.

"I know how hard it was for you to come here, my Lord," Denair said in a faint whisper, "what may I do for you?"

"I have a question about a guest staying at my house. Because of things I have observed, I have come to believe she may be one of us. I was wondering if you had picked up anything about her."

Tarak was uncomfortable; *can he see my feelings, my desire for her?*

"I know of her, my Lord," he said softly and then took a deep breath. "From the first day I set eyes on her I have known."

Denair remembered going thru the market place and sensing a strong life force about him, strangely familiar somehow. He had looked about and there in the distance he had seen Rayne and Mistress Sera in deep conversation. He had brought forth his ability and almost fainted when he truly 'saw' her; her aura was glowing with the same intense light that Serena had possessed. Had it not been for the old Stable Master being close by, he would have fallen in a dead faint.

"What are you saying Denair?" asked Tarak.



**“She is Ogatu, my Lord.” With a wave of his hand the little man requested assistance from his aide to lean forward. He caressed an oblong-shaped crystal and continued, “A newer, smaller version yes, but nonetheless, pure Ogatu. The Ogatu we were meant to be.”**

**Tarak watched the little man intently and quickly turned away not wanting him to see the disappointment he felt.**

**“We both know the Scathers created many designs of Ogatu. Back almost 22 years ago; during the time just before their laboratory was destroyed, they had been experimenting with a newer and more deadly version of Ogatu. I had ‘seen’ what they were attempting to do, and I believe she was the first to come to full term. In the chaos of the mysterious attack an escape pod managed to get away. It was thrown off course and crash landed on Elo - you know the rest.”**

**Tarak sat back in the seat and left out a long slow breath. *No!* Denair had just confirmed what he had only half-guessed, but he also gave him devastating news. Shaking his head in denial he asked, “So she’s nothing more than a weapon of the Scathers; a weapon that will activate when the signal is given.”**

**“No no, not at all, my lord,” Denair emphatically declared, Tarak sat up in surprise. “She may have been designed for that, but her program was never completed. She was a mere baby when the lab was destroyed.”**

**“Explain...” Tarak demanded.**

**“She was left with a blank conditioning program. Her being raised by the Elois was the best thing that could have happened; they gave balance to what was lacking in her makeup. And from what I have read, the discipline of the Earther ‘Samurai’ training allowed her to control the urges implanted in her. She conquered their DNA manipulation and conditioning without knowing it. My Lord, she is more of a threat to them than you can possibly imagine.”**

**“Is there any way to prove this?” Tarak was thinking ahead, he knew he would have to present all this to Naria.**

**“A DNA blood search would expose her true family line;” Denair said solemnly, “her origins and bloodline would be laid out and there would be no doubt. And I would bet a fortune that she is of the First Ones; a true pureblood.”**

**“It could also prove to be dangerous,” reflected Tarak.**

**“Ah, I see my Lord,” answered Denair in a strange voice. His eyes went out of focus, and he grabbed Tarak’s arm as he began to speak. “You fear what Lord Boras would do with this information; shaping it to his advantage. A hybrid would mean the species is polluted, and he would demand her death to protect our race from outside manipulation.”**

Startled Tarak blurted out, “By Hagar, you are good Denair! Serena always said that you had the strongest psychic ability ...” he trailed off remembering.

Denair saw the pained look on his face and felt his own guilt rising once again.

“My Lord,” Denair whispered, “I too felt her death, more than you know.”

Tarak was taken aback by the admission of the old man; it was obviously still a painful subject for him. He looked at the little man, and this time noted the pain in his eyes. Turning away so as not to embarrass him Tarak looked around the room and for the first time noticed the painting of Serena on the wall towards the back room. There were fresh flowers beneath it in a small crystal vase, testimony to someone’s devotion. There were also several small pictures of her and Denair, from happier times, on several tables about the room. *My God, he was in love with her!*

Tarak rose and went round the table to the little old man, offering his arm.

“Denair I owe you an apology... too long in coming, I know. I don’t blame you for what happened, and I truly apologize for the terrible things I said back then. It is no excuse, but I was half mad with grief. We both know how obstinate and independent she was. She believed she was invincible; and her hatred for the Scathers blinded her normally good judgment.”

“Thank you my Lord,” Denair shakily rose and bowed to Tarak, almost losing his footing. Tarak quickly caught the ancient man and eased him back to his seat.

“May I offer you some advice?” Denair asked.

“Of course Denair,” Tarak said curious.

“I can see the interest that you have in Lady Rayne, it is good and right; this is a match that should be. She is very attracted to you, but she has had no experience in this field, she is afraid of the powerful feelings that overcome her when she is with you.”

Denair leaned forward and grabbed Tarak’s wrist with his bony fingers, “you know the way of our women in this; only you can put them to rest. Go to her and tell her of your suspicions, let her decide what to do.” He smiled, “you may find her more understanding than you think.”

“Old man you are right about our feelings towards one another. Somehow she has managed to creep into my heart, and thoughts of her are becoming distracting. I’ve kept myself busy so I am never alone with her.” Tarak shifted uncomfortably, “You know there has been no one in my life since I lost Serena, Denair. Now, I suddenly find these feelings of longing beginning to stir again. I know what I want to do; but I have been unsure. If what you say is true, I now know.”

“Tonight when the storm raises my Lord Tarak,” Denair smiled, “you will have a chance to make your decision.”

**“Perhaps, perhaps...”**

**Tarak thanked the little man and made his way back home. He looked up at the sky and saw the huge band of thick white clouds heading towards the Hold; a storm was on its way, the first storm of the season.**

*We'll be snowed-in for at least four or five days.*

**He returned to his study and sent off several inquires. He also sent several notes to Queen Naria informing her of the situation, his suspicions, and Denair's pronouncement. He was deep in thought when Mistress Sera interrupted.**

**“My Lord, I am returning to my own home before the storm hits. I have several meals already made and stored in the cooler for you and Lady Rayne; all you need do is heat them up.**

**The storm was coming in she explained, and she wanted to be in her own home when it arrived. Tarak asked her if she and Kai would rather ride out the storm here in the main Hold. She said she appreciated the offer, but she rather liked their cozy little place, if he understood her meaning.**

**Tarak laughed and called her a saucy wench. He understood she and Kai wanted some time alone together; and what better time than 3 or 4 days, snowed-in. But he insisted a detail should accompany her and carry any provisions she needed.**

**When Rayne returned they had a hasty silent meal; each absorbed with their own thoughts. Rayne finished first and excused herself and went directly to her rooms. She built up the fire in the fireplace and sat and wrote in her journal.**

**Tarak retired to his rooms and prepared for bed. He lay awake a long time, thinking about what Denair had said. After a while he drifted off to sleep.**

**The cold winter winds began to announce their arrival down the mountain ranges towards the plains below.**

**The winter storms sent swirling snow and icy breath before them as they swept down. All creatures, large and small, sought refuge from the approaching maelstrom; instinct telling them what was coming.**

**The herd of wild Hausa began their annual run towards the more temperate climate; just ahead of the first winter storm.**

**The range ranchers also began to move; their herds of Kuyou were rounded up and they began the journey to the safety of the South.**

The Paint pony neighed and pawed at the ground; he had watched the Hausa band together during the night. Saw them begin their journey and head for the warmth of the South. Now he must decide - go with them; seek shelter in a cave, or take a chance that his new mistress would offer shelter. Something in his memory urged him to seek shelter with her. He forsook going with the larger herd, and instead he ran down the hill and made his way to the West gate. Ever watchful of the sky, he saw the storm rapidly approaching, and began to neigh and bang on the gate; calling for her.

Rayne woke suddenly and sat up in bed; something was wrong. She looked about the room and found nothing amiss; then she listened carefully to the wind howling about the Hold. Amid the sounds she heard the Paint calling out to her; she rose and ran towards the balcony grabbing a blanket and sweeping it about her as she looked below. The wind was icy cold; and huge snowflakes were beginning to fall. She held on to the railing and peered below. She could just make out the Paint down there outside gate; *he's calling for me!*

She turned and headed for the hallway with a smile on her face, *he's calling for me!* She grabbed her robe and slippers and ran down the Hallway taking the stairs two at a time. As she ran out the front door the cold wind hit her like an icy slap across her chest. She came to a dead stop and slowly took a breath; she had never before felt such bone-chilling cold. She quickly regained her composure and made her way to the West gate. She began to push back the heavy bolts that secured the massive gate all the time calling out to the Paint to let it know she was there.

The slam of the front door woke Tarak with a jolt. *What ...?*  
 He sat up looking about, clearing his eyes. He heard the beginnings of the approaching storm. *Ah the storm is finally here.* Awake now, he sat up and listened to the Hold. He arose, went to the window and looked out; amid the wind and the swirling snow he could just make out Rayne at the West gate. *What is she doing outside?*  
 He saw that she was trying to open the large doors to allow the Paint entrance into the Hold. He grabbed his heavy robe and made his way to the hallway and down the stairs.  
*Women!*

“Argh... I can't get this bolt to open Star!”  
 She hit the thing in frustration and yelled, “Open up damn you!”  
 She could feel the temperature dropping; the bitter cold against her skin told her she didn't have much time. Tarak was right about the cold, she should have listened to him; her judgment was very bad as of late.

**“Hang on Star, I’ll find a way,” she called to the neighing pony trying to reassure him.**

**Suddenly a pair of strong arms reached over her and slid the bolt back. The gate slammed open throwing her back and the Paint ran thru into the courtyard, wind and snow behind him. Rayne turned and saw Tarak pushing the large doors closed again. She was aroused at the sight. The howling wind had blown his robe half off and the muscles in his back and arms rippled as he pushed the heavy gate against the blowing wind, finally securing the bolts in place.**

**He turned around and faced her swearing angrily, “What are you thinking woman, you’ll freeze to death out here! You have not experienced cold like this... hurry, get him to the stables,” he ordered pulling his robe about him, “And then get yourself inside!”**

**She noted that he seemed to be angry with her, but felt it was not her he was angry with, so she decided to ignore him. She led the Paint to the stables and put him in a stall she had been readying for him. She made sure that there was plenty of hay, and several of the apples he loved in his food bin. She saw that water was available and then threw a blanket over his back. He nuzzled her head in appreciation. When she was sure he would be okay, she headed out of the stable and back towards the stairs to the main house.**

**By now the snow was so thick, and blowing about so, that she couldn’t get her bearings. She was shivering uncontrollably; the wind brought the cold swirling into every opening in her clothes, penetrating her very being. She hated to admit it, but Tarak was right, this cold was affecting her quickly. Her step faltered and she almost fell when Tarak came out of the swirling snow and wrapped a blanket about her. He lifted her in his arms and made his way back to the house taking the steps three at a time. Once inside he took her to the roaring fire in her room, grabbed a towel and began to rub her legs and feet to increase body circulation and warm her up.**

**“S, s, so cold...” she shivered uncontrollably.**

**Tarak pulled her to him wrapping another blanket about them both; and began rubbing her up and down, all the while speaking to her in a calm tone. He hoped his own body heat would slowly begin to warm her up.**

**After a bit Rayne relaxed some, and her shivering slowed as she snuggled against him. Without thinking she raised her hand and began to stroke his chest, running her fingers thru the silken hair. It was intoxicating, sensual, and it felt so natural. Suddenly she stiffened, realizing what she was doing and pushed herself away. Surprise and embarrassment showed on her face as she looked up at him.**

**He was smiling down at her, “It’s all right Rayne,” his voice seemed to caress her.**

**“I’m sorry I took such liberties... I, oh...” he could see she was flustered.**

Tarak gently pulled her back in his arms, “your feelings are natural, Rayne; I have felt them too. I have tried to keep away from you to let you come to terms with them on your own.”

“You, you feel this way also?” she asked softly, staring into his eyes.

“Yes, Rayne,” he answered in a velvety voice, “for a long time now I have wanted to hold you like this. I have wanted you to feel the warmth of my protection.”

“I feel it,” she answered without thinking in a sultry whisper, “Oh God how I feel it.”

Tarak leaned back and took her face in his large hands. He bent and rubbed the side of his face against hers, almost like nuzzling. He looked into her violet eyes and waited. To her surprise, Rayne made a guttural sound – like a purring. She hesitantly raised her hand and caressed the side of his face; still purring.

Tarak bent and kissed her gently on the lips. She responded by pulling him to her and kissing him in return with a passion she didn’t know she had. It welled up inside her and burst forth, surprising and frightening her with its intensity.

She pushed away and stared at him.

“Oh God!” Shocked and shaking her head she begged him, “Go, please... Tarak.”

She was frightened, an emotion new to her.

Though he didn’t want to leave, Tarak agreed to her request. He didn’t want to alarm her or push himself on her too soon. She wasn’t ready to admit the truth yet, but she was close. He left her and returned to his room.

Rayne was overwhelmed by her emotions; always in tight control, she was now faced with something she had never experienced before.

*What is this I am feeling? Why is this so intense, just the thought of him...?*

She retired to her bed but could not relax. She tossed and turned for several hours, and finally gave up trying to sleep. She couldn’t bring herself down to meditate; thoughts of Tarak and the kiss they shared filled her mind. She felt as if she were on fire.

Rayne got up and began to pace back and forth.

*He said he felt the same; he said it was natural for me to feel this way.*

*What does he know, has he seen something? Perhaps... no, unless...*

*Oh my God!*

*What if my suspicions are true?*

*What if I am one of them?*

*How could that be... oh but it would explain so many things.*

*Damn it, I have to know the truth, and that means going to Tarak.*

She left her room and went down the hallway to his room.

Hesitantly, she turned the handle and slowly pushed the door open and went in. He was sitting by the fire.

He turned and stood up when she entered.

“Lady Rayne?” He took a step towards her and she glided straight into his arms. Smiling, he pulled her to him holding her tightly.

“Slowly Rayne, slowly,” he cautioned gently, wondering if she had guessed the truth.

“Tarak, I don’t understand any of what is happening to me, these feelings... they frighten me. When I’m around you... these, these feelings are so intense,” she was breathing very deeply now. “My body comes alive; and I want to feel your hands on it,” she said in a husky voice, “and it scares me like nothing I ever felt before.”

Tarak held her to him, “You never have to be afraid with me Rayne. What you are experiencing is a natural thing; our women are very passionate. We can explore this together, as it should be.”

“There is nothing natural about any of this Tarak, these feelings... this is like nothing I have ever experienced.” She was very nervous but she caught it, “Wait; you said our women; then you must suspect the same thing I do.”

Rayne sat on the footstool and looked up at him and continued, “I know this is going to sound crazy, but I’m beginning to think I may be one of you. Is it possible the Eloi were mistaken about my origins? It would explain why I am so drawn to this planet... and to you.”

“So you admit that you are drawn to me,” he said smiling down at her.

“Oh... when I think of you, these emotions... I want to feel you...,” she looked about and took a deep breath.

“Easy Rayne, calm yourself,” he reassuringly told her, “You have nothing to fear.”

She looked down at her hands, and slowly up at him.

“I admit it scares me like nothing ever has. All this is new to me Tarak; I know what I want to do, but... something is stopping me.”

She looked up at him with uncertainty. Suddenly she looked about the room, and in an instant was rushing for the door in a panic.

Every fiber in his being wanted to run after her, but Tarak knew it would be prudent to let her deal with this in her own way. She must come to terms with her feelings and to what was happening to her. She must come to him first, of her own free will before he could claim her as his.



The next day they saw little of each other; Tarak was busy closing up the Hold for the winter months, and getting most of the people started on the journey to the Ohmu Forest. Rayne kept busy helping where she could. Mistress Sara noted Rayne's silence during the day, and caught her several times in deep thought. Noting she seemed to be in turmoil, she asked if she could be of any help. She was told there was nothing she could do; this was something Rayne had to figure out for herself.

That night Rayne retired early to her rooms, more so because she feared being alone with Tarak; afraid her emotions would get out of hand. She tossed and turned for several hours and finally, exhausted, fell into a deep sleep.

Many, many dreams came to her. Flashes of steel tables; a woman screaming; whisper-like sounds buzzing about; dark and light shadows; something in the dark was very menacing, and it was coming closer; and then there was the light.

She woke with a start, sat up and looked about her room, shivered, and automatically reached for K'anada. Something wasn't right; something was out of balance.

*Those dreams are no doubt the reason I am so uneasy.*

She slid out of bed and moved about her room searching; after several minutes she was satisfied that it was the dream. She went out onto the balcony and breathed in the cool fresh air. It seemed to clear her head, and refresh her spirit. She looked out over the white landscape and marveled at its beauty. Smiling she went back inside to the fire and plopped down in a large chair. As she watched the fire dance about, her mind wandered back to the previous evening.

*Oh Duncan, I wish you were here, she thought to herself, you might be able to see the truth of all this.*

The sun rose slowly and its rays flowed into the room through a large stained glass window high above sending colorful prisms of light dancing about the room in a descending pattern. As Rayne sat there watching the dancing colors, a dream, or maybe memory, unexpectedly broke and all the information she was seeking suddenly flowed into her mind.

Flashes of events came in rapid-fire images.

A few minutes later she stood up as understanding and acceptance filled her mind - she was smiling.

Tarak was in his room, awake after another restless night, sitting by the fire thinking. He too felt that something had happened and his thoughts went immediately to Rayne. He had to admit it was a pleasant surprise to find that her feelings were so strong. But, he also knew he could do nothing until she came to terms with them. For the first time in many years he was hoping for a liaison. A light tapping on his door interrupted his thoughts and he turned towards the sound.

“Come,” he bellowed in a deep voice.

Rayne slid into the room and stood there staring at him; then she began to smile strangely and he knew.

“I remember Tarak,” she said softly, almost purring. “I saw it in a waking vision, and this time I understood. I am one of you, and I was meant for this world from the very beginning. The Eloi understood this and changed everything; they made me more than what was intended. And now the ‘Masters’ fear what I have become; for they know an alliance with you will spell their doom; which is exactly what the Eloi had hoped for all along.”

She glided over to him and laid her head against his chest, his arms went about her protectively.

“I do want your protection, I do want you to hold me like this. I don’t fully understand the intensity of my feelings for you, but somehow I know that this is right.” She looked up at Tarak and her violet eyes were shining brightly.

He answered her with a low growl. “It is the way of our women Rayne,” he tightened his hold on her. “They are strong and intelligent; the leaders of our society. Yet they have one flaw; when they find their mate they shy away because of the intensity of their emotions. They run away in fear, denying what they want most. It is the man who must put these fears to rest; it is the man who must take control by offering his protection and showing her that she is the one for him.”

Tarak looked down at Rayne for a long moment; gently he held her before him.

“Little warrior woman,” he continued, “You have managed to burrow your way into my heart and warm it once again. You are in my thoughts every day, and I stir when you enter a room. I have suspected that you are one of us for some time now, but I stood back and waited for you to see this for yourself. You are Ogatu, little one; you are proving it right now. I can see no one else in my future; you are the one for me, there is no doubt.”

As the wind and snow swirled and howled against the Hold, Tarak bent and kissed Rayne sliding his arms around her and pressing himself to her. This time she smiled, purred, and returned his kiss abandoning all her reservations. She ran her hands over his chest as he buried his face in her neck, caressing her. Chills ran up and down her spine, she purred loudly and gave herself over to the strange feelings, enjoying the touch of him on her skin. It was sensual, sending little electric currents throughout her body. To her surprise, she suddenly sang out with a high-pitched Eloi sound of pleasure.

Tarak smiled and growled in appreciation; lifting her in his arms he spun around and headed for his bed. She pressed herself to him and purred as he laid her down. She tore at his clothing and ripped at her own, wanting to feel him against her skin.

“Easy little one,” he whispered in her ear, “let me show you how.”

As was custom in Ogatu lovemaking practices, Tarak took control and held her down forcing her to accept his attentions at his pace. He gently worked her into a high passion and then took her. He made love to her as he had never done before. She rose to meet him each time and Tarak increased his rhythm until her entire body quivered uncontrollably. Then he brought her to the brink and watched as she cried out, holding tightly to him, riding the wave of pleasure. Nothing with Serena could compare to the intensity he felt with Rayne. Again and again he showed her pleasures she had never known; and many times she cried out in the throes of ecstasy with his name on her lips. He too roared loudly when he reached his peak, causing her to purr and nuzzle his chest. Hours later, spent and exhausted from their passion, they lay in each other’s arms.

After a while Rayne began to speak about her life, telling him everything, in a soft emotionless voice. She even told him in a faltering voice her darkest secret; that she had always felt ‘alone’. Her false bravado and self-confidence was a clever disguise to hide the fact that she was always, totally alone. She loved Duncan as a mentor, she explained, but even he could not understand the depths of her solitude. When she and Duncan came to Aura, everything changed, the feeling was one of ‘coming home’.

Tarak held her and said he understood her feelings. He promised her she would never have to feel alone again. They were one now, he would always be there for her; she was a part of him now, and he a part of her.

Contented at last, knowing with a certainty that he was right, Rayne was at peace with herself. Tarak did as suggested by Denair and to his surprise, she agreed with him; a blood test was the only way to prove what she already knew. They agreed to speak with the Hold physician about it the next day.

They finally drifted off to sleep in each other’s arms - a deep bonding sleep that would unite them as one forever.

Tarak awoke with a sense of well-being, curled about her protectively. As he lay there remembering the night before, thoughts drifted in and out, and he smiled. He heard the storm howling outside and was grateful they were alone for the time being. It had been a very long time since he had shared the pleasures of the body with someone; until now he hadn't felt the need. But all that changed with her arrival; this strange woman/child stirred a passion in him that Serena had not.

She moaned in her sleep and stretched and scooted closer to him. He buried his face in her hair and found the scent intoxicating. He delighted in the feel of her smooth warm body as he ran his hands over her. His thoughts returned to the night before and he smiled wickedly; she had surprised him with the intensity of her feelings. He had concerns about her being so much smaller than him, that he might hurt her; but she put that to rest. At times it seemed that she couldn't get enough of him; rising up to meet his thrusts, she had pulled him to her with wild abandon. And then when she sang out the first time, he reveled in her overwhelming joy.

*Oh little one, he thought, you are indeed the one for me!*

She began to stir and rolled over, cuddling up next to him, her hand on his chest. She purred and snuggled against him. He smiled at the feel of her against him; oh how he had missed these intimate moments. He bent and kissed her forehead.

“Good morning my little warrior,” he whispered softly nuzzling the side of her face.

She stirred and stretched, arching her back seductively. She opened her eyes and looked up at him. “Good morning, My Lord,” she mocked smiling. Tilting her head she grinned and said, “I think I shall call you Tar. After all, I can't go around calling you Lord Tarak all the time,” she smiled and lowered her voice, “especially not after last night.”

“Oh?” He grabbed her, pulling her on top of him, “And it wasn't to your liking my saucy wench?”

“On the contrary, it was very much to my liking.” She kissed him, laughed and sat up, straddling him, pinning his shoulders to the bed. “I think I shall keep you around,” she said seductively, “I am sure I can find something for you to do.”

He was aroused immediately. “Best watch your words my sweet,” he said reaching for her, “I can be a bit randy in the morning.”

“Is that a threat,” she said coyly raising an eyebrow, “or a promise?”

He rolled over pressing her to him, kissing her playfully. Then he pulled her under the covers with him, and was aroused even more when she began to giggle.

**They made love again, only this time it was slow and sensual. The feel of her smooth skin on his body heightened all his senses. At one point it felt as if they bonded strongly as one. And she too felt that strong bond; this time there were tears in her eyes as she reached her peak. She held him to her breasts in a protective way, fearful that she might lose him; that this was all a dream. She told him they were tears of joy.**

**This time, the entire household heard his roar of pleasure, causing many to giggle.**

**When they came downstairs to breakfast together, none were surprised that it was Lady Rayne who glowed, showing the signs of contentment. Tarak too showed the signs of a successful mating, doting on Rayne at the table.**

**Mistress Sera was overjoyed that Lord Tarak had found love again, especially with Lady Rayne. She tried very hard not to grin at the new lovers and to keep a straight face making chitchat about the coming move to the Ohmu Forest, and looking forward to seeing old friends again. She doubted they heard anything she said as they were staring and smiling only at each other.**

**The inner Hold was abuzz with talk of the Lord's roar that morning. Soon it was about the entire Hold that the Lord had captured Lady Rayne's heart. Tarak's warriors embraced the news saying it was only natural that two great warriors mate as one. Besides, the warriors of the Hold held Lady Rayne in very high regard; she would be good for their Lord.**

**The general populace of the Hold was glad that Tarak had finally found love again; it had been far too long. He had mourned long and hard after Lady Serena died; and was never quite the same without her by his side. He would not be alone anymore; and that bode well for those who lived here.**

**And old Master Seatac, seeing what each of them had tried to deny, collected on many more bets.**

Later that morning Rayne stood on the landing and looked about. Snow covered the Hold and the surrounding area, but she noted it wasn't the same as Earth snow. This snow gave the impression of a great fluffy blanket spread over everything. She leaned over the balcony and looked over the parapet onto the plain below; as far as the eye could see there was white covering the ground. The air was icy cold and fragrantly fresh, almost intoxicating. She spun around and leaned against the balcony. Throwing her head back she breathed deeply and let loose with a very strange sound. It was the Eloi call of contentment, she was happy and at peace with herself. Smiling she left the balcony and headed down to the stables humming to herself.

*It's a beautiful morning, she thought to herself. Oh God, I am so happy!*

She continued to the stables and found Master Seatac feeding the Hausa. She went to the far pen and found Star there waiting for her. Ears cocked forward, he neighed loudly when he saw her approach.

“Good Morning Star, my beautiful friend,” she greeted him warmly giving him one of the apples he loved. She grabbed one of the brushes and began working on his long winter coat. Master Seatac made his way towards her.

“Good Morning Lady Rayne,” he called, “you look well and rested this morning.” He quickly noted her demeanor and inner glow, (very obvious to an Ogatu male.)

“Quite a storm blew through here; my babies were restless all night. Ha but tis just a prelude to the main storm, now that is going to be a real dilly. A good blow like last night means that winter is going to be long and hard this year.” Looking outside towards the north he added, “Should be here by midday tomorrow, I figure.”

“That was just a prelude last night,” she asked surprised, “my heavens man, what is a real storm like?”

“Oh it will lock us in for about a week, howling its way about us.” He raised his bushy brow and winked at Rayne, “good time for lovers to get to know each other.” He turned around and cleared his throat. “Then there will be a break, about a week of sunshine and blue skies before it returns with a vengeance.” He tapped the side of his nose and continued, “That is when we will leave for the Ohmu Forest.”

Realizing that Master Seatac was aware of her and Tarak's new status, she smiled and blushed at his reference. “You old dog you,” she said slugging his arm. He seemed to enjoy that response, laughing loudly as he went about feeding the Hausa.

Rayne finished brushing Star, made sure he had plenty of hay, apples, and water in his feed bin and then headed back to the main house. She found Mistress Sera in the kitchen, and there were immediate giggles from the staff when she entered. Sera quickly admonished them, but couldn't help giggling herself. Rayne didn't mind, and soon they were all laughing over the situation. Everyone wished her well and gave her their blessings.

Rayne went to the yard and worked out for an hour, pushing herself beyond her normal limits. She was filled with a new energy, and went thru her different routines with a new gusto. She rose to great heights in her leaps and felt inside like she could do anything. After about twenty minutes she landed in a sweat; grabbing her towel, she wiped her face and was suddenly aware that Tarak's warriors were watching her with new interest. She spun around and seized K'nada, unsheathed his blade and leaped through the air slicing thru imagined enemies swinging the blade with lightening speed. As she landed she spun about and faced them.

Raising K'nada over her head she shouted, "Yes, it was I!"

The courtyard exploded with thunderous applause and howls of approval. After working out with men for an hour she went back to the main house, showered, changed and went looking for Tarak. She found him in the study with a man she recognized as the Hold Healer.

"Rayne," Tarak rose when she entered, "This is Healer Murdock, I asked him here to explain about the test."

Rayne smiled at the man, "I am please to meet you Healer Murdock." She took his hand and held it for a moment.

"Lady Rayne," he smiled rising, "I am honored to meet you."

Dr Murdock indicated the chairs and they both sat.

"My lady, we have always conducted DNA tests on all couples seeking to mate permanently. It ensures that there is no crossing of bloodlines, thus guaranteeing any offspring produced will be of exceptional intelligence. It also shows us the line that each couple comes from; and can be followed back to the beginning."

Tarak turned to the doctor, "And all of this will be kept in the strictest confidence."

"Oh yes my Lord, you may rely on my discretion, I shall conduct the test immediately and return with the results." Turning to Rayne he continued, "Lady Rayne, I will need a sample of your blood."

"Yes, of course," she said rolling up her sleeve, seemingly in deep thought.

The doctor took a sample of her blood, apologizing for any pain he may have caused. He bottled the sample and placed it in a satchel he carried. He quickly excused himself and headed for the Bay area where a hovercraft was waiting for him. He climbed in and immediately made his way to the Lab in the mountains to the north.

Tarak and Rayne watched him go. "I hope it will finally put an end to all this guessing," she whispered.

"Don't worry my mate, it will prove what we already know," he put his arm around her protectively and assured her, "you are one of us."



Blood tests were done all the time on all who wished to mate; this was to insure there was no interbreeding among families. The lab personnel were used to the Healer's coming and going and so no one paid much attention to him. He docked and immediately went to the Lab and began the usual tests. He was very careful not to contaminate the sample. As the results began to print out on the machine surprise was his; *this can't be*. He quickly retested another sample; he wanted no reason for anyone to doubt the results. He studied the sample again and made several other tests.

"This is a stunning surprise," he murmured to himself as he printed out the results and placed his seal on them. Knowing this news had the potential of becoming a large political problem, Healer Murdock knew that he should report to the Queen first. But he decided his loyalties lay with Lord Tarak; he would let him decide how to handle such explosive news. Saying nothing to anyone, he packed up his bag and returned to the Hold. Alerted to his return, Tarak and Rayne were waiting for him in the study. As he entered both rose to greet him.

"Well?" Tarak blurted out, "What say you Healer?"  
Lady Rayne seemed a bit edgy also as she asked, "Healer?"

"My Lord," he began, "Lady Rayne is indeed Ogatu."

"Aha! Proof at last!" shouted Tarak, slapping his knee.  
Rayne sat down behind him smiling.

Healer Murdock continued, "Please, my Lord you must look at these results," he held up several pieces of paperwork. Both Rayne and Tarak read over the paperwork.

"Lady Rayne, your blood is the purest line I have ever seen; as strong as the First Ones. You have Eloï DNA, as we all do, but a purer strain; you also have some Human DNA as well. It seems the Scathers used humans in their later experiments. But the good news is that the overriding bloodline is pure First Generation, Ogatu."

"First Generation? Are you sure it's First Generation," asked a surprised Tarak.

"I ran the test three times my Lord, each test came back exactly the same," Healer Murdock was adamant, "there is no doubt."

"I am Ogatu," Rayne said in a soft voice. Both Tarak and Healer Murdock were overcome by the softness of that voice, (an Ogatu female trait.)

Rayne smiled at the Healer, totally captivating him.

"I cannot thank you enough Healer Murdock, you have ended a lifelong search with news that puts peace in my heart." Rayne hugged him out of sheer joy.

The poor man was taken by complete surprise, "Oh, my Lady, you honor me!"

Smiling he turned to Tarak, “My Lord, if you permit me, I would have to be blind not to see that you and Lady Rayne are a match. We of your Hold all rejoice in your finding one another. Do I have your permission to document the findings and send them on to the Queen’s Hold?”

Both knew that the results of all tests were sealed and sent to the Queens Hold to be added to the permanent records.

“I will be taking them to Queen Naria myself, Healer, this very day.” He turned and looked down into Rayne’s eyes, “this is something that must be handled very delicately. Will you join me Lady Rayne?”

“Oh yes,” she answered quickly, “I want to be there with you when you tell her, Tar.”

The doctor left them with a smile on his face thinking; *it is a good match. Lord Tarak needs a strong mate and Lady Rayne is a powerful force indeed.*

Rayne stood and walked to the balcony doors; throwing them open she stepped out into the sunlight. The cold air felt wonderful on her skin. She shouted out, “I am Ogatu! I belong to Aura and to her people!”

Tarak came up behind her and leaned close, “It must be a relief to finally have your fears put to rest. Rayne you are part of a large family now.”

*Family!* Rayne turned with a serious look on her face.

“Tar, I need to tell you something, I should have said something before, but I just didn’t think about it until now.” She stepped back and looked out over the balcony and when she turned around he could see the sorrow on her face.

“Tar, I can’t have children.”

He stared at her with a frown “Rayne...?”

“You have to understand,” she hastily explained, “not knowing what or who I was; let alone where I came from... it haunted me. The Eloi knew my genes had been manipulated but no more. I wanted to be sure that I wouldn’t bring some kind of monster into the world; so I decided to ensure that that wouldn’t ever happen. I had myself sterilized, Tar.”

Surprise showed on Tarak’s face, and then sorrow. Sorrow for Rayne at being forced to do such a thing.

“Oh Tar, I am so sorry,” Rayne misunderstood his expression.

“No, no, Rayne,” he said going to her, “I’m not feeling sorry for myself, my sorrow is for you. You will never know the joy of carrying your own child and giving birth.” He held her tightly to his chest, “Oh Rayne, they took so much from you.”

He leaned back, “Let me tell you something about us, Rayne. We are all family here on Aura; we do not place stock in the dire need for a child to be of one’s own blood. We are all united in that same blood; besides, there are always children needing a home after a Scather raid or a bad winter storm; that was how Kai came to be in my household.”

“Kai?” Rayne asked surprised.

“Yes, Kai; my father found him after a terrible raid on the outlying ranches. His whole family had been slaughtered; he was a baby at the time. My father scooped him up and brought him here to my mother. He was nurtured and raised as my younger brother, and so it was fitting that he should become my First. We are all part of one family here on Ogatu, do not worry my love, there will be children.”

Lord Tarak contacted the Queen’s Hold and asked to speak with First Altera, thereby throwing off anyone questioning a call from his Hold. He asked her to relay a request for a private audience with the Queen only saying he had some news for her ears only. Altera understood immediately and went straight to Naria who granted his request. He and Rayne left on a hovercraft the next morning and were at the Queen’s Hold in a matter of hours. First Altera greeted them when they docked and secretly ushered them into the Queens private rooms where Naria was waiting. She noted the look on Rayne’s face and her worst fears were confirmed.

“My Queen,” said Tarak bowing and taking her hand to his forehead. “I have news best herd by you first.” He handed her the official papers of the Blood Registry.

She quickly scanned them and looked up at Tarak and then at Rayne.

“Well, well, little one,” she said smiling, “it seems I was right about you.”

“Notice what the doctor said about her bloodline, Naria,” Tarak pointed out without delay. “The purest he had ever seen, as pure as the First Ones, the strongest genes. That alone would put an end to any questions or objections by anyone.”

“It seems she has stolen your heart, eh Tarak?” Laughing, she continued, “It’s about time someone did!”

“My Queen...” Tarak nodded slightly.

“Queen Naria,” Rayne stepped forward, unsheathing K’nada she went down on one knee and held the sword before her. “Now that I know my true origins I wish to become a citizen of Aura. I pledge my loyalty to you, and place myself and my sword in your service.”

Naria, deeply touched by her display asked, “You accept yourself as Ogatu; agree to leave the service of the human Science Guild?”

**“I was never in the Science Guild’s service,” surprise showed on Naria’s face. “I was given over to Duncan to learn about my heritage; my loyalty was to him, not them.”**

**“You willingly pledge your loyalty to Aura and her people,” Naria asked.**

**Touching the sword to her forehead Rayne answered, “I do so pledge.”**

**Naria stepped forward, placed her hand around the blade’s hilt and declared solemnly, “By the power invested in me as ruler of Aura, I accept your oath of allegiance. Rise Lady Rayne, daughter of Aura, sister of the Ogatu.”**

**Smiling, Rayne rose and sheathed K’nada.  
Naria enveloped her in her arms welcoming her.**

**“I knew from the first you were one of us, Lady Rayne. But you needed to discover the truth for yourself. I am pleased to call you Ogatu, and to call you sister.”  
Altera came forward and welcomed her warmly also.**

**Rayne thanked her and took her place at Taraks’ side. Altera noted his protective stance, his fingers touching hers; and took a step backwards. Tarak entwined his first two fingers around Rayne’s; Naria noted that small action.**

**“You have chosen Lady Rayne as your new mate, haven’t you Tarak?” She asked knowing the answer already.**

**“Yes, my Queen, I have,” he answered without hesitation.**

**“Good, you need a strong woman at your side; I approve this match. I am pleased and happy for you both.”**

**Naria knew that Altera had secretly hoped that one day Lord Tarak would see her as a potential mate. She turned and was silent for a moment as she studied the brave smile on Altera’s face, hiding the disappointment she most surely felt.**

**Suddenly she turned around and said, “Now Lord Tarak, we must carefully word a proclamation announcing to the population the news of Lady Rayne’s heritage. We must be very careful so we do not give Lord Boras any reason to deny the truth.”**

**They worked the afternoon away putting the right turn of phrase to the document. Naria said they would unveil the proclamation at the annual Oath Ball. Each winter when all were gathered in the Ohmu Forest, there was a large gathering where all the Lords renewed their Oaths of Allegiance to Naria and to Aura. It would be the perfect time for them to announce the findings of Rayne’s blood search.**

**As they left Naria watched them go from the top of the parapet and thought to herself that things were working out better than she could have imagined.**

Rayne and Tarak returned to the Hold arriving just hours before the storm. Three quarters of the Hold had already left the previous morning for the Ohmu Forest. They would be out of harms way and within hours of the main forest before the storm hit the northern regions. The rest of the Hold would follow after the storm abated.

Rayne and Tarak spent the rest of the week getting to know all about each other. Tarak opened up the master bedroom once again and he and Rayne spent their time inside. They bonded on many levels, not just physical, but mental as well as spiritual. They became as one, each knowing the others thoughts, each trusting the other implicitly. Rayne let go of all her fears and blossomed under Tarak's watchful and protective eyes.

They spent their days working out together in the arena, and at Rayne's urging, they sparred with Tarak's warriors. Tarak noted that she seemed truly honored to work out with his men. At his request, Rayne taught them many of the Eloi moves - both defensive and offensive. The warriors excelled in their practice sessions and took to the teaching with great gusto. Soon Tarak had a band of select warriors, a fighting force that would be unstoppable in battle.

During this time Tarak and Rayne were quietly joined in the traditional Ogatu way. They would have a more public ceremony during their winter stay in the Ohmu Forest; but both wanted to cement their joining in the proper way. The Hold Protectorate performed the ceremony amid Tarak's faithful warriors. All agreed that the match was a good one.

To show their approval, his warriors threw a raucous party afterwards with much drink, music, and dancing. Pandemonium reigned when Tarak took to the dance floor for the traditional Mating Dance; and again when Rayne joined him in a sultry version of her own. The merry-making continued into the wee hours of the morning until Lady Rayne ordered them all to bed.

There were many large headaches the next day.

# CHANGES

After leaving the orbit of Aura and setting course for Earth, Duncan ordered his entire crew to assemble in the Mess Hall. Once there he introduced their guests; Prime Minister Gordon; the two scientists, Mistress Tara, and Lady Killian; and two security guards, Pro Dantu and Pro Endin.

He related to the crew all that had taken place on Aura; and then informed them of the trouble they might face. He gave them a brief history of the Ogatu people, their origins and the on-going war with the Scathers. He told them if any of them had questions, Minister Gordon would be happy to answer them. Thus he ensured that there would be an open dialogue between the two species.

No one had a problem with the origins of the Ogatu; just the part about the unrelenting hatred of the Scathers. Minister Gordon explained about the hierarchy of the Scather civilization. The Elders ruled without question; and their life span was along one.

Duncan informed the two scientists that if they had any questions, they could address them to Alexei, who rose and presented himself to them with a flourish. The two ladies seemed to find Alexei very pleasing as they both made a purring sound, much to Minister Gordon's dismay, and the growls of the security detail.

*It's going to be an interesting trip,* Duncan thought with a chuckle.

Several weeks later everything had settled down and the ship was moving along at a good pace. All five Ogatu passengers had settled themselves in. The crew accepted them without any problems. The two females followed Alexei around for the first week to get to know the lay out of the ship and all the various departments. Not far behind were the two security guards who shadowed them wherever they went.

Most of the women on board found the females to be great companions, and each species shared small secrets with the other. The human females learned about Ogatu society and vice versa. There were many discussions on the mating habits of each species. Several of the human women admitted they wouldn't mind having a go at one of the Ogatu males. After much giggling, Mistress Tara said she did entertain the thought about Alexei; at which point the human females admitted they all had done the same.

The human males, on the other hand, were tongue-tied around the two Ogatu ladies. They did however manage to carry on a dialogue with the Ogatu security men. Men always seem to be able to bond easily, and it was the same with the male crew of the Phoenix and the security detail. They shared many stories of battle and many of rowdy behavior. The Ogatu males found the workout room and enjoyed using it on their down time with the crew.



Aware that winter was upon their home world, and that the social event of the year would take place during the winter encampment, the two female scientists decided the trip to the human world must be accomplished with all haste. They began showing up in the main engine room walking around taking measurements and making notes, much to the chagrin of Chief Swanson. They would come into the engine room and simply watch what everyone was doing, writing copious notes in their books. They would measure here and there, and then confer with each other, not realizing it was driving him crazy. Every now and then Lady Killian would ask him a question and his whole world would turn upside down with the sound of her voice.

Chief Swanson was a bear of a man, huge in girth and demanding of those in his engine room. Having the females coming and going was very disconcerting to him. He considered the engines to be his babies, and these women were eying them with coveted eyes. He spoke with Duncan about it, but since they were really doing no harm Duncan would not bar them from the area.

Then one day Lady Killian came to Duncan all excited saying she and Mistress Tara could reconfigure the engines and give him 40% more power, and it would only take a day to refit the engines. Chief Swanson refused at first. But after Lady Killian spoke to him, he agreed to let them work on his engines on the condition that he be allowed to help in the process. Lady Killian said that would be fine, she could use the help; besides he would learn the process and be able to do the same to other ships in the fleet.

Several days later the Phoenix was traveling along at a pretty fast clip and Duncan was very pleased with the improvements. He also noted Chief Swanson seemed to be very impressed with Lady Killian's abilities. The entire crew had embraced the Ogatu and all seemed to be going well.

Lt. Plummer interrupted his thoughts, "Sir, I have a blip on my screen, it's fading in and out."

"How far," Duncan asked.

"Two, three parsecs can't be sure, sir." He pushed several switches, "The signal is very weak."

"Can you tell what it is, Lt Plummer?"

"Not till we get closer, sir."

"Sound the alert, and bring us in a little bit closer Ensign Cooper," Duncan ordered. "Nice and easy Ensign, just close enough so we can get a fix our mysterious blip."

"Aye sir," he replied, "nice and easy."

The Phoenix slowed and began to creep closer to the area. Lt Plummer kept pushing buttons trying to get a better view of the area ahead; but he was having no luck.

Alexei and Minister Gordon had become fast friends after Alexei had introduced the little man to Chess. He took to the game quickly and with great gusto. He truly enjoyed strategizing and planning moves; and much to the surprise of Alexei, he won most of the rounds they played. They were in the Library enjoying a game when the alarm went off

“Ah, what is that,” Gordon asked when the alarm went off.

“It’s an alert. It means Duncan has reason to believe we may be heading into some kind of trouble.” Alexei explained. He stood, “I must report to the bridge, Minister Gordon, we can finish this game later if you wish.”

“Yes, yes,” said replied Gordon, “I would like that.”

Alexei excused himself and headed to the bridge.

There was a flurry of activity when he arrived; he went straight to Duncan, “What’s up Duncan?”

Duncan explained the situation. “Something is out there, not sure what it is. It’s possible we’re being shadowed. I don’t want to go in blind and unprepared.”

Mistress Tara casually slipped onto the bridge and went directly to the sensor array. She studied the screens for a moment, and then asked Lt Plummer if she could make a few adjustments. He looked at Duncan, who nodded, and she began pressing buttons and quickly brought their ‘blip’ into view.

“You can put it on the main screen now Lt Plummer, you should be able to see it clearly,” she said in a soft voice.

The screen came alive and before them all was a badly damaged Scather ship; or what was left of one. It seemed smaller than the one they encountered, but it was definitely a Scather ship.

“Scan it and see if you get any readings, Lt Plummer,” ordered Alexei.

“Scanning sir, I’m getting one very faint life reading in the forward pod,” he informed them, “nothing else sir.”

“Wait a minute, pan the camera over that way,” interrupted Alexei, “Duncan, look at the open sites; they appear to be outward, not inward.” Everyone studied the ship, “The explosions came from inside the ship.”

Duncan looked carefully at the ship, “you’re right Alexei, there was no fight here. All the explosive sites appear to be outward, something happened inside the ship.”

Everyone's eyes were glued to the picture of the dead ship, slowly turning in space.

"Something happened inside the ship; I wonder if we could board her," Duncan thought out loud.

"It would be unwise Lord Duncan," offered Mistress Tara quickly. "The Scather's have an automatic self destruct should they lose a battle; we found this out the hard way."

"Thank you for that information Mistress Tara, but they would have blown up long before this, I think." Duncan replied. "Something must have happened inside the ship that caught them unawares. What do you think Alexei, should we give it a try?"

"Not you old friend, sorry but we need you alive," Alexei replied in a deadpan voice. "It's my turn, I'll take this one."

"Take what you need but be very careful, Alexei. You haven't seen these guys in action yet," Duncan told him, "they're very fast and very deadly."

As he turned to leave, Mistress Tara grabbed Alexei's arm. "Sir, wait!" She quickly let go, seemingly embarrassed, "Oh, please forgive my forwardness."

"It's okay Mistress Tara, don't give it a thought; now, what is it?" Alexei asked.

"The sensor shows only one life sign; the creature is obviously dying or it would have attacked already. They are more deadly than ever when they know this. Please use utmost caution when approaching it. If the third leg on the left side is extended then you are safe. If it is curled close to the body, use extreme force or you will die."

Alexei looked closely at Mistress Tara with new appreciation. "You sound as if you have had more contact with these creatures than most."

"Before I received my appointment to the scientific community I was a Hunter. We paid a costly price learning how to deal with these creatures." She looked at him without emotion and continued, "I assure you I am not boasting; I am only concerned for your welfare."

"Mistress Tara," Alexei replied in a sensuous voice, "I can think of nothing more pleasing than your concern. Now, what else can you tell me," he asked smiling.

Tara blushed and the whiskers on her face stood out. She cleared her throat and answered. "When you first board the ship and the hatch opens, look for a thin strip of blue metal. Be very careful not to touch it, it is an explosive device. On the panel directly in front of you, you will see a green plate light up; press it and the device will disarm."

"Are there any other surprises?"

"One can never be too sure where Scathers are concerned, they are very aggressive," she said with distaste. "They attack without warning, and without mercy."

**“They hate your people that much?” He asked**

**“We believe the population has been manipulated and lied to over the centuries. It is the only explanation for their being able to carry on this senseless war. It would also explain why they attack the second they see us. Their losses over the centuries have been great, and they would have to explain it away to their people somehow. So they use us to keep the hatred alive. Just be very alert to your surroundings.”**

**“Perhaps you should follow me in via the cam-con,” he said pointing to a console across the room. “I would feel a lot better with you at my back.”**

**She smiled at him with genuine emotion and Alexei suddenly felt himself drawn to her. A quick flash across his subconscious of holding her... *What the hell?***

**“I shall do my best to guide you safely thru the ship,” she cooed and nodded slightly.**

**“I shall take everything you say to heart, dear lady, and I shall be very alert,” he replied bowing slightly in return. He raised his head, smiled and winked, then turned and left the bridge.**

**Mistress Tara stood there wide-eyed, purring softly.**

Alexei headed for the docking bay and suited up, he placed the camera on his helmet. *Well... this was a ridiculous idea*, he thought to himself; his emotions were conflicted. On one hand he was very curious to see the inside of their ship; and on the other, given what he had been told of these creatures, he was extremely wary. He calmed himself and focused all his senses; he would have to be very cautious. . He stepped into the air lock, sealed the door behind him; waited for the depressurization to complete, and opened the door.

*God, what was I thinking?*

He floated out into space and looked carefully around. He could see several dead bodies floating about near the ship.

*Damn they look bigger than I remember. Great, just what I need.*

He began to make his way towards the ship wondering where he could find a way in when he heard the soothing voice of Mistress Tara.

“Sir, Alexei,” she whispered in his ear piece and he felt it throughout his body; “be calm my friend, I am with you.” The sound of her voice seemed to give him the boost he needed. “See if you can make it to the third pod; the life sign emanates from that area. You should find an opening there. If I had to guess I’d say this appears to be scout ship.”

Alexei headed for the area using his jet pack sparingly. The closer he came to the ship the more he felt alone. *Okay Alexei, get it together.*

As he approached the area he saw the ‘door’ and headed for it. A lifeless body passed close to him giving him a start.

“Son of a bitch!” he exclaimed sending himself into a spin.

Mistress Tara understood and cooed reassuringly, “it is okay Alexei; they would have attacked already if they were alive. Easy, just keep going; see that opening port in front of you?”

“Yes, I see it,” he answered.

“Press the panel to the right,” she instructed.

He did so and it opened revealing three panels. “Now what,” he asked.

“Press the top panel and the door should slide open.”

He pressed it and watched as the door depressed a few inches and silently slid to the left. Inside he could see just a stainless steel room, an air lock.

“Slowly now, carefully step inside the airlock,” her voice soothing to his ears.

He made his way towards the opening and stepped inside. He noticed that Mistress Tara's voice was taking on a different, almost protective tone.

**“Now listen carefully Alexei, when the door closes behind you, stay there. Press the yellow button and wait for the area to pressurize. When the inner door slides open, do not move. In about 30 seconds a green light will light up on the panel; it should be safe then to enter the ship.”**

Alexei was beginning to realize just how crafty these Scathers were and he was glad he had someone like Tara to guide him.

Onboard the Phoenix Duncan and the crew's eyes were glued to the screen following Alexei's every move. Minister Gordon came onto the bridge with Lady Killian and stopped in surprise when they saw what was happening.

**“Mistress Tara,”** said Gordon in a breathless whisper, **“you let him board that ship alone!”**

Duncan turned, **“it's all right Minister, Alexei is very capable...”**

**“You don't understand Lord Duncan,”** he answered alarmingly, **“he could be in grave danger.”**

The two security guards behind Gordon were also alarmed. Pro Dantu chastened her, **“We should be over there with him; he has no idea what these creatures are capable of.”**

**“Minister Gordon, Pro Dantu,”** Mistress Tara began in a deep voice, **“there is only one life sign on that ship, and it is stationary. If you look carefully you will see that the explosions came from inside the ship. It appears that their warp coil failed and exploded.”** Mistress Tara's voice indicated that she was in charge here.

Both men stared at her like boys caught with their hands in the cookie jar.

**“Gentlemen I appreciate your concern, but this is my area of expertise. Captain Alexei is following my instructions to the letter; you need not have any concerns in this matter.”**

Pro Dantu looked like a chastised child, head down he mumbled something and backed up.

Minister Gordon sighed and acquiesced, **“Very well Mistress Tara, I bow to your expertise.”**

The door slid open and Alexei got his first view of the inside the ship. There was an orange glow about the entire inside and it appeared to be honeycombed. The explosions caused everything inside this area to be thrown about. There were many large pieces of machinery and consoles strewn about. There were wires and cooling ducts hanging from the ceiling; a lot of steam was being vented into the room off to his left. And he could hear something, or someone moaning just off to his right, up ahead.

“Can you hear that Tara,” he asked in a low voice, “someone is trapped in here. Geeze, this place is a mess. I’m going to move ahead a few steps.”

“Take three or four, but no more; I have to get a better view of the interior. Please pan the camera about so I can see,” she instructed. Alexei did as requested.

“Ah there it is!” she exclaimed. “Alexei, do you see the area to your left, the large black knob on the console mounted against the wall?”

Alexei turned and looked amid the rubble, “Yes, I see it.”

“I want you to make your way over there carefully, try not to touch anything else just yet. Yes, there, very good, now pull the knob out and down.” She held her breath for a moment. There was a grinding sound and a series of clicks and then silence.

“Very good Alexei, you are safe now to move about the ship.”

Panning to the right and upward, Alexei asked, “Is there a way to turn off that steam vent?”

“The panel in front of you, see it? In the upper left corner, fourth knob - push it. It should shut off the valve.”

“Ah, much better,” exclaimed Alexei as the steam abated and finally stopped pouring into the room. He turned around and panned the camera around the room.

“Well, what’s next Tara,” he asked admitting she was the expert in this environment.

“Listen carefully to each and every sound,” she said promptly.

Alexei set his famous ears and awareness in motion. He closed his eyes and listened; creaks and groans of metal on metal; hissing of other steam vents towards the back of the large room. Then he heard what he was listening for; it was a moan - whisper-like, but nonetheless, a moan.

“Do you hear that Tara,” he whispered.

“Yes Alexei, it’s coming from your right; be extremely careful,” her voice betrayed her.

“Don’t you worry yourself dear lady, I plan on coming back there and having a very long conversation with you about these Scathers.”



He began to move in the direction of the moans making his way around a series of huge consoles that had been upturned and thrown about the room. He was cautious enough to move as silently as possible. The moans were definitely getting louder. As he came around a rather large piece of machinery he saw his quarry.

“Taut!” shouted Mistress Tara into his earpiece.

Alexei froze and backed up quickly, whispering, “What did you say?”

“I am sorry, I reverted to Ogatu,” she explained, “it means do not move.”

“Ah, I understand,” he chuckled, “our word is ‘freeze’, and it means the same thing.”

“Freeze it is then, Alexei. Can you pan the camera around the corner and remain out of sight for a moment,” she asked.

He did as she requested and she studied the creature pinned under debris. She turned a dial and zoomed the camera in, carefully studying its features.

“By the stars,” she uttered under her breath.

She turned to Minister Gordon in surprise. “Minister, it is female!” Gordon also looked shocked. “Something is very amiss here; they never allow females on their ships.”

“Hey there folks, what’s the problem,” Alexei called, “can I move or what?”

“I’m not sure, stay where you are for the moment Alexei. This is unheard of; the Scathers believe females are inferior; they would never allow females on board a ship. Wait just a minute more Alexei; I want to check on something.”

She turned around and looked at Duncan, “Lord Duncan, can you pan your ship’s cameras around and find me one of the bodies floating out there?”

“Lt Plummer,” ordered Duncan, “find me a body.”

“Yes sir... here we go sir, I’ve got one.” He looked at Mistress Tara and waited.

“Zoom in closer please, Lt Plummer,” she instructed as she bent and stared at the video display, “a little more, more.”

The camera brought the creature closer and the entire crew got a look at their enemy in a way that made everyone shiver. Mistress Tara studied it carefully for a few minutes; turning to Duncan and Minister Gordon she announced, “It is also female.”

She looked at Lt Plummer and smiled sweetly; totally captivating the poor man, and purred, “Can you find me another one, please?” Lt Plummer jumped at the chance, like a love struck schoolboy. He found three grouped together and brought them on camera.

It didn't take her long this time, "Female, female, and the third is also female; I do not understand this." Her mind was racing trying to explain this sudden change. She knew everything about her enemy, and this was totally unlike them. An entire ship piloted and crewed by females... unheard of in Scather history.

Alexei interrupted her train of thought. "Tara, why don't we just ask the one in here what's going on?"

After much discussion between Duncan, Minister Gordon, and Mistress Tara, Alexei's suggestion seemed the most likely course of action.

"Use extreme caution Alexei," Tara advised, "this could be a trick of some kind."

Alexei came around the console and slowly approached the creature. It saw him and tried to back away moaning loudly.

"Ooowwaa," it yelled in a loud whispery voice, its eyes wide with fear.

Alexei raised his hand and approached slowly, "Easy, easy I'm not..."

The creatures' eyes opened wide in fear, "Nooo!" It howled loudly, "Kill me quick earthman, get it over, be done with me. Oh, oh, the pain..."

"Now you just settle down!" Alexei shouted, getting her attention. "Calm yourself." The creature stared at him in confusion.

"I have no reason to kill you." He answered in a whisper-like voice; trying to emulate her. "Damn woman, I'm just trying to help."

She calmed and turned her large head to look at him in surprise (he thought).

"You do not wish to kill me? But you... you are a human, from Earth."

Alexei realized she had been lied to about humans; just as Mistress Tara had suspected they lied about the Ogatu.

"Madame, I don't know where you got your information, but we Earthlings do not go around killing people." Changing the subject he asked, "what happened to your ship?"

"This is a scout ship; we stole it from the maintenance dock. We had hoped to make it to the Ogatu home world to seek their help in ending this war." She moved slightly and Alexei jumped back quickly. "Do not fear me sir, I will not harm you."

"You will pardon me for doubting you," Alexei replied as he walked around the creature. "We know only what we have experienced from your species in recent months and most of it has been bad. Your people go to great extremes to hunt down the Ogatu. My people cannot understand this insane hatred of a people that simply wish to be left alone."

Alexei could see she did not understand. “I believe your leaders lied to you about the Ogatu; lied in order to get your willing acceptance of this war.” Alexei shook his head back and forth, “Well, in any case please, please continue with what you were saying.”

“My sisters and I agree with you on that matter sir, this war against the Ogatu is insane. We were but a small group of many who wished to end this nightmare. We united and formed a group to do battle with those that run our society. You see there are barely any males left to mate with on our planet. Many of us will never know the joy of motherhood. The eligible men have been taken and placed in the service of the Elders; ancient men who rule our society,” she slammed her fist (?) down on the ground in frustrated anger, “they are all mad fools! We decided it was up to us; we females must put an end to this madness. We formulated a plan to try to get the Ogatu to help us. There are many, many more who think this way on our home world; they could not all come with us. We had hoped to make it to the Ogatu world before being found by our own kind.”

Alexei stepped forward and made his way around the trapped creature. He went to the console and tried to lift it off her and in the process something broke loose and slid towards him.

Seeing what was about to happen, the Scather quickly lifted one of its legs and kicked out, sending the machine flying across the room. Alexei realized then just how easily she could have killed him if she wanted; instead she saved him. He decided then that she was probably telling the truth.

“Thank you madam,” Alexei nodded to her, “you may have just saved my life.”

“I can’t have my rescuer getting killed, can I?” she replied in a different tone, smoother and softer.

“I can not lift this off you by myself. And you are injured; there is some grey ooze under you; if that is your blood, then you need to be seen by a doctor. May I bring some of my people over to help me move this and a doctor to see to your wound?”

“I do not know; I am frightened.” Her voice took on a different tone, “One of you is not so bad, but more of you... I do not know.”

“If it will make you feel better, I will stay right here by your side,” Alexei offered.

“You would do that for me,” she whispered, surprised.

“Yes, I would, I give you my word. Your ship was blown apart madam, I don’t know how long this pod will last; you need to decide quickly.”

“I do not wish to die like this,” she seemed to be crying, (or something similar to it). Will you be able to take me to the Ogatu world? I must try to complete our mission; or else all my sisters died for nothing.”

**“I may be able to help you in accomplishing that if you allow me to return to my ship. I will need a lot of help to assist me in freeing you.”**

**“You will return,” she asked apprehensively.**

**“Of course, I promised I would free you, and I shall keep that promise.” He bent down on one knee in front of her, “My name is Alexei, what may I call you?”**

**She hissed his name, “Alexssi...” she made a strange sound and continued, “My name is Omnimatyu; you may call me Tyu.” (Pronounced tie-u)**

**“Thank you Tyu, I shall return quickly.”**

**Alexei made his way to back to the air lock when he heard Tara’s voice in his ear.**

**“Alexei, can you remove the camera from your helmet?”**

**“Yes, what do you have in mind Mistress Tara?” Alexei already had a good idea as to what she wanted him to do.**

**“Can you quietly make your way back to the creature and leave the camera in a place where she will not see it; I want to see what she does when your are gone.” He did as she requested quietly.**

**When Alexei stepped out of the air lock, Duncan and Minister Gordon were waiting for him. He looked around for Mistress Tara but was told she would join them later. Alexei gave a quick report on the status of the ship. They adjourned to Duncan’s office and a serious discussion was held as what to do with the creature. Alexei relayed his feelings regarding the female; she was very frightened of him at first, but he had allayed her fears. In the process he learned that her world had been told Earthmen were killers, as bad as Ogatu. She claimed she knew for a fact that Ogatu were not as the Elders said and so believed that perhaps they had lied about the humans also. He stressed that he believed her to be sincere.**

**“The main point we have to consider first is if her story is true.” Minister Gordon was doubtful, “in all my years of dealing with Scathers, I have found only one constant... they are deceitful. We must find a way to decide if she telling us the truth.”**

**“She’s telling the truth,” said Mistress Tara entering the office, “I have no doubts now Minister.”**

**“Explain Mistress Tara,” Gordon demanded.**

**“I had Captain Alexei leave the camera behind. After he left, and she thought she was alone, I heard her call out to her dead sisters promising them that she would try to complete their mission. She wept for a bit and then she said something very interesting Minister.”**

Tara pulled out a disc from her uniform, “here watch this,” she said as she placed the disc recording into the computer. They gathered around the video screen as the scene came to life before them. The Scather was lying under a huge console, pinned down, and in obvious pain.

“Sisters!” She cried out in her pain, “My sisters, you have not died in vain!” She moaned loudly and twisted about. “We were right; they have lied about everything. If the Earthman speaks the truth, and I believe he does, I will complete our mission. Our mothers and sisters will grieve no more. We will finally put an end to the Elders rule; we will finally stop this madness!”

There was silence in the cabin. There was no mistaking the fear and desperation in the female’s voice, nor the determination; the emotion was raw. They looked at each other and then at Minister Gordon.

“So there has been dissention on their home world; this is more than we could have hoped for.” Gordon suddenly said, seemingly delighted.

“Minister Gordon, would you explain,” Tara interrupted, “our hosts do not know Scather politics.”

“Gentlemen, the Scather world is built on total and complete allegiance to their Elders. These men rule the Scather society; their word is law. There is no questioning of their authority, just total, blind obedience. If what this female says is true, they have used a great many of their males in the constant raids on our home world. It has severely reduced the male population and apparently is now affecting the females and the continuation of their species.” He looked at Duncan and then Alexei, and then continued.

“It appears it is the females who are rebelling; in thought and action. To have achieved the taking of a scout ship means that they are well informed of the goings on in the higher reaches of Scather society. They are well organized and determined.”

Tara added, “If the Elders follow their illogical conclusions regarding females, they will consider them as no viable threat and ignore them; which may prove to be their undoing.”

“So if we align ourselves with this female,” replied Duncan, “we just might be able to bring down the Elders and replace them with a younger ruling body.”

“Precisely Lord Duncan,” said Tara, “we must keep this female alive. We have to free her and find a way to move her to this ship. I don’t know how long that pod will hold together.”

“Well, now that I have seen her up close, Mistress Tara,” Duncan said, “I’m afraid the Phoenix may be too small to accommodate a creature that size. Duncan turned to Minister Gordon, “Sir, one of your ships has been following us since we left Aura. Perhaps they could accommodate her better.”

**Gordon looked at Duncan in surprise. “How long have you known?”**

**“Since we left Aura; don’t be alarmed Minister,” Duncan explained, “I would have done the same thing myself.”**

**Gordon stared at the commander and found him to be a truly honest man, just as the reports had described him. There was no deception with him, what you see is what you got. Gordon liked him, liked his manner.**

**“Yes, I believe the Sword will be large enough to accommodate her comfortably. I must inform Queen Naria of these strange events; and ask for her orders. I can guarantee that she will approve moving the female to the Sword, so we can get started on that. Lord Duncan may I use your communications center to relay this information to the Sword’s Captain?”**

**“Certainly Minister, you have free reign on board the Phoenix,” Duncan said with a short bow.**

**Duncan sent word of his own to Queen Naria explaining the situation; and also a ‘private’ note to her regarding Alexei. He was observed chuckling to himself as he left the COM center.**

Two weeks later Alexei watched from the viewer in his quarters as they approached Aura. He had been given special accommodations when the female Scather demanded his protection before she would enter the ship saying, 'she felt safe with him nearby'. After discussions between Tara, Duncan, and Minister Gordon, it was decided that Alexei should accompany her to Aura.

Alexei took advantage of the situation and put the time spent on the Sword to good use learning about this new race of people. He was very engaging and polite and made friends with most of the crew right away. He found something about each crewman and complimented him or her on it, thus breaking the ice. Soon even the few females sought him out and found him quite knowledgeable and entertaining. Captain Verock turned out to be an avid chess player and Alexei shared many a game with him.

Thru Alexei, the crew slowly got to know the Scather female better. The Ogatu females on board the Sword quickly bonded with Tyu saying they understood her plight. All agreed that they believed her story.

Alexei was in his quarters when he spotted the Saber heading their way. Just then his intercom hailed him.

"Captain Alexei to the bridge," it sang out.

"On my way," Alexei quickly responded and headed for the elevator. As he stepped out the Captain called to him.

"The Saber approaches Captain Alexei, and I am informed Queen Naria herself is on board. She will want to speak with you before she sees the Scather female."

"It's a good sign then, I mean that she came out to greet us," he looked to Captain Verock.

"Yes Alexei, it is indeed. But just as a heads-up; our Queen is a Warrior Queen; this means she does things her way without explanation. She is a fighter and a very formidable one I might add; I have fought by her side on many occasions. She is also very intelligent. She smells truth like you and I smell the air we breathe. She will question you about the female first," he looked at Alexei and smiled, "don't let her scare you, she can be hard and cold when she has to be. But there are times when she can also be..."

He smiled and looked away for a moment and Alexei got the impression the Captain knew the Queen better than most.

He cleared his throat and continued, "Well, let us just say you want to get on her good side. Just be forthcoming in your answers, don't give your opinion until she asks for it. Oh, and wait for me to present you to her... you understand?"



**“Gotcha,” said Alexei giving the ‘thumbs up’ sign.**

**The Saber, much larger than the Sword, slid alongside with ease. A small craft left it almost immediately and made its way to the Sword and docked. Queen Naria stepped into the opening of the craft and everyone snapped to attention.**

**As she pranced down the steps of her vessel Alexei couldn’t help but smile as he watched her movements. She had a definite regal bearing that couldn’t be faked. She was dressed in leather breeches, a white billowy shirt with a large gold and silver belt at her trim waist. From it hung the Bowie knife Duncan had given her. She wore a vest of the softest fur he had ever seen; it swayed with her every breath. Her features were very catlike, but human. Her face was beautiful and exotic to behold; almond shaped eyes that were violet, the same as Rayne’s. Alexei always appreciated the female form in every culture; many an alien woman found pleasures she scarcely knew existed as a result of his hands. The woman before him however took him by surprise; and he found himself admiring this warrior Queen.**

**It was then that Alexei noticed another female exiting the ship. She surveyed the area quickly and made a beeline towards Naria. Her constant eye movement and protective manner indicated to Alexei that she had to be the Queens’ personal guard, Altera; Duncan had spoken of her at length. She was trim and lithe in form, but he could not see her face because of the helmet she wore.**

**Naria looked about the large bay, singled out one of the crew, sashayed up to the Ensign, and had a few words with him. Unknown to the others she brought him news of the birth of a daughter and a son, twins. She congratulated him heartily, and gave him a disc of his mate and the two infants. Needless to say he was very grateful for her thoughtfulness; something she made a point to cultivate with her soldiers. She then spun around and marched directly to the Captain and Alexei.**

**“Captain Verock,” she purred, “how good to see you again. I understand we have a rather unusual ‘guest’ on board.”**

**Verock bowed slightly, “yes my Queen, a female Scather; she is asking for our help. Let us adjoin to the conference room where we may speak of the matter.” He extended his arm to Naria and waited.**

**Naria accepted his arm, a sign of great respect Alexei noted by the reaction of the assembled crew. They left the Bay area with Alexei and Altera following. They entered the conference room and Naria went to head of the long table and stood there looking out the large window; Altera stood beside the door. Verock took Alexei’s arm and ushered him along.**

**“My Queen,” began Verock, “may I present Captain Alexei of the starship Phoenix.”**

**Naria turned around, sized him up, then looked directly into Alexei’s eyes, holding him rigid for 15 seconds or so.**

**Alexei felt an embarrassing stirring as he bowed. *What the hell?***

**“I am most honored to meet the famous Warrior Queen of the Ogatu,” he said in his most diplomatic voice. “Commander Duncan asked me to pass along his deepest regards to you and hopes to see you upon his return.”**

**She seemed taken aback for a moment but quickly recovered and nodded her head, “you should be honored Captain,” she purred. “Duncan sent word of you and your many accomplishments. He seems to hold you in very high regard; most impressive.” She turned and went to large chair at the end of the table and gestured to them. “Gentlemen, please sit with me.” Both men took a seat on each side of her.**

**“Alexei, Verock, let us forgo all this pomp and ceremony get to the point.” She turned to Alexei and flashed her violet eyes at him, “I want you tell me everything, starting with the moment you spotted their ship floating in space; leave nothing out.”**

**Forty-five minutes later she knew everything that had happened. *His worth to Duncan is evident; he had taken every detail into consideration before he made a move. His description of the encounter showed his quick assessment of the situation. He relied on his gut feelings and intuition; very smart,* she thought to herself. “Your opinion Alexei?”**

**“I believe her Queen Naria; something about her eyes says she is not lying. As Mistress Tara showed us from the video, she called out to her dead companions vowing she would continue with their mission. She is very frightened, given her conditioning, but she firmly believes that there is a chance to end this war with your world.”**

**“And she insisted you be by her side while on board the Sword?” Alexei nodded, “...hmm, she sees you as her protector?”**

**“I believe so madam,” he replied quickly.**

**“Call me Naria, Alexei; I have a feeling we shall become good friends,” she purred. Captain Verock smiled knowingly. “Tell me, does she know I was coming here to question her?”**

**“I told her that it was strong possibility that the ruler of Aura would question her.”**

**“And her reaction to this news,” Naria watched his face as he replied.**

**“She was alarmed at first, asked me if you were going to kill her.” He chuckled continued, “I told her that you were not like that. Nevertheless, she asked me to be present.”**

**“Good, good!” Naria’s eyes glassed over for a moment and she smiled knowing that her decision of long ago was about to pay off. *We just may be able end this at last.* She stood up, “Gentlemen, let’s go and meet this female and put her fears to rest.”**

**Tyu had been placed in the largest Bay, an area reserved for the largest of the runabouts. The doctor had seen her, and her wounds had been cleaned and were healing nicely. She had to admit that the human, Alexei, was unlike anything she had ever expected. He had kept his promise and saw to her well-being and comfort everyday. And most surprising of**

all, she found the Ogatu females were sympathetic to her cause; they were friendly, and shared with her experiences of their own lives. Except for a difference in appearance, she found they were warm and friendly and not at all as the Elders had pictured them. Contemplating on all the lies the Elders had told her and her people she let her mind wander as to what if. Sighing deeply she said under her breath, "...if only I had an army..."

"And what would you do if you did little one?" came a strong voice behind her.

Tyu gave a start and turned quickly to see Naria standing on the level above her. She jumped and stared at the Ogatu Queen in surprise. Then, Alexei noted, her eyes went wide in recognition.

"You! But... but they said... you were reported dead ages ago."

Naria took a step closer; "Don't believe everything you hear little one, especially if it comes from the mouth of Elders."

The Scather female lowered her head and went down in a formal bow.

"Regards and honor to the one Myra taught; she who sowed the seeds of truth within our world; she who we females learned to believe above all others."

Captain Verock was at a loss, and looked to Alexei for an answer. He gave a classic 'palms up' and shrugged shoulders answer; he was just as lost. They looked to Naria and Tyu hoping for an explanation.

Naria went down the stairs and approached the female. She laid her hand on her head and said; "Arise Tyu, granddaughter of Myra, sister to this worthless child, and Holder of the Flame of Truth."

By now the entire Bay was curious as to what was going on. They gathered on the levels above and watched what was unfolding below.

Tyu began speaking and her tone was deadly serious. "Naria, wise-one, I bring news of a dark nature. They know your people move to the Ohmu Forest during the winter months. They know there is a city in the forest. The Elders are sending four ships with specially trained troops aboard. Naria, these troops were trained in utmost secrecy. We only came across this information a day before we left. There wasn't time enough to get information to deduce what their plan is; but they are coming in force to do terrible harm. We believe there is a spy in your midst, or a traitor."

"God help him or her if there is!" shouted Naria, and a chorus above her agreed.

The female Scather rose up and towered above Naria, but made no movement to attack her. She bowed once and began a low humming sound, which Naria answered with a purring sound of her own. Together they produced a soothing sound, almost hypnotic, echoing throughout the entire Bay area. Both began to sway back and forth to the sound for several minutes; and then suddenly they burst out in riotous laughter.

Naria turned around to the two stunned men, “It seems the secrets of our two worlds will soon be revealed for all to see. It is a long story gentleman, but we finally have a chance at ending this madness and living in true peace.”

“Captain, if you would bring some chairs we will tell you a story;” looking above at the assembled crew Naria smiled and motioned them to sit. She turned to Tyu and both women laughed as Naria sat down.

Tyu took center stage and began to speak.

“Good and noble people, many years ago, during a purge of the Ogatu workers, a small toddler was hidden from the laser pit by its doomed parents.

One of the workers for the scientists at City Central was named Myra and considered a trusted and loyal aide; ‘brighter than most females’ was their term. After losing two of her sons in the war, she had become disillusioned; and it didn’t help that she had stumbled across the truth about the Elders. Being a woman there was nothing she could do and so she felt betrayed and sank into a deeply depressed state.

One evening, on her way home from her post, she stumbled upon the child. She could see that she had been injured in the mob rush to flee the pits. The small baby lay there, shaking in fear, moaning in pain, staring up at Myra with wide violet eyes. What went thru Myra’s mind as she stared back at the child one can only guess; but in the end Myra scooped her up and made her way home. After examining the child Myra realized her wounds were far worse than she thought; in all likelihood the child would die without further aid. Bone-weary of death, tired of the Elders demands, tired of the lies and the mad senseless war, she decided to save the child herself. She applied some of the knowledge she had learned from her position in the science lab to heal the child; but in the process she unknowingly gave her near immortality.

Myra raised the child secretly, keeping her hidden from all, even her family. She named her Naria, which means ‘truth’ in the Scather language. She delighted at the intelligence of the child, and taught her all she knew. As the female grew, she displayed wisdom far beyond her years. She saw thru the Scather Elders’ words, and could reveal the truth in their lies. Myra knew that one day she would have to return her to her people and it saddened her, for she had come to love the child as her own.

Only one of her daughters believed as she did, and in time Myra told her what she had done. Myra knew she was taking a chance of possible betrayal, but the child would require help to grow to maturity. To her joy, her daughter agreed with her actions.

“For the record,” Tyu said looking about the docking area, “she was my mother.”

It was then Myra learned of a small group of females who believed nothing of what the Elders said, and were fast rebelling against them. Her daughter was a member of this group, and she stressed that secrecy was of the utmost. She told her mother that the women in this group were lying and reporting only female births; keeping the males hidden from the eyes of the Elders. They were teaching these males the truth about the Elders and their society; and in the process raising a small army to one-day rebel against them.

At her daughter's behest, Naria was raised along side these males, being taught the art of warfare with them. To Myra's delight, she excelled in it. Many of these rebel females worked in the large hangers that built the spaceships used in the ongoing battle with the Ogatu. It was here that the females altered a new ship under construction to include a secret room. Naria was trained and prepared to enter that room and begin the journey to her home world. As the day drew closer she told Myra she did not want to leave her; she feared for her safety. But in truth she was afraid to leave her, she loved her as any child loved its parent. Myra insisted that she needed to return to her people and bring about an end to this senseless war. She reminded her that with the knowledge she had been given, and the abilities she learned in training, she was ensured a chance at survival. Myra demanded she do this for both races. Once the ship landed, it would be up to her to find her way out and rejoin her people."

Altera picked up and continued the conversation here.

"And she did just that - leaving a trail of Scather bodies in her wake. The rest is Ogatu history; Naria the Warrior came out of nowhere, striking at Scather raiding parties barely after they landed. Countless lives were saved; warriors flocked to be in her service. The Ogatu people began to see her as a deliverer from those devastating attacks, as the current regime did nothing to prevent them. In time her popularity grew so large that when she took the throne as its rightful heir, there were none who denied her."

Naria rose and went to Tyu taking one of her hands in hers. "We may yet end this madness, Tyu."

Turning she gave the captain instructions to pull alongside the Saber; she wanted to transfer herself and Tyu to its docking bay. She asked Alexei if he would like to come along for the ride; she promised it would be interesting. He quickly agreed, saying he would enjoy seeing her beautiful world. Altera was sent ahead to prepare quarters for Tyu. When they arrived on the Saber, Altera was waiting on the docking bay with two of her guards. They escorted Tyu to her quarters and were heard conversing with her in her native tongue.

When she returned, Naria called Altera over and formally introduced her to Alexei. She made special note to Alexei of Altera's sharpness of mind and uncanny deductive abilities. And also the fact that she was unattached at the moment. Alexei got the impression that she wanted him to know that this was someone she was fond of; and that she would approve a liaison between them. Alexei felt like he was being railroaded and bristled at Naria's audacity.

Now that her helmet was removed Alexei got a good look at the exotic leader of the Palace Guards. She was much more attractive than he expected; a smaller version of Naria he thought, but a feisty one he bet. She was fit and trim, and no doubt an exceptional mind to have succeeded as Head of the Palace Guards. Alexei noted a faint odor, and found it pleasing somehow.

Her face was rather pretty in an exotic cat-like way; but what caught his interest were her eyes. She had violet eyes, like Rayne's, only hers seemed to have a life of their own. He was totally captivated. When he gazed into those eyes of hers his mind suddenly filled with quick flashes of bedding her. It was lusty, very physical, violent, rushed, and extremely sensual. Startled, he tried to control his reactions as he felt himself stirring and was taken aback at the intensity of it. He applied his strong will and fought to control his emotions. He got the distinct impression that she was testing him. *This is going to be interesting; he thought as he gave her his most wicked smile.*

As for Altera, she found herself immediately attracted this human with the unbelievable war record. Altera had stolen a look at the profile Lord Duncan had sent Naria on him. He had included a brief note about this favored captain of his, and his highest praise. Although he was not an exceptional swordsman, (her preference), his record indicated that he was a crack shot with a laser pistol. But what impressed her most was the added fact he often sparred with Lady Rayne; he was her favorite sparring partner it seems. To Altera, that spoke volumes by itself on his worth.

*Tho' an inch shorter, I doubt that will make much difference, she thought to herself wickedly, he is nonetheless a pleasing person. He withstood my small test and controlled himself; and let me know by his smile that he was aware of what I was doing. Very deductive, very smart. Hmm... he is quite attractive... in an exotic alien way...and it has been a while...!*  
Altera gave him a sly smile in return, as if daring him.

While onboard the Sword, Tyu had begun to teach Alexis the Scather language. Now onboard the Saber, Naria continued his lessons and was amazed at how quickly he picked it up. He was able to converse with Tyu after only a few days.

*Duncan was right, Naria thought to herself, this man is very intelligent; and though I doubt he knows it, very empathic also.*

"I like you Captain Alexei," she told him on their journey to Aura, "true, you have a vain and swaggering style, but you also have a sharp mind. That is the true measure of a man; at least by Ogatu female's standards, it is."

She smiled at him and he noticed the same aroma he had experienced with Altera, only more intense, and wondered if it was common with all Ogatu females.

Naria informed the Captain of the Saber as to what she intended; privately he agreed with her; it would be nice to finally bring good news to their 'guests'. He also informed her that the spaceport had left word that her new 'ship' was nearly completed; trial runs were all that was required. She sent word to Lord Tarak and informed him of the impending attack, explaining where the Intel came from. He replied back within twenty minutes that they would be ready. He in turn sent out word to the other Holds, and to the security detail at Ohmu.



The next day the entire party boarded a special glider. Naria, Tyu, Alexei and a handful of Palace Guards were transported to the secret port city of Aecia, near the southern coast. Alexei was glued to the portal as they glided down to the surface, asking Altera question after question until she shouted ‘enough already!’ A deep chuckling could be heard coming from Naria. Upon landing they boarded the large cargo ship, Halestrom. Its Captain was very familiar with the route to their destination, he had sailed it many times. Very few on Aura knew that there was a small colony of Scathers in an encampment on the Northern Continent.

Years ago Naria had come upon a very young Scather, one of a few survivors of an attack gone terribly, terribly bad. Having been raised in their society gave her the unique ability to be able to differentiate between the different types of Scathers. Naria immediately recognized how young this particular Scather was, and stopped before she slew him. Looking about the bloody field Naria noticed that many of the wounded and dying were young teenagers, like the one before her. She halted her men from the grim task they were performing and questioned the young boy. Addressing him in his own (Scather) language, she was able to put his fears to rest and learn a great deal. He said he was merely a second year student; that the Elders Troop Recruiters arrived at his school and pressed his entire class into service; none were allowed to even contact their parents. All this was done by the Elders decree. Poorly trained, they were dropped on the planet two weeks later and told to fight or they would die horrible deaths. Naria was horrified; these were just young boys, unsure of what was going on, frightened half out of their minds.

Knowing the Elders as she did she could not help but take pity on the frightened boy. She decided then and there that she would find a way to help him and others like him. After careful consideration and hours of deep thought, Naria made a decision that day – a decision that would have far-reaching consequences.

She took three squads of her most trusted and loyal men and trained them herself. She taught them how to differentiate the young Scathers from the old; how to pick out the squad leaders; but most important, how to speak Scathese. Naria’s soldiers immediately understood what their Queen was attempting to do and approved her actions. Many were tired of the useless bloodshed and wanted to end the conflict between the two worlds.

These soldiers were turned loose wherever there was an incursion. Once they arrived on scene, it didn’t take them long to pick out the trained leaders in each attack group. They would isolate them from the main group and dispense with them. With them out of the way, they would then address the young boys in their own language, explaining that they did not want to kill them, that they could offer them a sanctuary of sorts. Most jumped at the chance to live. Naria set up an encampment on the Northern continent and gave the first Scather residents, about 10 young boys, enough supplies and equipment for them to hack-out an encampment for themselves. From then on, all those who were not brainwashed, who could still see reason, were brought from the battlefield to the encampment where they learned the truth from the lips of their own.



Naria supplied them with food, and tools to help them build their own structures to live in. She told them she would do everything she could to return them to their home world. She took great care to cultivate a trusting relationship with the young leaders of this society as it grew. On a routine spy mission to their home planet, she asked for a set of plans from the starship bay to be copied. With these she was able to begin construction of a starship for her guests so they could return to their home world.

Through the Ogatu ships they came in contact with over the years, these young Scather boys learned that what the Elders had told them and their parents over the years was indeed a lie. The ships that brought them supplies were crewed by carefully trained 'sailors' under Naria's own orders. They were taught just enough of the Scather language to carry on a limited conversation - exactly what Naria wanted. Through the years a bond of trust had been formed between the Captains and crews of these ships and the Scather leaders of this small community.

So it was to the Halestrom, the largest of these sailing ships that Naria brought Tyu. Its Captain greeted her in her own language and put her at ease. Naria smiled warmly at this small action of the Captain and rewarded his thoughtfulness accordingly. Alexei noted that she spent two hours with the captain in his stateroom.

The captain appeared to be the hearty adventurous type, a real mans man; and from an Ogatu's point of view, quite attractive he guessed. It was obvious to Alexei that the Queen was rewarding her Captain for his remarkable duties. Alexei chuckled to himself when he realized what was going on, and received a slug to the arm and a scowl from Altera.

He checked on Tyu and could not help but note the excitement in her demeanor.

Tyu explained to him that she could hardly believe her ears when Naria told her of the Camp on the Northern continent. Hope that her brother was still alive was high in her thoughts. But best of all, Naria had told her that the leader of this community was called Rytal. (Rytal was the name of Tyu's betrothed; long thought lost in battle.)

Two mornings later the rising sun illuminated the northern coastline, and a few short hours later Tyu could make out a city within the jungle.

**“Hurry and finish with that roof Dytru; they could be here this afternoon!”**

**“Are the hydroponics back on line; Jaxtel, will you check on them?”**

**“Come on people, move those legs!”**

**“Give it a rest Rytal, you’re pushing too hard,”** shouted an exasperated Lytru. He watched his friend barking out orders and almost laughed at his expression. He was so concerned about Naria’s visit this time. He often wondered if those two had some kind of a special relationship between them. Leaning back against the pillar, let his mind wonder.

He thought back remembering when he had first arrived at the camp; scared and confused, traumatized by what he had just experienced and seen on a battlefield not of his choosing. The Ogatu were nothing like what the Elders said. They could have killed him and his friends without much effort; instead they addressed him in his own language and gave him a choice. He and four others were taken to this dock in the middle of the jungle - and met by their own. From them he had learned the truth about the Elders; their lies and trickery, and manipulation of the population. It was a terrible blow, he felt a complete fool; and he was depressed for months. But he, like the others before him, snapped out of it. He joined his brothers in carving out a town amidst the jungle. He and Rytal became fast friends.

Two months ago Rytal told him that there was a very real chance that they would be able to go home. Naria was building them a ship, a starship to take them home. Rytal was adamant about returning home and revealing the truth to everyone. And now here they were, awaiting her arrival.

**“She doesn’t expect miracles, just progress; and, my friend, I think we have that taken care of.”** Lytru was trying to engage Rytal in conversation so he would leave the others alone for a few minutes. **“We are self-sufficient now; we can supply our own food; we built an entire town, for stars sake! That alone has got to count for something.”**

**“Ah Lytru, your probably right. I have been pushing them, haven’t I?”**

Rytal looked about and saw that all the young men were working hard.

**“I guess I’m a perfectionist. I just want everything to be ready when she sees our city for the first time.”**

Rytal walked over to the railing and leaned against it for a moment.

**“You know in the beginning I wasn’t sure we were going to make it. But she kept all her promises to us. Supplied us with tools and food, and except for the ships, she left us alone. Best thing she could have done; it was grow up quick, or die.”**

**“No less important is your relationship with her; you were the first she spoke to, Rytal. You were the first to receive her proposal. Whatever you two spoke about during those first days seemed to have given you the confidence you needed. Lets be honest Rytal, you were the one who kept us alive here. If you hadn’t found those giant bees, we never would have made it. Which reminds me,”** Lytru went to the railing and pointed westerly, **“We have to start another hive. She laid another Queen, and if we don’t split them up there will be trouble with the worker bees.”**

**“That’s Simiyu’s field; he takes care of the bees. You’ll find him in the flower house, he’s busy cross-pollinating, experimenting again,” Rytal offered, a bit annoyed. “He spends too much time on experiments; we’re not following that direction anymore.”**

**“You know how he is Rytal,” Lytru pleaded, “he gets caught up in what he’s doing and forgets all about the time; he means no harm.”**

**“Neither did the Elders in the beginning and you see where that led. You’d better remind him that he has other duties that require his attention.” Rytal lowered his voice for effect, “Lytru, if he doesn’t learn to allocate his time better, I will shut him down. Tell him I don’t want to resort to that, but I will if he doesn’t work with me. We are not going to end up like the Elders!”**

**“Okay, okay!” he protested holding up his hands to fend off an unseen enemy, “But you’ve got to cut them a little slack, Rytal. You’ve been driving them too hard, man; you need to ease up a little.”**

**Both men glared at each other until Rytal broke down and began to laugh. He knew his friend was right; he had been pushing them too hard. He just wanted to impress Naria with all they had accomplished here. He sighed and closed his eyes remembering.**

**She had taken a great risk in trusting them; trusting that they would keep to the ‘Agreement’, the pact that each of them made with her. She accepted their word as their bond that they wouldn’t try to kill the captains of the ships and take them over. That they would wait for her to build them a ship to take them back to their world. She had placed a lot of faith in him to keep them going until that time.**

**“Rytal! Hey, come back to the present man,” Lytru yelled, “I said I’ll go and have a word with Simiyu, I’ll take care of it.” He was worried his friend was allowing himself to be too caught up with the Queen’s arrival. “Now, why don’t you take a break, have a drink, sit awhile, do something else besides this.”**

**“You really think I’m that driven?” He asked sarcastically.**

**“You think?” His friend said good-naturedly, laughing. He turned around and saw one of younger boys running an over to them.**

**“Sir,” the young boy called out of breath, pointing out to sea, “there is a ship approaching the entrance to the bay, it appears to be the Halestrom!”**

**“Well, well, they arrived early,” said Lytru, “just like Naria to catch us off guard.”**

**“Oh I expected as much Lytru, don’t worry we’ll be ready by the time she reaches our dock.” He smiled to himself, “I think she’s bringing us good news.”**

**“We’ll see my friend,” Lytru replied nudging his friend, “we’ll see!”**

Lord Tarak received Queen Naria's message on the morning he was closing up his Hold and about to leave for the Ohmu Forest. He informed Rayne and First Kai of this turn of events and at Kai's suggestion he called his warriors together and informed them of what lay ahead. They could not delay their departure so they would formulate a plan while traveling and be ready to put it in motion when they arrived.

Before they left first Kai went to the study and approached Lord Tarak, "My Lord, a moment?"

"Yes Kai, what is it?" Tarak noted the look of concern on his First's face.

"A young warrior asks for a moment of your time; he says it is of utmost importance. He refused to say anything to me except that he must speak with us both immediately."

"Very well, send him in," replied a curious Tarak.

Kai went to door and motioned for the warrior to enter. It was the young man who had fought at Rayne's side during the incursion, Tarak noted. He remembered when he praised his courage after the battle that the warrior was deeply touched by it. He seemed nervous and asked for the door to be closed.

"What is it that is so important that we must delay our departure young Bail?" asked Tarak.

"Lord Tarak, First Kai, what I have to tell you may cost me my life. But sir, I gladly give it, if it is in your service." The young man looked about at the two men and then continued. "Please bear with me for a moment, I must explain something."

"Easy young warrior, take your time, I can see that you are very upset about something." Tarak pointed to a chair in front of the desk, "Sit, take a deep breath and continue."

"Thank you my Lord. Let me begin at the beginning; I was orphaned at a very young age and taken in by Lord Boras' Hold. I thought I would have a good home; nothing could have been farther from the truth. In Lord Boras' Hold only the strong survive. It is kill or be killed in the lower levels of his Hold. I learned quickly and managed to survive to adulthood by doing what was necessary. My reward was to be inducted into his army. My world was filled with hate, and deception, and death."

The young man lowered his head for a remembering those terrible days. After a moment he raised his head and looked directly at Lord Tarak and continued.

"I have never known kindness, or friendship, or compassion until I came here. In the eight months I have been here I have learned that the world is not what Lord Boras pictures. And I can no longer remain in his service."

Tarak took a nearby mug and poured some water into it and handed it to the man who drank it all quickly.

“My Lord, I was sent here to spy on you and your Hold by Lord Boras. At first I sent back detailed reports on your Hold and the goings on in it. But after a time I just couldn’t do it anymore. My reports were few and far between; and gave no information at all.”

Kai rose and drew his sword, Tarak raised his hand, “No Kai, let him finish.”

“First Kai, if you wish to slay me when I am finished, I accept your judgment; but I can no longer sit by without warning you and Lord Tarak that you are in terrible danger. Matai was very insistent on knowing when you were leaving for Ohmu. I sent word that it would be four weeks more before we left. I believe Lord Boras is going to attack your party on the road, and then attempt to take the throne from Queen Naria!”

“He wouldn’t dare!” shouted First Kai.

“Sir, forgive me, but you don’t know Lord Boras as I do. He is a madman; he has a hatred for the Queen that borders on insanity. And worse, he has brainwashed many of his soldiers to believe it also. He firmly believes that he, and he alone, is the rightful ruler of Aura.”

Tarak sat back, his mind racing as to the ramifications of this news.

“Lord Tarak, you have showed me that a warrior is to be true and honorable. You and your entire Hold have showed me friendship and compassion. You have made me proud to be called a warrior of this Hold; I would willingly lay down my life for you and my fellow warriors. I could not allow this to go on any longer, I had to tell you.”

Tarak rose and went to the young man laying his hand on his shoulder. “Easy, I believe you Bail; I know this must have been very hard for you to do, considering your upbringing and what you have had to endure. I shall not forget your loyalty this day.”

“And you First Kai,” the young man asked uncertain.

“I believe you also Bail.” Kai smiled at the distraught young man. “Your voice rings with truth.”

“I want you to return to your duties Bail,” ordered Tarak, “and say nothing to the rest of the men right now. We must make plans for when we arrive at Ohmu. Not finding us on the road will force Boras to take action in the Ohmu Hold, and we must be ready for anything.”

The young man rose and went down on one knee taking Lord Tarak’s hand; “Thank you my Lord. I shall not fail you, or my fellow brothers in arms. I shall defend you to the end, I swear it!” He rose shakily and left the room.

After Bail closed the door Kai let out a long breath, “By the Gods Tarak!”

“Yes Kai, my thinking exactly; but keep an eye on him, just to be sure,” ordered Tarak. “You know,” he said tilting his head and furrowing his brow, “Rayne said she felt something amiss in the Hold. She said she didn’t know what it was, just a strong ‘feeling’. Now we know what she was picking up; the boy’s turmoil was evident. We must prepare for two assaults, my friend; both of them deadly.”

“You know you can rely on me Tarak.” Tarak nodded and smiled at his right hand man as Kai continued, “Should we say anything to the women before we leave?”

“Say nothing to Sera; I do not want her worrying; not in her condition.” Tarak saw the look of surprise in Kai’s eyes; “Yes my brother, I am aware she is with child. Rayne picked it up the first day she was here; we have no secrets from each other. And Kai,” he said placing his hand on his shoulder, “I am very happy for you both. I will inform Rayne on the journey; she just may prove to be invaluable to us now.”

The group left the Hold in the early morning hours sealing the doors behind them. Tarak informed Rayne and asked her to say nothing to Sera. With the certainty of an impending attack, Rayne and Mistress Sera were placed in the center of the caravan for safety’s sake. And Rayne understood that First Kai was placing Mistress Sera’s life in her hands.

The morning was bright and clear when they left and the air smelled sweet and fresh. The countryside was alien and harsh to the eye, but Rayne found it somehow very familiar. Tarak had made clear to her what they could expect; the biting cold, heavy snow drifts, and evenings with little or no sleep, crammed into small caves for shelter. The four-day journey would be hard; there would be no amenities; they would all be pushed to their limits. She laughed at his dire descriptions of the harsh conditions and kissed him lightly saying he had never stayed on the third moon of Alterei Regula; this would be a piece of cake compared to that.

Tarak couldn’t help but note the grin on her face as they rode out and it warmed his heart. *She is in her element and loves every minute of it; he chuckled to himself, look at my men vying for her favor; she has them eating out of her hand.*

After awhile Master Seatac shooed the men away threatening them with a good bashing if they didn’t leave her alone. She laughed at him for his effort, and he indignantly scooped up a handful of snow, shaped it into a ball and threw it at her. She replied with one of her own and when Tarak admonished them both to behave, they threw two at him. A serious snowball fight ensued and continued on and off as they journeyed late into the afternoon. They made camp that night in a low adobe structure that was carefully cut out of the side of a small hill. The Hausa, men and equipment fit snugly inside. A large fire in the center of the shelter kept them warm throughout the cold night. Everyone smelled like a Hausa by morning and looked forward to leaving the cave.

Rayne noted the sharp change in the landscape the next day. Large trees and grasslands were becoming more and more evident. They were leaving the sparse mountainous area and headed towards a more temperate climate. She noted rolling hills of violet flowers, and dark green forested areas miles ahead. Around noon, when the sun was high in the sky, Tarak rode back and joined her. They spoke of the landscape and changes with Rayne asking a multitude of questions. On a signal from one of his men ahead, he turned and pointed behind them. Rayne turned and what she saw when she looked gave her pause for concern.

The sky was a dark bluish color from horizon to horizon, interspaced within were white lightening strikes. It seemed to be a living thing, undulating across the land and heading straight for them. Tarak explained that an ice storm was brewing and would be upon them by nightfall. They would have to pick up the pace if they were to make the next shelter before it hit. Hours later Rayne noted a sharp crispness to the air, no doubt due to the approaching storm and the wind suddenly picked up considerably; the storm was moving into the area at a fast pace.

The group came out of a forested area and before them lay a gully, snaking around out towards a mountain in the distance. Tarak shouted orders instructing them to make a run for the shelter on the far side of the mountain; even the Hausa seemed to understand the urgency. They raced down the gully and around the mountain and Rayne saw where they were headed as four of Tarak's men raced ahead and abruptly stopped and dismounted. They began to roll a huge stone away from the entrance to a large cave. The rest of the group, bent over their mounts, rode straight into the cave and dismounted.

A massive boulder on the inside was then rolled back across the entrance; one man climbed above it and pulled on a rope and a large black tarp unrolled, covering the entrance. No doubt to keep the cold from penetrating thru the small cracks around the stone. The men immediately began to light two enormous fires in a pit in the center of the cave. The Hausa were moved to an area off to the side and well back from the entrance; there they were relieved of their burdens, and watered and fed. Large bales of hay were spread about their pen; it was going to be a very cold night. Thick pads of straw woven into long mats had been placed about the fire pit and piled high off the ground. Tightly hand woven mats were placed on this straw and then their bedding was placed on top of the mats. The bedding was brought out from many trunks located in a storeroom in the back of the cave. Blankets made from the hides of the indigenous animals of Aura were best suited to keep one warm in this kind of weather.

The evening meal consisted of bread and cheese and a warm oatmeal-like dish. It was not very tasty, but it would warm their bodies for the night that would follow. They sat around in small groups discussing in hushed tones the coming Scather attack and formulated a plan that would be put into motion should they try to attack the city in the forest. Most doubted they would be able to do such a thing, but they had learned over the years that being prepared was better than being caught off guard. After a while everyone began to settle in for the night.



The wind howled about outside giving testimony to the ferocity of the storm just beyond the protective walls of the cave. Rayne finally understood Tarak's concern about the cold and its effects on her. She had never experienced a cold like this before; it crept into the cavern like a sparkling mist and enveloped everything. It penetrated thru everything into ones very bones and chilled the body from within. She snuggled in the large warm coat that Tarak had given her just before they left the Hold, and pulled it tightly about her. It had belonged to Serena, he told her, and he couldn't see it going to waste in storage when she had need of it now. It was made from a Septak's hide and tho' a bit big on her, she gladly welcomed its warmth. Tarak curled himself around her to give her the added warmth of his body heat.

During the night the Hausa left their pens and came to the fire pit in search of their riders. As each was located, they would lie down beside them, thus forming a circle of Hausa between the men and the outer cold. Their bodies gave extra warmth to the encircled group and in all probability saved their lives.

When they rolled back the boulder in the morning the men found the frozen body of an obviously pregnant Snotig, a large cat-like animal indigenous to the area. Adults stood seven to eight feet tall; covered with a thick white and tan fur. Their cat-like faces had two huge fangs at the mouth and their paws held claws that could rip an enemy to shreds in seconds; they were ferocious predators. Apparently this one had tried to get to the safety of the cave but was caught outside by the storm. Rayne noted movement in its belly area and pointed it out. One of the men quickly cut it open, and two small cubs fell out onto the snow. One was already dead, but the other, a creamy tan and white color, was still breathing; but just barely.

Rayne feeling a kinship with the mother Snotig; (she had given her life trying to save her young), came over, pushed the man out of the way and went to work on the tiny little creature. It was shivering from the cold and shaking all over so she began rubbing its small body rigorously to get its circulation going. She scooped it up, cleaned it as best as she could under the circumstances, and wrapped it in a piece of cloth cut from the coat she was wearing; (to Tarak's dismay), then she placed it close to her heart. The beating of her heart would comfort and calm the tiny animal, and her body heat would eventually warm it up. Kai bent and cut out the milk sac and drained the liquid into an empty water pouch; once warmed it would provide nourishment for the baby Snotig. Tarak told Rayne that she was wasting her efforts on a creature that would in all probability die anyway. No one had ever been able to tame a Snotig; they were a feral animal, deadly when penned in; they always reverted to their wild nature.

Morning brought a crisp sunny day; the storm long since passed. They would be close to their destination by midmorning the next day. No one wanted to spend another night like that one. From their vantage point on the top of a rise they could just make out the beginnings of the Ohmu Forest far in the distance; there were shouts of victory from the men. Though it was still a day's journey away, its sight propped up all their spirits. They now began their descent into a valley before the final trek to the Ohmu Forest itself. Rayne saw off in the distance a large structure at the edge of a rather massive forest; she questioned Mistress Sera as to what it was.

**“That is the Ohmu Inn,” replied Sera with a smile, “that’s where we will spend the night. It is a traveler’s stronghold made of wood from the Ohmu Forest; trees that had been felled during storms or earthquakes were cut up and used for these Inns alone. Innkeepers are required to have a degree in the Sciences, Agriculture, Psychology, and the Law.” Rayne noted a certain sense of pride in Sera’s words as she spoke. “It is a singular achievement and a great honor to be placed in charge of one of these Inns; and it is only by appointment of the Queen herself.”**

**Kai joined them and continued, “People gather from all across the realm at these Inns on their way to and from Ohmu, and conversations span a wild myriad of topics. A good Innkeeper has to be up to date on the goings-on in the Realm and any changes in the Law and the Sciences. People who are on the road traveling always want to know the latest news, to see if they missed anything. The Innkeepers are highly trained and can deal with almost any situation. Their word is law in their Inn, and everyone knows the rules; it’s a good place to stay if you have been on the road for days.”**

**Sera looked to Kai and grinned, “Yes, it is a good place, and tonight we shall have a hot meal in our stomachs, and sleep in warm comfortable beds.”**

**“Sera, my mate,” Kai teased leaning close to her; “you’re getting soft.”**

**They continued the three-mile journey down the road to the Inn, and Rayne noted that the group was getting very animated. Many began speaking of the yearly gathering that would take place when they reached the Forest itself. She listened to all the conversations, and learned. Apparently these gatherings were where many found mates to take back with them to their different Holds. It was a time to renew old acquaintances and perhaps find new ones. Families were reunited, new births were recorded and matches were made. It was a time of much celebration and good will.**

**As they came closer to the large structure Tarak rode back and joined her.**

**“It’s an engineering marvel my love, my father’s grandfather designed it. The walls surrounding the structure are thirty feet high. In between the wooden pilings is a special cement/wood mixture that binds the logs together. Then they are put together in sections and each section is coated with a non-flammable liquid; it cannot burn.”**

**Rayne was fascinated by his description of the structure. “There are three levels to the structure; the top level has sentry posts at each corner and middle section. There is a landing pad, and also a communications center. The second layer is where the guests’ rooms are located; there are 300 hundred rooms in this Inn. The first floor is for the Main Entry and Greeting Hall. Just beyond that is a massive Dining Hall, where everyone meets and eats, and it boasts a huge Kitchen. One floor below this structure is the storage vaults for all the food and supplies it takes to run this place. There is also a laundry, a tailor shop, a shoe/boot shop, and a small armory. It is totally self sufficient.”**

**“The people certainly planned well when they built this place,” she complimented him; “I am very impressed.”**

**“During the winter it is not unusual for the Inns to be snowed in for several months,” he explained. “It is best if they are prepared for anything.”**

**Tarak smiled and leaning over nuzzled her shoulder.**

**“And wait till I introduce you to Dane Tevid, the Innkeeper. He and I played as children,” he smiled remembering, “and got into all kinds of trouble together when we were young men. You will like Tevid, Rayne; he is a truly good man.”**

**Tarak looked up at the sentry tower above the gate and saw his friend bound out the door at a dead run.**

**The huge gates of the stronghold slowly swung open and there were many shouts of welcome to Lord Tarak and his men as they entered, apparently they had been expected. When Rayne and Star crossed into the Inn Hold there was hushed silence as the little Hausa and his rider made their way down the path. All had heard of the Eloi warrior woman. Lord Tarak came to her side and held her hand high in his signifying acceptance and trust.**

The main entry room of the large inn was used for gathering and further in there were many tables and chairs and long large sofas. This was where the different travelers gathered to meet and exchange information. There was constant conversations and movement of people coming and going. Just beyond was the dining hall area. Tarak's men came into the Entry Hall and formed two lines allowing their Lord and First to enter safely. It was a time-honored tradition of protection of Lord and Lady.

Tarak and Rayne strode down the line and stood on the entry platform for all to see. Rayne smiled as she took everything in; it was a bustling place. There were large groups in heated conversations; and many farmers engaged in drink and talk of crops. First Kai and Mistress Sera came in and joined them.

The Inn Holder, Dane Tevid, came running in breathless, and welcomed them all. When he noted Lord Tarak's fingers entwined with Rayne's he couldn't hide his surprise. Dane Tevid's family had known Lord Tarak's family for generations. He and Tarak had grown up together and played as young boys before each chose their different fields of service. He alone knew how Serena's death had nearly driven Tarak mad. It was he who had sent word to Naria telling her that if she didn't intervene Tarak would surely be lost to them all. He considered Tarak a brother; so he was quite surprised to see the light of love in his eyes and not know anything about it.

Tarak removed his coat and took Rayne's; it was then that Dane Tevid saw the sword strapped to her back. He immediately knew who this woman was, and his surprise couldn't be masked, his face showed it.

*The female warrior, Eloi trained I hear, he thought, has Tarak gone mad?*

It was then that Rayne came forward into the light and he saw her brightly shining violet eyes.

"Dega-sou!" he exclaimed before he could catch himself.

It was quite possibly the most impolite expletive one could utter in mixed company. Embarrassed at his lack of care he began to apologize when he heard Tarak robustly laughing at his improper outburst. Tarak came forward and gripped the man in a bear hug and both greeted each other with a lot of back slapping and posturing. Tevid then turned his attention to First Kai and Mistress Sera, greeting them as family. It was then that Rayne learned that Mistress Sera was his younger sister.

Tarak turned and stretched out his hand to Rayne, calling her over. "Tevid, I am pleased to introduce Lady Rayne, I am sure you have heard of her." Tevid bowed at the waist and Tarak bent close and whispered, "She is one of us Tevid; and has agreed to be my mate."

Turning to Rayne, Tevid put on his best smile, "Lady Rayne, I am honored to meet you; and I don't mind saying quite surprised. This old Hausa tells me nothing, and then suddenly shows up here with a new mate and I'm supposed to take it all in stride."

Rayne smiled sweetly and replied without missing a step, “Oh my poor Dane Tevid, how inconsiderate of him. I shall have him flogged for his rudeness – what say you... 50 lashes?”

It was so unexpected that Tevid burst out laughing at the remark, as did First Kai and Mistress Sera. Tevid turned to a startled Tarak. “Oh she is your match Tarak,” he shouted as he took Rayne’s hand, kissed it, and held it to his forehead. “I like your style my Lady.”

Taken aback, Tarak looked at Rayne shaking his head back and forth, “Life with you is going to be very interesting my mate, very interesting indeed.”

Tevid led them to a large table off to the side in front of a warm fire and called for food and drink. Tarak’s men occupied tables in a semi-circle all around them. Large plates of steaming food were brought out and placed on the tables; Tarak’s men wasted no time in sitting down to a good hot meal.

Tevid asked Lady Rayne to allow him to order for her explaining she should have a taste of the different foods available at the Inn. They spent time catching up on all the events of the past weeks while they waited for their food.

Tevid was very impressed with Tarak’s tale of Rayne and the creatures on Agria. But it was the tale of the late Septak guard dogs that held his attention. He informed her that he had two of his own here at the Hold and would enjoy introducing her to them. Tarak cautioned that Tevid’s Septaks were a lot older than his and might not react the same way. She told him not to worry; she would council with her Eloi senses before approaching them.

Tevid excused himself for a moment and returned to everyone’s surprise with her coat. Grinning from ear to ear he escorted her to the high parapet that encircled the stronghold and stopped at a large gate. He unlocked it, stepped thru, and called the animals to him. A half hour later they returned to the warmth of the Inn and a warm mug of Tesh. Tevid was babbling like a schoolboy to everybody about the way Lady Rayne had calmed the large beasts and sat and sang with them.

There was raucous laughter when Tevid related tales about his and Tarak’s youthful days. It seemed that the boys were always getting into trouble for something or other; one particular story of their raid on a house of ‘red ladies’, attempts to get souvenirs, being thoroughly thrashed by the said ‘ladies’ was extremely funny. Rayne was laughing so hard that tears rolled down her face, much to the pleasure of a captivated Tevid.

Dane Tevid insisted that the finest room at the Inn be given to Tarak and Lady Rayne that night. He excused himself from the group and personally saw to it that a robust fire was prepared, and the softest bedding was laid on their bed. Two mugs of warm Tesh were placed on a table by the fire, along with a basket of bread and cheese. He returned to the group and noted the two ladies missing; and Lord Tarak’s face was not a happy one.

“What...?” Tevid asked as he followed Tarak’s eyes to the landing.

**“A group of Lord Boras’ men just entered the Hall, Tev. Damn the timing!” Tarak cursed. “They are rude bullies at their best; behave like animals, showing respect to no one. I have had run-ins with them before.” Lord Tarak’s eyes were glued to the group blocking the entry platform.**

**“The ladies will return shortly,” offered First Kai. “Hopefully these ruffians will have seated themselves by then.”**

**“All know the rules at my Inn,” Tevid informed him, “they shouldn’t cause any trouble.”**

**“It is not them I am concerned about, Tevid,” answered Tarak in a low voice. “Lady Rayne will not tolerate their type of humor; she may... overreact, if you get my meaning.”**

**Just then Rayne and Sera rounded the corner laughing lightly, ignoring the men on the landing. The ruffians quieted and watched as the ladies passed close by; then some made inappropriate remarks just loud enough for the ladies to hear. One made the mistake of grabbing Mistress Sera by the arm and swinging her around. Tarak saw Rayne’s eyes flash, and both he and Kai leapt to their feet; but they were not fast enough. In the split second it took them to rise, K’nada sang out and the brute and his cronies were up against the wall with him at their throats. His razor sharp blade had done its damage as a trickle of blood ran down all their throats. There was real fear on their faces as they stared into Rayne’s violet eyes. The entire Hall went silent; Tarak’s men were on their feet, ready to defend their Lord if necessary.**

**First Kai went to Mistress Sera and led her away as Tarak approached Rayne calling softly. “Lady Rayne, please, do not sully your hands with this trash, we have the situation in control.” Placing his hand on Rayne’s shoulder he felt her slowly relax, he whispered to her, “Ease down my little warrior, there is no need to sully K’nada with their blood.” At his use of her sword’s name Rayne sheathed the blade slowly, for effect; and then walked over to First Kai.**

**Tarak angrily addressed the men, “You men know better than to behave like animals in this place. I do not think your Lord will approve your actions, nor the insult to a member of the Queen’s court. You can thank your lucky stars that I was here; in all probability she would have taken your heads.” He pointed to Rayne, “That, you stupid fools is Lady Rayne of the Eloi.”**

**The men’s eyes flashed for a second in understanding; and then they were downcast in shame. The leader of the group went down on one knee and begged for his men. “My Lord, please accept our apology for this shameful outburst; we have no excuse.”**

**Tarak could have made a big scene, as was his right, but he didn’t want to spoil Rayne’s trek to Ohmu with bad memories; he sent the men on their way. He noted his men standing down and nodded in approval of their support.**

**Dane Tevid was not as gracious as he barred the ruffians’ way.**

**“If it was not already night I would have you all thrown out to fend for yourselves. You dishonor your Hold and reflect badly on your Lord’s house. Fill your bellies with food and retire to your rooms quickly. I want you gone by first light; and gentlemen, never return to my Inn.”**

**Tevid turned his back on them, an insult, and returned to his guests. Given what he had just seen Tevid was now even more enthralled with Rayne.**

*Ah my friend, you certainly have your hands full with this one. He thought to himself. She is more than what they say... and by the gods did she move fast!*

**Mistress Sera was speaking, “Really, I’m alright, they didn’t hurt me.”**

**“It is not the point Sera,” Kai was livid, “they acted on their thoughts and desires; they touched you!” Kai hissed, his eyes flashing angrily. “To think about an action is one thing; but they followed thru without a thought as to the consequences. I can only imagine what they must be like in their own Hold.”**

**Tarak joined them and Rayne placed her hand on his, “They were from Lord Boras’s Hold, weren’t they my Lord?”**

**“Yes my sweet, but forget them now; don’t let them spoil our trip. I want you to have fond memories of your first trip to Ohmu.” He smiled and leaned over and nuzzled her cheek with his.**

**“Mmm... you have my total attention now,” she purred leaning into him.**

**Dane Tevid smiled and leaned close to First Kai and asked, “Are they always like this?”**

**Laughing he answered, “So far, yes; it takes some getting used to.” He turned to Mistress Sera, “Were we ever like this, my sweet?”**

**She laughed and punched his arm, “we better still be, for your sake!”**

**Tarak and Rayne excused themselves and retired early. After they left Tevid questioned Kai how this could be.**

**“Lord Tarak ordered a blood test; it shows she is from the First Ones; purest DNA ever encountered on record. She is Ogatu, Tevid; her line is pure.”**

**“How can this be?” Tevid asked incredulous.**

**“She didn’t know her origins until she came here; the Eloï suspected I think.” She began doing things our way without being told.” He sighed, “She makes him happy Tev, happier than he has been in years. And truth be told, he centers her and calms her; it’s a good match.”**



**“But more important my mate, they are in love,” interrupted Mistress Sera, “And it is even stronger than his mating with Serena; I have never seen him so happy. He had me take down and pack all of Serena’s winter coats; when we arrive at Ohmu he wants the tailors to cut them down and fit them to Lady Rayne. He even instructed me to open the master bedroom when we arrive; he has finally let go of Lady Serena’s memory. And Queen Naria approves wholeheartedly; she says the match is as it should be. And you know how she believes in destiny; she has accepted Lady Rayne completely.”**

**“Easy my sweet, I am not disagreeing with you,” Kai pleaded. “I am very happy for him. Besides I really like Lady Rayne; she has a wicked sense of humor, and is remarkable in battle. She is very good for him and our Hold.”**

**“I have never seen anyone move as fast as she did; not even Naria. Guard her carefully my young friends,” said Tevid in a low voice.**

**Both Kai and Sera perked up at this, “What do you mean...”**

**“All kinds of information pass through this place my friends. I can say with a certainty that I doubt Lord Boras will accept the news of their joining well. You know what he is like; what he believes about ‘outsiders’; he will never accept her, or the test. The word from the men of his Hold that pass thru here occasionally paints a picture of a man obsessed with his own self-importance. Between us, I think he means to try for Naria’s throne; and I told her as much.”**

**“Really?” whispered a knowing Kai.**

**“Keep your eyes open my friends,” warned Tevid, “I wouldn’t put anything past that man.”**

While Tarak and his party were stopped at the Ohmu Inn, the Halestrom pulled up to a dock on the other side of the planet. Two rows of Scather warriors were lined up to honor its occupant. Naria stepped to the gangplank and looked about as Rytal called them to attention. She smiled at the simple gesture as she came down and went directly over to Rytal.

“My friend, you are looking well,” she said smiling, “And you have been very busy, I see,” she continued looking about, “I congratulate you on your hard work.”

“We are grateful for the help and the trust you have given us Queen Naria,” he answered with a short bow.

“I come with good news for you all,” she replied loudly. “I have been informed that your ship is ready,” she looked at the faces of the happy creatures. “I have kept my promise, will you keep yours?”

Shouts of “yes” filled the air; and Naria smiled, waved, and turned to Rytal.

“And for your loyalty, I have a surprise,” she said pointing towards the ship.

The crane on the large ship was lowered into the hold and rose up again lifting a platform to the surface. On it was Tyu and Alexi. Rytal squinted at the sight as the platform rose up; the rising sun behind it bathed it in a bright glow obstructing the occupants from view for a moment. It was lowered to the ground and there was a hushed silence. Suddenly Rytal recognized one of the occupants and took a step forward.

“Tyu...? Tyu, is it really you?”

“Yes my beloved, it is I,” she answered softly.

He came forward and reached out to her as she did the same. They touched heads gently and there was a humming sound. Their hands entwined and the two stood together for a few long moments.

Alexei stepped off the platform and went to Naria’s side, “Husband and wife,” he asked quietly.

“Betrothed,” she answered with a wry smile. “Rytal, let us adjourn to your meeting hall where Tyu can explain all this,” offered Naria.

A half hour later, in the town meeting hall, Tyu’s story was told to all. With the bias against females still a part of their psychological make up, many were amazed that the females could have gotten as far as they did. But the information that the females of their home world were with them and wanted to replace the Elders also, gave them the morale boost they needed.

**“My supervisors have indicated that the ship is ready and needs only a trial run; then my friend, it will be ready for you and your men. I hope you have been studying that navigational book I gave you.”**

**“Several of us have,” answered Rytal, “and we are confident that we can master the ship.”**

**Naria turned to the young leader and recognized the look of a determined man.**

**“Rytal, you have kept your word during your stay here, and now I have kept mine. You have earned my trust and respect. We will outfit your ship with supplies and the latest star charts showing where each of their ships is located at the present time. I suggest you leave as soon as you have a plan to put into action.”**

**Tyu spoke up, “But Rytal, they will never allow you to get close; they will have realized by now that you are no longer under their control.”**

**“Not to worry,” interrupted Naria, “we have something special for that. Your ship will run cloaked all the way home. They will never know you are out there;” she smiled, “just a little something my scientists managed to come up with. You should be able to land and contact the resistance forces before they even know you are there. The rest will be up to you my young friend; I wish you God’s speed.”**

**Rytal rose and ordered the others to their feet; all turned and bowed to Naria.**

**“Thank you dear Queen Naria; for your trust in us and for keeping your word. If you had slain me those many years ago we never would have learned the truth about the Elders; and thousands more would have died needlessly. Now, because of you, we have a chance to put an end to their madness. We have been planning a surprise for the Elders for years; you have now given us the chance we needed.” He took her hand and held it against his forehead. “We salute you!”**

**There were cheers, and feasting, and boasts of great deeds, and songs, (Scather warriors sang a lot). By midnight most had excused themselves and retired to their quarters.**

**Still at the table by Naria’s side, Alexei pondered, “given that tech does not work on the planet, how do you plan on getting them off the planet and up to their spaceship? I mean I doubt if you could fit two of them inside a shuttle.”**

**“Not a problem Captain Alexei,” smiled Naria, “I will just have them beamed up to the ship.”**

**A surprised Alexei quickly asked, “But I thought technology... it doesn’t work on your planet.”**

**Naria chuckled, “On the northern continent no; but on the southern continent, we have no problem.” She placed her hand on his and added, “Very few know this Alexei, and I trust I can count on your discretion?”**

Alexei smiled at the obvious test, “Of course Queen Naria, your secret is safe with me.”

“That’s a good thing,” interjected Altera suddenly from behind him, “I would really hate to have to gut you.”

“You could try dear lady; you could try.”

And with that Alexei whipped around, grabbed Altera, and spun her off her feet. Landing on the ground with Alexei on top of her, she had a very surprised look on her face. Then she smiled and laughed wickedly.

“Aha, you like to play,” purring she continued, “We shall have much fun in the future, I am sure of it.”

Unexpectedly Alexei was enveloped in the strange odor he had noticed before; and he was having some very erotic thoughts. All of a sudden he was having second thoughts about his rash actions.

And all the while in the background Naria could be heard softly laughing.

**Dragged before an angry Lord Boras, a frightened man knelt shaking with fear. Armory Hold was a dark forbidding place; the walls were hung with heavy red drapes from ceiling to red-carpeted floor. A large silver throne on a raised platform stood in the center of the room. Something Boras had designed himself and had his craftsmen working on; getting ready for the coming days.**

**Above the massive fireplace that occupied one whole wall, was a portrait of Lord Boras in his youth, an imposing figure even then; the artist capturing the darkness in his eye. Fearing Lord Boras would find out his deception the artist convinced him that it was a look of regal confidence; ‘so few can pull it off’, he assured him. Boras came to love the painting like the narcissist he was. Others would look upon the painting and know immediately who and what they were dealing with.**

**Boras was pacing around the large throne, strutting like a peacock in heat, screaming every few minutes at the man.**

**“What do you mean; you don’t know where she is?” Lord Boras was ranting and raving at one of his spies, “She is constantly under our surveillance; how could she just disappear?”**

**“My Lord, she was in the palace! I saw her thru a window in her quarters, she was preparing for bed.” The young man was trying to explain; “I took time to get some food and drink; I hadn’t eaten since the day before. I was gone for a total of twenty minutes, when I returned she was gone.”**

**First Matai felt sorry for the young man, he had lost the Queen and Lord Boras was not pleased with his report as to how it occurred. Matai knew Boras wasn’t interested in his explanation. He expected the impossible from his men; and when they didn’t comply he rid himself of them.**

**“Find her! Scour the planet if you have to, but find her!” he screamed at the man, who jumped up and ran out of the Hall.**

**“My Lord, you know how she is; she is probably having a clandestine meeting with a male.” Matai hoped this would placate the angered man, “Has she not done this before?”**

**“Aha, you are right Matai, she does have appetites that rival any man's. Perhaps that is where she went.” Boras was calming down; “We shall pick her up in the morning and keep on her trail this time.”**

**“My Lord, word has come from Lord Tarak’s Hold; they will leave after the first series of storms pass thru.”**

**“That makes it four weeks from now. Mmm... good, good, it gives me time to plan a surprise for them. Heh, heh, the Oath Ball this year will be one to remember. Now my First,” he said coming too close to Matai for comfort, “are you sure you will be able to take out Altera?” His voice dripped with venom.**

**“She will meet her end before the start of the festivities,” boasted Matai.**

**“She is extremely fierce in battle, Matai; she may be too much for one man to handle. Perhaps a backup plan, some; extra men to ambush her just in case she kills you first.” Boras was taking no chances, everything hinged on Altera being taken out first.**

**“My Lord, have faith in me! Have I ever let you down? Outside of Naria herself, I am the only one on this planet who stands a chance of taking her out. She will die by my hand, you can be sure of it.” He had to get Boras off his back about this. “But if it will put you at ease then I will have a back-up contingency of men waiting.”**

**Matai smiled his best smile all the while thinking, *I will not need more men. I will kill that insolent Ousa and enjoy doing it. She humiliated me in front of my men; I will not let that go unpunished. She will die by my hand and my hand alone!***

**“Good, Good... now remember, place our men in key positions around the Warrior’s Hold and the Queens Hold.” Lord Boras was caught up in relating his plans again.**

**“Yes, yes... Once Tarak is dead his warriors will be too confused to act; we will be able to take control without anyone questioning our actions. An assassin’s arrow will remove Naria and, shocked at the foul deed, I will vow revenge on whoever did it. Then I will take over and restore peace.”**

**The words came dripping out of his mouth with such venom that Matai turned quickly and stared at his Lord, (in disgust). Lord Boras was lost for the moment visualizing the death of his hated enemy with glee.**

**Matai backed out of the room and returned to his quarters. A package was on his desk. *Ah, at last it has arrived.***

**He opened the box, removed wads of packing and looked inside. A small bottle was wrapped with more thick packing. Carefully he unwrapped the bottle; its contents held a powerful poison. Difficult to get, costly to prepare, this little bottle was priceless, and essential to his plans. He had to take care... there would be no more.**

***A few drops in her water each morning should do the trick, he thought with a smile. By the time she notices something is wrong it will be too late.***  
**He would have the advantage.**

On the other side of the world, Naria was preparing to say good-bye to Rytal and Tyu. The Scather settlement was closed down and abandoned; everyone had been beamed up to the new ship.

Rytal went over the ship with Naria's master architect and shipbuilder. It was a smaller version of the one he had come on so many years ago, but it was exactly what he needed. It was well armed, and the shields cloaking device would provide them with the ability to return and mount a resistance before the Elders knew they were there. He could scarcely believe that the time was finally at hand.

Rytal knew their whole plan would depend on his ability to get to and take out the Elders before anyone knew what was happening. Tyu had insisted on helping him accomplish this after he shared his plan with her. They would share their fate together, she would not chance losing him again; she told him. In the end he agreed with her, it might even help to get closer to the Elders if she was with him. He watched as she said farewell to the earthman, Alexei, and wondered what had compelled the man to save her.

"I shall miss our conversations Tyu," Alexei told her as he stood there holding her hand. "I was beginning to get really good at your language. I have enjoyed your company, and I hope that everything works out for your people. I want you to know that I wish you and Rytal a long happy life together," he smiled. "You know, you two go together well." He stepped back and took his place beside Naria.

Naria hugged Tyu and Rytal, and addressed the group.

"God's speed my young friends. I am very proud of all of you." She looked at each one directly remembering their first meeting so many years ago. Turning to Rytal she smiled and said, "I know you are destined for great things Rytal, you have Myra's wisdom. I hope when we next meet that I will be speaking to the new ruler of Skathia."

"You have placed your trust well Queen Naria, I shall not fail you. When next you hear from me it will be over; as to a ruler, I shall let the people decide."

"Well spoken Rytal," cheered Lytru, "that is why it will clearly be you."

Naria stepped onto the beaming pad and called the Saber. A bright light and the party was beamed off the ship. Naria watched with Altera and Alexei from the viewing room as the ship powered up and headed out into deep space.

The Captain came into the room, "my Queen, they named their ship "Myranaria, that means Myra's Truth in Scather, doesn't it? It is a fitting name."

"Yes," she answered softly, "she would have been so proud of them."



Tarak rolled over and stretched his large frame, sighing deeply. He lay there listening to the sounds of the morning; the different guests of the Inn stirring about. He turned and lifted the covers and admired Rayne's form as she slept beside him.

*She is my match in almost every way. I must admit, I never knew I could feel so strongly about a female. She has touched a part of me that Serena never did. Denair said that she was destined for me and I can't help but wonder exactly what he meant by that statement.*

Rayne stirred and rolled over snuggling up against him. He looked down at her and smiled as he bent close to her.

"Good morning my sweet, time to wake," he purred as he kissed her forehead.

She opened her eyes and smiled. "Ah, you're awake again before me; I must be getting soft."

"Just stay the way you are my love, I like watching you sleep," he told her as he caressed her body with his large hands.

"You keep doing that and we shall never get up," she said reaching for him.

"Uh, uh, uh! We do not have time for this my love," he gently stopped her. "We must be away early so we reach the Ohmu Forest by early afternoon."

Rayne sat up and looked about and stretched, "We will continue this tonight Tar; I will not be denied your pleasures."

He laughed at her feigned anger. She rose, grabbed her robe, and went to check on the baby Snotig. It was curled up in a small box surrounded by the soft piece of coat she cut for it.

"He is sleeping soundly; you know, I think he is going to live."

"They grow quickly Rayne; in a month's time it will be the size of a Turon, (a fox-like animal that inhabited the mountainous regions). You will have to set it free, its growth pattern will accelerate after that. They are unpredictable and cannot be trusted around people."

"Maybe he'll be different Tar. After all he was cut from his mother's womb; he never received any of her training; all he will know is what we teach him." She pleaded for her little charge, "The Eloi say if you raise a child from the time of birth you can teach it anything. Am I not proof of that?"

"You are a sentient being Rayne, this," he replied pointing to the creature, "is a dangerous predator. There is no comparison!"

"Ah but you are wrong," she countered, "Was I not meant to be a predator to you and your people? Did not the Eloi change all that when they raised me?"

**“Argh!” Tarak threw up his hands in frustration knowing he could not fault her reasoning. “I do not want to argue with you on this Rayne. Just believe me when I say you cannot trust this creature. Countless have tried, and many have died or been maimed for life. I know what I speak of.”**

**“You are wrong here Tar; this is something I know.”**

**She left him standing there and went to dress. When she came out she seemed to put the matter behind her. She came up to him and kissed him on the cheek.**

**“So today we will arrive at the Ohmu Forest; should we be wary of Lord Boras?”**

**“I do not think he will try anything just yet. But if what young Bail says is true, we must be prepared for some kind of sinister plan to take effect.” He continued dressing, “Boras is too much of a coward to attempt anything in the open. No, he will try something under cover. Your senses will prove to be invaluable now, my sweet. If you pick up anything amiss, no matter how small, let me know immediately.”**

**“Do not worry my love; I have no intention of loosing you to that creature. But he is not the one I would worry about if I were you. His First, Matai is his name correct; he is the one you should have your sights on. He is the one carrying out his master’s bidding.” Rayne looked at Tarak and emphasized, “He is the more dangerous one.”**

**“Why would you say that?” Tarak asked, trying to understand her thinking.**

**“If, as you say Lord Boras is a coward, then he has to have someone he can count on to carry out his nefarious plans. It stands to reason that this ‘First’ of his must know his master well. Lord Boras has the bloodline and the power; so this Matai must have aligned himself with Boras for that reason alone. He stands to gain power if Boras succeeds. Eloi training dictates that this kind of man is much more deadly. His personality type would be completely amoral, and there would be nothing he would not do to ensure this.”**

**Tarak thought for a long moment.**

***By the God’s she’s right, Matai is deadly; my encounters with him end just short of battle.***

**He laughed and Rayne looked at him questionably.**

**“Again you show your wisdom my little warrior. I shall take your advice and put it into action. I will need a ‘Seeker’ for this, and Altera can provide me with one. When we arrive I shall speak with her.”**

**Dane Tevid had a large and hearty breakfast waiting for Tarak and his party. He knew from experience that they would arise early and want to be on their way. He lavished Rayne and Mistress Sera with fresh sweet fruit from the tropic regions; and doted on them till Rayne pleaded for mercy.**

**“Tevid you ply me with my weakness; sweets! I shall have to workout for days. You are terrible... don’t ever change.”**

**Tevid's face was beaming at this, "I shall not my lady, as long as you visit many times."**

**When Tarak came forward and said his good-byes he received an invitation in return. "After you are settled in, and the routine gets boring, come and spend some time at the Inn. We will have a good long visit, and I will get a chance to woo that lovely mate of yours again."**

**"You better be careful my sweet," said Rayne playfully, "Dane Tevid just might turn my head."**

**"Ha! You two are going to be a lot of trouble, I can see that now," he countered laughing. "Fear not my friend, we shall return for a long visit; I want to see how much trouble you two can get into."**

**Rayne gave Tevid a long hug, "I like you, Dane Tevid. I can see why Tarak counts you as his true friend."**

**"And you, my lady, I can see now why Tarak's eyes shine with so much love. You are just what he needed to bring him back to life again." Tevid held her hands and then kissed one, "Good journey dear lady."**

**After good-byes from Sera and Kai, the party mounted and was off. Tevid watched from the parapet till they were out of sight. Then he went to the communications room and sent word to Queen Naria that they were on their way. She immediately had Altera dispatch her special 'recon' troops to scour the forest looking for traps and or enemies of various races.**

**Much earlier that morning three men entered Miners Hall in a hurry. One broke off from the others and climbed the castle steps to Matai's quarters. Knocking lightly he entered and informed Matai that Lord Tarak was already at Ohmu Inn. Lord Tarak had arrived just before he and his men; and he had the Eloi warrior woman with him. In all likelihood he would leave in the morning for the forest Holds.**

**Matai flew into a rage after receiving this news throwing things and raging for minutes. Then he stopped and thought for a moment. A sly look appeared on his face as he stomped into the quarters of his sleeping men and woke them with shouts of 'to arms' and 'wake up!' He worked up a hasty plan and sent his men on their way to implement it.**

The journey to the forest brought a great change in the landscape. There were rolling hills of a deep velvety green color swaying in the wind. They were interspaced with fields of the violet flowers that Rayne had seen when she first flew over the planet. It also brought them close to Lucent Lake. Rayne begged Tarak to stop so she could explore. He tactfully refused, but promised they would spend an entire day by the lake after they were settled in. She told him she would keep him to that promise. There were chuckles from the men at that, which quickly disappeared after a scowl from First Kai.

The party came over a rise and below them could be seen the beginnings of the forest. From the air the trees appeared massive; but here, standing at the opening to the forest itself, Rayne felt insignificant. The trees rose up to the heights as far as the eye could see and then out of sight. Their smooth cream-colored bark was glistening in the sunlight. Interspaced at great lengths were limbs with deep dark green foliage on them. Rayne couldn't help but be reminded of broccoli spears. She excused herself and joined Tarak at the front of the party.

“Oh Tar I have never seen the likes of this before,” she said in a breathless voice leaning in close. “I have been to many, many planets, but none, none can compare in beauty with this!” She waved her hand about to indicate the forest before her. “This is truly a wonder to behold.”

“Hold your comments until you see the inside my mate,” he chuckled, “it will take all your strength to navigate it. Remember, there is an entire city hidden deep within.”

“Then what are we waiting for, let's get going!” She said as she grabbed the reins.

“Easy Rayne, we have not received the all clear yet.” Handing her a long looking glass and continued, “Look to the left, high up. Do you see a reddish brown bird on the tree limb?”

Rayne scanned the large tree, and sure enough about halfway up was a long branch. There was a reddish brown bird sitting on it preening himself. It reminded her of the large Himalayan hawks of Earth, snowy crown, sharp beak, talons and all. “Yes, I see it.”

It is called a Thaiku, one of my men found a nest while out hunting one day. It had been torn apart by a larger predator, but buried beneath the top layer was another and in it was a single red egg. Siskin was no fool; he knew what that red egg meant, so he carefully took it with him and hatched the bird. I have to give him credit for being tenacious; he went to the library and studied about the bird and how to raise it. I can tell you he raised it very well and better still, trained it to do his bidding. A deep connection developed between him and the bird; he calls her Paska. It was his idea to use the bird as a signal. Let's just say I have found it is wiser these days to send in a recon group first. When that bird flies away we will enter the forest.”

“You are full of surprises Tar,” she leaned closer and whispered, “and not just in the bedroom.”

Tarak's eyes flashed and he growled as he reached for her. Holding her to him for a brief moment he quickly whispered back, "Just wait until tonight my love."

Rayne smiled and coyly replied, "I'd better return to Mistress Sera, she'll be wondering what we're up to." With that she rode off, leaving her mate grinning and shaking his head.

Rayne joined Mistress Sera who asked, "Is there anything amiss?"

"No Sera, just waiting for the all clear; we should be moving any minute now."

Tarak watched as the large bird took off, soared high, and then dove into the forest, lost from view. He turned and gave the 'all-clear', and the caravan began to move again. Down the hill they went, following a well-worn path that many had taken all their lives.

High above their movements were being observed by highly trained shadows.

"Please signal First Altera that they have entered the forest," whispered Sonia to her communications man. Signaling two of her squadron with hand motions, she ordered them to rise up another twenty feet and recheck for traps.

"There are others in this forest today," she hissed.

The com-man was uncomfortable; he knew from experience that when Sonia was upset, it was for good reason. If she said there were others in the forest, then he knew it must be so. Trouble was they couldn't find them; that meant they were high up. He knew that if she caught them... she would kill them without a second thought.

The deeper they went into the forest, the more subdued the lighting became. Rayne sent out all her senses and received mixed readings in return. The forest was immense; she could not filter it all at one time. So she employed her Eloi skills and broke it down into sections. What she then received made her uneasy.

Tarak rode back to see how she was enjoying her first view of the forest and was concerned when he saw the look on her face.

“Rayne... what is it Rayne?”

“You asked me to send out and ‘feel’ the forest when we entered, to see what I could pick up.” Her eyes were wide as she looked at Tarak as tho’ seeing something other than him. “There are eyes watching us from far above, two different groups. One shines in the light and protects; the other hides in the dark and wishes us harm.”

“Gods and seers!” exclaimed Kai, who had joined them.

“My sentiments exactly,” whispered Mistress Sera.

“Easy Rayne, come back to me woman,” there was a slight tone of concern to his voice.

“Let it go warrior, return to us here.”

Rayne suddenly closed her eyes and shook her head.

“Ugh, I have a bad taste in my mouth,” she reached for her canteen. “We have some nasty company way high up; but we also have some angels up there chasing them.”

“Good, good, Rayne; you picked up Altera’s Skycon group. They keep an eye out for trespassers in the forest. No doubt she sent them to clear the way for us; a good friend to Warrior’s Hold is Altera. Let us continue on our way; but I want you and Sera to join us at the front of the caravan. We shall be at the lift within the hour.”

Rayne and Mistress Sera followed Tarak and joined the front ranks. As they moved along Rayne began to notice a subtle change in the forest. She looked above, and in the distance and could see that there were walkways high above the forest.

“Tell me about this lift, my Lord,” she asked puzzling, “and how do we get these animals up there?” She pointed above with a smile on her face.

They came to a clearing in the forest, and off to the side was a small cottage. Two very large men came out of it; huge men with muscled arms and thick necks. Upon seeing Tarak they quickly welcomed him back to the forest. Tarak introduced them and explained that they were the lift keepers. One of the men walked over and climbed steps to an immense platform with a curved horn mounted on a stand. He breathed deeply several times and then blew into it and out the other end came the sweetest sound Rayne had ever heard. It was a lilting sound that seemed to caress the forest itself. It rose in crescendo until it sang out of its own accord.

**“Shi-shi-shi-shi... Ahhheeeiiii...”**

**A startled Rayne jumped as she realized there were actual voices singing within the sound itself. No one else seemed to have noticed. There was a great shudder that went through the earth as she felt it move, and then a muffled clanking of a machine came from above. The lift began to lower to the waiting party on the forest floor below. The group dismounted and held the reins of their mounts, which seemed unconcerned; no doubt they had done this many times before. The lift would take almost 30 minutes to reach the bottom of the forest. As they waited Tarak explained to Rayne the workings of this marvel.**

**“It operates on a pulley system, four men working in unison, bring us up and lower us down. The lift is made from the bark of the very trees it operates on; it is very strong, and very old. The city and the lift were already here when the Ogatu first landed. So too were many of the Holds; but only on this continent. The southern continent is uninhabitable; any who traveled there never return. It is best left alone...” he drifted off as if remembering something.**

**“Where was I...oh yes... the lift; it will take us up to the lowest level of the city, from there we will ride across to the main thoroughfare. That will be the second level; from there we will cross to the farthest end and take a ‘ferry’ across to Warrior Road. From there we go straight on to Warrior’s Hold in the City. We will meet many people along the way Rayne, and no doubt you will be stared at quite a bit.” Tarak laughed, “Do you think you can manage my mate, or would you prefer to be covered by a cloak?”**

**“My Lord, are you ashamed of me as a mate?” Rayne retorted turning the question around on him.**

**“No, no, you misunder...” Tarak began when she cut him off.**

**“I do not fear what others think; I know who I am, Lady Rayne of the Ogatu!”**

**“Uha-Rah,” echoed the men striking their shields.**

**“Well said,” echoed First Kai and Mistress Sera.  
Tarak smiled with pride at his little warrior woman.**

**The lift arrived and they stepped on it with their mounts and took their places. Tarak called for six more men to come forward with their mounts and join them; Bail was one of them. A few minutes later the lift began to rise with a jerk and start on its journey to the top. Rayne looked out over the forest as they rose higher and higher and was enthralled with the view. She began to pummel Tarak and Kai with questions as they rose pointing here and there in quick succession. About three quarters of the way up Rayne suddenly became silent, moments later she shivered and Tarak noted. Her eyes darted up and down and left and right. She shook her head and leaned in close to him.**

**“Tar I feel very uneasy, eyes are on us. Something is amiss; the closer we get, the stronger the feeling that something is waiting for us. This is not good.”**



Tarak knew enough about Eloi training not to second-guess her abilities.

“Swords!” He promptly ordered and the six men drew theirs as he continued, “Shields at the ready, we may have unwanted company. Be alert to your surroundings; when we reach the top form a crescent around the women.”

Bail came up beside Tarak, “My Lord, this is the work of Matai; be alert, he likes to attack when one is not looking.”

Tarak stared at the young man and the thought quickly passed thru that he was lying and was there to attack from within. He dismissed it quickly. They reached the top without incident and all seemed fine.

There were more huge men operating the lift at the top. They offered a cheerful greeting to Lord Tarak and his men and were very gentle helping the ladies off the platform with their mounts. They indicated the ‘road’ ahead.

Rayne looked about and above, sending out her ‘feelers’ to locate the danger. All was silent, not even a quiver in the ether. *They are standing down for some reason.*

“We will wait here for the second lift,” Kai and Tarak had their swords drawn; “it would be wiser to have more men in case we run into any trouble.”

They stood off about 20 paces from the lift area, backed up to a tree trunk about 12 feet wide. It would provide some shelter should an ambush attack come. The six warriors fanned out in front and held their shields before them to protect the ladies. They were not jittery or nervous, nor jumping at every sound. These men were well trained, and had high confidence in themselves. After what seem like an eternity the lift began to move upward again. Twenty minutes later sixteen men and their mounts stepped off the lift. Upon seeing their Lord armed and ‘shields up’ they immediately drew their swords and fanned out.

First Kai began barking out orders, “Front and rear defense, move; women in the center; eyes up, and down!”

The men mounted their Hausa and fanned out forming a semi-circle in the front and rear of their caravan. Two men positioned themselves in the center with crossbows pointed upward; their eyes scanning the trees above. The lift started up with the rest of their men and supplies. Tarak and Kai worked like a finely tuned machine; a slight nod and Kai began moving forward, the men following in unison. They moved at a fast pace across the lower level road and dismounted as they approached the bridge to the main thoroughfare. Suddenly a warrior yelled and slumped to the ground; a short thin arrow in his neck. The warriors closed ranks and tightened up. Everyone was looking up and down, right and left; heads were turning this way and that, minds wondering who would be next to fall.

Rayne scanned the surrounding forest for movement of any kind. Suddenly she shed her coat and leapt into the air as K’nada rang out and cut an arrow neatly in two.

Landing she turned to Tarak, cold anger on her face; she nodded once and was off. She went up the tree so fast it was as tho she was a bird. Tarak knew he couldn't stop her, all the same he held his breathe for her safety. Each of his men had trained with her these past weeks, but still they were amazed at her speed and agility. Minutes went by and not a sound could be heard. And then from high above they heard a shout and what they thought was a scuffle. Abruptly a body sailed by on its way to forest floor below; the man was obviously dead or he would have been yelling. Then all was silent for several long minutes as a game of cat and mouse was being played out in the treetops above.

Suddenly another arrow came whizzing from behind. As if in slow motion, young Bail saw the arrow headed for Lord Tarak's back. All he had endured in his young life raced before his mind. The kindness and acceptance of Lord Tarak made his decision easier; he dived behind Tarak shouting 'No!' shoving him out of the way. Bail took the arrow in his chest and slumped to the road moaning. His fellow warriors immediately took up positions about him offering cover.

Two more arrows sang out in quick succession but to no avail; they hit a tree. They were loosed too fast, as if someone was in a rush. Then silence... nothing. A few minutes later a crossbow fell to the road not five paces from the group. There was a shout; a scuffle, a shrill 'nooo...' and another body fell. This time it landed in front of Tarak. He stepped forward and bent and turned the man over; it was the same man that had accosted the women at the Inn.

Rayne landed silently beside him, her face emotionless, K'nada stained red with blood. "There was a third, but he gave up this one to get away," she nodded with her head. "But," she smiled, "K'nada gave him a parting gift. He shall not walk on that leg without limping."

"Let us make haste for the Hold men," Kai shouted. The party continued on their way at a fast pace taking their dead and wounded with them.

**High above Sonia watched.**

*Never have I seen such speed; a warrior as fast and as deadly as Naria, herself. This must be our new sister, the Eloi-trained female who is one of us. She marked him and drew blood; his trail will be easy to follow. Maybe we shall see where it leads and find out who is pulling his strings.*

**Motioning her troops to stay, Sonia followed at a discreet distance from high above. The man stopped after several minutes and seemed to be speaking to someone in the shadows. Sonia couldn't see him as he kept out of sight. After awhile they seemed to be arguing, and then suddenly the injured man bent over grabbing his chest. He looked up once and there was surprise on his face. Just as suddenly his eyes closed and he slumped forward and fell from the limb to the forest below.**

*Whoever he is, he wants no witnesses.*

**Sonia waited hoping she would get a look at the mystery man. All she could see was a large silver belt buckle. After several minutes she realized he was gone. She would report all this to Altera and let her make her own deductions as to whom it could have been.**

Altera received Sonia's report and immediately went to the Queen's bedchamber. She knew she would be sleeping, but Naria said to wake her if there was any news. Knowing Naria was not going to be pleased with this information, she took a deep breath, knocked once, and went in.

"Naria," she called gently, "Naria wake up; I have some news."

Naria rolled over, stretched, and sat up.  
"Altera, um...give me a moment."

She rose, put on her robe and went into her bath chamber. She came out a few minutes later and poured herself a glass of water, drank and sat in one of her lounge chairs. She motioned to the other one and Altera sat beside her.

"Okay, let's have it," she said matter-of-factly.

"You were right Naria; there was an attempted attack on Lord Tarak's party. On the lower level as they made their way to the upper level road. But the attackers didn't count on Lady Rayne being with them."

"Lord Boras is getting bolder; continue please."

"Sonia reports that Lady Rayne stopped an arrow meant for Lord Tarak, and then went after the shooter. She gutted him first and then went after a second assassin; his fate was the same. Sonia said she moved so fast she could barely keep up with her."

"Our little warrior is proving very useful," said Naria with pride.

"Now it becomes interesting, there was a third man. He got away, just barely, but she marked him with that sword of hers. Sonia followed the bloody trail; the man was trying to make it back to his master. Whoever he was she couldn't see; he kept in the shadows. But when the man reported what happened, he was killed; much to his surprise I might add. His master did not want to leave a trail that led to him. Sonia attempted to follow this man, but lost him. She believes it was Matai, because she saw the buckle on his belt; and we all know Matai has a silver winged one on his belt buckle."

"Well now, things are getting interesting. No one was hurt in Lord Tarak's party?" Naria asked with concern.

"One man was killed, and one was injured taking an arrow meant for Lord Tarak. They made it to their Hold with their dead and wounded." Altera took a breath and continued, "Lord Tarak has posted sentries all around his Hold; to say he is angry is an understatement, my Queen."

**“Ha, if I know Tarak he will be planning a surprise for Lord Boras, and Matai.”**

**“My Queen, I worry for your safety. If Lord Boras would attempt this, so close to the Gathering Ball, it must mean he is going to make a move on your throne.”**

**“Altera you worry too much. Come, sit by me,” she padded the lounge, “and I shall let you in on a little secret.” Naria moved her legs and Altera sat down.**

**“Now my faithful friend, listen and learn. When I learned about Lord Boras and his plans I sent out feelers to all the other Holds. I learned that none, I repeat none, approved of him or his methods of doing things. I personally met with each one and informed them as to what was taking place. Each offered to defend the throne without my even asking. This told me that I could count on the Holds to back me should I challenge him in front of the court.”**

**Surprise showed on Altera’s face.**

**“I would have told you sooner, but things were moving at a fast pace. Forgive me my dear friend,” Naria apologized, “but I had a chance to find out if the Holds stood with me, and I could not delay, I had to find out quickly.”**

**“There is no need to apologize Naria,” Altera quickly replied, “I would have done the same thing.”**

**“Now, I want you to bring Lady Rayne to me; be discreet, let no one see you. There are things that only she can tell me that I must know.”**

**“Yes my Queen, it shall be done right away.”**

**“Ah, but first, tell me how it goes with our guest.” Naria smiled, “Is he to your liking?”**

**“He is a handful, my Queen, very independent and curious, always asking questions. I have secured him in the Light Brigade wing. Best no one knows he is here just yet; my brigade will keep the secret.” Now it was Altera’s turn to smile, “as to your question, no we have not joined yet. I have been very busy; but we will, of that I am sure. I am curious about Earth mating practices.”**

**Be prepared for a pleasant, and very satisfying surprise my friend.”**

**Both women laughed knowingly.**

At Warrior's Hold, Tarak, Kai, and Rayne were in the study going over defense plans. A large map of the Hold was on the table and they were going over the placement of sentries. There was a knock on the door and Mistress Sera entered.

"You have been going over those plans for hours," she announced, "It is time to take a break and eat something."

"Ah, you're right Sera," replied Kai.

"Yes, we need some food and drink," echoed Tarak, "Thank you Sera for reminding us."

They adjourned to the dining hall where Sera had filled the dining table with food. The different aromas assailed their senses and made them realize just how hungry they were. They sat and filled their plates in silence; each thinking of recent attack. Tarak was the first to break the silence.

"How is young Bail doing Kai," he asked concerned, "is he going to live?"

"It was touch and go for awhile," he answered, "but the physician believes he is strong and will make it. It was a very brave thing he did."

"Yes, I agree, he saved my life. I shall not forget that act of unselfishness," replied Tarak in a solemn voice.

"Will you gentlemen excuse me for a moment," Rayne smiled sweetly; she had suddenly 'felt' the presence of Altera. She rose and left the Hall and went directly to Tarak's study. Altera was waiting inside when she opened the door.

"The Queen told me to come here and wait," explained Altera, "she said you would sense my presence and come. She has need of your skills and asks that you come."

"My I tell Lord Tarak where I am going, first; he will be concerned if I disappear without a word." Rayne asked in an Eloi voice.

"Yes my Lady, of course," answered Altera, feeling a little lightheaded.

Ten minutes later they were following a secret path to the Queen's Hold. No one saw them as they made their way to her private bedchamber. They entered by way of a secret door, and Rayne waited in her sitting room while Altera went to get her. Naria entered a few minutes later and Rayne could tell she was trying to put on a serene face; despite the fact that all was not well.

"Lady Rayne, thank-you for coming so quickly," she said as she extended her hand.

**“Queen Naria, I shall assume that you heard about happened upon our arrival. Is this why you summon me?” Rayne replied letting her know that she didn’t need all the formality and to get down to business.**

**“Ah, good, good; I have need of your skills right now. It is imperative that I know if my Hold has been breached; your Eloi skills will be able to put my mind at rest.”**

**“Of course, come and sit my Queen,” Rayne indicated a chair. “This may take awhile, for I must go deep. For you I will make the exception to see how it done; try not to be startled.”**

**Rayne got up and sat on the floor in a cross-legged position and closed her eyes. Her breathing became deep as she pulled within. Then it slowed till Naria thought with alarm that she wasn’t breathing at all. Naria noted that a slight glow began to form around Rayne. She could only wonder what secrets the Eloi had taught this little warrior.**

**Rayne sent her mind out through the Hall of the large Hold. She passed many of the Light Brigade, intend on keeping watch over their Queen. Their hearts were pure and their concern real. She continued on about the Hold, thru the kitchens, the drawing rooms and so on. She came to the brigade quarters and traveled the halls of this wing of the Hold. Something suddenly caught her senses; she advanced to a room, the odor was familiar. She went into the room and there was a large wooden vat mounted against one wall. It contained the water supply for the entire brigade. She inspected it again; when she was sure she continued on her way throughout the wing inspecting each room. She got quite a surprise in one room of the west wing where she found Alexei sleeping in a large bed. She chuckled to herself not realizing that Naria picked it up. The only other thing she picked up was an unlocked door on the lower level leading to the street behind the Hold. She slowly began to bring herself back by increasing her breathing.**

**She stirred and opened her eyes to find Naria on the edge of the chair, a concerned look on her face.**

**“I am fine my Queen; I know it can be disconcerting for the uninitiated,” she explained to calm her.**

**“You were gone for two hours! Naria exclaimed. “I began to worry Rayne; you can’t fault me for that.”**

**“I am sorry,” replied Rayne quickly, “I should have warned you that there is no time when I travel the ether. I sail about looking at everything, feeling everything and everyone.”**

**“So did you find anything?” Naria asked expectantly.**

**“Yes, several things. The vat of water in the Women’s Brigade quarters has been tainted with a slow acting poison. The entire vat needs to be replaced as the wood would have soaked up the poison by now. It would keep releasing its death to all who use it. You have a spice called Tyra; all who drank from the vat will have to chew one of the cloves to purify their bodies of this poison.”**



**“This is the work of Matai, there is more?” asked Naria uncertain.**

**“Yes, a door in the lower levels, one that leads to a back street behind the Hold is unlocked. Whether it was deliberate, I do not know; but it must be secured.”  
Naria’s eyes showed her disbelief that this could happen right under their noses.**

**“On a happy note,” a smiling Rayne continued, “your Hold is filled with loyal subjects; many are concerned for you. And, you seem to have a strange man sleeping in the women’s quarters.”**

**Naria laughed loudly, “Aha, you have found our guest; you really are good! Well now, this will take some explaining.”**

**Naria rose and grabbing a goblet asked Rayne if she would care for some Tesh, as she was pouring herself some. They sat and Naria related the events of the past week and how Alexei came to be in the Hold. When she was finished Rayne commented that she was very impressed with her planning so far in advance, where the Scather’s were concerned.**

**“Do you think it will work, will this Rytal be able to pull it off?” she asked amazed at the audacity of their plan.**

**“Yes, I do. They are determined to get the truth out; and most of the population is wary of this war. They stand a very good chance of succeeding.” Naria stood up, “Now, some good news, Lord Duncan has completed his task and is on his way back; they should arrive before the Gathering Ball.”**

**“And Alexei,” she asked.**

**“Ah yes, I was thinking of moving him to Warrior’s Hold for safety’s sake. Would you care to visit with your former shipmate while I put some plans into action?”**

**“Oh yes,” she quickly answered, “Alexei is quick; he will notice the change in me right away.”**

**“Does that concern you?” Naria asked.**

**“No, Alexei will keep my secret,” she replied. “I am happy, truly happy for the first time in my life. Alexei will see that.”**

**Naria went to the door and opened it. “Altera, would you discreetly wake our guest, and bring him here?”**

**“Yes my Queen,” she answered smiling.**

Rayne watched her go and picked up on the interest that Altera had for Alexei. She looked at Naria knowingly and nodded her head towards the departing Altera... Naria chuckled. "A divergence for her amusement, she forgets to have some fun in life."

Altera had great fun waking Alexei by lightly running her hands over his body; just to get a 'feel' of the man; and she was pleasantly surprised at her own reaction. He on the other hand woke with a start, leaping out of bed. His reaction to her touch was most apparent and he stood there embarrassed, trying to cover himself.

"What the hell are you doing?" he demanded, feigning anger.

"My, my," she purred suggestively, "you are full of surprises Captain Alexei."

"Altera, women do not behave this way with a man they know nothing about," he explained.

"Your women," she countered, "this is Aura, and we are Ogatu!" With that she rolled off the bed. "The Queen has need of you; dress quickly!"

She poured him a goblet of Tesh and watched as he showered and dried himself. She was curious, and watched in fascination as he shaved. Not knowing what to expect, Alexei put on a second uniform he had with him. All in all he was ready in twenty minutes, with Altera's approval.

She led him thru little known passageways to the Queen's chamber. She opened the door and all but pushed him into the room. Rayne stood by a table and turned when she heard him enter with Altera right behind him.

"Hello Alexei," she said softly, smiling.

Alexei stared at the woman in front of him barely recognizing her. Instead of her hair pulled back tightly in her usual manor, it was falling freely about her head in golden abandon; her face radiant, her violet eyes shining brightly.

"Oh my God, Rayne, it really is you." He came forward and embraced her, swinging her around. "You look fantastic kid, this place agrees with you!"

Altera rushed forward, "How dare you put your hands on Lord Tarak's mate," she shouted as she came towards Alexei.

"No Altera," Rayne intervened stepping between the two. "It's alright, when earthmen who are old friends greet after a long time, they hug," Rayne explained, "It is an embrace of friendship, a sign of family of the spirit."

"Forgive me Lady Rayne," replied Altera, "but you are Ogatu now; such behavior by the mate of Lord Tarak is unacceptable."

**“Wait a minute,” Alexei interrupted, “mate of Lord Tarak? Rayne, what the Hell is going on? Are you married?”**

**Rayne turned and smiled at Alexei.**

**“I found out who I am and where I belong Alexei; I am Ogatu, blood tests prove it. And something else has happened. I’m in love, Alexei; and you were right, it is wonderful!”**

**She smiled at him in a way he had never seen her do before.**

**“I found that happiness you told me about, Alexei, I found it with Lord Tarak; we have joined together as one.”**

**“Well I’ll be!” Only now did Alexei notice the similarities between Rayne, and Naria, and Altera; she was right, she was one of them.**

**“Does Duncan know about any of this?”**

**“He will in about a week or two.” Alexei stared at her, “They’re on their way back and should arrive before the annual Gathering Ball.”**

**“He’s going to have quite a surprise waiting for him.” Alexei chuckled, “Seriously tho’ Rayne, I am happy for you.”**

**“Thank you Alexei. Queen Naria will be sending you to Warrior’s Hold. You will meet Lord Tarak then. You’ll like him; he’s just as crafty and pigheaded as you. And Alexei, we shall keep this information between us.”**

**“Yes, of course; I look forward to meeting this Lord Tarak,” Alexei took her hand and kissed it and held it to his forehead, (as he had seen others do).**

**Rayne nodded in acceptance. “Now if you will forgive me, I must be off. There is much to prepare at Warrior’s Hold.” Rayne headed for the door and turned once before leaving.**

**“It was good to see you again Alexei.”**

**“I must accompany Lady Rayne back to her Hold,” explained Altera following her out.**

**“Please wait here for me; I should only be a few minutes.”**

**Alexei sat back and went over everything again in his mind. He had to admit that the change in Rayne was startling. In the midst of his thoughts Naria walked in. He jumped to his feet and bowed, “Queen Naria!”**

**“Calm yourself Alexei; you happen to be in my sitting rooms.” Naria glided over to the lounge chair and motioned to Alexei to sit.**

**“Oh, I was told to wait here; Altera is escorting Lady Rayne to her Hold.” He explained nervously. (A first for Alexei)**

**Noting this, Naria took advantage of the situation to probe for information.**

**“Do you find Altera pleasing Alexei?”**

**“What, oh, yes, yes; she is a stunning woman; very strong, and yet very sensuous.”**

**“So you will have no trouble bedding her?” Naria asked a shocked Alexei.**

**“What!” There was a moment of strained silence and then Alexei erupted.**

**“Oh I see; I’m the toy of the moment,” he answered angrily, “brought here to amuse and service your First!”**

**Surprised at his reaction, Naria jumped up, “No, no! I didn’t mean it that way, Alexei!” She had managed to insult and rile him up.**

**“I was not insulting you, I was merely inquiring as your intentions. Altera was curious, and I was unsure if you were capable of mating with our women.”**

***Dega-sou!* Thought Naria, *I have opened a can of worms!***

**Alexei glared at her for a moment and replied, “I understand perfectly, Queen Naria.”**

**Naria poured herself a drink and offered him one, “Alexei, please forgive me if I have insulted you. We do things differently here; strong women make advances first. It is our way and in no way diminishes the male.” She offered Alexei the goblet, “Perhaps there is someone else who has caught your fancy;”**

**Naria guessed, “Mistress Tara maybe;,” she noted his reaction, “I understand you were close on the Phoenix.”**

**“My dear Queen Naria,” Alexei said smiling broadly, “stay out of my private life.”**

***Aha, I’ve hit a nerve!* She thought to herself.**

**“I shall be a good boy and perform as expected; and then I will be done; agreed?”**

**“Agreed!” Naria laughed loudly, “My, my, you do have a temper! How sweet you are when mad!”**

**Alexei stared at her in disbelief. “Listen here...”**

**Altera returned just then and put an end to an uncomfortable situation. She escorted Alexei back to his rooms promising she would join him later.**

Alexei took out his journal and sat and recorded everything right away so he wouldn't forget any of the details. A lot had been going on; a power play seemed to be taking place with one of the Lords. Naria may have found a solution to the Scather problem. He left out the details about the southern continent; he had given his word to Naria, and he would keep it. This was turning out to be a trip of many surprises.

*Wait until Duncan finds out about Rayne, he thought to himself. He had to admit however, that Rayne seemed to be filled with joy; she's totally different.*

It was good to learn that the Phoenix was returning. He was actually looking forward to seeing Mistress Tara again. He enjoyed her company very much; which brought to mind a rather delicate problem. He didn't know how long he could put off consummating his relationship with Altera. She was very demanding and seemed to expect him to move on her.

He was conflicted, if what Naria said was true, Altera wanted to bed him out of curiosity and nothing else, which suited him just fine. He liked her well enough; but when he thought of Mistress Tara, ah, there was no comparison.

*But...it just might prove interesting, he thought to himself smiling.*

Rayne returned to Warrior's Hold and found Tarak in the study with First Kai, both busy with fortifying the Hold. She decided to go around and familiarize herself with her new residence. Mistress Sera directed her to the master bedroom, explaining that it had been closed off since Lady Serena's death. Lord Tarak had ordered it opened and aired out. The housekeeping crew that had arrived before them had thoroughly cleaned and dusted the room. Rayne followed her instructions, out of curiosity, and spotted it at the end of a long hallway. Two massive doors opened into a dark, dreary room; heavy dark green drapes hung throughout the room. The massive four-poster bed was in the center of the large room ringed with the same dark draperies.

**"Oh this will never do!"** Rayne exclaimed thinking, *it's like a medieval castle!*

She headed for the window and threw open the curtains; then went about the bedroom opening all the drapes and tying them back. Once this was accomplished she got a better look at the room. It was full of heavy wooden furniture and chests, the large bed, and two dressing rooms, (on opposite sides), and a small sitting area with lounge chairs. *All in all not bad, she thought to herself, plenty to work with.*

**"Mistress Sera,"** she called down the hallway, **"would you be so kind as to send me two strong men. I am definitely going to need some help up here."**

Rayne climbed onto the bed and began to unhook the heavy drapes and toss them onto the floor. By the time the two men arrived she had completely removed them from the bed. She had them take the trim off the top of the four-poster, and then move the dressers and chests out of the way. She rearranged the bed up against the Northern wall, closer to the large fireplace. She repositioned the dressers in the dressing rooms and placed the chests under the windows.

Two housekeepers came into the room and were shocked to see the drapes on the floor. They scolded her that Lord Tarak like the bedroom the way it was; Rayne very diplomatically informed them that Lady Rayne did not. They also tried to close the window drapes and were chased from the room for their efforts. Lord Tarak and First Kai could be heard laughing from the study, as they ran by.

Downstairs there was a slight uproar in the household staff at first, but they soon settled down when Mistress Sera informed them that Lady Rayne and Lord Tarak had joined as one. She was now the Lady of the House, and she could decorate their bedroom, or any room for that matter, as she saw fit. The staff was happy for their Lord, and admitted that they liked Lady Rayne, but her ways were different, and they needed time to get used to them.

Curious, Sera went up to the master bedroom to get a first hand look at what the housekeepers were objecting to. She was pleasantly surprised with the changes Rayne had made.

With the curtains opened and the light shining in, the room was much brighter and softer looking. Rayne had placed vases of flowers about the room on various tables and dressers that gave off a pleasant fragrance. She had moved the bed closer to the fireplace, and removed the dark drapes from around it. There were brightly colored comforters on the bed. Pictures of Serena had been taken down and replaced with landscapes. The room had a light airy feel about it.

“Oh my, it’s beautiful Lady Rayne,” Sera exclaimed, complimenting her.

“Thank you,” Rayne smiled at her, “it was just too dark and foreboding. It needed to be lightened up and arranged in a pleasing manner. I like things open, light and airy.”

“Well, I am amazed that such small changes can make such big differences.” Sera walked about the room, “I just may borrow some of your ideas for myself.”

“Feel free Sera,” Rayne told her, “use what ever you want; we’re all family here.” Sera smiled at her turn of phrase as she continued to walk about.

“Oh, I almost forgot, I took the liberty of unpacking your gown and hanging it up. Also, the Hold Tailors sent over two more gowns as partial payment for your designs. They said they have been inundated with orders for dresses similar to the one you wore at the meeting with the Queen. Rayne, what they sent over are so beautiful, you will no doubt be very pleased with their work.”

“Thank you Sera, for being so thoughtful,” she told her earnestly.

As Sera headed for the door she turned, “Well, I have work to get back to; I must get busy with the preparations for dinner.” She explained further, “First night in Ohmu always encompasses a large dinner party with many Lord Holders stopping by to see Lord Tarak and pay respects. No doubt this year they will come to see you.”

“Thank you Mistress Sera,” Rayne smiled, “I don’t know what I would do without you.”

Rayne went into the dressing room where her luggage was and looked about. Hanging on a special holder were the two gowns. Yes, they were stunning. One was in a deep dark maroon color with cream-colored lace at the bodice and cuffs. The other was dark blue with silver streaked thru it; she thought it rather regal. Each came with shoes and a cape to match, and a holder for K’nada; she was very impressed.

Tarak finished up his work and joined her in the room. He approved her changes and said it felt like a new room altogether. He knew it was healthy to remove all signs of Serena if he was to make a life with Rayne. She had made the room her own with small subtle changes. He liked the openness of the room; it suited Rayne, and had a good feel to it. They sat and enjoyed a mug of Tesh together. Rayne told him about everything that took place at the Queen’s Hold, including finding Alexei there. The little Snotig climbed up and settled in her lap.



**“So her Hold has been breached too!” Tarak commented, “I found the same thing here. The two cooks who arrived before us are both ill with something that is sapping their strength. From what you just told me, it seems the same poison has also poisoned them. Thank the gods you know the cure, I will have it administered quickly.”**

**“We must remove the water vat here in the Hold, Tarak...” she began.**

**“Already done my love, that’s what was under the large tarp you asked me about when the first party left. It had not been installed yet; that’s why they became ill. I have found it is wiser to anticipate Lord Boras’ actions.”**

**“I am rapidly losing my patience with this animal, Tar. He needs to be taught a lesson, and quickly.” She angrily replied.**

**“Do not get so upset my love,” Tarak caressed her face. “He will be dealt with, as will his First. Now calm yourself and come give your mate some proper cheer.”**

**Rayne smiled wickedly and rose and shut the door to their bedroom. Turning, she slowly pranced to Tarak removing her clothes as she went along. His eyes grew wide and he smiled and growled in a deep voice. Suddenly he grabbed her and carried her to their bed, tossing her on it. They made wicked, lusty, rushed love; as tho’ they might be found out any second. Tarak tried to conceal his roar but was unable, as his love for Rayne was great.**

**Many of the kitchen staff could be heard giggling at the sound. Mistress Sera could be seen smiling too, and giving her mate a lusty look, which asked, ‘why don’t we do that?’**

**First Kai was heard laughing and shaking his head as he headed out the door.**

**Across the bridge at the Queen’s Hold, in one of the guest bedrooms, Alexei rolled over and woke up; Altera was already gone. He lay there for a moment remembering the night, or was it morning, before. He had fallen asleep waiting for her to return. But return she did and woke him in a fashion that was extremely erotic. He noticed that same aroma and was almost helpless in its effect. He grabbed her and they wrestled for a bit and then he got the better of her and held her down. After that it was a bit of a blur. He could however definitely say that it was a night to remember. He reached peaks that he never knew he was capable of; she was one hell of a woman. Afterwards she seemed almost docile, snuggling up to him and sleeping for a time.**

**She woke early and rose, she dressed and then woke him. She thanked him for a night that was very pleasing, but she told him, he was not the one for her; she would find her mate among her fellow people. She truly enjoyed his attentions as they released the stress she had been feeling. She kissed his forehead and told him to go back to sleep, which he did, and then left his room.**

The Phoenix came bursting out of warp and just as quickly slowed as it approached Aura. Minister Gordon was called to the bridge and as he stepped from the lift Duncan greeted him warmly.

“Minister Gordon, as promised, we arrived well before your Gathering Ball.”

“Yes, yes; oh this is perfect.” The gentle little man stared at the main screen, “Lord Duncan, I must compliment you, your crew has been remarkable; warm and friendly and helpful to us in every way. The journey was a long one, but the time passed quickly for us due to your crewmen. I thank you, and also thank you for your speed in returning us home. I will bring a glowing report to my Queen.”

“Oh, no-no Minister,” Duncan countered, “It is I who ‘thank-you’; it was your wisdom that prevailed and now my home planet is safe from attack.”

“Ah well, to be correct we must thank Lady Killian and Mistress Tara.” He grinned, “Their efforts convinced your scientists not to attempt any examination of the device. They do have a way about them – especially with males.”

“Yes, your women do have a way about them,” Duncan emphasized the word ‘way’ in such a manner that Minister Gordon knew what he meant.

“Indeed,” Minister Gordon chuckled and looked at a note handed to him. “Ah, I have received word from Queen Naria. She welcomes us home and hopes that you will attend the Gathering, as her guest.”

“Nothing would give greater pleasure Minister,” replied Duncan diplomatically.

“Ah, good, good,” Minister Gordon echoed. “Now I must go and pack and inform the ladies we have arrived.” He turned and left the bridge.

“Sir,” Lt. Womack called, “the Sword is approaching and hailing us.”

“Put it on the speaker lieutenant,” Duncan ordered.

Two seconds later they heard the Sword... “Phoenix, we salute you and welcome you back to Aura. We trust your journey was a successful one.”

“Sword, we are honored that you come to greet us on our return,” answered Duncan.

“We were asked to escort you to the planet by Queen Naria, Lord Duncan. We are expecting a visit from our mutual enemy and most certainly would not want you to be caught in crossfire.”

**“My thanks for your kind consideration,” answered Duncan. “Ensign Cooper, follow the Sword and set up an orbit around the planet.”**

**“Sir, yes sir!” he answered as he maneuvered the ship about.**

**Four hours later Duncan, Minister Gordon, the two lady scientists, and the security team were standing on a platform on top of the Queen’s Hold. Duncan had to admit that the ride to the Queen’s Hold was one of the first times that he had been scared half to death. The pilot had performed one of the slickest landings he had ever experienced.**

*A controlled glide, he thought to himself, in the middle of this grand forest - what a pilot!*

**They were met by a captain of the Light Brigade and escorted to the Queen’s office immediately. She was waiting for them and rose as they entered. She greeted Minister Gordon warmly and questioned him at length about the Earthmen and their reactions. Satisfied, she turned her attention to the two ladies and congratulated them on a job well done.**

**As the leader of the two, Lady Killian was also grilled on the earthmen and her feelings about their ‘honesty’. Her report was concise and to the point. Naria was greatly pleased and with pomp and ceremony gave her a sash of purple, which appeared to be a great honor.**

**Naria then turned her attention to Mistress Tara and congratulated her on the events that transpired before their arrival. Her careful handling of the Scather female was exemplary, she told her, and may have just provided them with a way to end the war with the Scathers. Naria then removed her sword and touched its hilt to Tara’s forehead; she in turn nodded and placed her hand around the blade. A slight movement by Naria and blood was drawn. Naria then announced that from henceforth she would be known as ‘Lady Tara.’**

**Tara was overcome at the honor, “My Queen, I am honored by your trust in me and my abilities.”**

**“It is well founded my sister,” replied the Queen. “I am aware, Lady Tara, that you had knowledge of my ‘guests’ on the southern continent. Yet you never broached the subject, keeping its secret to yourself. You trusted me not knowing what my plans were; a true and loyal sister of the throne and Aura.”**

**She turned, smiled at Duncan, and winked. “Now, off with you all. It is Gathering time and I am sure you all wish to return to your homes and loved ones.”**

**The small party left the Queens Office and went their different ways. Naria poured two goblets of fresh water and handed one to Duncan.**

**“I am pleased to see you again Commander Duncan,” she cooed.**

**“As ever Queen Naria, it is I who am honored by your lovely presence.” He answered in a voice dripping with innuendo.**

Naria threw back her head and laughed loudly as she held out her hand to him. He took it and held it to his forehead, bowing as he did so.

“You are more beautiful than I remembered,” he told her with a wink.

“Ah, you and I are going to have a grand time together at this Gathering!”

She laughed and slapped him on the back. Duncan squeezed her hand slightly and caressed his face with it, Naria purred softly in reply.

“Now, I must have you settled in at Lord Tarak’s Hold; it would not look good for me to keep you here. Captain Alexei is already there and looks forward to your arrival. By the way Duncan, he is indeed a valuable asset.” She turned and added; “He will have quite a lot to tell you, I am sure.”

Duncan was led to Warrior’s Hold and met at the door by Mistress Sera, who welcomed him warmly. She escorted him to his room and indicated which room was Alexei’s. She left him to unpack and get reacquainted with his captain. As she walked down the hallway she knocked on Alexei’s door and informed him that Duncan had arrived and indicated his room.

Duncan threw his bags on the large bed and opened them. He took out his dress uniform and hung it up. He placed his ditty bag in the bathroom and went back to further unpack when he heard a knock at the door.

“Enter,” he shouted.

“Duncan,” Alexei said as walked into the room extending his hand, “welcome back!”

“Alexei,” Duncan smiled as they shook hands, “I understand from Naria that you have quite a story to tell.”

“Oh yeah, quite a story, have a seat,” he said sitting, “it’s a beaut.”

For an hour and a half Alexei related the events as they happened from the time he left the Phoenix to the present. Both men discussed the ramifications of Naria’s foresight to providing a sanctuary for the young Scathers. And later both were laughing at Alexei’s explanation of his predicament with Altera, and how he handled it. He also mentioned his surprise at learning there were two classes of women on the planet. First, there were the homemakers; these women had children and dedicated themselves to teaching the younger generations. Second, there were those who were warriors. These women were more ‘free spirits’, and it seemed on equal terms with the men.

“The women here seem to have an amazing ability Duncan,” Alexei continued, “as I am sure you noticed.”

**“Yes I have,” Duncan chuckled. “Yeah, you should have seen Lady Tara wrap the security people around her fingers on Earth. The scientists won’t be touching the device circling Earth, she convinced them the result wasn’t worth the risk.” He scratched his head, “Amazing women!”**

**Duncan laughed and rightly guessed that Alexei’s compliments about Lady Tara and his use of her name was an indication of much more interest. He wondered if they were involved with each other.**

**Across the Hold, Rayne and Tarak were working out with his elite guard. A young warrior came out to the walkway above and leaned over.**

**“My Lord,” he called to Tarak below, “Lord Duncan has arrived and is in his room. Captain Alexei is speaking with him now.”**

**“Thank-you Raitan,” Tarak replied. Turning to Rayne he smiled, “My mate, your mentor has arrived; I am sure you will have a lot to tell him.”**

**“Let’s finish this first, and then I shall go make myself presentable.” She lunged forward, but Tarak was ready and spun around coming down behind her, pinched her on her behind and leapt as she turned around laughing.**

**“You are advancing very well my love,” she spun and shot out her leg catching him off guard. He went down in a heap laughing and she whispered in his ear, “but not that well.”**

**Back in Duncan’s room he asked, “Alexei, Rayne, did she find out anything?”**

**“Oh yes, she certainly did,” Alexei replied in a somber voice. “Duncan, she found out who she is, what she is.” Alexei reached for the door handle and turned, “I leave her to tell you. But to set your mind at ease, the change in her is nothing short of remarkable. I’m truly happy for her, Duncan.”**

**He left Duncan standing there wondering if what he guessed all along had come true. He didn’t have to wait long. There was a light tapping on the door, it opened and Rayne stepped in.**

**“Duncan?” she asked looking about.**

**He stepped out of the shadows smiling and she shot into his open arms. He lifted her and swung her about. He noted that she actually held on pressing herself to him in a hug.**

**“Oh Duncan, I am so glad you’re back; I have so much to tell you,” she said breathlessly.**

He put her down and held her hands out and took a good long look at his charge. Alexei was right, there was something different; she seemed to be glowing, and he noted her eyes appeared to be luminous.

“Okay kid, lets sit down and you can fill me in on everything,” he said leading her over to two large chairs. “Now, tell me what you found out.”

“There’s so much, Duncan; first of all, I was right, I am an Ogatu. There were so many little things that happened. I was doing things the Ogatu way without even realizing it. I went to Tar and told him; he said he suspected all along, Duncan. We had blood tests done and they proved it beyond a doubt.” She watched his reaction carefully.

He smiled at her and reached for her hand squeezing it, “That’s great news kid, good for you!” He noted her use of ‘Tar’; a familiarity that spoke volumes.

She smiled, “Well, from there things kind of escalated pretty fast. Remember me telling you how I was feeling strangely attracted to Lord Tarak? Well, it turns out that he felt the same way about me, but he couldn’t say anything.”

Duncan sat upright, “And...?”

“Well, we talked about it; and fought about it, and avoided each other for about a week. Then we talked and fought some more; but in the end, the attraction was too strong. I realized that I was drawn to him in a way that I had never felt before. To make a long story short, we fell in love.” She searched his face for disapproval and finding none continued, “Duncan, I have never known such happiness, never knew there could be such contentment.” She went to the door and reached for the doorknob, stopped and turned around, “I’m going to spend my life with him, Duncan.” She opened the door and Tarak was standing there.

“May I enter Lord Duncan?” Tarak asked in a voice that seemed uncertain.

Duncan stood, “Since it looks like we are going to be family, of course you may, Tarak.”

Duncan extended his hand and Tarak grabbed his forearm in the manner of the Ogatu. Eye to eye contact between the two was strained for a moment, and then Duncan smiled.

“I wasn’t sure you would approve of our joining Lord Duncan,” Tarak began, “Rayne is very important to me, so naturally her happiness is of utmost concern. She wanted to be the first to tell you the good news and I could not deny her. Officially, it is the male who descends on the female’s house and declares his intentions to the father.”

“Rayne, would you leave us for a moment,” Duncan winked, “you know, man to man talk?” Rayne left the room and Duncan turned to Tarak. “So, I take it you have already had your way with my charge Lord Tarak.”

**“Lord Duncan!” Tarak roared, “That is something not discussed with another. It is a private matter between the man and lady who are involved. It should be enough to say that she has my heart.” He paced back and forth, then turned and looked at Duncan. “I... love her; I have taken her as my life-mate.”**

**“Now that’s what I wanted to hear Tarak,” he rose and took Tarak’s hand, “now you have my blessings.”**

**Tarak smiled and went to the door and opened it, Rayne was waiting in the hallway. She looked up at Tarak and then at Duncan questioningly.**

**“Come in my sweet, Duncan approves of our joining,” Tarak told her happily.**

**“Thank you Duncan,” she went to him and kissed his cheek, “I knew you would.”**

**Tarak growled at this and Rayne spun around, hands on hips.**

**“You had better get used to me hugging my friends, my mate. If I wish to give Duncan a peck on the cheek, you have nothing to be jealous about. He is like my father”**

**“Your ways are strange Rayne; you must remember you are Ogatu now. A mated female never allows a male other than her mate to touch her.” Tarak stared at her, “It just isn’t done.”**

**“Well, then we will change that rule. I show affection to my friends, male and female. I most certainly will not adhere to some stuffy ritual that is outmoded. Besides, it implies that you don’t trust me.”**

**“My sweet, I trust you with my life; that is not the point...” an exasperated Tarak began and was cut off in mid-sentence.**

**“Enough!” Rayne’s voice was flat and commanding, “I will not discuss this further.”**

**Duncan sat back and roared with laughter.**

**“I can see that you two are going to have a very interesting life; there will never be a dull moment in your house. Not with two strong-willed and stubborn personalities like you two!”**

**Both looked at Duncan, and then at each other; they burst into laughter and leaned into each other. Duncan saw Tarak nuzzle the side of Rayne’s face ever so gently, and kiss her forehead. It spoke reams of his love for the volatile little warrior-woman.**

**“So,” Duncan said changing the subject, “Alexei tells me there is a power struggle taking place; is Lord Boras planning to make a move on Naria’s throne?”**

**“He will try,” replied Tarak in a flat voice, “but he will not succeed. Come; let us adjourn to my study.”**



**They gathered in Tarak’s study with First Kai present. Lord Tarak filled Duncan in on what had taken place during the trip to the Ohmu Forest. He informed him of his plans, and what had been put into effect the past several days. Rayne had used her Eloï skills and paid a visit to Lord Boras’ Hold. What she found there was very disturbing. Lord Boras indeed planned to make a grab for the throne during the annual Gathering Ball. He intended to take out Lord Tarak by an assassin’s arrow as he left for the ball. In the confusion that would follow Naria herself would be slain by another assassin; whom he had cleverly placed in the rafters of the throne room. He would then step in and take control and bring order.**

**“Knowing Boras as I do,” continued Lord Tarak, “he would never leave the Queen’s kill to anyone but Matai.”**

**“Why not just arrest him now?” asked Duncan.**

**“You have to understand Duncan; he must be caught in the act before he can be judged,” explained Lord Tarak. “It is Ogatu Law concerning a Lord Holder; he must be proved to be a betrayer to the Queen and Aura.”**

**“I see,” replied Duncan, understanding their Law regarding someone of prestige. “Will Queen Naria be in any real danger?”**

**“Possibly,” Tarak answered, “but she will take precautions.”**

**“And you are sure that Lord Boras has no idea that you are aware of his plans?” asked Duncan, concerned.**

**“His arrogance is such that he thinks himself so clever, so ingenious, that no one would ever suspect him of such activity,” replied a disgusted First Kai.**

**“And that is his weakness Duncan,” added Lady Rayne. “Already we have used it against him. On the first night in the Hold at Ohmu Forest the Lord Holder throws his doors open to receive the other Lord Holders. When Lord Boras arrived, I used my skills and made an instant ‘friend’ of the presumptuous little Ousa. I had him enthralled; he followed me around all night like a puppy dog. Needless to say Lord Tarak and I were very careful not arouse any suspicion as to our true relationship; we did not announce our joining to anyone. We shall do so at the Gathering Ball.”**

The large space laboratory orbiting Aura, (in a cloaked state), was in a constant state of activity. Deep space probes were continuous with two technicians always on duty monitoring activity. They had a vast region to keep under their watchful eyes and were very adept at spotting any activity. Both noted the three blips on their screens at the same time.

“Captain to the monitoring room!” came the over the intercom almost immediately.

Captain Andrid made his way to the monitoring room. He was larger than most Ogatu, dark fur with the white streak down his mane signaled him as from the ‘First’ line. Exceptional organizational skills and a deductive mind that rivaled most were his best traits.

“Vintar, have you spotted them?” He asked as he entered.

“Sir, we have three distinct blips headed this way. It will be another two hours before we can get a definite picture. Our farthest probes will pick them up when they enter our solar system.”

“Keep me informed of their progress,” he ordered.

“Sir, there is an earth ship in the area,” Vintar informed him. “Should we apprise them of a possible encounter, that is, if they turn out to be Scather ships?”

“Hmm, yes do so, but on a coded frequency. Tell them to be ready, but not to engage unless attacked first.” Continuing the Captain explained, “I have a feeling if these are the ships we were warned about; they will ignore the earth ship.”

“Yes sir!” answered the young technician already dialing a special frequency.

Captain Andrid went directly to his quarters and pressed a button the far wall. It opened up to reveal his private Com Center. He called the Queen’s Hold and informed the technician there of the news and his course of action regarding the earth ship. Naria’s orders were that she be kept informed of any Scather ships in the area.

Two hours later Captain Andrid returned to the monitoring room for an update.

“Is there any progress?” he asked the technician

“Sir, yes sir. There are two very distinct engine signatures; they are Scather ships. But it appears that they have a tractor beam on the third ship.” The tech turned some dials, “this is very unusual sir, there does not appear to be an engine on the third ship. There are no discernable power readings, very strange. They should be coming into view any minute.”

Both men watched the monitor intently. Then the picture seemed to fill with a dark grey color as the lead ship passed close to the probe. A few adjustments and the camera zoomed back and they got their first view of the three ships.

**“Dega sou!” Exclaimed Captain Andrid; “Is that what I think it is?”**

**“Yes sir, bigger than ours by three; but a glider all the same.” The young technician turned and looked at the captain in alarm. “Sir, this means they know how to land on Aura.”**

**Rapidly realizing the implications of this Captain Andrid repeated aloud, “Worse than that young man, this means there is a traitor among us.” Both men watched the screen.**

**“How long before they reach Aura?”**

**“It should take them three to five days, sir. They are pulling a heavy load.”**

**“I must report this to the Queen immediately; keep them under surveillance at all times. Do not loose them in the Partelly Nebula.”**

**“Yes sir!” answered the young technician.**

**Twenty minutes later Naria was swearing over the Com channel.**

**“I will give you one guess as to whom this traitor might be, Captain Andrid,” her voice angry, “and the answer will be an easy one.”**

**“My Queen, even Lord Boras would not be so foolish as to do this,” exclaimed Captain Andrid. “He would be causing his own doom.”**

**“Lord Boras means to have my throne by any means necessary. I am sure he has a plan in place to destroy the raiding party, but only after my death. Then in the panic that would follow, he would step in and assume control.”**

**“The man is mad! The other Lords would never accept him; they would rebel, and Aura would become a warring ground.” Captain Andrid’s voice betrayed his feelings, “this is monstrous!”**

**“As you said, he is mad; and madness has its own logic,” replied Naria bitterly.**

**“What will you have me do my Queen?”**

**“Prepare a welcoming committee for our visitors. I leave it to your discretion as to the way; you are very good at planning surprises. Aura is at stake Commander Andrid; I have the utmost confidence in your abilities.”**

Understanding his sudden rise in rank Andrid answered, “Thank you my Queen, I shall not disappoint you.”

Andrid immediately went to work mapping out a plan to intercept the Scather ships before they had a chance to release the glider on Aura. He chuckled as he remembered something, and immediately placed a call to the Sword.

“Is everything ready,” asked Lord Boras in an agitated voice, “everything must be in place before we begin. There can be no mistakes, Matai.”

His voice was becoming shrill as he went over his plans again; Matai was getting weary of his continuous ranting.

“The raiders are in place my Lord, they have trained well, they know what they are to do and when.”

“Good, good!” Lord Boras was practically salivating, “We must be ready for swift action. And your perch above is secured? Everything hinges on your being able to take out Naria before I enter the Hall. Only then can I begin my rise to the throne.”

“No one knows of the secret passage to the top of the rotunda, I shall be in place in a matter of minutes,” Matai answered confidently. “When you make your entrance my Lord, Naria will already have fallen.”

“Ah, in one day I shall be ruler of Aura,” Lord Boras exulted, “my rightful place will be restored!”

Matai went about his duties checking and rechecking, making sure that all was ready. He mused to himself that Lord Boras had never even considered that the other lord holders might not accept him as ruler; that they might actually prefer someone else. Matai knew Lord Boras was not liked by any of them, they considered him a bore and a pretentious cad. They would never allow him to take the throne.

He was not worried that Boras would succeed; he had made plans of his own to ensure that it never happened. He could care less about the throne and the power that came with it. He was more interested in something else. When Boras took the throne, it would be for a very short time; Matai planned on killing him and exposing his devious plans, thus proving his loyalty to Aura. And his reward would be what he wanted most, the post as new Lord Holder of the mines and armory.

**“Rayne!”**

**Lord Tarak’s voice bellowed down the hallways and throughout Warrior’s Hold. Many recognized the temper of that voice and knew something was afoot.**

**“Lady Rayne, I need your attention to a matter that has come up!”**

**Rayne came up the stairs two at a time wondering what was wrong. She found Tarak outside the master bedroom with two very frightened maids.**

**“What is wrong my Lord?” she asked innocently, feigning not understanding.**

**“I warned you that creature could not be trusted. It attempted to attack these two when they entered our room.” Tarak lowered his voice and looked directly at Rayne.**

**“You know what has to be done.”**

**“Wait, wait just a minute my Lord,” turning to the maids she asked, “Danil, please tell me exactly what happened, I want every detail.”**

**Obviously frightened, Danil related the story thru trembling lips.**

**“We came to tidy the master bedroom, my Lady. I went to the bed and shook the sheets and comforter and suddenly the monster leapt on the bed and growled. He leaped for me. We both screamed and ran out of the room.”**

**“Is that it? Ha,” she laughed, “he wasn’t attacking, he just wanted to play. He likes to jump on the comforter when I shake it out. It’s just kitten play; he would not have hurt you.” Rayne took Danil’s hand, “Come with me Danil, watch.”**

**Rayne went into the room and found the baby Snotig hiding under the large dresser. It was quite frightened and mewling piteously; she had to coax it out.**

**“Baby, come on Baby, yes that’s it, come on out.”**

**At the sound of her voice the creature began to emerge from under the dresser. Its soft golden fur shined as the sunlight from the open window danced upon it.**

**“Come on, no one is going to hurt you. There you go Baby, yes, mama’s here.”**

**The small furry creature ran to her and tried to burrow in her lap. Looking up at the two women and holding the little creature Rayne explained.**

**“See, he’s more frightened of you. Remember he’s just a baby, your screams scared him.”**

**Rayne continued to calm the shaking creature.**

**Danil took pity on the small furry creature and stepped closer, “May I pet him my Lady?”**

**“Of course you may Danil, he won’t hurt you. Come here,” she patted the floor beside her, “lick the back of you hand and let him smell it.”**

The woman knelt down beside Rayne and did as instructed. The Snotig smelled her hand and then licked it. She chuckled and stroked the small creature running her hands over its silken fur. It rose and scampered to her lap curling up on it. At this small act the delighted woman lost all her fear of it.

“Oh you sweet little thing,” she exclaimed, thrilled. “His name is Baby?” she asked looking at Rayne.

Tarak threw his hands up, “Argh... What am I going to do with you? I tell you, these creatures can not be trusted.”

Rayne laughed, “My Lord, it is only a baby, barely a week old. If it is surrounded with trust and love, it will naturally think of us as its pride. It will protect us when it matures; just as your Snotaks did.”

“But LadyRayne that has all been tried before,” Kai interjected joining the group, “and the results were deadly; an entire family slaughtered. These animals always revert back, it is their nature.”

“Was that animal taken from its mother’s womb as this one was? Was it nurtured and loved within the family unit, as this one will be?”

Hands on hips, Rayne stared at Kai and then Tarak.

“I know what I am doing; I have done it before with other fierce creatures.”

“Alright Rayne, I give up. But I hold you responsible for its actions.” Tarak was adamant, “I will put it down if it hurts anyone, and I will not ask your permission.”

“You won’t have to my mate,” Rayne countered, “It will not hurt anyone in this Hold.”

Later as Kai was relating the event to Sera she found it amusing that their first fight turned out to be a draw. Kai explained that this was serious; he was worried for her safety, as the creature would begin to grow rapidly in the next two to three weeks. He did not want to put her in any kind of danger right now as she was carrying their future.

Sera explained that she was not concerned in the least. She trusted Lady Rayne in a way she could not explain. If she said Baby wouldn’t harm anyone, then she believed her.

Still not convinced Kai insisted on having a warrior in the house at all times, (in close proximity to Mistress Sera). Young Bail was assigned the task and accepted the honor with many thanks. He saw it as his way of showing Kai he was able to return to duty.

Both Duncan and Alexei found the whole incident amusing. They knew Rayne far better than most and had seen her in action with fierce beasts. There was no doubt that she would succeed with the creature; and it would, no doubt, become a fierce protector of the Hold.

During the evening meal word came from the Queen's Hold that the Gathering Ball was put off for two days. A scout ship was returning from deep space and the Queen felt these men and women were entitled to attend, as their mission had been a long one.

With two days to kill, Duncan inquired if he and Alexei could walk about the encampment and visit the different levels. Lord Tarak saw no reason why not and asked several of his warriors to accompany them. He told them they were free to explore as they wished, but he pointed out, they would be a point of curiosity for the people and the presence of his warriors would avert any undo fear of the strangers. Duncan saw the wisdom in this and agreed.

Tarak and Lady Rayne used this time to visit the various Holds and pay their respects. Rayne was greeted warmly at Tailor Hold and complimented on the designs she had provided previously. They had created a rage among the female population, and the Hold Tailors had improved on them to better suit the female Ogatu. Rayne received the Order of the Golden Feather from Lord Justin himself for her contribution. She was deeply touched and thanked him profusely for the honor.

As they went from Hold to Hold word spread quickly that the Eloi warrior woman was visiting the Holds with Lord Tarak. There was a great deal of speculation as to their relationship and the gossipmongers were kept busy passing on any information they could glean from Hold to Hold. Lord Tarak was greeted at each Hold with great respect and ceremony. It was a known fact that Lord Tarak was the Queen's confidant, so no one wanted to offend him.

At Knowledge Hold Rayne greatly impressed Lord Gustav with her acquaintance of their laws. She also pulled him aside and placed the records of her blood test in his hands. The results drew his eye and from then on he looked at Rayne with new respect. She urged secrecy explaining that Queen Naria would announce it at the Gathering Ball. Understanding, he nodded and placed the paper in his office safe.

At Medical/Science Hold she astounded Lord Nardo with her knowledge of DNA and gene splicing applications. They got into a heated argument on cell growth and the ability of genes to adapt. It ended with both laughing and respecting the others view. She also displayed her knowledge of the galaxy and the one beyond.

By late afternoon both Tarak and Rayne were worn out with pomp and ceremony. Tarak suggested they return to Warrior Hold and rest before the evening festivities. They went straight to their rooms, passing thru the kitchen to grab some bread and cheese and cold Tesh.

"Which Hold will we be visiting this evening," Rayne asked with a yawn.

Lord Tarak answered 'the best', with a wry smile. Sea Hold was the one he was looking forward to visiting the most.



**“Come sit by me,” he said patting the cushions beside him. “The people of Sea Hold are very different my sweet,” he explained; “they do not go in for fancy dress and pomp & ceremony. They are a hardy lot, very down to earth, and very expressive. They enjoy Gathering time because it is an occasion of rejoicing. Sea Hold people work very hard during the year providing the other Holds with food. So at Gathering Time it is natural that they are boisterous and entertain and party the entire time they’re here at Ohmu. They enjoy dancing, and drinking strong spirits, and very loud singing.” Tarak laughed loudly at a memory and then continued. “From past experience, we find it is best to visit them at twilight for an evening of great entertainment.”**

**Rayne smiled and replied that after that glowing recommendation, she was looking forward to the visit. "What is the Lord Holder like?"**

**“Well now,” Tarak advised her, “Lord Dorsal is very different from most men of Ogatu. He is from the ‘First’ line; marked with a white streak down his mane. He is taller than most, quite muscled and can take any man. His personality is such that he need not challenge anyone, nor try to prove anything. He is very observant and in all probability will see thru our ruse immediately. It is rumored that he possesses the ‘sight’; he reads people quickly and accurately. He is also the only known man able to turn down Naria’s advances; (Tarak winked at Rayne), it is said his love for his mate is all consuming and that strong. It was reported that Naria did not take offence but instead complimented him on his moral fortitude.” Tarak took a sip of Tesh and continued. “Everyone knows she holds him in the highest regard and that no matter what he requests for his Hold; it is granted without question.”**

**Rayne arose and made her way to their bed. She removed her clothing and lay down on the cool sheets. She turned on her side, tucked her leg up under her and patting the bed said in a seductive voice,**

**“Now come here my strong mate and tell me how you managed to turn down Naria...”**

**Tarak was leering at her as he rose.**

Later that afternoon Duncan and Alexei returned to the Hold, arms laden with 'gifts' they had received from the various shopkeepers they had encountered. The people had all been curious and plied the men with questions of every sort. Their openness in answering their inquiries won over even the most dubious. All in all, their trek about the encampment had won them many new friends and done a lot for intergalactic relations.

Best of all, Alexei had run into Mistress Tara, now Lady Tara, at a dress shop. She seemed quite happy to see him. He greeted her in the formal Ogatu way, as he did not want to read too much into her actions. She was very gracious and genuine in her delight at seeing him again; they spoke for several long minutes. Summoning up his courage Alexei asked if she was going to the ball; upon her answer he inquired if he might escort her. She accepted immediately and said she would join him at Warrior Hold. She bid him good day and left him standing in the street with a silly grin on his face. Alexei stood there watching her walk away till she was out of sight. After that, Tarak's warriors teased him unmercifully for the rest of the day.

Alexei would have been very surprised to learn that Lady Tara had spotted him an hour before, and that she had arranged to 'bump' into him. She had also arranged an invitation to join Lord Tarak's party to the festivities at Sea Hold that evening. Had Alexei not asked her to the Ball, she would have asked him.

As she walked away she too had a grin on her lovely face.

That evening Lord Tarak, Lady Rayne, Lord Duncan and Captain Alexei, assembled in the main living room. Lord Tarak mentioned he was waiting on a guest to arrive before they left. A knock on the Hold door and suddenly Lady Tara appeared on the landing, much to Alexei's delight. She was dressed in a light pink silky blouse and a dark burgundy skirt that flowed about her as she walked. Alexei stepped forward offering his arm and Lady Tara took it so fast that Tarak couldn't help but chuckle. The happy party left Warrior's Hold with a small squad of warriors, as escort, and headed towards the far end of the 'town'.

Loud music and singing could be heard echoing down the long walk-street as they approached. A rather raucous celebration was taking place up ahead and Lord Duncan could see a line of people waiting to enter the Hold. He turned towards Tarak and pointed ahead.

"A popular Hold for all it seems, eh Lord Tarak?" Duncan stated the obvious.

"Very popular," Lord Tarak shouted above the music, "that is why it is the second largest Hold in the Ohmu Forest. Eventually everyone comes to Sea Hold to celebrate during Gathering."

The crowd suddenly parted and a red headed bear of a man stood in the middle of the path. The white stripe down his mane told Rayne immediately who he was. Taking a stance with his hands on hips he glared at Lord Tarak and shouted loudly.

"Tarak, you old devil you! Get yourself and that pretty warrior on your arm up here now!"

He roared a challenge loudly, and Tarak answered him with one of his own. Then Lord Dorsal threw his head back and roared once more.

Lord Tarak and his party made their way to Lord Dorsal's side. Both men greeted each other with bear hugs and shoulder slapping. Tarak introduced Lady Rayne where upon Lord Dorsal scooped her up and swung her around laughing, calling her 'little warrior' as they made their way inside the Hold. Once inside he put her down, and turning he pulled Tarak aside and whispered in his ear.

"She's perfect for you; you lucky devil, and one of us to boot!"

Duncan and Alexei were introduced and received a hearty welcome. All were ushered to a large table in the center of the room. A stunning raven haired beauty was placing two large pitchers of a brew on the table. Several servers behind her were instructed to fill the table with food, which they did. Extra chairs were brought out and placed about the table. When the lovely lady was satisfied that the table was ready she turned and nodded towards Lord Dorsal. She then turned around and smiled, and with a wave of her hand, bid the entire party to sit.

Alexei and Duncan could not help staring at the stunning woman's beautiful face. She was exquisite - small and dainty, but well proportioned in all the right areas. Her eyes were deep violet orbs that struck a man to his core. Her entire face held an angelic appearance. The fingers on her hands were long and graceful; and she seemed to glide about the room. This was Lady Amelia, Lord Dorsal's mate. Duncan bet Lord Dorsal had to fight off many a suitor to attain her.

Tarak greeted her warmly and took her hand and held it to his cheek causing her to blush. When he introduced Lady Rayne, she immediately threw open her arms and embraced her in a genuine hug. Both women became instant friends and sat together talking the rest of the evening.

She smiled sweetly at Lord Duncan and Captain Alexei as they were introduced and never did either man ever see such beauty. They now understood the story of Lord Dorsal and his beloved. Alexei smiled at her and noticed a certain familiarity about her face. Alexei also noted that no one introduced Lady Tara, or even acknowledged her presence. He was about to say something when he was caught off guard.

"So, is this the young pup that has caught my daughter's attention," Lord Dorsal bellowed to Lord Tarak across the table. Turning to Duncan he stated, "And you Lord Duncan, you vouch for him?" Both men turned and stared at Alexei.

Alexei's eyes went wide in surprise with a question, "Tara...?"

Tara rose and glared at Lord Dorsal, "Father...!"

Turning she answered, "Yes Alexei, Lord Dorsal and Lady Amelia are my parents. Please, don't let my father intimidate you... he'll have much too much fun if you do."

Catching her gist, and a shrewd judge of character, Alexei made a decision. He pushed back his chair with some force and stood up; the room fell silent.

"Yes sir, I am interested in Lady Tara," his voice indignant. There was a short staring contest between the two men as Alexei feigned an attack on his honor and good name. "Lady Tara has a very unique personality, a quick and interesting mind, and she can handle herself well in an emergency; I admire that in a woman. She also happens to be the most beautiful woman I have ever met," he turned and bowed towards Lady Amelia, "that is, with the exception of her mother."

The room exploded with shouts and clapping and foot stomping. Lord Dorsal stood and took Alexei's forearm in a meeting of equals; both men grinned.

"You have courage boy; this is good, you're going to need it!" He laughed and then whispered in Alexei's ear, "You are also the first she has shown any interest in... treat her well and with honor."

"You can count on it Lord Dorsal," Alexei promised.

Lord Dorsal slapped him on the back and then grabbed his mug and toasted the meeting of old friends and new ones; the Gathering; and life in general.

Alexei found it unusual that Lord Dorsal was not even concerned that he was of another race, an alien race by his view. He asked Tara about that and she laughed saying that her father was a simple man with simple beliefs; he saw all men as one under God. Besides, her life was hers to live; she was old enough to make her own decisions.

Alexei looked at Lady Tara with renewed interest and respect. She was her own woman indeed. She had made her way from Sea Hold all the way to Space on her own terms. Through her determination she had excelled in her chosen field, and owed her success to no one but herself.

*She is her own woman, he thought, grinning, and for some reason I can't get her out of my mind.*

Alexei had had many women in his time, alien and human, but he noted none that could come close to Tara. She was his match in every way, and he was just now realizing that he truly wanted to get to know her on a deeper level. That he was looking at the long-term aspects of this relationship; and it thrilled and scared him at the same time. He turned and Tara smiled at him and everything else became a blur after that. He was like putty in her hands, and didn't care one bit. They sat close to each other and spoke in hushed tones the rest of the evening.

There was not much conversation as they ate, everyone was hungry, and the food kept coming. As they finished and each sat back and enjoyed a long drink of mead, the table was cleared. Small bowls were brought out and the ladies dipped their fingers in and dried them.

During this time a female with a mask on sat down beside Duncan. He was unsure as to the protocol in this type of situation. She seemed very brazen and began to inch closer and closer to him. He was uncomfortable and unsure as to what action to take when he suddenly recognized the scent wafting thru the air. *Naria!*

Deciding to teach her a lesson, Duncan leaned towards her and under the table ran his hand up her leg. She all but leaped up; then she began to chuckle, in a deep lusty voice realizing that Duncan had seen thru her little disguise. The two paired off to explore their friendship again.

Meanwhile, the telling of tales began; and there were many. The sea held some of the strangest mammals on the planet; Lord Dorsal was fond of all of them, but especially the behemoth of the seas, the Balenus. He described the mighty animal to Duncan and Rayne telling them that the huge flukes were longer and larger than his own hunting ship. The animal had piercing blue eyes that watched your every move. Lord Dorsal explained that he did not enjoy hunting these magnificent creatures, but one of these would feed an entire town for the winter. Every bit of the Balenus was used; it's hide would provide shoes for all, it's fat would be refined and used in various products. Lord Dorsal turned to his mate and nodded and she excused herself for a moment.

**“Tarak, my friend,” he began, “I want to thank you for the lance you designed for me. It is a truly magnificent weapon. I spotted a Balenus on the third day out and followed the brute for two more days before I got a clear shot at it. It did not give up easily, mind you, but the weapon you designed made his death a noble one.”**

**Lady Amelia returned with a wooden box, which she placed in front of Lord Dorsal.**

**“I wish to say thank you, for your thoughtfulness, and your friendship. With this weapon we will be able to hunt the larger beasts without losing anymore ships.”**  
**Lord Dorsal opened the box and withdrew the contents. “Knowing your fondness for your Snotaks, I thought you would appreciate this. I had it made out of the jawbone of the monster.”**

**What he held was a carefully carved copy of the two Snotaks that had given their lives for the Hold during the Scather raid. Dorsal couldn’t have known that they were dead, but all the same the gift was deeply appreciated by Tarak. The artisan had captured the personalities of both of the Taks. It was a beautiful ivory carving; polished to a high sheen.**

**Tarak was deeply touched, “I do not know what to say.” Tarak grabbed Lord Dorsal’s forearm, “You overwhelm me with your thoughtfulness my friend, I am truly honored.”**

**“Good! Good! Ha ha,” Dorsal slapped Lord Tarak on the back, “Now we celebrate; more mead; and music!”**

**With that the Hall erupted in music and there were cheers. Many couples began to leave their tables and go into a large room off the dining area. Seeing Rayne’s eyes following them, Lady Amelia called to her and explained.**

**“That is the dancing room. The musicians are in a holding pen above the dance floor, the music flows about the room and all are affected by it. The room is a giant circle within a circle. There is a countertop of polished wood that extends about the entire room; it is manned by many servers, so mead will be flowing freely.”**

**The group rose and made their way to the dancing room.**

**“I hope you have dancing shoes on Lady Rayne.” Lady Amelia laughed, “If I know my mate, he will drag you out on the dance floor as soon as we enter.”**

**Sure enough, as they entered the room Lord Dorsal swept Rayne off her feet and made for the dance floor. The beat was fast and raucous. She watched several of the dancers for a moment and got the gist of their movements. Then she dove in and joined Dorsal matching his movements step for step. He was roaring with laughter at the end of the music.**

**“I can’t believe you kept up with me, my lovely Amelia is the only one who can do that. I believe you have found a winner Tarak,” Dorsal laughed again, “Ha, you better watch yourself or some young man will steal her away.”**

Rayne leaned in and said in a sultry voice, “Maybe I did the hunting, Lord Dorsal.” She had caught him totally off guard and he had no retort.

Now it was Tarak’s turn to gloat. “Ha! Bet you never saw that coming, eh Dor. My warrior woman has you tongue-tied.”

Tarak took Rayne’s hand and led her to the dance floor. He requested the hunting song, and upon hearing it’s opening melody Rayne recognized it.

It was the same song they danced to on their mating night. Tarak winked and began to strut around her in a demanding way. Laughing, Rayne threw back her head and shook her hair and they did their best impression of a hunter and its prey. Rayne’s slow erotic movements around Tarak’s body left nothing to the imagination. By the time they were finished many of the men were looking at their mates with a great deal of lust. The smiling women grabbed their mate’s hands and quickly made for the doors. Lord Dorsal was affected also as he leaned into his Lady and nuzzled her neck.

“You two are dangerous!” Lord Dorsal bellowed as Tarak and Rayne rejoined the group. In a low voice Dorsal declared, “Only now do I realize that you two have already joined as one. Not surprising with the heat that is generated between you. My congratulations to you both, I wish you much happiness.”

Lady Amelia took both their hands, “I wish you both joy and happiness. As happy as I have always been with my wonderful mate.” She then looked at Lord Dorsal with such love in her eyes that it was almost a living thing. Each now understood where Lord Dorsal’s strength came from.

By midnight Lord Tarak was feeling the effects of the strong mead as his speech became slurred; Rayne took charge and bade their goodbyes to all. It was the first time Tarak had allowed himself to relax in a very long time.

Rayne had seen Duncan pair off with a strange woman earlier. Thinking this was unlike Duncan; she studied the woman carefully and suddenly realized that it was Naria. As for Alexei, she knew that he would be keeping company with Lady Tara. Rayne called for their escort and began the walk home. Tarak was singing and laughing as they made their way back to Warrior Hold. The warriors reveled in their Lord’s happy demeanor.

They were about thirty feet from Warrior Hold when Rayne’s senses suddenly tensed... “Defense circle,” she commanded in a firm voice. The warriors immediately circled the pair.

“What is it my mate?” asked Tarak.

“I think we have company my Lord, unwanted company!”



Rayne berated herself for not bringing K'nada along. She asked one of the warrior's for his sword and he gave it to her willingly. Suddenly she heard the wizz of an arrow and raised the sword just in time to deflect an arrow meant for Tarak.

"Move quickly," shouted the Captain of the escort.

They increased their speed and were practically running when they made it to the steps of the Hold. As they went up several arrows whizzed thru the air; Lord Tarak shouted and fell, an arrow in his back shoulder. The Captain grabbed him and the warriors shielded him and dragged him inside. Once inside Rayne checked his wound and called for the physician.

She ran to her room ripped off her gown and changed into her battle clothes. She returned to the main room in two minutes. The Physician was working on Lord Tarak when Kai rushed into the room and asked what happened. The Captain of the escort reported all that had occurred. Kai turned and noted K'nada across Rayne's back as she came down the stairs. He could see she was seething with anger.

"I have had enough of this," she spat out. "First Kai, would you care to join me in a little hunting of our own?"

"Oh yes, I have been looking forward to a little hunting for quite some time."

They left the Hold by the back door and went immediately to the trees. They went straight up about twenty feet and waited; there was no movement, everything was still. Suddenly from above them they heard a voice.

"They are still here Lady Rayne," whispered Sonia, "we are waiting for them to move so we can follow them back to their lair."

"Then wait we will," hissed Rayne.

Thirty minutes later there was slight movement in the trees below them. They waited till the men passed and were ahead by three minutes. Then they began to follow them. It was obvious by their direction as to where they were headed - Miners Hold. The small group unexpectedly changed direction and went to house on the second level below Miner's Hold. They were unaware that they were being followed as they began to boast to each other about their 'victory'.

Sonia cautioned the group to hold a short distance away.

"They may be waiting for someone to report to," She warned, "we might be able to catch the person responsible this time."

"You have run into this before," it was a statement rather than a question.

"Yes, but they were always eliminated, no witnesses you see." Sonia remembered the ruthlessness of her first encounter. "Curses, it could be the same here!"

**They dropped out of the trees and as Kai went thru the front door, Rayne and Sonia broke the window and dove in. Three of the men were lying on the floor, dead. The fourth was choking and grabbing his throat, a goblet lying on the floor where he had dropped it.**

**Rayne went to the man, “Who did this to you?” she asked the dying man. “Don’t protect him, you were expendable in his eyes; he leaves no witnesses.”**

**The horrified look on the man’s face told them they were right. Just now realizing he had been used the man summoned all his strength and tried to speak.**

**“It...was... It was... Ma...Ma... tsk...argh.”**

**The man fell in a heap as his final breath left his body.**

**“Their tesh was poisoned; the killer knew they would toast each other when they returned from their task. What better way to silence any loose ends.” Kai put the bottle down and turned around. “We will get no proof here; but we all know the name he was trying to say... Matai!”**

**“Kai, calm yourself,” Rayne cautioned, “I am sure we are being watched.” She slowly walked about the entire room and then turned.**

**“We have an old Eloi saying; ‘give nothing away to the enemy – in voice or action’.”**

**Rayne went to the door. “They will receive no further information from us. We will leave without any expression on our faces, no rushed movements in our actions. Simply take to the trees and return to Warrior Hold.”**

**“Lord Boras has an insatiable curiosity; he will send someone to find out if Lord Tarak is dead or alive; that person will simply vanish. Matai too will wonder when he gets no reports back.”**

**Kai suddenly knew what Rayne was about to do. “Captain Sonia will you be so kind as to join Lady Rayne in silencing our watchers; when you are finished report back to the Queen.”**

**They left the house and took to the trees; in seconds they were gone, or so their watchers thought. There was slight movement in the trees minutes later as two men slid to the landing and looked in the house. Fear was on their faces as they exited. They had no sooner re-entered the trees than they were cut down without ever seeing their enemy.**

**Moments later at the other end of the level two silent figures slid out of the trees and landed on the balcony of Warrior Hold that led to the master bedroom.**

**“I bid you farewell Lady Rayne, I must report to Queen Naria. I thank you for the honor of joining you to slay those who did harm to Lord Tarak. We will continue to keep watch from above.”**

**“Thank you Captain Sonia,” Rayne replied. “I am beginning to think that this monster needs to be put down quickly before any other lives are lost. If he cares so little for his own men; he will care nothing for the people of Aura.”**

Rayne watched Sonia as she rose far above and was out of sight. She turned and entered her bedroom to find two guards holding their swords to her throat. Recognizing her they immediately lowered their weapons.

“Oh, Lady Rayne, please pardon us; we didn’t know it was you. First Kai sent us here to watch over Lord Tarak’s safety.”

“I understand Surinam,” she answered recognizing him, “I feel safer knowing that you and Branton will be watching over him. I know I can rely on your courage and strength to protect him.”

Encouraged by her words both men vowed to give their lives to protect Lord Tarak.

Rayne checked on Tarak and spoke to the Hold physician. Reassured, she then went down to the study where Kai was waiting for her.

“And so...?” he asked.

“There will be no information returning to Miner’s Hold.” Rayne pored herself a glass of water. “The doctor says Tar will be fine; he sedated him so he could heal overnight. He will be back to normal tomorrow and we both know he will want to strike against Matai and Boras.”

Turning she looked up at Kai and for the first time he could see how deeply she had been affected by the attack. Bending her head she said in a whisper, “They almost took him from me Kai.”

Touched, Kai placed his hand on her shoulder, “but they didn’t succeed, Lady Rayne.”

“Maybe we can fool them into thinking that they did. Keep Tar inside and out of sight for the next day. Have the entire household act as if something grave has happened. Make the assailants handlers think they have succeeded. Would the household staff go along with the ruse?”

“Lady Rayne, these people have been in Lord Tarak’s service all their lives. The household staff will do whatever we ask; especially if we tell them we are setting a trap for his attackers.”

“Yes, yes, and I want business to go on as usual, no changes in our routine. Just a somber household concerned for their Lord Holder.” She muttered.

Kai was immediately curious; he knew Rayne was planning something else.

“You are planning to do something, aren’t you?”

“Do you think I will sit still while this animal attacks those I love?” Rayne sat down and looked at Kai, “I have something subtle in mind. I want three of your best warriors in the trees; I will need their help for what I have in mind.”

**“Not unless you tell me what you are planning,” answered Kai.**

**“I am going to leave a warning for Matai; one that he will understand. He will not know whom it came from; only that death was very near. It will generate a fear of uncertainty.”**

**“My brother would not approve such action Lady Rayne. Look, I know you are angered by what happened, but we have different ways of dealing with this kind of thing,” Kai was trying to explain their ways to her. “He will be dealt with and executed for his crimes.”**

**Slamming her fist down Rayne raised her voice, “It is you who does not understand Kai!” Startled at her forcefulness Kai placed his hand on his sword hilt.**

**Seeing this, Rayne realized she couldn’t push him much more. So in a softer voice she explained.**

**“I am sorry I raised my voice to you, Kai, but I know what I speak of. Lord Boras needs to remove Tarak; as long as he is alive Boras doesn’t stand a chance and he knows it.”**

**Kai was stunned, “How could you possibly know these things?”**

**“I have visited his hold twice now; Tar wanted to know if he was really after Naria and the throne. I told him what I am about to tell you. Lord Boras is mad, insane with ambition. He truly feels that he is the rightful ruler of Aura, by right of bloodline. He plans to take the throne by force. He knows he cannot accomplish this alone; but with Matai’s help, he could. Remember he knows Matai very well; he has molded him from the time he was a young child. I have dealt with evil men before Kai; the race and language may differ, but they are all basically the same. Boras is an egomaniac; he probably recognized the amoral character of Matai early on and has molded and used him over the years. In this case the stakes are big, bigger than anything he has attempted before. So in order to get his help, he promised Matai the one thing he knows he wants more than anything – the Lordship of the Mines. Once he takes the throne he will place Matai in charge of Miners Hold.”**

**“Listen well; if Matai thinks Sera’s death will sideline you, he will kill her without a second thought.” Rayne’s voice took on a new tone, “He is totally without conscience Kai, he cares not who gets hurt as long as he gets what he wants. So I am going to speak to him in the only language he understands...fear. He will not know it was I; he will only know that someone is on to him. I am doing this with or without your help.”**

**“Since I can’t stop you, I will agree, but we will keep this between us for now,” he sighed deeply, “But hear me well; if this causes Matai to react badly and my Sera is harmed,” Kai glared at Rayne, “I will hold you personally responsible Lady Rayne.”**

**“Bail would die before he would allow any harm to come to her, Kai.” Rayne put her hand on Kai’s arm, “I will speak with him about what has occurred; he will be ready for anything Matai might try. Remember, he knows Matai better than anyone and he has a score to settle with him.”**

**Kai called a warrior over and spoke to him for a moment and then the young warrior headed to the barracks. Five minutes later two strapping warriors marched into the study and reported to Kai. Turning to Rayne, Kai introduced them.**

**“Lady Rayne, may I present Torf and Renai. They are very skilled in the trees and have even been praised by Sonia herself several times. I believe they can assist you with your plans. I shall leave you to your business.” Kai left the study and climbed the stairs to check on Tarak.**

**Rayne rose and grabbed each warrior by the forearm in acceptance. They understood the gesture immediately.**

**“Lady Rayne, we assume you will be planning a visit to our Lord Tarak’s assailants,” they said bowing. “We are honored that you have selected us to assist you.”**

**“Gentlemen,” Rayne said entwining her arms with theirs, “let me fill you in on what I have in mind...”**

Matai returned to Miners Hold and assured Lord Boras that everything was in order. His plan had worked and Tarak had been felled. Word was he was gravely injured; would probably die during the night. Boras almost jumped with glee at the prospect. He pumped Matai for every detail of the assault for over an hour.

Matai left Lord Boras in disgust and went to his own rooms. He felt dirty, as tho' he had touched something unclean. He quickly disrobed and went into his dressing room; a long hot shower would make him feel better; yes, he needed to get the stench of death off him. He lingered a bit longer than usual, but the hot water felt good and seemed to refresh him. He dried himself off and wrapped the towel about him. Looking in the mirror he brushed his hair back, cleaned his teeth, and checked out his reflection.

“Good, good; much better,” he muttered as he admired his reflection.

He left the dressing room and stopped in his tracks.  
There was a bump in the middle of his bed; someone was in his bed!

*Ah, one of the women, perhaps that saucy new maid in the kitchen. But then again, one can't be too cautious.*

He reached over his dresser and pulled out a knife from the scabbard on his belt hanging nearby and slowly approached the bed.

Grabbing a handful of covers he wrenched them back.

Lying in the middle of his bed was the assassin he sent to strike down Tarak.

Matai spun around expecting an attack.

All was silent, no movement anywhere.

The curtain at the balcony window rippled silently with the evening breeze.

*How could anyone enter my room without being seen? For that matter how could anyone breach Miners Hold security?*

Visibly shaken, Matai backed up to the wall and pressed himself against it.

He scanned the room slowly and found nothing out of order.

*This is impossible, he thought to himself wild-eyed. Someone is toying with me.*

He reached over the dresser and grabbed his belt buckle and all but ran for the door.

Once in the hall he began to attach the large buckle to his belt when a piece of paper slipped to the floor. Matai stared at it for almost a full minute before he picked it up with trembling hands.

Written in bold letters was a warning; I AM WATCHING YOU.

A single bead of perspiration traced its way down the side of Matai's face. His hand instinctively went for the dagger on his belt. He looked about again, but this time there was fear in his eyes. He crushed the paper and shoved it into his pocket as he ran down the hall.

Tarak awoke with the morning sun, stiff and sore, but otherwise in good spirits. As he turned over he saw that Rayne had curled herself about him in a protective mode and slept with K'nada in her hand. He was touched by the gesture. Also the thought crossed his mind as to what action she had taken after he went down. He gently rubbed his large hands over her body until she stirred awake.

“Tar,” she smiled sleepily, “you’re all right?”

“Yes, yes, of course I am. The fools just caught me off balance, and a little besotted.” He winked at Rayne and leaned in to kiss her, “It was but a mere flesh wound my love.”

Rayne sat up, the smile suddenly gone.

“No it wasn’t Tar; a centimeter to the right and I would be planning your funeral pyre.” She took his hand in hers, lowered her head and took a deep breath; squeezing his hand tightly to her breast she whispered thru clenched teeth, “You were almost taken from me last night!”

Seeing her reaction Tarak took her in his arms and held her to his chest.

“Rayne, my little warrior, I am so sorry, I had no idea you would be so affected.”

“I was affected Tar,” she said with tears in her eyes, “much more than you know. I went a little crazy last night, Tar.” Looking a bit sheepishly she admitted, “I believe I owe Kai a deep apology; I placed him in a precarious position because of my anger.”

Sifting thru her words, Tarak understood what Rayne was telling him.

*Oh lords – she did something,* he thought to himself.

“What did you do Rayne? Knives and shallas - you didn’t kill Boras did you?”

“Tar, no, of course not! We, Kai and Sonia and I killed some assassins. Then, I sent a message to their master, Matai. Let me explain...”

Rayne explained what happened after Tarak was felled, what she and Kai and Sonia found at the house. What they did to the group that came to kill the assassins, and the message she left for Matai in his bed. Then she apologized for her rashness.

Tarak laughed and held her close to him.

“My mate, you were a lot more restrained than I would have been. I would have rode into Miner’s Hold and called out Matai and gutted him in front of Boras.”

He kissed her head and laughed again. “I am honored that you cared so much and yet still held yourself in restraint, it must have taken a lot of self control.”



**“My love for you is total Tar,” she looked at him and continued in a soft voice, “It guided my actions and stayed my hand last night. But I will not deny that I thought about it.”**

**“Ah Rayne,” he kissed her and held her to him, “I love you woman.”**

**They lay in bed, holding on to each for a while longer. Tarak began to realize just how much Rayne cared for him and felt guilty allowing himself to become such an inviting target. He should have been on his guard.**

**“I am weary of this cat and mouse game we play with Boras. Tonight is the Gathering Ball; it should be a time of great celebration and kinsmanship. I do not want to see it forever remembered as a war between a madman and the Queen.”**

**“Tar, why can’t we take matters into our own hands? You and I will be the only ones who will know the truth. Remove Matai and Boras at the same time.” Rayne looked into Tarak’s eyes for the reaction she wanted, and did not find it there.**

**“We cannot; our world is built on a system of laws, Rayne. These laws are for all, not just a few. We cannot step outside the law to remove a cancer from our society. We must remove it from within, using the law.” He took her hand, “Otherwise Rayne, we are no better than the madman; thinking ourselves better to judge and condemn him.”**

**“My mind knows the truth of your reasoning Tar, but my emotions want to see their blood spreading on the ground under their dead bodies.”**

**“Easy Rayne,” Tarak squeezed her to him, “if I know Naria as well as I think, she has something special planned for the both of them. Now, enough of this; my stomach growls and I am hungry enough to eat a Hausa.”**

At the Queen's Hold, Naria woke in Duncan's arms. For a brief moment she remembered the evening before and smiled. How surprised she was at the sexual prowess of this strange earth man, who brought her to heights she thought she could no longer reach. Ah yes, he was one for the ages; she would prefer to keep him around for a bit longer.

Duncan awoke to the sight of Naria smiling at him in a strange way. When asked she simply replied that she was enjoying the memory of the delights of the night before. Duncan countered with a wry smile that she need not remember; and reached for her. Needless to say, Naria was late for her morning briefing; a first for her.

Altera had just finished briefing Naria on the events that took place during the night when word came by courier that Lord Tarak was fine and would recover. Naria listened saying nothing, but it was plain that she was not pleased. After long thoughtful consideration she turned and pressed a button on her desk.

“Forgive me Altera, but I must ask a question for the record.”

A knock on her door and Minister Gordon entered with a slight bow, “My Queen?”

She nodded to him; “I need an official witness Gordon.” She turned around and faced Altera. “First Altera,” Naria began in an official voice, “are you fully able to take down First Matai?”

“Without much effort,” she answered with distain, “he fights dirty, which makes him an easy target.”

“Excellent, I think we have waited long enough; it is time to stop this madness. Please kneel First Altera.”

Naria took out her sword and holding it before her began to recite the Death Order.

“I, Naria, Queen of Aura, do hereby invoke the right of protectorate and declare that the beings known as Lord Boras and First Matai are a detriment to the citizens of Aura. Evidence is clear that they have taken lives in an insane pursuit of power. Evidence shows they have deliberately sought the death of Lord Tarak.”

She stepped forward and took Altera's hand and placed it on the hilt of her sword.

“As my First, I hereby place an order for the execution of Matai in your hands, Altera. His swift removal is called for... So let it be done!”

Minister Gordon stepped to Naria's side, “I so witness this order being given,” he said somberly.

**First Altera stood and gripped Naria's sword tightly in her hand. "It shall be done before the Gathering Ball tonight, my Queen."**

**A smile played across Altera's face as she turned, left the Queen's office and headed towards her quarters. She had been waiting a long time for this day. She quickly dispatched a messenger to the treetops in search of Sonia.**

**Altera's hatred of Matai was deeply personal, and had festered for many years. Returning to her quarters Altera sat at her desk for a moment; lowering her head into her hands, she sighed as she remembered. She brought to mind her dear friend Romain. An innocent young woman with a gentle heart, sent into the pit of horrors known as Miners Hold, like a lamb to the slaughter so to speak, thru a marriage of convenience.**

**She had known and loved that bright young woman as a sister. The friendship of the Queen's First and the dainty Lady Romain of the House of Skymar was known by all. Quite a strange couple for a friendship; yet they suited each other well. Lady Romain loved the wild abandon and fierceness of Altera; secretly wishing she could be more like her. And Altera envied the dainty beauty and positive attitude of the lovely young woman. Lady Ro is what she called her, and thru their friendship Lady Romain showed Altera that she too could be soft and gentle, and yet stay strong. She was the daughter of a well-respected head of the University, a professional teacher of the young of Aura. Altera was always surprised at her positive approach to everything.**

**When she heard of the arrangement Ro's father made for a marriage to Lord Boras Altera had ranted and raged for an hour. She tried to convince Ro that she should refuse her father's request, but she would not. She decided to look at it as a positive thing. Altera continued to correspond with her after her marriage. Over the course of the next year she had watched her close friend change from a bright, positive ray of hope into a frightened little mouse. Her last letter had spoken of a night of untold horror. It also spoke of her despair and her decision to end the madness; Altera thought she meant she would leave Boras. It was a day later that Altera learned of the death of Boras' third wife. Altera nearly went mad with grief.**

**She would now have the pleasure of avenging the death of a dear friend.**

**When the members of the Light Brigade saw her return to her quarters with the Queen's sword they knew that the order had finally been given. Altera was soon inundated with requests to be part of the detail she would take with her; the Queen's Light Brigade did not care for the inhabitants of Miner's Hold, especially Matai. An hour later Altera left the Queen's Hold and began to make her way towards Miner's Hold.**

**Within minutes word reached Matai that Altera was on her way with a detail of warriors and the Queen's sword in her hand. He knew what that meant and had plans in place, just in case. Lord Boras had already planned to be out touch all day; there was no way for Matai to warn him of these changes; but then, Matai was looking out for himself. As far as he was concerned Boras could fend for himself. Matai left word with his people that he was headed for the Ohmu Inn; he knew Altera would wring the information out of them and follow swiftly. A trap would be waiting for her and her warriors, and he would finally have the pleasure of killing her.**

Unbeknownst to Matai, his every move had been watched from above by someone who hated him more even more than Altera; someone who had a burning desire to run a sword thru his heart. She immediately went to work altering Matai's plans, and setting him up for Altera.

Many years ago a young girl of fifteen had burst into Altera's study and begged for justice. The young girl had accused Lord Boras and Matai of killing her beloved older sister; but without proof nothing could be done. After consulting with the Queen, Altera received a judgment that the girl be trained so she could be part of the justice she craved when it was dealt out. The girl had taken to the training very well and was soon a favorite of Altera's. That young girl had been Sonia.

No one but the Queen knew that she and Altera had hatched a plan to keep Sonia out of Lord Boras' clutches. For Aura law dictated that upon the death of a spouse, the husband could invoke the next sister in line to take her place. And Sonia had seen him eyeing her at her sister's funeral. Fear that he would invoke the law forced Sonia to confide in her sister's best friend, Altera. Altera would never allow Boras, or Matai, to get their hands on Sonia. It didn't take long for Altera to come up with a reason to keep Sonia from Boras' clutches. When Lord Boras made a small inquiry of her father, he was told that she was unavailable for she was in the service of the Queen. Needless to say, he was not happy about it.

Sonia had made it her personal duty those many years ago to keep tabs on Matai and Lord Boras. There was nowhere they could go without Sonia knowing their movements. It was only recently that Matai had become almost paranoid in keeping his movements secret. It was to no avail as far as Sonia was concerned; and now it was about to payoff. Finally she would be witness to Matai receiving his just due.

As Altera entered the forest in hot pursuit of Matai, Sonia and her squad slid down some vines and awaited her.

"He is on the run First Altera, he set a trap for you up ahead, but we removed its fangs. He is skirting the Ohmu Inn and running directly for Miner's Hold."

"Can you get ahead of him from above, my sister and cut him off?" Altera asked.

Already knowing what she had in mind, Sonia answered; "No problem, stop him we will."

Sonia and her squad returned to the trees and were gone in seconds. It took them eight minutes to catch up with Matai and his men. Sonia had her squad mark and take out each Hausa the men were riding. Carefully aimed darts hit the animals just below the calf and sent a paralyzing potion thru their bodies bringing them to the ground.

Matai leapt off his falling Hausa with his sword drawn, looking around wildly. He knew Altera couldn't be far behind. He was still at least ten miles from Miners Hold; he would have to fight his way to safety.

**"Face me as a warrior Altera," he brazenly shouted, "or do you not have the courage?"**

**He fanned out his men in a horseshoe shape and waited for Altera to attack; he didn't have long to wait. Altera and fifteen of her Light Brigade came riding up to the edge of the tree line. Matai stood there, sword in hand, defiantly glaring at her.**

**A look of disgust on her face, Altera turned to Sonia and signaled by hand. Immediately, Sonia and her group let loose with a barrage of darts. Matai's men went down one at a time. Matai fought the effects of the drug, but he too finally went down with a thud. He was paralyzed; he couldn't move, couldn't speak, he just lay there waiting for the blow.**

**Altera dismounted and walked over to his prone body. Looking down at him she spat out: "I would love to gut you now, slowly... but you don't deserve the honor of being slain by my hand. You deserve to be put down like the mad dega you are."**

**"Nooo..." Matai fought to get the word out. "Let...me...die...fighting!" It took all his strength to force these small words out.**

**Altera raised the Queens Sword and held it before her ignoring him.**

**"As First to Queen Naria, I hereby read the charges: For those countless boys that you corrupted; for the many innocents that you stole from, raped, and murdered; for following a man you knew to be mad and doing his bidding; for attempting to kill Lord Tarak; for plotting to murder the Queen and aiding Lord Boras in taking the throne, you are hereby sentenced to death."**

**Sighing she continued thru clenched teeth, "But most of all, you miserable piece of dirt, for raping and murdering the Lady Romain, my dearest friend."**

**Matai's eyes took on a strange look.**

**Altera stepped back as Sonia lowered herself from the tree limb and jumped to the ground. She circled Matai studying his face; she too recognized the mounting fear in his eyes.**

**"Look closely at my face animal, does it not look familiar?"**

**She bent over him.**

**"Here, if I pull back my hair like so,"**

**There was sudden recognition in Matai's eyes.**

**"Ah, now you see the resemblance."**

**Matai tried to show anger – she ignored him.**

**"Lady Romain was my sister; we were very close." Her tone now changed, "so close in fact, that I felt what she felt, I experienced what she experienced."**

Altera looked at Sonia in surprise, this she didn't know. She had heard of the closeness of sisters before, but this was the first time she knew someone. No wonder Sonia was out of her mind with rage when she burst into her office so many years ago.

"So you see, dega, that night when you dragged her out of her room, stripped her in front of your men, I was there." She continued in a dead voice that chilled Matai to the bone.

"When you dragged her to his chambers, threw her down and raped her in front of the little monster... I was there.

"When you held her down while he did unspeakable things to her... I was there."

Sonia's voice choked for a moment and then she continued with tears in her eyes. "And when she begged you for mercy, begged you to end the torture... I was there."

Sonia smiled wickedly, eyes glazed over, "and now..." Sonia bent and lightly caressed the side of Matai's face, "I shall extend that same measure of mercy to you."

Matai was now filled with terror.

Sonia took a few steps to the right of the tree and pulled back a large tarp covering a pit; almost immediately there was a particular humming sound that was unmistakable. The pit was filled with a couple of hundred Dentil beetles. The humming was deafening. Dentil beetles consumed their prey alive!

Matai's eyes reflected the terror he felt, a gurgling sound of protest erupted from the back of his throat. He twisted and turned, trying to escape, but to no avail. Tears began to form in Matai's pleading eyes; his body betrayed him and he suddenly wet his pants, the dark stain spreading.

*No!*

Sonia bent down, and smiling sweetly, began to roll him over to the pit.

"It should take them two to three days to eat you entirely," she said coldly.

"They are slow, and methodical, but very thorough," she emphasized smiling.

Then the smile was gone and her face was like marble.

"I give to you the same mercy you gave to my sister."

She rolled him into the pit, turned around and walked away.

Matai fell with a thud and the beetles began to swarm over his body immediately.

An inhuman cry of anguish erupted from the pit.

Sonia went to Altera's side.

"Thank you for allowing me to avenge my sister's death; it feels like a weight has lifted from my shoulders, and from my heart." She took Altera's hand, tears streaming down her face, "You are my dearest friend, my new sister; I shall forever be at your service."

On a signal Sonia and her fierce warriors took to the trees and were gone.

Altera ordered the rest of the men slaughtered. If they served Matai, they were as guilty as he, and needed to be eliminated. Her troops gladly complied with the order. When finished, they mounted their Hausa amid gurgling sounds from the pit.

Altera walked over and looked below, tears filling her eyes. Matai was twisting and turning, scrambling to keep the beetles from his head. He had a wild look on his face, like a man trying to keep a step ahead of the devil. She almost felt sorry for him - almost. She turned and walked away in disgust.

“May you rest in peace now my sweet dear Ro, my friend,” she whispered softly, “this was for you, and so many others.”

Altera returned to the Queen’s Hold and reported directly to Naria. “It is done my Queen,” she said in a dead voice.

Naria could see the pain on Altera’s face and took her into her arms. Altera broke down and began to sob, her body shaking with the emotion she felt. The action was so uncharacteristic of Altera; Naria knew she was in pain.

“It is over Altera, my friend. Lady Romain’s death has been avenged at last.” She held her at arms length, “you have fulfilled your vow to her. She can now rest in peace.”

“I know this in my head my Queen, but my heart is still so saddened at the death of such an innocent.” She looked at Naria with tears in her eyes, “Why do the innocent always have to suffer at the hands of such monsters?”

“I wish I had an answer for you my friend, but I don’t.”  
Gripping both of Altera’s shoulders Naria shook her gently and continued,  
“Now you must pull yourself together, this is far from over.”

Altera straightened herself and took a deep breath, “Yes my Queen, there is still one more piece of garbage to dispose of.”



“Commander, after we pass the Anterian Moon please bring the cloaking device up.” The voice had an air of authority about it, superiority one might say, held only by the Elders. “I want to be rid of our trackers and able to move about without their prying eyes on us.”

“Sir, yes sir, Admiral!” was the crisp answer.

“We are almost at the culmination of all our plans,” the admiral continued. “I will not risk failure at this late date. From the data we have been able to accumulate, and the unexpected Intel about gliders and landing sites on the planet, we should be able to rid ourselves of this problem once and for all.”

“The men have trained long and hard sir, they are ready,” assured the commander. “Six months of intensive training, and brainwashing, have given us perfect soldiers. When we turn them loose there will be no stopping them.”

“Yes, yes Commander, this will be the final time we will have to bother with these creatures. Our names will go down in Scather history as great heroes.”

The Admiral noted the Commander’s smile as he returned to his chair and sat. His mind drifted back six months. Back to the meeting he had before the Elder Council, itself. They were placing their last hopes with him; they told him, with him and his plan to finally end the ‘Ogatu’ problem. The youngest and strongest were taken from their parents and placed in special camps. They were drilled ten hours a day in fighting techniques. And each night as they slept, their brains were filled with propaganda against the Ogatu. Six months straight they drilled them, never letting up. In the end, the Admiral produced exactly what he promised he would; 600 dedicated fighting robots intent on killing every Ogatu in sight.

*If in giving the Elders this plan helps them to succeed; then maybe I will be rid of the thousands of faces that disturb my sleep each night;* thought the Admiral sadly.

Though he would never tell a soul; he was secretly glad that this would be his final hour. He was tired of this useless war and ready for his life to be over. His loyalty had been pledged to the Elders many long years ago; but lately he was beginning to think that they were all mad. Somehow, somewhere along the way they had crossed a line and descended into insanity. And though it gnawed at his conscience, there was nothing he could do about it, short of killing them all. So here he was, onboard this giant glider, taking 600 of their youngest and finest to their probable deaths. *Perhaps we are all mad,* he thought to himself.

“Engaging the cloaking device Admiral,” reported the commander. There was a slight tremor in the ship, and then a humming sound; they were now invisible to the eye and undetectable to any probe... or so they thought.

The communications center, Com Central, orbiting above Aura received a cryptic message from deep space and word was immediately sent word to the Queen's Hold.

Naria rushed to her communications room holding her breath; *please let this be success*, she silently prayed.

A message had been received she was told by a reluctant ensign. She sighed and then chuckled as he began to haltingly read the message. She had prearranged a greeting with Rital, 'to the bitch that rules Aura', to confirm that it came from him. She read the message for several long minutes smiling.

"Minister Gordon, please have Lord Dorsal, Lord Tarak and Lady Rayne join us in my study. Oh, and ask Duncan and Alexei to come also."

Fifteen minutes later they all stood as Naria entered her study.

"Well gentlemen, it looks like our plan has succeeded. Rital sends greetings from the new government of Scathia; the Elders are no more. It was quick and swift and apparently most welcome by the populace." She looked about, and smiled at Duncan before continuing.

"I feel a giant 'but' coming on," Duncan said with distain.

Naria nodded with a grimace.

"But, unfortunately, he warns of an attack that he could not recall. They were under strict orders to remain silent, no radio contact after they entered our galaxy. From the information they are still gathering, he says they are very young, and little more than flesh and blood robots. They were all brainwashed, trained for six months for one purpose, to kill us all. He says there is no hope for this group; we will have to kill them all. He further states that new information indicates that the Elders received a message from a traitor among us. Engineering plans for a glider were sent along with instructions on exactly how to operate it to reach the planet. He says they were instructed to land near the Ohmu Forest, and the Ohmu Inn was mentioned. Rital could not find out who the traitor was, but, since the plans were very detailed, he believes it has to be someone high in our government."

Minister Gordon quickly replied, "I will issue orders for an alert immediately, my Queen. Shall I call the heads of all the Holds to the palace?"

"All but Lord Boras; it seems he is suddenly and conveniently out of touch." Naria looked at Gordon and nodded, the little man left in a hurry.

A half hour later all the Lords were assembled in the Queens Study listening as she informed them as to what had taken place. The gravity of the situation was reflected in their eyes.

"Lord Boras betraying Aura...?"

"My Queen, are you certain?"

"Lord Boras is a bit strange... but to betray the people..."

"He must be stopped and forced to pay for his crimes..."

**“My spies tell me that his hold is completely bare of warriors,” Minister Gordon informed them, “they left Miners Hold three days ago. We believe they are positioned somewhere in the Ohmu Forest; no doubt to strike against the Scathers and take credit for ‘saving’ the people of Aura. We will find them and when we do we will know where the Scather raiding party is planning to land.”**

**“Queen Naria, may I make an observation?” asked Duncan. Naria nodded and Duncan turned to Gordon. “Given your history with the Scathers, do you really think they would land at a site chosen by their enemy?”**

**“How right you are Lord Duncan,” turning Naria looked at Tarak and Rayne. “Lord Tarak, any ideas?”**

**“Already ahead of you my Queen, I will inform Dane Tevid to keep a sharp eye out for any incoming Gliders. He will inform us the minute any are sighted. I will send First Kai to the other end of the forest in case there is a landing there. I will place two squads of my finest warriors at his command, my Queen. A runner will be sent at the first sight of a craft.”**

**“Good, good,” answered Naria, “I have instructed Commander Andrid to prepare a welcome. But we all know that he can do only so much against cloaked ships; some may get thru and land on Aura. We must be ready to greet them when they do.”**

**“My Queen,” Lord Dorsal interrupted, “it is winter here. They have never come in the winter, always the spring and summer.”**

**“Your point Lord Dorsal,” asked Lord Gustav.**

**“They are insectoids; the cold will slow them down to a crawl. They have no information about our seasons and how cold it gets during the winter months. They have no idea how it is on the plains this time of year; I refer to the biting cold and unrelenting winds. A storm is predicted for tomorrow afternoon; if they are caught in the open, they will die.” Lord Dorsal smiled and raised his hands, “End of problem!”**

**“If it was me, and I knew this was a one way trip,” Rayne said in a soft voice, “I would land my best troops right on top of the Queen’s Hold.”**

**“By the Gods you are right Lady Rayne,” shouted Lord Dorsal.**

**“As ever Lady Rayne, you see thru the diversion and into the heart of the matter,” praised Minister Gordon.**

**“Yes Gordon, I believe you are right,” agreed Queen Naria, “I shall have First Altera and her troops prepare a welcome for the poor fools. “I suggest my Lords that you all have your Holds prepare for attack. Secure your people below and place your warriors on the top level.”**

**The Lords rose, bowed to Queen Naria and then turned to Tarak; raising their fists high they shouted as one, “For the glory of Aura!”**

**After which they turned and filed out of the palace making quick steps to their respective Holds to prepare their defenses.**

**Lord Gustav stayed behind while the others left and quietly approached the Queen.**

**“My Queen - a moment if you will; I want you to know that if you should need extra troops, I will be at your call. If they should attack your Hold, you may find refuge in my Hold. I pledge to defend you with my life.”**

**His small gesture to offer her his protection endeared him to Naria; she was deeply touched by his thoughtfulness. She assured him she would be safe in Lord Tarak and Lady Rayne’s company. Besides, she told him, he must remember she was a warrior; and warriors do not back down.**

**As to Lord Boras' whereabouts, well, he was hiding in a small cottage below Miners Hold. He had his men deployed all along the area of the designated landing site. As soon as the Scather ship landed, his men would emerge from their hiding place and attack. When he received word they were finished killing the monsters, he would join them in a march to the Queens Hold. His men would spread the word about his defense of Aura against the Scather raid. He would be welcomed as a hero by all.**

**If all had gone according to plan, Matai would have removed Naria by then. He would then assume his rightful place on the throne. With Tarak and Naria dead, no one would oppose him.**

**Boras was so confident of himself that the thought of failure never entered his mind; his ego simply wouldn’t allow it. All he could think about was the pomp and ceremony of his coronation. The fun he would have picking a new wife from the fairest in all the land. The sumptuous feasts he would have; all the Lords forced to attend. He would have his revenge for their disdainful treatment of him.**

Three Scather ships came out of hyper drive and de-cloaked just as they entered the atmosphere; Commander Andrid and the Glider Squad were waiting for them. The battle was savage and short; the two larger ships (obviously) sacrificed themselves so the gliders could get away and breach the atmosphere to complete their mission. Andrid sent word to the surface with co-ordinates as to the possible landing sites available to these ships.

Lord Tarak and Lady Rayne had their men spread out across the Queen's Hold. Naria and Altera were ready with the Queen's Light Brigade. They spotted the first glider as it emerged from the clouds and made a beeline in the direction of the Queens Hold. The second appeared to be headed in the direction of the Ohmu Inn. Tarak warned Kai who was already on the road; it would take him less than ten minutes to reach the Inn.

Lord Dorsal and his platoon found Boras' men and surrounded them. After giving them a very grim choice, they gave up without a fight.

As the Glider passed over the top of the forest Scather troops began jumping. Their parachutes opened and they glided downward towards the direction of the Queens Hold. Their accuracy showed that they were well prepared and apparently had been practicing for very long time. They landed at the uppermost level of the forest and ran smack into Sonia and her troops almost immediately. The attack was vicious and heated, she and her troops managed to take out quite a few of them. Unfortunately, these Scathers were trained very well; they regrouped quickly and held off the second attack giving the main troops time to descend.

Spread out along the length of the Queen's Hold, Altera and her Light Brigade waited for sight of the Scathers. Swords at the ready, they were backed up by Lord Tarak's platoon of Eloi-trained warriors. The Scathers came down quickly and attacked savagely; the fighting was brutal and no quarter was given. They managed to break thru and Naria and Altera fought for their lives. At this affront, Tarak's warriors surged forward in a blood-rage and in an engagement that lasted a heated thirty minutes, cut them down.

Covered in green blood, the warriors emerged from the trees announcing their victory with shouts of "Uwah!" At Lord Tarak's direction they left the mopping up to the Light Brigade and headed out towards the Ohmu Inn.

Rayne saw to the defense of Warrior's Hold with six carefully hand-picked men. They slew about thirty hard core, well trained Scathers. They too were all bathed in green blood by battles' end. They joined up with Lord Tarak and headed at fast pace towards the Ohmu Inn.

Meanwhile, First Kai reached the Ohmu Inn with his warriors just as the glider passed overhead. As he and his men entered thru the large gate they saw the Scathers parachutes open, it was going to be a nasty fight. Making haste they rushed directly for the stairs leading to the roof.

Dane Tevid and all the able bodied men in the Inn were on the roof and ready to battle. The sight of Kai and his men rushing forward gave them the extra courage they needed. They watched as the large force floated closer and closer. Suddenly there was a barrage of arrows from above; they had indeed trained well. At a flick of Kai's hand a barrage returned the gesture, but with deadlier accuracy.

The Scathers, to their horror, were met by a group much larger than expected; their Intel was false! The battle was bloody and fierce, but the outcome never in doubt. Now, there was still one more group of Scathers out on the plain; but just where they landed was anyone's guess.

That group, in fact, landed on the outskirts of the Omhu Forest. They gathered together quickly and headed straight for the interior of the forest. Twenty minutes later they spotted the city above them and began to climb; once at the top they attempted to swing themselves over to the landing to begin the slaughter. Unfortunately for them, they were spotted by Sonia's vigilant forces and were met by a barrage of arrows from men from all the Holds. They proved their worth that day and took out half of the Scather force. The brief encounter that followed put an end to the last of their plans for annihilating the Ogotu.

All that remained now was Lord Boras.

A knock on Altera's door would bring the drama to a close. A servant from Miner's hold was asking for Altera and sanctuary. Telling the Queen's First that she did not want to be thought of as a traitor, she related how she had overheard Lord Boras and Matai plotting the Queen's death and the overthrow of the Lords Holders. The staff in Miner's Hold was watched carefully at all times; more so at Gathering time. The Lordholder knew many would not return if allowed to leave. She explained that this was the first chance she had to get away to warn the Queen.

Altera took her to the Queen straight away and they learned the details of Lord Boras' plans. It was then that Naria decided to hold the Gathering as planned. Boras would no doubt think Naria dead and attempt to enter. All the Lords would be informed of the change in plans and they would make judgment when Boras arrived. Naria then instructed that the young girl be taken to her rooms and readied for the Gathering that night. She would stand at Naria's right side when Boras entered the Hall. With the Scathers dead or dying, there was no reason for not having the annual feast.

Carefully concealed in the uppermost branches he bided his time. He watched as the young men he had trained for so long were cut down by a superior fighting force. He could no longer stand the insanity of the Elders, but he could not disobey them either. Too many years of service; no he would die doing what he was sent to do.

Two hours before the Gathering, Lord Boras came out of hiding and made straight for Miners Hold and his quarters. He bathed, and perfumed himself preparing for his triumphant entrance into the Gathering. As per his instructions, Matai was not to contact him unless something went wrong. Having heard nothing, he naturally assumed that everything was going according to plan. The small Scather intrusion and the panic it would have caused was the perfect blind for hiding the assassination of Naria. By now Matai was dealing with Altera also. Smiling to himself he thought arrogantly that nothing could stop his ascending the Throne of Aura.

With pomp and ceremony Lord Boras began to make his way towards the Queen's Hold. He noted that the street was noticeably devoid of people. But then the Scather raid had probably scared the main populace; they were probably hiding in their homes he explained to himself. They were simpletons, so they naturally would be afraid to come out. The closer he got the Queen's Hold the more excited he became. Finally he arrived and dismounted with a flourish... still no one around. He climbed the steps as if he expected a crowd to begin chanting his name. In his mind, he actually heard them.

The massive doors opened and as he was greeted by Altera herself.

*What?*

He turned pale at the sight of her until she smiled at him, bowed slightly and bid him enter. She swung open the doors to the Queen's Hold and loud music could be heard from within. He followed Altera down the long hallway and entered the Gathering Hall. He reeled at the sight before him.

*No!*

There was Naria, sitting on the throne!

*Matai?*

Matai was no where to be seen.

Something wasn't right; Matai should have taken the Queen out long ago.

Boras scanned the room quickly and saw the truth in everyone's eyes.

*No!*

He was found out... Matai had failed. Boras froze where he stood.

*No..no!*

It was then that Altera walked by him brazenly displaying Matai's belt buckle fastened to her sword hilt.

*No...!*

Boras bowels squirmed as he suddenly realized he was in real danger.

He began to back up slowly.



Down the hallway Mistress Sera was not feeling all that well. She had had several bouts with her stomach that morning and one that afternoon. A small meal seemed to keep it calmed down, but now her stomach was queasy again. She wiped her face with a cold compress and washed out her mouth. Adjusting her dress she spied herself in the mirror.

**“You look a wreck Sera! Now get yourself together woman. You will not ruin this evening for your mate!”**

She knew this was a special time for Kai and she wanted to please him. She left the women’s chamber and headed for the Great Hall.

**“Lord Boras,” Naria called out loudly, “you are not leaving us are you?”**  
The entire Hall watched intently.

**“My Queen,” Boras answered in a strained voice as he bowed from the landing, “I... I suddenly felt ill. I didn’t want to pass anything on to anyone.”**

**“I doubt anyone can catch treason,” boomed Lord Tarak.**

Lord Boras glared at Tarak with pure hate.

**“Be silent dog!” Boras spat out, “I need no lessons from you or your kind!”**

**“And just what... kind... would that be, Lord Boras?” Naria asked in a tight voice.**

Boras took a stance on the platform, his hand on the dagger at his side. He knew he had been found out, but he was not going to give the bitch any joy in her victory.

**“Half-breeds like yourself, witch!”**

The whole court went silent, aghast at his words.

His answer was just what Naria had been waiting for; she rose and threw off her robe. Stepping forward she unsheathed her sword and raising it over her head called out the challenge...

**“I challenge your right to hold Lordship; I challenge your right to Hold!”**

In an instant Lord Boras saw all his dreams crumble before him. The lines between his dream, (held for so many years), and reality were clearly drawn; and somewhere in between Lord Boras lost his hold on either. His face became hard and he all but growled at Naria.

It was then that the door opened and Mistress Sera stepped into the room. Before anyone could warn her, Lord Boras had spun around and grabbed her, holding his dagger to her throat.

First Kai began to rush forward but Tarak held him back. Kai held his breath and gripped his sword hilt. Lady Rayne stayed his hand and began to move backwards.

**“Hold right there you devil woman... no one moves,” Boras screamed, “not if you want Mistress Sera to see another day.”**

**Turning towards Naria he spat out, “You witch! You are nothing but a filthy hybrid! Not even really one of us... an abomination! Yet they allow you sit on the throne that is mine by birthright!**

**“We are all hybrids you idiot!” Tarak shouted, “How do you think the Scather scientists made us?**

**A ripple of “ah's” ran thru the court.**

**“My family has endured since the beginning times. We are of the first ones; we have never interbred; our bloodline is pure. The throne is mine!”**

**"You and your 'family' have produced some of the sickest and cruelest members of our society," Tarak spat out. "More often than not they are insane; pure breeding has a tendency to produce such monsters."**

**"You shut up! You know nothing," Boras screamed.**

**“Oh give it up Boras; you are nothing more than a spoiled little boy who can’t have his way.” Naria baited him, “Everyone here knows of your plan to have Matai remove me.” She gave him a moment to digest this and then continued in a mocking voice. “You really thought you could march in here and take the throne. Good God man, the true Lords of Aura would never allow a weakling like you to sit on the throne.”**

**“Shut-up, shut-up, shut-up! I am the rightful... I am...” Lord Boras looked about the Hall and all he saw was condemnation in the eyes of the other Lords. "Don't look at me..."**

**“What I cannot understand is how you could conspire with the Scathers. Hatred of me is one thing, but you showed our hated enemy how to attack your own people...hardly the actions of a ruler.” Altera glared at Boras and then said in a sneer, "We have proof of all little man, Matai told us many things before he died.”**

**Boras’s eyes went wide and he screamed madly, “Arrgh!” Spinning around he quickly dragged Mistress Sera with him out of the Hall.**

**Altera left the Hall by a side door and called her guards. They were in the trees headed for Miners Hall within seconds.**

**Kai made to leave but Rayne stayed him. “I will get her back, Kai - I swear it.”**

**“No Lady Rayne," Naria whispered, "this is for me to do.”**

Naria left the Hall and headed for the trees; she caught up with Lord Boras at the lift; he had armed himself well. He had tied Mistress Sera's hands and pulled her along behind him to the lift. His mistake was his chivalry. Turning to help the lady onto the lift he was not prepared when she shot out her leg as Rayne had taught her. She caught him off-guard and he went down in a heap and she turned and ran down the pathway.

Lord Boras recovered quickly and seeing his hostage running away went into a fit of rage. He ran after her like a wildman and reached out and grabbed her hair and yanked her off her feet. Sera screamed loudly and fought him off as only a mother protecting her young could do. Lord Boras backed away from her staring in surprise, just as Naria reached them.

"Boras, give it up; you have lost and there is nowhere for you to go." Naria jumped down to the walkway and approached him. "Fight like a man for once in your life Boras, or bend over and allow me to take your head. Either way your life ends this day."

"Aargh.....!" Boras screamed incoherently as he raised his crossbow and shot out a barrage at Naria. One hit her in the upper shoulder but, true to form, she simply pulled it out and continued towards Boras.

"You have corrupted your Hold and the people in it. For far too long we have turned a blind eye your actions. But the murder of Lady Romain... the kindest and most innocent woman..." Naria turned for a moment and cleared her throat.

"Her death was the final straw. We have proof of all you have done, and the other things you were planning to do. Treason is punishable by death."

While Naria spoke Lord Boras slowly backed up and began to raise the weapon again. Mistress Sera spotted this and fearing the worst for Naria kicked out and sent the weapon spinning away. Boras spun around and struck her with such force that she went spinning to the ground.

"How dare you, you filthy whore! All of you...you're nothing!...nothing but mongrels." Boras' tone became maniacal, "I am the true ruler of Aura; I alone have the purest blood."

"The purest blood belongs to Lady Rayne, tests confirm she is of the First Ones," Naria informed him stonily.

"No!" screamed Boras, "Lies, you are all serfs, peasants, and dogs."

Naria could see that Boras had lost what little grip he had on his sanity and had descended into madness.

"The only dog I see is standing before me; and he is rabid with hate." Naria began to move forward, "This is over!"

Naria stepped forward and Boras jumped back a step. At just that moment, the Scather Admiral that been hidden dropped down and cleanly cut Boras' arm off. Screaming like a child, a panicked Boras attempted to run. bad move. The Scather spun around and neatly cut him in two. It then turned and began to move towards Mistress Sera who screamed in terror.

Naria sized up the situation quickly and continued to move forward. Raising her sword she attacked the monster maneuvering her way between it and Mistress Sera. They fought fiercely for at least five minutes when suddenly the Scather rushed forward swinging his sword wildly. Naria simply stepped aside, spun around raising her sword as she did, and took his head as he passed. It was over in a matter of seconds.

Naria went to Mistress Sera and helped her to her feet. Her lip was split and bleeding, but otherwise she was okay.

“That was very brave of you Mistress Sera, considering your condition and all. You have my utmost thanks for your effort.” Naria bowed with a flourish and became dizzy with the effort.

“My Queen, you are injured; please allow me aid you back to the Hold,” Sera offered.

“Not necessary, they should be here shortly. Altera and Kai...aha...see... here they are now.”

Altera went to Naria, “My Queen, you are injured. Come, we return to the Hold.” Turning to Sonia she instructed, “Please get rid of both of this garbage.”

“No,” Naria interrupted, “bring him back to the Hall...now!”

Kai rushed to Sera's side and seeing the blood sliding down her face uttered, “Sera, oh my God, you are injured!”

“It is just a split lip Kai, I am alright. I got so angry with the pompous ass that I wasn't afraid of him. We fought... and this was the result. But my Queen arrived and saved me,” she said looking at Naria and smiling.

“You have one strong woman there First Kai,” Naria nodded, “she will be quite an asset to your house.”

Lord Tarak and Lady Rayne came down the pathway.

“Queen Naria, you are injured...allow me assist you to your Hold,” offered Lord Tarak.

“No need Tarak, Altera has everything in order. It is not but a small flesh wound. But I do insist we return to the Hall. This must all be laid before the other Lords.”

Twenty minutes later they were assembled in the Great Hall, Lord Boras' body on the floor in front of Naria's throne. She stood and addressed them.

**"Lords and Ladies of Aura, before you lies the body of Lord Boras, his death by my hand alone. The charges against him are many, treason, murder, torture, etc... Proof of his crimes will be entered into the records. Does anyone have cause to doubt the sentence carried out against him?"**

No one stepped forward to object.

**"We now have a Hold in need of a Lord. With the Lords agreement," Naria bowed to them and continued, "I propose the raising of Kai, First to Lord Tarak, to the rank of Lord and placing him in charge of Miners Hold. It needs cleaning up badly, and I can think of no one more equipped to do just that. What say ye?"**

There was immediate stomping and shouts of "aye" around the Hall.

**"So be it!"** shouted Naria, **"Come forward First Kai and Mistress Sera."**

Kai and Sera made their way thru the crowded room in shock. Kai had never expected such an honor. Lord Tarak and Lady Rayne were beaming for him.

Stepping before Queen Naria they both knelt down. Pulling her sword, Naria touched Kai on the shoulder and nicked it slightly, drawing blood.

**"For your loyalty, for your love of Aura and her people, I, Queen Naria do hereby raise you to rank of Lord Holder; to be passed onto your children and so forth. I appoint you Lord of Miners Hold, it's possessions and all those therein... rise Lord Kai."**

Naria stepped to Sera's side and placed her hand on her shoulder.

**"For your bravery in the recent adverse situation, for defending your Queen against overwhelming odds,"** Naria removed the sash she had around her waist and tied it to Sera's wrist. **"I hereby announce that henceforth you shall be known as Lady Sera, Mistress of Miners Hold."**

There were shouts of "aye" and great stomping from Warriors' Hold crowd. To say they were proud of Kai and Sera was an understatement. Tarak and Rayne came forward and congratulated the young couple. Many surrounded them and wished them well.

Tarak made his way over to Naria.

**"Pretty shrewd of you to align our two holds like that,"** Naria smiled at him, **"yes a real slick move indeed."**

Naria laughed, **"Well I couldn't think of anyone I trusted more. Besides that place needs to be cleaned up. A squad of your warriors to back him is all he will need. I have every confidence in him."**

**"Ladies and Lords! I bid you toast the new day. Raise your tankards high and take pride in who we are... what say you?" Naria asked holding the Queens cup high.**

**"UWAH!" shouted the entire room in deafening chorus.**

**"We are Ogatu!"**

# EPILOGUE



Four months later the winter season ended and all returned to their Holds. Lady Sera and Lord Kai returned with an addition to their household. On an early Spring morning, a son was born and Kai and Sera had never known such joy. Lord Tarak and Lady Rayne filled the new Lord and Lady's Hold with gifts for the new arrival.

Lord Tarak and Lady Rayne spent many a night in Miner's Hold during the first few weeks. But a new Kai emerged and took the reigns of leadership of Miners Hold with gusto. He took Bail as his First giving the young man the honor that was due him. Within two months they had weeded out the worst of vermin that had occupied that Hold and in the process gained the respect of the townspeople. With Bail's help they were able to bring about honor once again to Miner's Hold. Justice was served in that Hold for the time in years.

Lady Sera changed the main Hold house from top to bottom. Everything that belonged to Lord Boras was taken out and placed in a pile in the center of the courtyard. Lady Sera told the people they could choose what to do with it. To her surprise they set it afire wanting nothing of their former Lord. The people embraced the kindness of Lady Sera and hovered in protection of her whenever she went among them.

Tarak was very proud of his brother and his abilities. He soon accepted that Lord Kai had things under control and returned to Warrior's Hold. He and Rayne had a long and passionate life as mates. And many children found themselves as wards of Lord Tarak's household; much to the joy of Lady Rayne.

Life continued on Aura.

Duncan returned to the Phoenix with Alexi, but not for long. At Naria's insistence he became the official Guild Representative to Aura. He did not object as he had fallen in love with Naria; and she in turn cared deeply for him. Years later, when Duncan passed, a heartbroken Naria followed within a few short months.

It was Lady Rayne who urged Altera to take the throne with Naria's blessing. No one objected for all knew Naria had trained her for this all along. Her rule would prove to be one of peace and justice.

Alexi took over as Commander of the Phoenix, and Lady Tara accompanied him as scientific consultant. They spent many years exploring space together. Theirs was a long and passionate relationship, but that is another story.