

THE ELF AND HUNTRESS

The Elf & Huntress

J. L. Lawson

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Man's great misfortune is that he has no organ, no kind of eyelid or brake, to mask or block a thought, or all thought, when he wants to.

---Ambroise-Paul-Toussaint-Jules Valéry

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Playing Favorites

"A punishment to some, to some a gift, and to many a favor."
---Lucius Annaeus Seneca

“No I am *not* the *Assistant* Manager of the lab...” her nostrils flared with the riposte. She had to take a deep breath and remember that it really didn't matter what this person, or anyone else for that matter, thought about her, her position, *or* the lab. She had a charter from the Executive Director to achieve specific goals---this cover was just that: a well constructed mask. In a gentler tone, “...I am just a struggling lass from the highlands, however if you would wait here, I'm certain I can arrange for you to interview one of the management. Now I really would like to get in out of this rain!”

“Thanks Doll, that'd be super!” the agent grinned in triumph. “And if we could be allowed to bring along our cameras?...”

Tera was careful not to roll her eyes, but maintained her grip on civility as tightly as her umbrella. “I will see what I can do. If you will wait here?” And she finally made the foyer of her own facility. “Inger,” she needn't have raised her voice; the Chief of Security for the labs was always at the doors in the morning. “Please find Clara or Jack and give them heads up that they have an eager journalist waiting out front...” Shaking out her rain gear and shedding her sodden coat, she held them, dripping, out to the genial guard.

“Yes Ma'am. Und guten tag!” Inger was still trying to get used to the position, she reminded herself as she breezed passed the screening machines and the rest of the formidable security measures keeping plain folks at bay.

“Ms. Elphinstone, the progress reports from the night shift are on your desk and I made sure the department heads are aware of the

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meeting change.” Her lieutenants were nothing if not organized, she thought and flung her coat and shoulder bag onto the layout table next to her desk.

“Thanks Vince, now if the espresso machine is working..”

He winced and disappeared, closing her doors behind him. Talking to herself was just a way of organizing her thoughts she justified and opened her mouth to emphasize, “The Boss does it; must be useful...” reassuring herself. “Now,” she reached for the reports, hoping the milestones that were supposed to have been reached last night--- “are we ahead or trailing?”

Vince glided to the desk, set down the demitasse and let himself out again. She reached for the cup; took a sip...

Her vision began swimming and the scene before her blurred. “Crap!” she struggled up against the restraints. “Another damn memory!” She tossed her head back and forth to get her hair out of her mouth and hopefully dislodge the probes and wires decorating her scalp; her arms and legs strapped so tightly to the bed/table their usefulness was passed futility. The caked and clotted bloody streaks up and down her arms and legs were testament that she had been out of the restraints at least long enough to gain *them*. “I hope that was entertaining enough for you!” she blasted, though her voice was raw and thin. “Whoop, whoop! Another exciting memory of reading reports! You guys are sooo not getting anywhere!”

Her minor rebellion in the face of her dire predicament was all she really had to keep her sanity over the last... how long *had* she been tucked away in this Naudi hell-hole? The dim and bare closet of a room with its blank walls and ceiling, and that smell! “What is this stench!” she repeated for the hundredth time at least. She had a suspicion that it was her own loss of hygiene... And again she tried to shake her head clear of the fog descending...

The night closed in on her where she crouched in the shadows of the alley. Her mind always drifted back to those morbid recollections when she wasn't careful. The chill of the moist fog on her hands and face brought her out of her private hell. She glanced

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across the street for any sign that her marks had arrived without her noticing. Nothing. Just the erratic pulse of the abused neon sign over the tattoo shop window answered her scan. 'Won't be long..' she muttered under her breath.

She stood and retreated deeper into the shadows. Circling the building without a sound through the narrow alleys was all that suggested she was haunting the shop across the street. The sounds of splishing steps grew louder as she emerged at her other secret peeping spot. The figures of a couple, both the same height, but one stumbling and reeling next to the other, solidified from out of the gloom. 'That's my Jack and Jill; tardy as usual..' As they passed her station she crept out behind them before they could reach the flickering neon light. Silent as death, she slipped 'a package' into the coat pocket of the reeling fellow; the girl none the wiser for the movement. Tera was out of sight again in an instant into the vacant doorway of a neighboring shop. The tattoo parlor door opened and the tinkling of the little bell over it as it shut was dampened by the roiling mists at once.

Tera stepped out of the shadow and walked casually back up the way the couple had come. "Four, three, two, one..." There was a flash of light that lit up the narrow lane for several moments. At once it became darker than it had been but for only a split second. She lifted her wrist to her face. "Ready for pick-up..." she uttered matter-of-factly and continued on up the shadowy lane toward the brighter lights and festive shouts and music of the boulevard.

She threw back her overcoat and put on her best 'let's get this party on!' face as she joined a band of revelers just coming out of one of the hundred bars and honky-tonks lining the strip. Her tight red dress glowed as bright as the thousand lanterns swaying overhead to mark the third night of celebration over the people's recent liberation from their overlords. Her matching red heels clicked on the cobblestones behind the little knot of revelers. She moved like a drunken debutant until she reached the Underground. Slipping down the stairs she pulled the coat up tighter again and slumped onto a

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bench to wait for the train.

'One more errand and I'm shut of this little backwater planet...' she sighed and glanced down at her shoes. 'And something more comfortable...' The approaching screech of grinding metal heralded the train. She rose, intuitively glanced back and forth across the platform; no movement. She positioned herself near the boarding steps still semi-covered by the pillars. The cars stopped with a whistle and whoosh, the doors snapped open. She waited until the last second and leapt as they slammed shut and the train took off for the next stop.

There were only a handful of passengers. The rest of the district's residents were all back up on the strip carousing and drinking their brains out. 'Save two notable exceptions...' she reminded herself with a grim smile. She made a little cough and brought her wrist to her face again, "Fourteen minutes till second package drop." Her voice was low and her eyes took in the entire contents of the carriage. Still nothing. Through the windows, low lit side tunnels and the under-lit passing trains smeared by. A mechanical gong announced the next stop and she hunkered down in the seat, looking for all the world like a bag lady or other of the teeming homeless vagabonds that were ubiquitous of late.

An elderly lady and her nurse stepped into the car. Tera scrutinized the pair, ensuring they were who they appeared to be. Satisfied, she relaxed a bit and reran her next 'drop-off' in her mind. Another gong and she was up at the door as it opened, and was across the platform like a phantom, no one the wiser for her passage.

Again she emerged from her overcoat like a butterfly from a chrysalis and allowed as much attention to herself as could be offered by this new avenue of celebrants and their raucous singing, laughter and shrieks of ridiculousness. Two blocks later she pushed through the polished glass revolving doors into the elegant foyer of a grand building. Smiling coquettishly at the poor saps who drew the short straws for nightwatchman duties she bounced up the broad stairs drawing both their attentions absolutely. 'Never under-estimate

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the power of moving mammaries!' she grinned back at them when she reached the mezzanine and ducked into the ladies room.

The door had only just shut and she was transformed again. The seductive costume of the early night replaced by the dark matte skintight suit of a shadow. She leapt onto the sink counter and was inside the ventilation shaft without a sound. "Countdown to drop on my mark," she whispered to her invisible comrades. "Mark."

She moved like a cat through the winding shafts with the surety of one who had been there before. Suddenly stopping over a vented juncture, she rose up through the hatch and climbed the service ladder to the maintenance door above her. A moment to trick the lock and she opened the door enough to look down the empty upper floor hall.

She slipped a plastic wedge into the lock and let the door close, her ear pressed to its surface. The clomp of leather shoes barely rose in tempo as she listened. Again she held her breath, waited as the steps passed her door. She moved silently out into the hall, slipped another 'something' into the pocket of the suited gentleman just passing and was hidden in the alcove opposite her door in a blink.

The gentleman turned the corner at the end of the hallway and she opened the door behind her in the alcove. Crossing the suite, she burned the locked latch of the window with a pencil laser and pushed it open. The muted din of the streets below instantly pervaded the stillness of the vacant rooms. She crept out onto the ledge and began the short climb up the wall, moving like a spider over the glass and steel. At the roof, she picked up the backpack left for her there and pulled out her last disguise.

A roar erupted in the floors beneath her as she smiled mischievously and jumped from the roof.

The dank night air rushed over her face. She blinked back the gathering moisture in her eyes and glided toward the rows of piers at the harbor. Spotting the one vessel she knew was waiting just for her, she made a barrel-roll to drop some velocity and pushed herself into a spread eagle that fully dampened her descent. Dropping softly onto

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the upper deck of the ship. Two assistants helped her out of the flying gear.

“It's good to have you back Boss;” said the slightly shorter of the two.

“Mistress is waiting. If you take my meaning, ma'am,” intimated the other.

The first one held open the hatch leading to the bridge of the vessel, “We're cleared for lift off, at your discretion Boss...”

Tera marched onto the bridge and sat in the captain's chair. “Let's blow this backwater little satellite! Mama's got an appointment with her majesty and she doesn't want to be late.”

She turned to the pilot, “Our two 'guests' situated securely? Sadly, I over estimated the charge for the third... Que lastima...”

“Yes ma'am,” came the curt response as the ship shuddered and rose. “Anticipated docking in forty minutes...”

Tera touched a panel on the arm of the chair, “The Elf, here. Special delivery expected inside the hour. Please have my bounty waiting, we shan't be docked longer than necessary. Her Eminence is expecting me and I won't keep the Matriarch waiting!”

The blurred points of light through the main viewer crystalized into a familiar pattern of stars, then just as suddenly they blinked out as the little scout ship went into wrinkle drive. “Good. Alert me in twenty. I'm going to have a bath.” With that she left the bridge and sauntered across her quarters dropping bits of her clothes in trail behind her. “Shower.” She said with not a little anticipation in her voice. The hot spray of water and steam filled the bright chamber and she was enfolded. “Aah...”

Tera Elphinstone. Born Earth. Recruited Lascor Special Operations after first contact. Indentured Contract Operative for three years and four months following her extensive training period with the Selective Services Administration. Answerable only to the Matriarch. Anticipated release from indenture: three days, seven hours and... “Twelve minutes. Can't come too soon...” she repeated

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to herself as she towed off and pulled her court robes from the drawer. "Dressing like a geisha is one of the things I'll be missing about this gig!" She writhed and wriggled into the costume and did a turn in front of the mirror, making a practice flourish. The translucent, billowing folds of the robes swelled then snapped around her figure like saran wrap in the blink of an eye.

"Perfection;" a voice uttered mechanically through the speakers as the Elf gazed, satisfied at the display.

"Yes. It should be; I've only done it a thousand times..." the Elf responded. "Inform the Matriarch the Naud's last remaining 'errant children' from Tabila are on their way to the 're-education' facilities." She smiled "Via channels, naturally. A girl's allowed a kickback from time to time. These two were *very* naughty boys and girls. The one I left in pieces was positively... evil. I'll have his price in rhodium if you please."

"Understood," retorted the voice and the speaker went silent.

Under her breath, "Damn snooping, department staff..." she muttered at the pervasive monitoring busybodies who intruded at the most inopportune moments.

The Elf was on her last assignment. "Where shall I visit first?" she mused half aloud to herself. Crossing to the view port in her quarters she gazed out at the smears of light that were the passing stars. "*Not* a Naudi outpost or haven, that's a given!" she stamped and turned to return to bridge. 'Had enough of that lot on behalf of our latest well-paying clients...' It was always best to appear at command when dealing with these quasi-directors. 'Directors,' she sniffed at the title. As if the witless automatons directed anything in reality. A pinging chime announced her return to the Bridge.

"Bring us out of wrinkle, and hail the Directorate of Naudi Diaspora Re-assimilation;" she commanded.

The screen filled with the well-groomed face of a man she didn't recognize--and no wonder, the Directorate had a higher turnover than a brothel of lepers. "Docking permission requested and

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bounty disbursement expected, as notified...” her com officer announced to the blank face of the director.

“Dock ten.” The face mouthed mechanically and added, “Disbursement delayed...”

The Elf leaned forward menacingly from the captain's chair toward the screen. Through clenched teeth she repeated evenly: “If this delay is greater than a nano-second, this facility will be missing its charter the next second later...”

The screen blipped with static for a moment and the smiling face of a woman replaced that of the droll little man's visage. “Miscommunication. 'Delay' is a misnomer. A simple exchange is all, we take custody of the packages and you have your bounty. No delay, I assure you. The Matriarch need not be involved in the slightest...”

“Satisfactory,” the Elf replied smoothly and cut the link. “Skip protocols and put us at dock ten. Now.”

“Yes Captain,” the smirking voice of her pilot answered. This was more like it!

There was a bumping and a sudden stillness. “Oops, we may have crumpled their umbilicals as we transited, Captain...” her pilot pointed out without remorse.

The Elf was at the docking hatch in a flash. Her two 'packages,' the 'emigrees' who had at last been returned, flanked her, blindfolded and bound. She pushed them through to the platform ahead of her. The waiting 'reception committee' took custody and a tallish woman stepped forward extending a small shimmering cube in her hand as she did so. “Your bounty Captain. And may I add...”

“Not interested,” the Elf spat as she turned, grabbed the offered reward and shut the hatch on the emissary before she could finish her short speech. “Bounce!” the Elf said without hesitation.

The little scout ship blinked from the dock and was in wrinkle toward Lascor inside three seconds. “We'll arrive at Court in eighteen hours and thirty-three minutes Ma'am;” the voice of her navigator

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announced over the speakers.

“I'll be in my quarters. Please knock three times...” That was ship's code for disabling the snoop monitors' signal.

A moment, and there came: “Captain, free to be yourself ma'am. All department signals jammed.”

“I'll be in my quarters.” the Elf strode up through the short corridor removing her official robes as she went. “I need a nap...”

There is a back story to this little escapade.

The Elf; Tera Inghean Elphinstone, was the second child of a very happy couple residing on their ancestral highlands in the village of Fortingall. The Elphinstones were a modest folk but not provincial by any stretch. Their children, as they themselves before them, were shuffled off to the Universities on the continent as soon as admissions were secured. Tera and her older sister were natural scholars and graduated with highest honors in less than the prescribed four years. Fortunate, that. Their parents died in a rail accident a few months later.

Her sister, Mara, accepted a research/teaching position at the Max Plank Institute; Tera went into the corporate world with a definite attitude. The Drummond Group made her an offer she couldn't refuse and in seven years after the first months of her employ, she became one of a handful of Directors overseeing the most vast and influential engine for change on the planet.

Then company operations took a turn for the interplanetary and Tera's future went with it.

It seemed innocuous enough. Just a little assignment to inventory the Seranath Trade Guild holdings outside the Nourii systems before formal negotiations for merger would be drafted by the Drummond Group attorneys. A precious few people from Earth had ever heard of the Naud, let alone the Lascorii. The latter was intentional.

History Lesson One---the Lascorii:

Setting: Central band of star systems in Nourii traded space

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within the Orion Spur. Colonization had been ramped up to ensure that their hold on the habitable worlds nearest at hand provided a buffer. A necessary barrier of sorts for discouraging any other peoples from reaping the resources needed by their own ever-growing and expanding culture.

On one of those, less hospitable colonized worlds---Lascor---a strange mutation began to appear in the second generation of the settlers. The Emigration Commission's lead biologists were summoned, tests and research concluded the unthinkable. The environment of the colony's planet had worked with surprising swiftness to twist their genetic heritage. The younger generation suffered not at all in the rather dangerous environment of the planet supporting the remote colony. The only really disturbing side-effects of the mutation were that the offspring were all female and upon adolescence exuded a most distinct and powerful pheromone---Wonderful for further protecting them from the harsh atmosphere, however deleterious to common interaction with their former Nourii brethren.

The Lascor colony was quarantined, all settlers screened and those not possessing the mutation were evacuated. Sisters were ripped from brothers, wives from husbands and little girls orphaned by their grieving families. The 'afflicted' generation was abandoned to their own devices. The 'Lascorii,' as they were referred to by the hushed and shamed voices of the few Nourii directly involved in the action, were left without any apparent means of self-continuation. An all-female population boded ill for any future they might have wished for themselves, in the face of complete isolation, with the complete lack of Nourii contact there was a total vacuum regarding material support. That was well over thirty-seven hundred years ago.

At the time of the enacted quarantine, a mere couple dozen of the women were with child. Hope against hope arose in all of them that male children might be forthcoming. Some glimmer of a chance that perhaps their doom was not sealed. Such was their brief joy when in fact there were male offspring born. Sadly, as it turned out,

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they were sterile...

Lascor itself is situated at the farthest boundaries of Nourii occupied space and as such was visited infrequently by scout ships and the occasional trading vessels requiring refueling and resupply over the vast range of their routes. It took the Lascorii little experience with those impromptu 'guests' to realize what an affect their own bodies' atmospheres had on the unsuspecting travelers---whatever their origins. In a word, they were mesmerized and compliant.

The first Lascorii woman to recognize the potential of their natural influence over any and all visitors also took advantage of that first opportunity from the unlooked for visitors to guarantee herself, and her clan, supplies from the visiting vessel, the indefinite company of several of the male crew and: children. She was Lei'tressa Reja Tei Emiclairsenne. Thereafter honored by her 'sisters' as Lei'tressa Reja Tei Emiclairsenne I, first Matriarch of Lascor.

With their survival no longer hanging in the balance, the subsequent centuries saw the blossoming of their society and culture. The force of natural selection had created them and their world; they responded the only way they could. They developed their own version of their history, codified their own traditions of proper conduct, of leadership, of succession, of lifestyle, training children---all girls for the most part---and most importantly for this particular story: their own *very* unique foreign policy.

It might occur to lesser minds and hearts that the use of the Lascorii Flame, as their singular enchantments were reverently referred to, might be used as a weapon of conquest, of absolute control and domination. That was not the path down which the Matriarchs of the Lascorii guided their people however. They had had to develop superior cunning, become masters---mistresses, rather---of illusion, supreme manipulators of deceit and misdirection as their native weapons. All valuable strategic tools in the arsenal of the most adept culture of espionage ever birthed in the galaxy.

The Lascorii exported their sole sovereign gifts to the highest

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bidder. A veritable black market of black ops. Ships, they had. Resources, they acquired. A reputation... they cultivated. The 'Matriarch of the Lascorii' became a title synonymous with power and unqualified obeisance among their clients; but with fear, mistrust and loathing from the Nourii peoples who had shuttered their memories of any connection with the shadowy sirens of Lascor.

It should not be surprising how several centuries of professional espionage shapes a culture. The children of the 'royal' household bore the brunt of the rigorous and methodical training disciplines prescribed for every Lascorii child--girl. The patterns of instruction, the structural scaffolding of their path began at last to resemble more the tenets of a spiritual discipline more than the rigors of clandestine occupational training. With that evolved an ethos of self-justice, a pervasive sense of destiny, an atmosphere not just of legitimacy--but de facto Lascorii superiority and absolute spiritual authority.

The Lascorii were nothing if not devout. That their 'business' was other peoples' secrets was merely sauce for the goose, as it were. Fast forward to the last decades, and the emergence of a distant frontier world entering into the commonwealth of systems already enjoying peaceful trade—naturally moderated and manipulated by the shadowy puppet-masters of Lascor. A frontier world remote and isolated, now shedding its former provincial cosmic perspective and being welcomed by the rest of the civilized systems of the Spur--Earth, or as was referred to by everyone else: Enta.

While other cultures were securing trade agreements for import and export of goods and such particular to the worlds themselves, the Lascorii had a slightly unique take on the notion of import/export. The Lascor made sure they had the 'pick of the litter' when it came to developing 'partnerships' with the new people. Agents were dispatched and directives were issued demanding the best of the best be brought home to Lascor for possible 'recruitment and training.' As it happens in many quasi-religious movements, there is a drive toward selective proselytization that is too seductive

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to be ignored. The Lascorii had the rarest form of that infection. They 'allowed' selective inclusion into their ranks for the betterment of other cultures.

That was the sole charter of the Lascorii Department of Selective Service overseen by her eminence herself and offering term contracts of indenture to only the most fortunate of candidates—long contracts to those with obvious and demonstrable potential; short-term contracts to those of marginal ability but with verifiable possibilities. In the not so distant past of the aforementioned frontier world, that particular activity was referred to by the epithet: shanghai-ing crew-mates---a gross interpretation of the Lascorii version.

History Lesson Two---The Naud:

From the boundary worlds of the Spur bordering the Sagittarii Arm, a people arose who weren't given to peaceful coexistence in any form, whether with themselves or, as it became apparent, with anyone else. Their only solidarity came in the form of mutual cooperation when they encountered 'visitors' the first time. That first trading scout ship disappeared and was not heard from again. The Naud were not inventive, they didn't construct engineering marvels, they weren't even terribly adept at finding their way around. However they discovered that they were masters at usurping technology. The first scout ship, her crew summarily dispatched, became the Naud ticket to other worlds ripe for the picking.

Lacking any navigational prowess, it took centuries for them to stumble upon the civilized worlds of peaceful commerce. Their infrequent encounters with any vessels in their path added to their fleets and to their ever growing arsenal of destructive technologies. One of their talents lay in the twisting of useful and harmless technology into offensive destruction. That talent aided them in so far as the worlds they ultimately found offered little or no armed resistance. Their empire was in its infancy, but growing rapidly and becoming a force to be reckoned with by the elder alliances of worlds established in the central bands of the Spur.

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The Naud methods of operation had changed little from those first early days of raiding and pillaging: Make first encounter, Determine the worth to themselves of the resources available, Commandeer the technology---and enslave those who knew how to use it, until such time as the Naud themselves were competent enough to operate it, Dispatch 'assistants,' Move on to the next. Simple.

So it happened that when Tera Elphinstone, on her reconnaissance mission for the Seranath Trade Guild and Drummond Group, blithely showed up on one of the worlds infrequently visited by the Naud, she was 'welcomed' with a bit more than open arms. She was 'invited' to remain indefinitely as a 'special guest.' Her 'hosts' were more than a little curious about the frontier world of her arising and more importantly the technological achievements of that world. Her extended stay with the Naud 'interviewers' was a living hell in the midst of which she had a growing wish to just die and be done with it. It was a stroke of greatest good fortune for her, then, that a Lascorii Contract had been accepted by the Matriarch to penetrate the ranks of the prison world in which Tera had been a heavily restrained guest. Within a fortnight of the Lascorii infiltration of the odious network of interrogation levels at the main complex, Tera was found, identified as being unique among the other inmates of that particular ring of hell, and as quickly liberated from the escape vessel chartered to remove many of the more valuable 'guests.'

She was offered transport for return to her former life, yet to her way of thinking, the obligation to her rescuers outweighed the mundanity of the interplanetary surveying she had occupied herself before her Naudi 'vacation.' She was enfolded into the Lascorii Selective Services almost as soon as her physical and mental wounds were healing and she was exemplary in adopting even the most nuanced of the culture and its people. It was during her training period that the Matriarch herself took special notice of the immaculate young warrior rapidly rising through the programs.

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The Elf shuddered out of habit when she awoke from her nap and looked out of habit at the scars on the backs of her hands and arms. A grim reminder that she had successfully graduated (read: been liberated) from the nightmare that was the 'Naudi Investigation Institute.' She had, from the capable and brilliant Director of the most prestigious trade and negotiations entity on her home world---through the bowels of hell itself---to become the multi-talented, superlatively lethal Lascorii bounty-hunter in the direct employ of her eminence the Matriarch herself *and* a bit more than even that....

Perhaps the waking nightmares would one day abate, she hoped once more. The desperate memories of the early days of her 'interviews,' the cell, the mind-games, her memories exposed, abused and twisted under the expert manipulation of the Institute's best torturers... the endless physical abuses... Then came the rewarding days and nights of mental, spiritual and physical training under the careful mentoring of her Lascorii sisters that made her now: death personified should she be required... or merely inclined..

"Captain," once again as she had upon every other opportunity, her pilot whispered uncertainly as the Elf prepared to disembark for the Court. "If she offers a second contract---and she rarely does personally, if ever she has---what are you going to do?"

The Elf glanced back at the, still young, woman she considered a friend. "Stop saying that!" Taking a deep breath she answered more evenly, "At least I'll negotiate for un-indentured status---I've earned that much over the last nearly four years. Contract or no, I am Lascorii now. The Matriarch knows that more keenly than anyone." The Elf didn't mind that her last comment might be a little ambiguous.

"My little Elf! How comforting to have you near once more." So began the private audience. "Now let us have a good look at you..." Waving her hand in a small circle the Matriarch made it perfectly clear what Tera most cherished: that the Matriarch was genuinely fond of her, and that she herself was *very* fond of her.

Tera made the requisite spin, making as she did so the ritual

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movements and flourishes. Her mentors would have been proud, she was certain. Under her demur smile and unabashed expression of devotion, Tera's heart was swelling with sincerest adoration of this woman before her. That wasn't a by-product of her orientation, training in the disciplines; that was the result of the Matriarch's plucking her, alone of all the others before and after her, from out of the handful of elite candidates the Department of Selective Service had produced, and making Tera Elphinstone *her adoptive daughter*... Unprecedented!

And---the second best kept secret on Lascor---which is a secret wrapped in a riddle, enfolded in an enigma, tied into an labyrinth of anathema and dangled in plain sight; a shining jewel of mystery and allurements---Tera Inghean Elphinstone was first in line to the Matriarch's throne over all of Lascor and its vast networked empire. Tera cautiously glanced around the empty reception hall.

“Mother, thank you for letting me come home...”

Reja Emiclairenne V responded with warmth and a sigh. Her own natural daughter had fled Lascor upon reaching responsible age. Reja knew where she was, but refused to intervene in what her daughter chose for herself as her own vision of destiny. Then Tera entered her life. It took only a few months of their constantly in each other's company that Reja bestowed on Tera the gift of the Lascorii Flame. The biologists of Lascor are without peer in the Spur---they had to be. It had only been a mere few hundred years before they had identified and isolated the genetic signature in their genome that set them apart from every other people so distinctly---that was the singular best kept secret of the Lascorii, and only the Matriarch herself controlled it. Tera's heart nearly burst with honor and pride when that boon was gifted her.

“Oh, my little Elf, I have missed you so...” she took the Elf's arm and they strolled the gardens, chatting and giggling as the girls they felt when in each other's company. “And have you any opportunity for practice?” Reja turned the conversation to the practical after a while. Her curiosity was genuine. While the Flame was 'always on' as it were, it could be amplified at will---with a bit of

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personal manipulation, the techniques for which were trained into the girls of the royal household from their earliest adolescence. Tera wasn't born Lascorii. But what the Matriarch was just now referring to was something beyond the 'usual' applications of the Flame.

The closest members of the royal household, from the first days of the first Matriarch, possessed within themselves the ability to exponentially amplify the Flame to the effect of a lethal weapon. That was the boon Reja bestowed on her daughter, and it was that in particular that she was curious just then.

Tera smiled, "Only when it is impossible for anyone to tell that I am the source... I was able to even make a remote experiment of it on my last contract! It was spectacular."

That delighted her mother to no end. "And what are you going to tell your crew when it is obvious that you are remaining in close contact with me? Are you going to invent another 'Contract'---un-indentured this time... I really liked that touch! Inspired..."

Tera giggled. "It wasn't so clever, really. The service has thousands on contract, *and* who renew in spite of their expressed disgust with the service... Take Reia, my pilot for example. She wouldn't dream of a life outside Lascor circles---all whining to the contrary."

Reja shook her hair and the air around them shimmered with light. The Elf sighed, "And I have to learn how you do *that!* I love it!"

Her mother guided them back inside the hall and toward the banqueting rooms. "I have a little surprise for you..."

Tera was careful not to ask. Special surprises and gifts from the Matriarch were not to be taken lightly or for granted. They entered through a side door into the now very crowded 'throne' hall---there is no throne, just a raised dais and a chair, a very plain looking chair at that. Instantly every knee was bent to them. Reja whispered to her, "I have gathered these to witness your ascension as heir apparent. You shall not live a secret, hence forth..."

Tera's mind raced. This was grander... so *not* on her radar... so improbable... "But mother," Tera whispered in return, "what if..."

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“Shush darling one. Reja Tei left a vacuum in her wake. I must have an heir and you know it.” She waved for the ceremony to commence, “Besides, what better way to make *sure* you keep coming home than to turn over the Matriarchy to you!”

Tera Inghean Elphinstone had to agree with that reasoning. Although truth be told, coming home was her singular delight anymore. The tedious contracts she was compelled to fulfill, the odious clients she'd had to appease... She smiled and endured the rite. She would never have to take a contract she didn't want, ever again! “Now that's a perquisite I can get behind...” she smiled genuinely as the minister presented her for the first time to the Court as: “Tera Inghean Elphinstone Emiclairsenne Tei I; the Lascorii Heir Apparent; Chosen Princess of the Hundred and Seventeenth Matriarch of Lascor. High Priestess in the Royal Order of Geishas, Keeper of the Eternal Knowledge and Wielder of the Lascorian Flame.”

Tera looked out at many of the familiar faces, mostly her own royal sisters---who served as the Matriarch's personal bodyguards; no more lethal individuals in the Spur---and many others whom she did not know. But all of them bowed their heads low and offered for the first time to her their fealty. For Lascorii, that is an eternal bond and obligation---and one of the very reasons her mother's natural daughter had escaped at just the moment she did. It was about to be 'her time.' Tera's royal sisters were the daughters of the Matriarch's sisters by blood, and each of them to a person, personally approached and vowed her life to the Heir Apparent.

As they retired to the dining halls for the celebratory banquet, her mother whispered, “I won't be surprised if 'the Elf' were to become quite the phantom of mystery in the Spur before long. None of our predecessors ever left Lascor after initial installation. You are a rare and unique future Matriarch---besides the obvious. The only real concern I have going forward is...”

An ear-splitting alarm cut through the Court, followed by concussions from the direction of the space docks...

“What the...” the Elf breathed and chased after the bodyguards

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instantly hurrying the Matriarch to the fortified inner palace. “Who in their right mind would...”

The answer to her half-formed musing presented itself nearly at once. A Naudi battle-cruiser settled over the palace, casting a fetid shadow over the gardens and spires as the smaller fighters swarmed the skies beyond and around the capital city. Tera caught up to the Matriarch and her mother finished her sentence, “...revenge on you for the miscalculations of your predecessors. The Naud are not very happy with our 'participation' in their internal affairs it would seem.”

The Matriarch gave a nod to her security; two of them separated themselves and flanked Tera. “These are Isin and Senta. All your sisters volunteered to watch over you, these two are specially devoted...” her mother nodded. “Take the Reaper and get off-planet at once!” Without hesitating Tera bowed obediently. With her new personal bodyguards, one ahead of her and one behind, they slipped through the hidden passages to reach the caverns beneath the palace.

“Isin, send someone to fetch my crew, if they are still alive. Get them down to the Reaper. We're going to offer the Naud a curt reply to their rude intrusion...”

Her crew were under the inadequate cover of one of the landing platforms; their ship, along with every other vessel at the capital's space yard, was smoldering in its bay. Having one of the Matriarch's own security fetch them and take them who knew where was unsettling enough, that they were running toward the current weapons fire was icing on the cake.

They wove through a maze of corridors and passages none of them suspected even existed. A mile or more away from the palace grounds proper, they stood before a cavern. They were prodded to venture inside; they turned a corner in the tunnel and gasped.

Isin was waiting and growing perturbed at their lack of alacrity. “Don't dawdle! Get aboard!” she commanded.

It took no more coaxing. Reia muttered as she ran up the ramp, “Great! *And* stealing the Matriarch's private yacht. This day is not going at all well...”

Isin giggled as she couldn't help but hear. “Don't look so glum.

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It's not stealing, if that's all you're worried about.” She slapped the controls to close the hatch behind them..

The Elf was in the Captain's chair noting with satisfaction that her mother's ship was even more heavily armored and equipped than her own. Correction: her previous ship. Her crew, Reia, pilot, Jista, the navigator and her lieutenants, Song and Pim could only stare in shock as they entered the bridge.

“Captain?” Reia mouthed in a whisper.

Senta stood between them and Captain's chair. “This is not just Captain. This is Tera Inghean Elphinstone Emiclairsenne Tei I; the Lascorii Heir Apparent; Chosen Princess of the Hundred and Seventeenth Matriarch of Lascor. High Priestess in the Royal Order of Geishas, Keeper of the Eternal Knowledge and Wielder of the Lascorian Flame..”

The Elf spat with anger, “...And one royally pissed off bitch!” She added to the gaping faces of her little crew, “Your contracts are hereby renewed, *and* released from indenture. You serve me willingly or not at all!”

Reia's voice was stronger all of a sudden. With a glance at Senta, she repeated, “Captain?” Senta made the most imperceptible movement toward her. “I mean: Orders, your Highness?”

The Elf laughed grimly, “Get me on that Naud ship!”

Only Isin and Senta smiled knowingly at that. Reia, Jista, Pim and Song complied with obvious reluctance.

“Ready to bounce,” Reia called from the helm a moment later.

“And Captain,” Pim offered, “may I come along?”

The Elf's sisters looked with new admiration on her lieutenants.

The Elf shook her head, “You're good, perhaps better than most, but what I have to do now is beyond your talents--- Assassination isn't on your resumés that I'm aware of..”

Senta explained it simply: “The Matriarch has groomed the Elf personally for the throne; the flame in her is death.”

The Elf's expression was impassive.

Jista wondered aloud, “Then what's the point of two more personal bodyguards if the Captain is so lethal on her own?”

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Isin replied through clenched teeth, “We are bound to the royal line; we are her sisters by honor and blood! For through the Elf’s heart and veins flows *all the royal blood of Lascor*. That was the gift of the Matriarch. We serve or die.”

Senta reminded, “Every Matriarch, from the very first, has died of natural causes. That unblemished record will not end under our watch!”

A little while later above Lascor, “Put her over near that outcrop...” The Elf pointed through the screen. The looming hulk of the battle-cruiser overshadowed the near mountains and the relatively small, lithe Reaper was easily concealed amongst the crags. The Elf glanced quickly to Isin and Senta, who had already decided between them which would accompany the Elf. “I remember rather vividly how the Naud layout their vessels,” the Elf sketched out how she intended to move through the vessel and just precisely who were her primary targets. Following that briefing, she whispered, “Ready?”

Senta grinned maliciously, “Trembling with it...”

The Captain announced to the crew, “The escape pods are too small to show on their scanners. They are magnetically configured, so once attached to that... monstrosity, begin a fifteen minute count, then recall the pods at that moment. Understood?!”

Isin nodded. Pim and Song went to the pods to reinspect the controls one last time. As Senta and the Elf made their way to them also, the Elf began, “Stay close and be the eyes in back of my head...” Senta nodded curtly.

“One other thing,” the Elf admitted, “I’ve only practiced a handful of times... This may get real messy, really fast.”

Senta grimaced, “I have virtually no practice at all I’m embarrassed to say. But as weapons go, I’m your girl!”

“Fifteen and no more;” the Elf reminded Pim and sealed herself into the capsule.

“They’re away! Begin the count,” Isin announced to the bridge, though the others could see that for themselves on the screen spanning the front of the bridge.

Reia turned to face Isin, “Why isn’t the capital returning fire?”

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Isin chuckled, "All the Naud can do is burn and scorch buildings and 'things.' They are no real threat to our people just now. They know us well and realize implicitly that they'll have to thoroughly suit up to make a physical invasion of our world--which I rather doubt they'll attempt on a first run. You are from Jontun?"

Reia nodded. "First in my class out of Selective Service..." she added proudly.

"Of course, or you wouldn't be part of my sister's crew. My point is that you perhaps don't realize that Lascorii do not deal in armed confrontation as a rule. So no 'return fire' as you put it."

"But..." Jista started to protest.

Isin elaborated, "Avoid the sword when a needle will do, avoid a needle when a fingernail will suffice, avoid soiling your fingernails if a word is sufficient. If words are inadequate; flame 'em!" Just an old adage..."

"So," Reia interpreted, "which are they going to use over there?" she motioned to the pods, now secured to the underbelly of the beast.

Isin gazed at the scene, "The Elf has history with them. Fifteen minutes will be an eternity for many of the souls on that ship."

The Elf and Senta cut through the outer skin of the hull in nothing flat. They entered a vacant utility shaft beneath the ship's engine rooms. Up through the meandering shaft like water rising in a glass tube, they reached what the Elf was sure had to be the Command deck level. They cut the bolts holding shut the hatch in front of them and pushed through in a flash.

The corridor they emerged into was comparatively tranquil. No rushing soldiers or armed sentries other than those required for stations keeping; and why should there be. There was no fire fight with the planet below, no aerial dog fights to support. Just bomb the living crap out of everything on the surface. The Naud could do that in their bath robes. The approaching knot of officers coming on or going off-duty caught the two women off guard; Senta dispatched them rather quickly with a precision laser knife. They didn't even make too much noise going down. It was the detachment of

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patrolling soldiers they happened upon short of the bridge that they thought would surely set off alarms. The Elf and Senta amped up their flame to somnolence-inducing levels and as the dozen Naud wavered in a drowsily drugged state, the ladies slipped through them, lasers slashing precisely and efficiently through the falling bodies only to face the two sentries in front of the access to the bridge. They were down in a blink; their imploded skulls the only testament that the Elf *really* needed more practice. Senta chortled, "I'm pretty sure the flame isn't supposed to do *that*..."

The Elf's nose was still twitching at the Naud stench in her nostrils. "Maybe a bit too much attitude?" she hissed through her teeth as they pressed into the bridge.

Senta began a methodical plasma bolt pattern cutting down each officer in turn at the stations ringing the command center. Sirens and alarms rang out all over the ship, while the Elf marched straight through the melee to the single person in the Captain's seat. As the Admiral raised his pistol, his face became contorted, then collapsed into his neck, and it didn't end there. His torso folded in on itself until there was only a puddle of goo dripping from the seat of the chair.

"Now for the ship itself..." the Elf exclaimed as Senta sealed the bridge doors to interference and located the branch of the utility shaft servicing the bridge proper---the part they couldn't cut through before without tipping their hand prematurely to the bridge officers.

The Elf reconfigured the ship's navigation and laid in a wrinkle course for the cruiser that would take it to the one place she'd dearly love to have it visit. After jury-rigging the weapons systems into an auto-destruct of sorts, she blasted the controls of every station. "No doubt there are secondaries and back-ups of back-ups," she rose slapping her hands together as if dispelling the grime from her skin, "But by the time they get this straightened out, it should be too late."

Senta waved for her to join her at the shaft panel, "Time to go sis."

They descended as quickly as they'd risen just minutes before, though now they were blasting every conduit and wire harness they

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passed. “Ten seconds by my count...” the Elf grinned sincerely enjoying herself. They lowered themselves into the pods and resealed the hatches.

“Bounce them back, Now!” Isin exclaimed as the seconds drained from the counter on the Reaper bridge.

Pim and Song's voices came over the speakers, “Got 'em!”

In moments the Elf was in the Captain's chair once more and commanding that they return, but to the palace space port instead of the cavern. The receding silhouette of the massive cruiser diminished to a dot in the sky above them. It winked out as the Elf followed her crew and sisters down the ramp onto the scorched and still smoking remains of what had been one of the most elegantly appointed ports in the quadrant.

“Isin, please alert the Matriarch that the interruption to our banquet has been quieted.” To her other sister she intimated, “I was so looking forward to that gorb-ber-ry cobbler...” Senta licked her lips in sympathy and couldn't help but giggle---an uncommon and incongruous sight to behold of one of the twelve royal sisters, so generally taciturn and dour.

Senta related every moment of the surprise attack on the Naudi cruiser to a hushed audience of courtiers and royal family. The descriptions of the Elf's use of the Flame brought gasps and not a few raised eyebrows. It seems the Flame, in it's most lethal manifestation, only ever, at most, renders the victim drained of blood to the brain, and only once 'on record,' at worse, caused slight bleeding at the ears.

The Matriarch looked at the Elf, who at that moment was wearing a most sheepish expression. “I told you, *and* I told Senta, I hadn't practiced enough...” she defended.

The Matriarch raised an eyebrow, “Perhaps 'practice' is not the preferred course for you in this instance. It would seem that that might be exceedingly over-excessive. Moderation in all things.”

The Matriarch's sisters repeated aloud the axiom, “Moderation in all things.”

Aside, and for the Elf's ears alone she confided, “I couldn't have

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done better myself. And I once had to remove a Selenian tyrant from office with only a scant window of a few seconds while passing his entourage on the street. The accounts afterwards suggested he'd been victim of a falling piano or some such thing. It *was* a mess... and did *not* enter our official records!" She couldn't help but giggle at the recollection.

(At this point, it may appear to the uninitiated that the Lascorii are a most callous, ruthless, vicious and bloodthirsty lot. However nothing could be further from the truth. They are not necessarily bloodthirsty. And one must remember that although they have relationships with nearly all the peoples of the Spur---save the Nourii---they are pariahs, outcasts, officially anathematized. That duality is their reality and has shaped to a great degree their own sense of what survival actually means.)

The celebratory banquet stretched into the next day. The Elf was lauded by all Lascorii as having been the ideal choice of the Matriarch for ascendancy. That reflected well on the Matriarch as well as the entire royal family for their participation in the training and 'special' development of the Elf as a premier Lascorii---however unorthodox her ascendancy actually was. There had never been a non-native Matriarch in the long history of the people.

Reia, Jista, Pim and Song were allowed to have a suite adjacent to the Heir Apparent's rooms in the palace for the nights they remained on Lascor. Each of them, also not native of that world, remarked again and again as they peered out at the great capital city from their balcony, just what a remarkable sight it was to behold where ever they turned their gaze: women, women and more women. So few males to be seen anywhere that they turned that into pastime; a game---keeping a running score of the rare numbers of males spotted in a day.

And although the four crew-mates had arisen on worlds that had their own fashions and styles of colorful costumes, to be sure, *nothing* could compare with the vast near cacophony of brilliant colors and textures sported by every individual woman on the planet. Then there was the reality that those weren't just women but Lascorii and to be so surrounded by that much Lascorii pheromone was

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beyond intoxicating, it was causing them to doubt their sanity---on those few occasions they ventured out of their rooms at all.

It had been one thing to be shut in a ship with the Captain. Her atmosphere didn't seem to be quite so overwhelming for some reason. The Elf didn't make it patently obvious that she'd had the air exchangers on their little scout ship replaced with the extra-heavy duty versions typically used on ships three times her size. But the Palace and their near future was another matter entirely. The crew was now faced with the prospect of *three* Lascorii women on the same ship with them and they were in a quandary as to how they were going to fulfill their sworn commitment to the Elf under those extreme circumstances.

"We could just wear full suits and helmets..." Pim offered the most unpopular solution first.

"We could just wear breathers like I've seen divers in water wear..." Reia recalled from her own home world.

"Or perhaps blinders and breathers and..." Jista counted on her fingers, "...just end up with full suits again, like Pim already said."

"There has to be some reasonable solution to this." Reia was adamant, "We *are* committed to serving the Elf!" Her friends nodded certainly at that confirmation of their mutual interest.

"There is something you haven't considered yet..." the Elf's voice made them jump.

"How did you sneak up on us?! I didn't notice a change in the air or my thinking..." Song had to know. This situation was encouraging. "Can you control your atmosphere so completely then?!"

The Elf shook her head, "No it's not that simple. Although I can amplify it, I can't actually diminish it substantially."

"Then how did you sneak up on us just now?" Pim asked, truly impressed.

The Elf smiled, looking over their shoulders. "The same way my sisters just did, actually..." The four wheeled around and were staring into the smiling faces of Senta and Isin.

"How are you *doing* this?!" Reia insisted, then she gripped the

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arms of the two friends closest to her. “And why aren't we enchanted just now with three of y'all so near?!”

Isin strode to a chair and sat down. Senta did likewise, as the Elf leaned back against the side table next to the window by which her crew were holding conference.

“Like most things on Lascor; it's a secret.” The Elf seemed to be enjoying this. Her crew waited; they knew enough not to try and pry or quiz the Elf. She sighed, “You are going to *have* to have figured it out sometime soon anyway...” and she crossed to sit on the floor tailor-fashion between her sisters. “Although we cannot truly diminish our atmospheres... take a really good look at us...”

Her four crew narrowed their eyes as if squinting would increase their perceptions. Song shrugged, “You look as healthy, tan, and beautiful as ever.”

“Three peas in a pod,” Pim added resignedly.

“Not very observant,” Isin teased.

“Probably don't know what color are the Elf's eyes even...” Senta joined in.

“Certainly aren't paying attention to the obvious...” the Elf added to the fun as well.

“Okay!” Jista exclaimed, “What are we so *obviously* missing?!”

Isin stood up and slowly turned a complete spin in front of them. When their faces still weren't registering the 'clues,' Senta said, “Do that again sis, let's see if this helps...” and she knelt next to her sister as Isin began another very slow spin. Senta pointed at Isin's ankles, then her wrists, then a barely perceptible line encircling Isin's neck... “Anything?” Isin asked as she finished the display. The Elf was struggling to keep from bursting into laughter at the faces of her crew screwed up into *very* deliberate thought and inspection.

Isin and Senta threw up their hands and plopped back into their chairs. “They're hopeless!”

The Elf seemed to have given up as well. “Never mind then;” turning to her crew she smiled, “Suffice it to say, y'all will not have to wear full activity suits just fulfill your duties aboard the ship.”

Shaking off their disappointment in observation exercises, Reia

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asked, "And just what ship might the Heir Apparent be expecting to commission for her future adventures?"

"And upon what sort of adventures might we anticipate voyaging?" Jista wanted to know as well.

Isin and Senta were just as curious. They had spent their lives in service of the Matriarch nearly completely here on Lascor with only a few legitimate contracts sprinkled over a dozen years. "Truly, beloved sister, where might we go?"

The Elf leaned back, her knees brought up between her outstretched arms and clasped hands. She smiled, "I can take any contract I wish..." she began coyly. "...And I've always had a yearning to see the beauty of Sheranara and the Gorim Stations, not to mention the Nabiou twin planets---they say they are absolutely identical; mirror images of each other..."

Her audience was clearly in the palm of her hand now. "But what I think I'd really most love to do, now that I do have other over-riding obligations and responsibilities, is..." and she let the thought dangle in the air between them a moment too long.

"What?!" all four crew nearly shouted at once.

The Elf glanced at her sisters; they were almost as anxious to hear. "Is to take the Seranath Trade Guild Contract and..."

Shock rippled through the room. In whispered tones Isin and Senta both repeated, "The Seranim have offered a contract to the Lascorii?! That's unprecedented..."

"Nevertheless, it is on the Matriarch's desk as we speak. I should very much like to petition for that contract. It is a directive of sorts: reconnaissance of the frontiers for any Naud incursions and report locations and routes, or deal with it directly if possible... *or* request Sargassian fleet assistance."

"The Nourii can't have signed off on *that* contract! And they have two voting seats on the Seranath Trade Guild Executive Committee!" Senta insisted.

"As I understand it," the Elf interjected, "this is another *exclusive* contract between the Seranim and the Lascorii---*not* a Guild action, per se, at all---no committee---And *that* is not unprecedented in any

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way at all. We've been serving Seranim contracts for ages! You know: those special little 'one-ups-man-ship' errands they so dearly love to play out with their rivals."

"And the Matriarch is persuaded that it's perfectly fine for her own beloved Heir Apparent... that it is absolutely safe going into harm's way chasing after Naud?!" Reia was skeptical.

Insin, Senta and the Elf had to laugh out loud at that. "You mean like the little errand into 'harm's way' we took just a few days ago before we could finish our banquet?"

Four very chagrined faces gazed back at the sisters. Jista shrugged, "When do we leave for the hunting trip?"

Reia insisted, "And I still haven't heard: what *ship* do we get to use?!"

The audience was arranged within the week. All preparations for the Heir's contractual responsibilities, as well her personal obligations to the Court had been most thoroughly reviewed and established clearly to the Matriarch's satisfaction. At the formal bestowal, "So it is with great confidence that I bestow this contract on the Captain of the Huntress!"

A ripple of surprise ran through the select members of the Court in attendance. "The Huntress?" murmured through them.

The Matriarch smiled to her Elf, "I called in a few favors with the Nabiou and Sargassians---the only people able to build decent ships around here. All very hush-hush of course. No one, even after our long and mutually profitable relationships over the years with so many of this Spur's peoples, is presently willing to admit direct intercourse with Lascorii."

"When will she arrive?" was all the Elf could voice.

"She's already arrived," the Matriarch smiled teasingly, happy with her secret coup among her own most inquisitive family. "Has no one toured the reconstruction at the space port today?"

All thirty, or more, women dashed without a thought to etiquette to the high court terrace. Like girls watching for the first signs of an approaching parade they squinted toward the space port at the far perimeter of the palace grounds where the rest of the

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capital city arose. A hush fell on them as the Elf and her two closest sisters waded through them to the balustrade. A gleaming ship, obviously the larger sister of the Reaper sat on the highest platform. Engineering crews were refitting her with certain 'improvements' only the Lascorii possessed for their own uses on their own ships. They didn't have a ship-building industry of their own, and the truth of it is that they'd never had cause to initiate such a venture. As the Matriarch alluded earlier, their needs were fulfilled for the asking from the plethora of current and former clients---all of whom wished to keep that relationship out of public knowledge.

"She's beautiful..." the Elf whispered into her mother's ear.

"Only the best for my little Elf."

The Elf went to her knee before her mother. "On behalf of myself, my sisters and crew, I thank you most humbly for your thoughtful consideration and bountiful gifts."

The Matriarch was visibly embarrassed. She reached a hand to her daughter as she glanced furtively at the others on the terrace, and whispered, "Dear, *we do not* bow..."

Louder she continued, "You are to be 'on task' according to the terms of the contract, by no later than the end of the week. It's been ages since I traveled to nearer the center of Seranim-traded space, but I'm fairly sure you have to get underway immediately to hope to fill the initial clauses of our agreements," her smile was wavering. She was essentially shooing her daughter out the door and she had severe mixed emotions over that situation.

The Elf made the slightest gesture to her sisters. They understood implicitly and bid their leave of the Matriarch. They headed to their apartments and then to round up the crew. As the Elf took her leave, the Matriarch intimated, "Dearest, I have taken the liberty of offering you a couple other candidates for your crew--- it *is* a larger ship than you're used to, you know. They are waiting at the Huntress for your consideration. Take them or don't, but *do* consider them. Adieu." The Elf carefully *only* inclined her head and left, a tear trickling down her cheek. That she was so loved and could love so deeply the woman she called mother had long ceased to

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amaze her.

She was in for another little surprise as she approached the Huntress's docking bay on the high platform. "Well I never..." she muttered. Two very familiar faces beamed back at her.

"Permission to come aboard my Captain," said the shorter one.

"Ravena! Elenir! How... When..." the Elf sputtered.

The taller one, Elenir---not as tall as Pim and Song; few people were as tall as Atrians, save the Malekiaii---she jested, "I do hope your commands and directives are somewhat more succinct!"

The Elf straightened up, "Permission granted. I presume you each can find your way around a starship?"

After the Matriarch had first made it clear that the Elf should be brought into the family, all those years ago, Ravena and Elenir were assigned as the Elf's personal tutors in astro-navigation, strategic maneuvers and counter-assault, weapon's systems, shipboard horticulture and cooking. The latter were each of her mentor's specialities as it turned out and the Elf ate like a Princess over the course of those many months. Which of course she was, though she didn't yet know it at the time.

"We may be able to figure out where the toilets are..." Elenir retorted and picked up her and Ravena's duffles.

"Lead the way, oh illustrious one," Elenir continued, following their former pupil onto her ship. And what a ship it was.

Generally speaking, the exception being the Reaper---the Matriarch's personal yacht---the Lascorii made do with pretty run of the mill even second hand scout ships for transportation and fulfilling their contracts and such. Even the Elf's former ship was just a modified little scout. It was in those 'modifications' that the Lascorii ships were distinctive. More about that later. The Huntress however was not a run of the mill ship. Like the Reaper, she was custom built to specifications the Matriarch negotiated personally. And her design, both externally and internally, was absolutely a one off construction---save that she *did* look more like the Reaper than any other ship.

Isin and Senta were closely followed onto the platform by the

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Elf's own crew of several years, Reia, pilot, Jista, navigator, Pim and Song, her lieutenants and general 'get-it-done' girls---the one's who took care of the galley, ship's repairs, maintenance, medical and away mission particulars. As they all boarded and made their way to the bridge, admiring every panel, bulkhead and viewport on their way through the ship, the surprise of being greeted by Masters Ravena and Elenir was icing on the cake. Senta and Isin rushed to embrace their mentors while Reia, Jista, Pim and Song could only surmise that this was a 'good' thing. That and they were feeling a little light-headed in the presence of *five* Lascorii. Their own trepidation about how they should fare over the course of this contract renewed itself with a vengeance.

Before the Elf made the formal introductions, she whispered an imperative to Isin, who instantly herded Elenir and Ravena to the crew quarters on the plausible errand of getting them settled. "As you've noticed, the Huntress is quite a large ship, as far as our experience goes..." she nodded to her four crew.

"And since this contract is of a somewhat indefinite nature, *and* we shall be traveling so *very* much farther than ever we have before, we shall all be rotating through bridge responsibilities and all the other necessary chores the Huntress shall require of us." She'd stalled long enough; Isin gave her the thumbs up as she returned with their new honored crew.

"To that end I am pleased to welcome aboard, Master Elenir--the Matriarch's chief of stellar navigation, *and* who happens to make the best moo shoo pork ever put in the mouth. And Master Ravena---the Matriarch's chief minister of strategic operations, and also the finest gardener Lascor has ever produced!"

Both women nearly blushed at being so highly commended to their new crew mates. Truth be told, they begged the Matriarch to let them come along on the contract, not just because Court life was a thin substitute for the proper application of their gifts, but to serve the Heir herself, on a new ship, on such an indefinite contract to the ends of the frontiers... *That* was not to be missed.

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Just A Hint

*“Success is not built on success. It's built on failure. It's built on frustration.
Sometimes its built on catastrophe.”*
--Sumner Murray Rothstein

“Now, shall we get the initial seating arrangements settled?” the Elf 'suggested.' “Reia, Helm. Jista, assist Elenir at navigation if you please...” Jista was aquiver at being able to serve with the renowned Elenir. “Ravena at security; Isin, Pim, Song, Senta, I would very much like one of you at com at all times. Now to all of us: we'll need someone in the gardens---which if you haven't seen yet, are a treasure---and one of you please take the responsibility to insure that our galley is always properly stocked and ready for snacks, meals and feasts if required...” She looked over the bridge and the vacancy at a station she hadn't noticed until that moment. She glided over to it and brought up the stats on the monitor. With a grin she turned to the others, “Correction; Senta, Isin I shall need you to split your time, for the time being, between the other ship's chores and the science station exclusively---which as the Matriarch has foreseen appropriately---is equipped with state of the art long range sensors!” She clapped her hands and leapt to the Captain's chair. “Let's get this contract underway! The Matriarch was quite correct, we have a long way to go just to make good the initial clauses. Y'all can stow your gear after while.”

They took their stations and the bridge began to look as though they'd been running this ship all their lives. The Elf touched a panel on the arm of her chair. “Ship's log; I am Tera Inghean Elphinstone Emiclairenne Tei I; Heir Apparent; and Captain of the Huntress. We are departing for our first rendezvous with the Seranim representative according to contract. That individual, a person by

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name of: 'Denalin,' shall be our sole link to the Seranim and to our own people for the duration of this contractual term..." She listed the initial crew assignments and finished with, "...We shall make good the trust and faith placed in us by the Matriarch, our people and the principals of our contract. Ready to raise ship."

She cut the recording and stood, glanced to Song at the com station, "Song, have the Port-master clear the platform." To the helm she said, "Reia, prepare to lift on my mark." To Elenir, "Lay in the most direct course for the Balos system, our assigned rendezvous." To Ravena and Isin—the latter had taken up the science station, "I want to know before they do if we have any Naud company, is that understood?"

"Loud and clear my Captain!" They both replied at the same time.

"Viewer on and forward." The Elf commanded. The screen lit up with the late morning brightness over the capital and the palace barely visible at the periphery of their view.

"Platform clear, Captain," Song declared.

"Engage!" the Elf announced and sat down. The ship shuddered for a split second, then they were all pressed into their seats as the Huntress leapt into the sky and gathered speed toward the edges of the now thinning upper atmosphere. The Elf counted to ten in her head and commanded, "Reia, Wrinkle on Master Elenir's course!"

"Aye, aye my Captain!" Reia responded and the stars in the viewer, took on their familiar appearance as the Huntress slipped through the intervening star field in her bubble of normal space riding the wave of the wrinkled space at two hundred times the speed of light.

Jista announced, "On course and at maximum velocity, Captain, estimated rendezvous in twenty-one days, twenty hours, and change."

The Elf smiled, "Alright then, twenty-two days; who's on galley duty first? This calls for a little celebration!"

Pim had to know before she headed to the galley, "How are we four able to be in the presence of five Lascorii and not be out of our

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heads by now?! And don't say it's the air exchangers," she leveled at the Captain, "That worked on our little scout, but here?"

Senta got their attention, and reached a hand up to her throat, each of the Lascorii did likewise. She pulled at what appeared to be an exaggerated fold of skin. "As you have still not noticed," and she let the distended membrane 'pop' back against her skin. "We have elected to wear these. They do not block our atmospheres entirely, but they are a sufficient stop gap."

The Elf added to the surprised expressions staring back at her and her sisters, "And... they shall also allow us to mingle more easily with any... uh... unfamiliar peoples we shall likely encounter. First impressions and all."

Reia was as flabbergasted as the other three but the significance of the moment wasn't lost on her for as long. "Y'all did this for... us?"

"And the poor saps we run into, like the Captain said," Ravena retorted.

"But, yes primarily for you four," Isin assured her.

Jista, Pim and Song could only say, "That is the most wonderful, the nicest..." before their tears fell down their cheeks unchecked.

The Elf nodded acknowledgement of their gift then announced, "So... I suppose *I'll* take the first galley shift?"

Pim and Song shook off their tears of gratitude with a laugh. Song offered, "Oh no, our Captain!" Pim hopped to the door, "...Just so whelmed..." she pulled up a corner of what was supposed to be a shirt--actually not more than a sleeveless choli, traditional on Atria where she and her sister, Song, grew up. Song was already out the door, calling, "We'll have a little 'maiden voyage' feast ready in no time."

Reia asked, "If we aren't expecting to have to navigate around any globules or black holes or such..."

Elenir and Jista chuckled, "Nothing on the charts, at least."

"Then, if it please the Captain..." she continued; the Elf saw this coming from the get-go. She made a general announcement.

"On these longer stretches of transit, set your monitors and

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routines to stations-keeping---but keep a remote with you at all times. If something does rear its ugly little head, I want it double-teamed post haste. Clear?”

“As a bell!” Reia grinned, and punched in locking codes for the helm. She bounced up and headed for the door. “I’ll just pop on down and give those two tall drinks of water a helping hand...” Her voice trailed off as she turned back suddenly. “I mean: Permission to leave the bridge Captain?”

Isin and Senta were delighted that Reia was really catching on to their sister's elevated status and finally offering the proper respect. That wasn't lost on Elenir or Ravena either. Ravena picked up two remotes for her panels, handed one to the Captain and stretched. “It should be a quiet passage. We are essentially in relatively secure shipping lanes for the first three quarters of the journey;” she inclined her head to the Elf, “Again, thank you *so* much for requesting Elenir and me for this assignment.”

The Elf had to do a quick mental recovery. Her mother had evidently solicited in *her* name, not a request from the matriarch, but from the Captain of the Huntress. She inclined her head in return, “I never thought you or Elenir would actually take me up on the suggestion—let alone my mother letting go of y'all, but I couldn't be more delighted that it has turned out as it has.”

Elenir and Jista set the nav station to alert them in the event of a necessary course correction and dangled the remotes around their necks. “I think I'll go and offer my services to the cooking staff. I'd love to see what provisions you've stocked... and maybe the girls will let me dabble...” She bowed to the Captain, “Permission to leave the bridge, your Highness?”

“Granted,” the Elf shrugged. “Okay! *Everybody* off the bridge! We're *all* going to the galley. And on the way, y'all should decide upon your own quarters and get settled in; my quarters are naturally just off the bridge here...” With that she went through the only other door leading from the bridge, and inspected her own cabin. She was a wide-eyed girl when she stepped in; “This isn't just a 'cabin' this is a mansion!”

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She took a few more steps inside the room that would serve as ready room/conference room; one entire wall from floor to ceiling was a view port. She stood transfixed at the sight of the star field morphing by outside the 'glass.' "Oh, mother... You've outdone yourself this time!" She tore herself away from the view and explored the rest of the apartments. She had her own galley, her own bedroom as large as her boudoir at the palace. And then there was the bathing rooms! The first was a walk-through shower, leading into the spa with a bathing pool large enough to accommodate the whole crew; then there were two satellite bathing/shower/changing rooms off the spa. "Am I supposed to entertain in here?" She had to wonder; "I know Lascorii cherish bathing time..." It occurred to her then that her mother hadn't, and none of her mentors had ever detailed the *specific* social responsibilities of the Matriarch-to-be. "Well, this is just *too much* for little ole me alone. New precedents coming up!"

She went into her boudoir and opened what she took for the closet. Shock. "I could hide a small moon in here!" She ran her fingers over the robes, costumes, uniforms, disguises, tried to count how many pairs of shoes there were, stood at the dressing table and drawer, after drawer, after drawer slid open in front of her. She stared as if in a trance. "I don't even know what some these jewels are!" The brilliance of the display in front of her jiggled a memory. During her early training under the Matriarch, she'd been specifically told by her mother, "...jewels and such are pretty and they are fun to wear when you play dress-up, but their chief function is to both distinguish you from among all other women *and* to always have liquid assets as constant resources. Enrich and other currencies may rise and fall, but the precious metals and gems shall endure---but mostly they are pretty! Pretty is important..."

The Elf picked up one necklace she recognized at once---an exact replica of the one her mother wore at all times: the Tear of Emiclairsenne. She held it up to the light and gazed into the depths of the rosy crystalline heart of the stone. "I wonder if I can see the flaw in it's heart the same as mother's... She gasped. "Oh my!" She

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realized of a sudden: This was *not* a replica! She raised the necklace over her head and held the stone close to her breast. She was truly treasured---Her mother made *sure* she knew it.

She left her quarters and joined her company in the galley's dining hall where each of them, it seemed, had pitched in to add something to the smorgasbord. "Heaven!" she chirped as she lifted the first morsel to her mouth. Glasses of wine were poured and Senta raised a toast.

"To the Huntress, grandest starship of Lascor! To this company, most fortunate of officers ever to serve a Captain! To the Elf! Princess, Heir and honored leader, our heartfelt fealty we offer to you!" With that, all eight of her company performed a formal court curtsy, deep and elaborate. The Elf thought, 'Isin and Senta had to have taught my little crew rather well---and quickly! This takes practice.'

The Elf inclined her head slightly to acknowledge the gesture and announced, "I am honored. Now. Let's establish a few of our own protocols, shall we?" She began as she gathered more scrumptious things onto her plate. "I would prefer we dispense with formal courtesy as practiced at the palace. I am Captain; that in and of itself carries respect enough for one person. Aboard the Huntress, we can defend ourselves against virtually anything or any one. But when we are 'entertaining' or away from the ship, I must be adamant that no gesture or word betray my identity as Princess-Heir of Lascor. *That* is absolute." She looked to her sisters. "To insure that, either Isin or Senta shall *always* command away from this vessel. Is that clear? Unless we are among those who already know me as Captain, I shall only ever be as I have always been, the Elf: a scout or an adjutant, but I will not lead. I must have y'all's oath on this. The Matriarch has been far grander than generous and we shall not repay her by losing her Heir. Now that she can at last rest easier in the knowledge that our people shall have another in a very long line of smooth transitions of leadership---however long it may be before I must shoulder that mantle. May she live a joyous long time!"

Isin and Senta heaved a sigh. Senta spoke for them, "Captain, we

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are humbled, and we *will* try to make good your hopes in us. But you know *we* are more used to a *much* lower profile..." Isin added with a chuckle, "Like *behind* the scenes, low. Two sisters among twelve; it hasn't been too difficult to get lost in the crowd, so to speak."

Elenir had to laugh as she tried to look much shorter, "This is as low a profile as I can manage..." and she glanced at Pim and Song. "Y'all too I suspect?"

The sisters grinned at being lumped with someone they so respected. They put their arms around Elenir's shoulders and attempted a shorter profile also. Ravena, Jista and Reia stood up on their tip toes. Ravena announced, "There! *We* have *your* lower profile now too!" And all six of them were for the moment the same height.

The company had a good laugh. The Elf continued, "Now as to our Seranim contact, Denalin---and the contract doesn't mention whether our Denalin is male or female..."

Reia chimed, "Denalin is usually a male name among the Seranim. At least it always *was*. My folks' business---starship systems of course; like every other enterprise on Jontun---was underwritten by the Guild, so we got to get to know the regional reps pretty good."

"Alright then, our Mr. Denalin will perforce be the only exception to the protocols I've stipulated. He *has* to be; it's in the Contract." The Elf shrugged her shoulders and pushed on. "Speaking of ship's systems, I would very much appreciate it if you three," she indicated Reia, Song and Pim, "would be kind enough to get up to speed on all the Huntress's systems---especially the newer bits---and give the rest of us a crash course on maintenance and such. Each of our company should be able to make general repairs and be as comfortable with a spanner in the engine room as you are."

Senta asked, "I have been a little curious about that. How is it that Reia, Pim and Song know so much about how ships are cobbled together?" Isin nodded to that inquiry. That they knew the names of the various peoples of the Alliance was one thing, that they only encountered them through the Selective Service really didn't offer

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much in the way of insight..

Pim took that one easily.

“My sister and I are originally from Atria. Our people are, well as compared to a bunch of others I could name, superlative engineers. We don't build as *many* starships as the Sargassians---excuse me, the people of Jontun---but the ships we do build are lightyears more advanced than those in the rest of the Sargassian fleet. They have to be since they're mostly used as research vessels and science platforms. Does that help?”

Reia added only, “Like I said before, I am one of those: people of Jontun. And like pretty much every other kid I knew, I was flying almost as soon as I could crawl. My family didn't actually have a 'house' in the traditional sense. We had a shipyard and labs. I can find my way around a ship blindfolded and pretty much tell you where it was made, how fast it is and whether you need a team to steer her or just a thought.”

Jista was grinning at that. She explained to Isin and Senta, Elenir and Ravena, “And she's not exaggerating! In fact that's one of the reasons I got into the Selective Service in the first place. I am Kuralii, sailing class. As far back as we can remember or as old as our stories, we have been the best navigators of any people we've ever encountered.” She looked to Elenir, the Lascor Chief of Navigation, directly. “No offense, ma'am.”

Elenir nodded, “None taken, please continue. The Kuralii, I only know the name by hearsay I'm afraid to say.”

Reia joined in, “I was assistant pilot on the Guild's freight run from Atria to Malekiaiii. We had a glitch in our primaries and had to drop wrinkle. That put us in the Rennus system...”

“...My home system,” Jista picked up again. “My folks were once space-faring and we still retain the knowledge of 'how' to build a ship; we just don't have the inclination or resources to 'actually' build a ship. But we could assist the freighter Reia came to the Islands aboard. And we did. Reia and I swapped stories and palled around, and well one thing led to another...”

“...Our chief navigator fell in love with the planet,” Reia

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explained, "I sorta volunteered Jista for the job and the First Mate pitched it to the Captain as the best thing that could ever happen---the Kuralii being the best and all."

"So when the Lascor approached me," Jista shrugged, "I insisted Reia be invited also, or no go!"

Ravena's eyebrows rose in her head. "And that went over alright with the Service Director?! She *really* doesn't appreciate ultimatums."

Song and Pim spoke up, "Actually we four were the only ones in the entering class that season, and we sorta all stuck together if you see what I mean. Besides I'm pretty sure it was an *assistant* director that okayed our enlistment."

Isin laughed out loud, and punched Reia, "So when you said: 'top of my class out of selective service,' you meant marginally ahead of your friends!"

Reia's face was the picture of chagrin, "Actually we four were kinda..."

"...We each are top of our class!" Pim giggled. "Reia in Commercial interests and Trade---and flying of course---Jista in Navigation and network relationships, Song and me in Engineering, systems analysis, and every other technical aptitude the service offers as a discipline."

Song added, "Naturally we all got highest marks in Contract Negotiation and the martial training..."

Ravena smiled, "I *remember* you now! I was the physical disciplines head of department for several seasons---y'all were more than adequate pupils." All four of them grinned. Gaining a 'more than adequate' from Master Ravena, was high praise indeed.

Isin and Senta had sat rapt at the stories of all the far-away places. Isin sighed, "Senta and I are already so loving this adventure. Not just to be the only two of our sisters to get to personally serve the Heir, but to actually leave Court indefinitely! Paradise!"

Senta nodded excitedly. Suddenly the two most highly trained royal bodyguards looked nothing like their former taciturn selves. "Just *heading* to the edges of the frontier is thrilling beyond anything we'd imagined we'd ever be assigned."

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Song asked hesitantly, "What is it like to live at Court?"

Isin sat up more erect, "Serving as the Matriarch's personal security is the role of every royal niece as far back as our histories stretch. It is a noble calling and the highest honor. So... to answer your question: a lot of traditions, protocols, rituals and..."

Senta continued, "...and more than our fair share of sleepless nights. But that all is balanced by having some of the best food on Lascor, and not just from the royal lands either. The Matriarch makes semi-annual tours of the whole of Lascor. We've sampled every regional and local cuisine there is made on our world."

"But that's the up side of those tours." Isin qualified, "The rest of the time we're scouting logistics, making travel and security plans and failsafes, contingencies, alternates to alternatives, and on and on. Keeping the Matriarch as safe where ever she wishes to go, as she is in her own bath, is a science *and* an art."

Ravena clapped, "Here, here! And the Royal Twelve perform their duties superlatively! I am constantly commended on the Matriarch's security any time I've had interactions with my peers from other worlds. And I tell them the same thing I'm telling you: It's the Royal Nieces not my staff who insure the comfort and absolute safety of the Matriarch. Let me tell you, I am justifiably proud of your service; it is an unparalleled model of excellence."

The three of them made slight bows to each other from mutual admiration. Senta concluded, "So that's about all Isin and I know about Court life: the behind the scenes parts."

The Elf sat quietly munching on little bits of tasties as the company shared stories, patted each other on the back and generally began to bond as sisters. 'This is well;' she concluded to herself. 'Time enough later to get ship's drills and procedures into them as second nature. But that *has* to happen; the Huntress deserves no less.'

Aloud she asked, "May I suppose that every one has settled on their living arrangements? And I'm curious if y'all have satisfactory bathing facilities?"

The tide of oohs and aahs that washed back on the Elf after

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that question was enough to rock her on her heels. “Good! I didn't want to be the only one with a spa in my rooms..”

The others were suddenly quiet. Isin ventured softly, “...Rooms? Plural?”

The Elf grinned, “Yeah! Come on gang!” and she led the company up to the Captain's quarters and gave them the grand tour like she'd lived there for years.

When they all stood around the bathing pool, it took only the Elf dipping her toe into the warm waters to get the others instantly shedding clothes and climbing in. Reia, Pim, Jista and Song held their breaths and suddenly looked anxious. Senta laughed, “Just try and practice your training: don't look into our eyes, pick the tips of our ears or foreheads and you shouldn't be quite so whelmed.”

Elenir sighed, “Getting out of that body suit as often as possible is at the top of my list from here on out..”

They lolled and splashed, giggled and chatted until the Elf was certain she'd already turned into a prune. “I'm going to the bridge and review the ship's schematics and specs. I need to know the Huntress as well or better than the people who built her. Y'all can pursue whatever you wish for a while. I would like to begin duty shifts at...” she glanced up at the chrono, still set to palace time, “...seven this evening. Decide amongst yourselves who will take the first watch. Shifts will be six hours at a stretch until further notice. I will designate who shall command on the bridge in my absence, as I have always done before.” She stood and the others, for the first time saw plainly what they couldn't have noticed in the bubbles of the bath: the Elf's scars, and the Tear of Emiclairsenne. They sucked in their breaths as one person.

Senta spoke first. “Highness, I never suspected just how...” her voice faltered.

Neither Reia, Pim, Song nor Jista had *ever* seen the Captain's body either. They were in shock. Isin reached up a hand to touch the Elf's legs. “So ravaged, so cruel..”

The Elf shook her head and her auburn hair cast droplets around the room. “Don't give it another thought. I have enough

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nightmares for all of us...”

“But they could have repaired...” Senta began, “they could have done so much when you went through the Rite of Flame, or at least afterwards...”

Isin nodded, “The experience gave you the beautiful spots and shapely ears of our people. Why didn't it... Why didn't they...” The Elf held up her hand.

“*It* couldn't because the Rite doesn't make you a completely new person, it enhances what you already are. And I am this. *They* didn't because the Matriarch forbade it and I agreed whole-heartedly.” The Elf explained, “My scars are my badge of honor and courage. I fought the Naud and their devices with all my strength---they failed to break me. *That* is what so touched the Matriarch that she became inclined to request my company. That was when I first began spending hours and hours with her alone---'kindred spirits' she called us.

Senta focused on the necklace, “Is that? I mean the Matriarch always...”

The Elf nodded, “It is the Tear of Emiclairsenne. Mother hid it in my wardrobe.” She waved in the direction of her boudoir.

Ravena exclaimed what was in the forefront of each of the Lascorii's minds, “Highness, the Tear has *only ever* been passed to the Heir at the formal ascension to the Matriarchy. This is unprecedented!”

“No doubt as much as is a non-native Heir to the Matriarchy of Lascor...” The Elf added as an afterthought, “But then the Matriarch has been determined that she be remembered as the force that steered our people toward a brighter future in harmony with other worlds rather than as the outcast it has always been---that was her intention for initiating the Selective Service in the first place and here we all are! In truth, we owe a great debt to our absent sister, the Matriarch's daughter by birth: Lei'tressa Reja Tei Emiclairsenne VII. Had she not chosen her own destiny away from Lascor, mother would never had re-evaluated her reign and the direction of her legacy.”

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The Elf still stood before them in only her scarred skin and the Tear. “Now what else are y'all dying to know as long as I'm laid bare as it were?” She giggled at the pun and her body shook pleasantly. Her company looked up at her from the waters. The Elf was the tallest person on the Huntress---even taller than the Atria who were generally the tallest people in the Alliance, after the Malekiaii---and from the level of the bathing pool, she looked more than statuesque; she was larger than life. Song and Pim rose up from the waters to flank her. They laid their hands on the Elf's shoulders and caressed her gently. “Our Captain,” Song whispered, “You are truly great. It is such a privilege to have served you these many years.”

“Thank you;” the Elf reached her arms around their waists and gave them a squeeze. “Now, I'm off to the bridge.” Without another word, she walked to the wardrobe in her room and selected one of her favorite robes---Lascorii robes closely resemble the silken Hanfu or Kimono of the Elf's home world. How the Lascorii wear them and how they manipulate them is what sets the garment apart from its cousins. On a Lascorii, the 'robe' is a living thing which flows, encloses, flutters, ripples, floats... all depending on the moods and feelings of the wearer. At that moment, the Elf's robe was flowing in her wake like the waves of a grand sailing ship of old; she was the embodiment of Nike.

The three weeks of their voyage to reach the rendezvous passed quickly for them. As the Elf insisted, they ran drills for evacuation and rescue, engineering and command procedure drills; essentially drills for every emergency that could befall a ship hurtling through the depths of interstellar space. By the time Reia dropped them from wrinkle just a scant distance from the Balosian space station complex, the company of the Huntress functioned as a seasoned and cohesive crew. The Elf nodded to Pim at the com.

“Channel open my Captain,” she responded after pinpointing the stations' bands.

Reia muttered, “This is the first time a Lascorii ship has ever asked to dock somewhere---in broad daylight!”

“This is the starship, Huntress, arriving in the fair Balosian

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system at the request of the Seranath Trade Guild agent: Denalin.”

Elenir, Isin, Senta and Ravena held their breath unconsciously. Reia was right; this was unprecedented. A Lascorii ship approaching an Alliance outpost just like any other ship anywhere might do. The tension on the bridge was as thick as the silence over the com.

“This is Associate Stationmaster Onrolbe. Welcome, Huntress. Denalin has only just arrived as well. The forward agent for the Guild has requested adjoining docking berths. I am sending coordinates now and informing them that you are docking. During your stay with us you will find that our hospitality rivals the Gorim Stations or those of Breuges. Please make yourselves at home here. Out.”

The combined release of breath was audible. A small cheer rose in their voices over the seemingly mundane maneuver into space dock. It was a historic break with all they'd known and was making them just a little giddy.

“That went very nicely,” Ravena commended in a gross understatement. “Now let's just have a peek at how the Balosians deter Naud intrusions...” She made a scan of the station. The administration would be none the wiser for it as the Lascorii ships employed a proprietary scanning technology completely undetectable by standard Alliance ships and stations. They were also pleased that it went unnoticed by every Naudi vessel they'd encountered thus far as well.

“Pretty standard issue installations...” Ravena recounted as she read through her data, “Several dozen plasma cannon---well-placed for the most part---automated blasters and precision lasers at every docking berth---well thought out, that---the traffic buoys are actually armed mega-yield platonite---very clever. That's about all I'd expect for a station as well-trafficked as this, *and* on these trade routes.”

“Thank you, Ravena,” the Elf offered and turned back to Pim, “Anything from our Denalin?”

“Hailing now Captain.”

“Put it on the viewer if you please,” the screen shifted from the tranquil view of the station and backdrop of the planet below to the

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disarming grin of a *female* Seranim.

“Greetings Huntress!” She opened genially. “Punctual. Very good sign for the enacting of a contract. Very good...”

“I am, as you should already have been notified by the Matriarch...” the Elf began in response.

“Yes! The Elf! We are more than delighted with the Matriarch's choice for this assignment. And I am Denalin---I know, I know; for us it's typically a man's name, but...” and she brought her hand up beside her mouth as if sharing a secret. “...I'm the fifth of seven, all girls with boys' names. My folks just kept trying and hoping, you see...”

“Denalin, would you like to meet on the station? On your vessel, or would you care for a tour of the Huntress?” the Elf held out her hands in a most welcoming manner. As an afterthought, “Not all of my crew are Lascorii and those of us who are have made provision for not whelming them. We keep a safe atmosphere for guests.”

Again that effervescent grin, “Marvelous! I shall be at your 'front door' in moments. It's just me, I'm afraid. The Guild Council was *most* specific regarding my obligations to this contract. Though while I was uneasy over that stipulation at first, I must say once I was informed that it was yourself whom I would be 'handling,' as it were, I breathed a most heartfelt sincere sigh of relief. Your reputation precedes you even here.”

“Very kind Agent Denalin; I shall be at the door in a moment.” The Elf closed the channel and rose to go to the docking bay doors. “Any one want to tag along? I don't want to intimidate our Denalin, but company is nice...”

Isin nodded to Ravena who smiled and suggested, “Jista, dear, would you?”

Thrilled at the opportunity, Jista followed the Captain from the bridge. “I think my ready room will serve nicely as a comfortable meeting place after we give 'Deni' the grand tour;” the Elf repeated as they turned the last corner to reach the doors. She pressed the control and the hatch lowered smoothly. There, standing just out of the way of the descending ramp, stood the hobbit-like Seranim:

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Denalin.

“Welcome aboard the Huntress, Denalin of the Seranath Trade Guild, Committee for Investment Protection. We are at your service.” The Elf and Jista made friendly little bows of their heads as token esteem. Jista realized then why she was elected to accompany the Captain: she was the shortest of their company and perhaps a slightly more appealing companion to the diminutive Seranim while strolling the ship.

Denalin clapped her hands together and stepped aboard. “Wonderful looking vessel,” she stamped her foot on the deck plates and listened. “Solid and resonant. Very auspicious. So shall we get down to it, or..”

“Perhaps a brief tour?” Jista offered.

“If it's profitable to us all?” Denalin responded with a casual Seranim agreement. The Elf followed behind them and only added a word here and there as Jista filled the role of meticulous docent.

“And through here then is the bridge...” she extended her hand for Denalin to inspect the command center---saving the best till last. The Elf crossed to the door leading to her ready room and waited as each of her officers explained their duties and the gadgets of their stations.

At last they were seated across from each other at the table in front of the grand view port in her ready room.

Denalin reached into her document bag and produced a hardcopy of the Contract, two sealed envelopes and a few other papers. One of which, the Elf noted, was a well folded chart. “Now then,” Denalin began in an official tone, “if you will notice on page fourteen, section two, subsection four, paragraph eleven...” the Elf already had her copy open to that very page and paragraph---it was the only one with pages of blank lines immediately following it.

“...you may now inscribe your first destination on the first line following...” she waited for the Elf to be ready, pen poised. Denalin certainly had a flare for the dramatic it would seem. She unsealed one of envelopes and read the contents, “...As anticipated: in the Olnish system.” She then unfolded the chart and indicated the

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system as marked thereon. “Special Instruction General: Contact with possible residents, if none, survey for any traces of Naudi passage or intrusion. Report same. Prepare for further voyage...” and she read off the coordinates of the next three systems to be likewise surveyed and reported on. “Special Instruction Specific:” she continued, “If contact with Naud is encountered and the margin of risk of said encounter favors the surveyor of contract, said surveyor is hereby licensed and encouraged to take extreme measures. Report results of same.”

Denalin pursed her lips and looked up at the Elf. “Sounds pretty straight-forward. Any questions thus far?”

“Was that all?” she shrugged.

Denali reached for the other sealed envelope. “Just this...” and she followed with, “I believe you will find this is referred to on page sixty-three, section one, subsection one...” the Elf flipped through her copy to find that that was the last page of the document as well as the last clause.

“Okay...”

Denali read: “...having completed general and specific instruction addendum, agent is directed to complete the contract enactment by reviewing Attachment Two...” and she held up the second envelope and looked up at the Elf at the same time. “...*Contractor* to open and read.”

The Elf extended her hand to receive it and read the same thing Denalin just read. “Here goes then...” she took a deep breath. ‘What in the world can they possibly add to this contract that isn't already spelled out six ways to Sunday!’ ran her thoughts. She slit the fold of the envelope and out slipped the single sheet of paper from inside. She held it up where they could both read:

“Seranath Guild Agent of record, one: Denalin, of high standing and unimpeachable record, shall, for the term of this contract, serve as adviser, liaison *and passenger on assigned ship of record--the Huntress of Lascor!*”

It was impossible to say which of the two were more stunned and shocked into disbelief. The Elf recovered first. “Denalin? Did

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you have even an inkling they'd pull this on you?"

Denalin could only shake her head from side to side.

The Elf looked again at the final terms. "There is a little more..." she read: "...Such service shall be compensated as hazard pay at twice standard rate. Should agent not complete voyage of contract, such compensation as has been merited shall be subject to arbitrary disposition by this Committee; favoring the Agent's last will and testament as closely as possible within the constraints of unforeseen developments... blah, blah, blah..." she glanced up at Denalin's still stunned expression.

"That's it. That's all they wrote," the Elf emphasized by turning the single page over and backwards and every which way as if doing so might dislodge any more information. It did not. "Well then, welcome aboard the Huntress as our very honored guest!" the Elf extended her hand once more, hoping to shake poor Denalin out of her shocked state.

Denalin stood, put away the papers and pushed the chart across the table to the Elf. She took a deep breath and put her own hand into the Elf's still extended hand. "I am comforted by the ease with which you have taken this most *un*-looked-for addition to the contract. I shall endeavor to comport myself in a manner acceptable and honoring to the office I now must inhabit. Thank you for your kind welcome. Now," and she tried a little smile once more. Her expression became less disappointed and more excited as her smile grew. "...this shall be a grand adventure! May I see my quarters now?"

The Elf patted Denalin's hand with her free one, "I shall have Jista escort you at once. Is there nothing you need have sent over from the ship you arrived in? Luggage? Personal effects of any sort?"

Denalin had to chuckle at that. "I shall recover my wits soon enough, I promise. Yes, of course: luggage and such! Where's my head?"

"In that case," And they emerged from the ready room onto the bridge. "Jista please escort our honored guest to her ship and fetch

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her luggage and whatever else she wishes to bring along. Our Denalin shall be part of our company going forward---per Contractual obligation.”

To their credit her crew didn't even blink. Jista hopped up from the com and accompanied Denalin out of the ship to fulfill her Captain's request.

Jista and Denalin strode the short distance between docking bays and the Seranim hailed the ship's first mate at the airlock. “Back so soon?” commented the mate without a thought to the presence of a companion.

Denalin simply muttered, “Slight deviation in my traveling arrangements I'm afraid; Guild business is nothing if not exciting.” Catching the eye of her personal porter, she added, “I'll be needing to have my things transferred to the Huntress, if you'd please assemble my luggage?”

They only had to wait a moment or two before the overburdened carrier returned with the assorted trunks, boxes, containers and bags. Denalin's eyes grew round as she stepped toward him. “That's not *my* luggage!” She whispered and looked up into the eyes of the porter. He shrugged and offered a handshake of farewell---a very familiar form of handshake to the inner circle of the Guild. Then he allowed her a nod of assurance. That one nod explained everything to her; the Guild had made preparation for this little contract addendum. Her fate now lay with the Elf.

Back on the Huntress, as soon as Jista and Denalin were off the bridge...

“Captain! The Seranim is *really* going with *us*?!” Isin exclaimed in confusion.

“It was a shock to both of us, and more pressing on herself I'm sure. The committee blind-sided her absolutely. Therefore we shall make her feel as at home here as she might be on a Breuges station. Clear?”

“Yes Ma'am” resounded through the bridge.

“Now, Song, if you would make some thoughtful preparation in appropriate quarters for our guest? I suggest, perhaps, near the

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gardens *and* the galley? If she decides she would like different quarters at some point she can make that transition herself--just as each of you might at some point choose."

Turning to Elenir, "Plot a course for Elenessa, if you please..." then to Isin, "I would very much like to have hourly updates on the long-range scanners going forward and across our beam. I will repeat: I do not want any surprises on this trip if we can help it..." then she had to laugh out loud at her own preferences. "...beyond the shocker we've already absorbed."

Jista and Denalin returned within the hour. Song asked after her comfort in the selected quarters, which seemed perfectly satisfactory to Denalin. "I would like to ask for one concession..."

"Certainly, if the Captain agrees;" Song stipulated.

"It's just that I was forced to leave my pets, two cats, in the care of a neighbor before leaving the home office..." she began, "And well, since I am likely to not see them again in the foreseeable future..."

When the Captain *was* informed; "She wants to bring *cats* aboard?!"

"Not just any cats," Song tried to explain, "they are evidently *very* special animals. She's a member of a breeding club or something and one of the members is on this station *and* is willing to make a gift of a pair of females out of sympathy for our Denalin's predicament. It really *is* a grand gesture."

The Elf rolled her eyes and sat silently for a moment too long for Song's comfort. "Sure. Why not. Anything else?"

Song lit up. "Nope, that was it! I'll go and let her know the good news. Thank you Captain, thank you very much. I know this means the world to her..." and Song was skipping down the corridor to tell Denalin it was a go.

"Cats." The Elf repeated to herself. The rest of the bridge crew were careful to not let the Captain see their grins. The Elf looked around the room at the backs of their heads. "...No surprises. Good! At least we're keeping to *that* simple demand." A wave of laughter rolled across the bridge. It *was* funny.

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“We are three and a half weeks from Elenessa, Captain,” Elenir was able to say once she'd gotten control of her breath again. “And that's at maximum wrinkle. I've plotted the other initial coordinates along the way that the contract stipulates and it looks like we'll be spending quite a fair amount of time in regions known to be the haunts of roving bands of Naudi ships... that's the hearsay anyway.”

“And that's what we're out here for;” the Elf confirmed. “Denalin will be giving us a new phase of destinations as we complete each previous phase. Security in ignorance; the future voyages of the Huntress should remain a secret to any baddies out there.”

She sat back in the Captain's chair and mused to herself, 'Now, how shall we entertain ourselves over the long days between systems.' Almost aloud she reflected, “But first things first;” she announced clearly, “We need to restock our provisions for, as Elenir pointed out, a month at least; it will in all likelihood be twice as long---there's just no way of knowing. I would like you each to assemble lists of everything you can think of that we might be wishing we had and otherwise won't.” There was a back lash of chatter from the bridge as the company leapt on the charge in earnest. Hearing some of the initial 'needs,' she was impressed. “Yes, it would be prudent to have a stockpile of parts for repair...” she reiterated other of the suggestions she'd just picked up, “and we shall no doubt be wanting to bulk out our gardens...”

But Song's contribution captured her instantly. “We have that huge empty bay down below that could house a runabout or little scout ship, but we have no ship! Why can't we have a specially built craft that is perfectly adapted for our peculiar...”

The Elf interrupted her.

“Now *that* is the idea of the day!” All chatter ceased abruptly. She stood, and Denalin offered shyly, not sure if she were 'allowed' to insert her own thoughts, “We *can* stay at this station for up to seventy-two hours before we'll *have* to commence the contract. Is that enough time to acquire that stuff you are considering?”

It was an innocent enough observation and brought all eyes on

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the Elf. “Seventy-two hours... Ladies, let's go shopping!”

The reality of what they had just been planning came to rest on them with a thud. Go out into the station? Themselves, personally? Lascorii mingling nonchalantly with regular Alliance folks? Like it was just the most normal thing in the world. No one moved.

The Elf held up her hand; “In the first place, it is unlikely that there are but a handful of Nourii on the Station. Even if there are more, we are suited and our comrades are testament that our atmospheres are reined in sufficiently to not cause a commotion. Although a few of us are unused to such flagrant exposure as this, some of us have been doing reconnaissance work amongst the peoples of the Alliance for years---*that* isn't so *very* different than going shopping.”

With a newfound confidence, the bridge evacuated like a fire drill. Each member of the crew rushed to their quarters to prepare for the assault on the station's shops, stores and warehouses. This was a pet dream come true for the Lascorii and a welcome opportunity for the others. Denalin just stood where she was. The Elf winked to her, “Mistress Denalin, you are with me. We have some very *particular* shopping to do...”

The Captain and the Guild Rep made quite the sight as they left the docking ring; the tall auburn haired Lascorii and the diminutive fair-haired Seranim lady trailed by her new little four-footed devotees. The 'cats' as Song referred to them, weren't the creatures the Elf associated with the name. These were more like the highland shepherd dogs of her youth---in attitude and devotion. They were definitely a derivative of feline stock, however their rather large limbs and penetrating eyes gave them more the look of mythical temple guardians than house cats.

“And will your 'pets' take commands as well?” the Elf was curious, glancing over her shoulder every so often to see the pair padding along behind them and staring up at her and their new mistress.

“Absolutely! Want to see?” Denalin crowed excitedly, hoping to impress upon the Captain the good judgement she'd shown in

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allowing her additions to the ship's company. "What would you like them to find for you?"

With just a shrug from the Elf and, "How about the resale equipment shop we're looking for?" Denalin stopped in the middle of the promenade they were navigating and bent down to her cats--- it wasn't actually necessary for her to stoop, they stood to her waist already.

She looked at one then the other, speaking in a normal voice, "Mim? Yula? Please find the finest resale equipment shop on the station." That was it. The Elf was completely skeptical that the two little beasts had even the remotest clue what was a resale shop, let alone distinguishing a fine one from a salvage emporium.

The cats trotted off in different directions at once and disappeared into the crowds. Denalin smiled, "We can continue to look for one ourselves, but I promise they are going to find it first."

"And..." the Elf queried, "they'll just find us again and take us there?"

"Precisely!" Denalin grinned triumphantly.

The Elf wanted to laugh but didn't. "When I was last here, and I was intentionally inconspicuous on that particular visit---contract and all---I remember there being just the sort of shop we're needing, down on the maintenance ring... If it's still there..."

They took a bounce tube down through the station. The air became a little thicker and warmer as they descended. When they emerged from the tube, the muted clanging, screeching and scraping of construction was all around them. And sitting on the landing as if waiting for them were Mim and Yula. They rose and turned to walk ahead of the 'newcomers.' Denalin was all smiles.

"Well I'll be..." the Elf whispered in surprise as the cats took up waiting positions either side of the broad doors of what looked to be a rather exclusive salvage shop. None of the grimy and rusted bits of brick-a-brack one usually associates with an establishment vending used and collected ship's parts, this enterprise was nearly pristine in its presentation of shiny hull and deck plating, control modules, servos, actuators, thruster components and whole engines...

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it was a ship-builders candy store!

Denalin had to ask, “Is this what you were looking for?”

The Elf just nodded and made sure to reach down to the two 'cats' and whisper, 'Good kitties' and pat them on the heads before entering.

To her surprise, Reia and Pim were already in the back of the shop haggling with the proprietor over what looked like an intact yacht cockpit. The Elf turned to Denalin. “So, is it possible your cats just happened to find our friends and *that's* why they 'led' us here?”

Denalin was crest-fallen, but not giving up, “Perhaps the Captain would like to be even more specific about what she is wanting from this shopping excursion?”

The Elf took a deep breath, “Okay, but you won't like it...” The cats had sidled up next to Denalin and flanked her. “I really would like to find a Naud cloaking module; Pim has been tinkering with the theory behind its operation and says she can improve on it...”

Denalin glanced at each of her pets in turn. “You heard the Captain...” and they slipped away from the Elf and Denalin into the aisles and piles of gleaming hardware. “Just give them a little while to inventory the place. If it's here; you'll have your croaking device!”

The Elf coughed to stifle a laugh, “That's: *Cloaking* device. I hope Mim and Yula hear a bit better than you do through this constant noise.”

Denalin sniffed, “It is insufferably noisy; they hear better than you can imagine, however...”

Reia saw the Captain and left Pim to finish the negotiation. “Captain! Good you're here too! We found a...” she began.

“Yes, I noticed...” The Elf was scanning all around them trying to spot the cats in their search. Every now and then there would be the flash of a tail or the clatter of a leaping animal from one stack to another, and she'd catch a glimpse of the little beastie and as quickly it would disappear again. “Will he deliver?”

Reia grinned, “Better than that; he's checking to see if he still has all the other parts that came off the yacht...” Her eyes went wider to add greedily, “...It's a Nurlian GL429! He claims the owners

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abandoned it in favor of a larger yacht; that it was just meteor damage... wealthy idiots---dropping ownership of the finest craft ever to come out of the Nurlian shipyards! You know: every component is hand crafted! It's easily..." The Elf held up her hand.

"I have seen them before, Reia. You don't have to sell me on the purchase..." and she gulped as Mim came and sat down in front of her followed immediately by Yula. She glanced at Denalin, "Well? Does this mean they found it? Or that there isn't one here? Or that they can't find it? Or they misheard me too?..."

Denalin held up her hand and smiling, she bent down to her cats and whispered to them. Their tails flicked back and forth and they looked up at the Elf. Denalin straightened up, "Then show us, Please!"

They walked slowly around one massive stack after another, careful to keep looking back to the three people trying to follow them through some very tight passages. After six or seven minutes of threading their way through the labyrinth of pieces and parts. They stood on either side of a rather uninteresting assembly of what looked to be mostly wire looms, old fashioned electrical connectors and antique fluidic converters.

"Uh..." the Elf and Reia posited together. Denalin kept an eye on her pets as she began disentangling stringy bit after clumpy wad of the mess. The cats were twisting their heads from side to side, cocking their ears this way and that as if not so much keeping up with their mistresses progress as *directing* it...

The Elf and Reia pitched in under Denalin's instructions, which she appeared to be getting from the two furry sleuths. At length, after virtually removing the entire tangled mass from its own pallets to two stacks either side, they stopped and stood back. The cats leapt into the middle of the 'excavation' and the three searchers sucked in their breath. The cats were perched on thin air about half a meter off the floor!

"I... How..." Reia was near speechless. Denalin was bursting with a mother's pride and showered her lovelies with praise and quite a doting display of petting and scratching. That was another thing the

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Elf now noticed about her newest crew members: they purred really loud! They could hear the contented rumbling over the incessant din of the maintenance level itself.

The Elf stepped to the edge of the nearest stack and peeked around the corner to where Pim was smiling and shaking the owner's hand, waving to the now extensive collection of yacht parts and probably, the Elf concluded, arranging for delivery of their treasures. She ducked back to her companions. "If this is what I suspect it is, and I've no reason to think it isn't, its power modules still have enough charge to keep it activated... but that's not indefinite. So this little 'invisible' beauty likely got lumped in with this other mess completely un-noticed..."

Reia smiled slyly. "Which means it's not in the inventory logs, and..."

"Finders keepers;" the Elf concluded in a hushed voice. "We just have to get it out of here without being conspicuous..."

Denalin was aghast at the scheming transpiring right in front of her nose. "Are you seriously discussing: Not Paying a Fair Price for This?!" Such a notion cut deep into her mercantile soul. It was a heresy of unspeakable madness. NO Seranim could even conceive of such a thing. It was... "That's..." and her voice shrunk to a hissing caution, "...s t e a l i n g!" she nearly only mouthed, then shuddered as if a bitterly cold wind blew through her.

The Elf faced her calmly. "Stealing what?" and she held out her hand toward the seemingly empty space beneath the cats still comfortably floating in mid-air.

Denalin gestured wildly at the scene, "That! Of course!" as if it were patently obvious which 'what' they were discussing.

Reia shrugged "I don't see anything..."

The Elf shook her head, "I don't see anything..." and narrowed her gaze at Denalin in a rather fierce expression that actually scared the Seranim more than the heinous breach of morality. "What do you see?"

Denalin looked between Reia and the Elf, between the Elf and her cats, between the cats and back in the direction of the

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proprietor's office. She appeared to be making up her mind in the face of an existential urgency. She shook her head and looked plaintively up at the rafters above. "Nothing."

"Just to satisfy your sense of ethical behavior," and she turned to Reia, "Please go and inquire of our good proprietor if he has a Naud Cloaking Device on offer from his inventories." Reia skipped off at once on the errand.

The Elf grinned as if just conquering an empire.

They heard a howling laughter from the office area and shortly Reia returned. "Boss, he says that's the craziest request he's ever gotten, and he's been doing business here for over a decade. No. He doesn't have a cloaking device."

The Elf smiled at Denalin, and to Reia, gestured at the mounds of tangled 'stuff' sitting either side of their treasure. "We need the whole lot of this, I'm thinking..."

Reia understood implicitly. "Absolutely! Can't have enough of it!" The Elf asked the cats to hop down, which they did instantly, and Reia began heaving armfuls of the junk back over the 'thing that wasn't there.'

As the Elf turned to wind her way back out of the maze, she called over her shoulder, to the marginal relief of Denalin, "Be sure to offer a fair price for our stack of antiques..."

Reia gave the thumbs up as she headed off to rejoin Pim and the owner. She had one more lot to add to the delivery.

The cats trotted ahead of them as they returned to the bounce chute that would return them to the upper levels. "Captain," Denalin was still visibly shaken, "If this is an example of how you intend to approach the fulfillment of the contract as well... I mean so outside the boundaries of decent behavior and fair play, I'm not sure that I can... That I should... That any Seranim would conscience..."

The Elf waited for her associate to just spit it out, but that wasn't happening. "Mistress Denalin, are you suggesting that the nefarious forces we are ostensibly contracted to encounter and confront shall abide by the notions of plain-dealing and moral rightness you wished to enforce upon *me* just now?"

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Denalin hadn't taken her considerations to that conclusion as yet and her face showed it. "No of course not Captain. I just mean that.."

The Elf wasn't letting up on her; "And are you then suggesting that although we are to be in a pitched conflict with such unscrupulous foes, that I should constrain myself to only deal from the position of ethical justice and disallow even a hint of bending a cherished 'rule or two'?"

"No! certainly that would be wholly impracticable Captain..." Denalin protested. "I don't think, *however*, that treating honest merchants on a Guild underwritten space station the same way you would deal with those sorts of vermin is either appropriate or conscionable!"

The Elf put her hand to her chin and they stopped nearly in the same spot they stood when Denalin had first sent her pets on their little errand earlier. "I am offering said 'honest merchant' a fair, perhaps even exorbitant price for a mess of antique jetsam he'd never unload on anyone else. I think I'm doing the fine man a favor!"

"But the Cloak!..." The Elf put a hand to Denalin's mouth. She caught herself suddenly and finished in a whisper. "But the cloaking device!"

"What cloaking device? He said he had none! Even laughed at the very notion of it!" The Elf replied as innocently as she was able, "And I didn't see any cloaking device. I was very disappointed in our little shopping spree. I suspect Mim and Yula are disappointed as well. They tried so earnestly to please..."

Denalin coughed and sputtered, "Are you going to stand there and tell me that there wasn't a cloaking device?! What were Mim and Yula sitting on then? Fairy toadstools!? I saw the invisible thing as well as you and Reia did!"

"Really minister," the Elf tsked, "You saw an 'invisible' something? And you insist that *I* saw it, *and* that my honorable chief pilot saw an *invisible* something as well? Does that even sound remotely plausible to you?" and with that she strode off toward a line of shops advertising the latest holo-equipment, games, shows,

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constructions and projectors. To add insult to injury, Mim and Yula, who had sat patiently by as the two non-cats had their little spat, pranced off after the Elf leaving Denalin, immobile, gaping after the receding trio.

Shaking herself out of her trance, Denalin hurried to catch up to her obstinate new associate and fickle pets.

That evening after the company was assembled in one of the station's less crowded, nearly vacant restaurants---old habits die hard for the Lascorii---the Elf listened and jotted down the list of 'finds' her company had acquired during the 'restocking operation.' She pushed the list aside as the meal was delivered.

"It would appear that we will only need to spend tomorrow rearranging our space shipboard to accommodate our wealth of new goodies..." she announced.

Denalin, who had still not recovered entirely from the day's shocks, offered a snide, "...ill-gotten and otherwise..." She probably, in hind sight realized much later, should have kept her opinions to herself. She didn't have the requisite experience with Lascorii to make *any* value judgements whatsoever.

Isin was sitting next to her and responded instantly to the remark. "Ill-gotten?! Define your terms!"

Denalin was caught off-guard. It seemed an accurate and obvious modifier to use in this instance. She said as much.

Senta listened to the defense and could only smirk, "Stealing? Is that essentially what you are accusing the Captain of?"

Denalin nodded unabashedly.

Elenir and Ravena were now most attentive to the interchange. Ravena waded in with, "Mistress Denalin of the fair and honest folk of the venerable Seranath Trade Guild---What do you *really* know of 'stealing?!' Isn't that a concept you understand to be: the unlawful or immoral act of removing from a rightful owner of a something, that very something, without recompense, without payment of any sort let alone without the expressed permission of said rightful owner. Is that how you perceive 'stealing' then?"

Denalin smiled warmly, "That's a very reasonable definition of

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the term; you have the makings of a Seranim trader, Chief Ravena.”

Ravena cackled contemptuously, “Don't saddle me with *that* epithet, young Mistress Denalin. I just want to be sure we are on the same page is all. Perhaps a little anecdote regarding 'morality' as we perceive its workings in the present day is in order here---just as an exercise in widening our perspective if you will.”

“Broad perspectives offer greater opportunities,” Denalin recited a standard Seranim adage.

Ravena began, “Is it moral to abandon those in dire need to the whims and vagaries of unkind fate?”

Denalin was visibly put-off by the notion. “And,” Ravena continued, “would it be a moral travesty to then pass judgement on those abandoned souls, such that they should ever suffer ignominy and derision at the hands of any who might otherwise offer the withheld assistance?”

“How abhorrent...” Denalin stifled.

“So then,” Ravena continued, “What recourse might be left to those outcast souls, if the moral framework of their world had been so abused, rent and destroyed by the callous actions of those populating the larger world in which they found themselves? Would it not seem just, even imperative that they struggle against such deplorable adversity to achieve even a modicum of self-dignity and esteem in spite of the oppression visited upon them?”

“Surely,” Denalin followed.

Ravena sat forward, “But into what miasma of morality must they then pick their way forward in that commonwealth of worlds, when said 'commonwealth' has already displayed such a stark disregard for the essential morality that should be the heart and soul of all civilized worlds?”

Denalin was seemingly at a loss for words. But then she seemed to gather her resolve; she ventured, “In your story, there is obviously a great wanting of that morality which I revere and would live by; a huge void in the very heart of that commonwealth. Those oppressed and formerly abandoned people would have no choice but to either lower themselves to the deplorable standards of that pseudo-

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morality already at play, or take the moral high ground and condemn their oppressors for the severe lack thus evinced.”

Elenir interjected a hearty, “Well reasoned, young Mistress!” and Denalin was pleased that she had gained such commendation in the exchange. Elenir continued, “My esteemed colleague has just given you a summary account of the history of the Lascorii. The anathematized people who had their right to survive, to live as a people *stolen* from them in the very first days of their existence. *And* by the *very* people who gave birth to them. I needn't point fingers or name names. Suffice it to say those 'thieves' are, and have always been, part and parcel of the grand Sargassian Alliance *and* they are almost *entirely* underwritten in their *every* endeavor by: the honored, the venerable Seranath Trade Guild---whose moral compass must always guide them toward unimpeachable action. How does *that* jibe with the 'morality' you so closely espoused mere minutes ago regarding your chastely held abhorrence of *Stealing?*”

Denalin was certain she'd just been accused of complicity in a most heinous travesty of social justice---perhaps of the ultimate theft: the attempted genocide of a people... Her mouth made the motions but no sound escaped. The Elf intervened. To Ravena and Elenir she chided, “I think our associate and dear friend has enough to chew on for the time being. Let's finish our very good meal and return to the ship before our appetites wholly sour from the grim realities here exposed.”

The rest of the evening was a somber affair for Denalin. The Huntress's company was in high spirits however. They were at the docking hatches directing the stream of delivered goods and treasures to every available nook and cranny, every workshop, bay and closet on the ship. To the Elf's utter amusement, Mim and Yula followed or led each lading foray into the ship. And when they tired of that, they curled up at the Elf's feet and made that roaring thrumming Denalin called purring.

Then first thing in the morning, their salvage proprietor's delivery men arrived with Reia and Pim's treasured Nurlian GL429---some assembly required. It was the arrival to the loading bay of

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Mistress Denalin that truly marked the occasion as 'special.' The Elf watched her carefully as the Seranim approached the workmen and appeared to be in a lively conversation with them as they situated the Elf's expensive antique junk pile as directed by Reia. Every so often Denalin would gesture towards the Elf, rummage through the tangled mass in front of them as the delivery men would scowl and follow her gaze. After a few minutes of the show, Denalin came trotting over to her waving the star chart over her head.

“And what mischief have you visited on my reputation with the good Salvage Owner?” the Elf asked evenly, knowing that anything the Seranim did to hamper her relations with the supplier could be mended rather easily. Money talks.

“Only this!” Denalin held up the chart in front of them and pointed to the intervening space between where they were around Balos and then to the the Olnish system, their initial destination. “They said that their boss had picked up that particular pallet of 'merchandise' as part of a larger lot at auction not four days ago...”

“So, I suspected as much. No one in their right mind would intentionally purchase obsolete flotsam as an addition to an otherwise utile inventory.” She caught herself, “Except *this* fool of a Captain.” the Elf offered facetiously; still a bit curious over the chart.

“Just so,” Denalin agreed, then offered, “And I am very sorry for my naïve behavior yesterday. I shall endeavor to amend my provincial notions.” That admission was followed quickly with the point of her interview of the delivery men. “It's just that that particular 'lot' of merchandise was wrested in toto from a blasted and adrift collection of vessels salvaged from right here...” and she again pointed at the little system not a fortnight from their present location nearly abutting the Olnish system.

“So?” the Elf could see where Denalin was taking her account.

“So!” and she lowered her voice, “If the Captain was correct that that...” and she waved a hand at the subject of conversation, “... 'purchase' had to have been recent and operational at the time of salvage...”

The Elf clapped her hands and waved for Elenir and Isin to join

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her at once. “Then our prey is nearer at hand than we'd ever have expected. What destroyed their ship may be a bit of a mystery, but that they were in this system... perhaps still *are* in this system... can't be passed over lightly.”

Elenir and Isin stepped up, “You called mon Capitan?”

“Slight change of course, chief;” and she nodded at the chart. Denalin was still pointing out the locations from whence the workers, now concluding their delivery, were certain their boss had procured the lot of antique spaghetti. “We're going hunting sooner than we'd hoped. Hasten the lading of the last of our stores and seal the ship for departure. We may have a rather narrow window of opportunity and I'd rather not have it close on us.”

“At once!” Elenir headed for the bridge to plot the course. Isin ramrodded the conclusion to their lading and delegated crew to finish the sorting and stowage, while she went to the Port-master's offices to submit departure requests and such---Protocols and red tape mostly.

Reia was green with envy that Pim and Song got to remain in the hangar bay and start the task of reassembling the major components of their newest treasure. “Not fair...” she muttered more than once while bringing up the helm to active and ready status. “I found it; I should get first crack at it...”

The Elf put a hand to her shoulder. “My dear Reia, do you suppose you could force yourself to turn over the task of pilot to a helmsman of obviously inferior experience?” She added the spice, “That would free you to... uh... go play erector set with your friends...”

Reia was mollified, even excited, but she glanced around the bridge and had to sigh. “Who has even a little experience as pilot? Well, Jista, but she's convinced *actually* touching controls is plebeian. Of course Elenir, but she's got that bias in spades. Not...” then it seemed to dawn on her. “You?!”

The Elf laughed, “How do you think we got around when you were on away missions? Magic?”

Reia was a fountain of advice, cautions, directions and worries

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over her cherished helm all of a sudden. The Elf smiled and gently nudged her from the chair. “Thank you. If I encounter anything truly unavoidable, I will call you to the bridge. Now run along and play nice with your friends... Shoo!”

It didn't take telling her twice. Reia was bouncing down to the hangar bay before the bridge door shut behind her.

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Long And Winding Road

"At no time are we ever in such complete possession of a journey, down to its last nook and cranny, as when we are busy with preparations for it."

---Yukio Mishima

“All hands, we are lifting for the Illian system where we hope to pick up the trail of some most unfortunate Naud. Therefore we have just two weeks to make good out little yacht and outfit her with the additions her designers neglected to include as her basic equipment.” The Elf glanced over to Senta at the com, Mim and Yula, sitting on the back of her own chair as if it were their rightful positions as 'Assistant Captains,' followed the Elf's gaze wherever it fell. “Please advise the Portmaster that we are ready to commence separation and egress from the station.”

While that was underway, the Elf stood up from the Captain's chair and settled herself at the helm. Mim and Yula slunk down onto the cushions of the vacated seat---right at home.

“Cleared, my Captain!” Senta announced.

“Releasing docking clamps and maneuvering to threshold,” the Elf recited her actions as she performed them. “All thrusters reverse and acquiring exit buoy guidance signals.”

The bridge view screen was filling with the vast star field as the station diminished and vanished from their sight. “Clearing perimeter beacons, preparing to wrinkle...” She looked up and smiled.

“To Illian!” and she punched the control for the wrinkle drive. The Huntress was enveloped in her little hurtling bubble of normal space as the wrinkling wave of velocity carried her on course for the next adventure. The Elf stood up after setting the helm to auto, and

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sat back down in her own chair. Mim and Yula leapt to the now vacant helm, expanding their domain and view.

“Well done, Captain!” Elenir and Jista both commended at once. Jista added, “So all those years of practicing behind Reia's back have paid off after all.”

The Elf looked pained, “What she didn't know didn't hurt her. More to the events at hand: We just made a historic open contact with an Alliance station and were welcomed, did routine business and were wished 'happy trails' upon our departure! *That* is the promise of a new future for our people we have for so long wished and which the Matriarch has hoped would transpire *in our time*.”

She reached over and stroked Mim who was tag-teaming Yula for the constant companionship of the Elf between the helm and Captain's chair. The Elf was content with the attentions of the two 'crew,' while Denalin had mixed feelings over the shift in loyalty. They were *her* cats... at least they *were* a gift to her, not the captain. But, she reasoned, if the cats made her own presence aboard the Huntress even a little more palatable to the company, so be it.

Ravena stood and requested, “Permission to leave the bridge, Captain. I have the grand chore ahead of me of remodeling our gardens, repotting, grafting and pollenating..”

“Certainly, oh chief of the green thumbs;” the Elf smiled.

Elenir followed suit, “And I should really get down to the galley and organize our pantry. Our restocking was more just a random stacking of goods---no rhyme or reason to it at all.”

The Elf nodded, “Permission granted.”

“Besides, our shipwrights will be needing a good series of meals to fulfill the Captain's schedule for their little project;” she justified.

Isin, at the science station continued to monitor the long range scanners for even a blip of indication that they might need to drop from wrinkle and investigate further clues of their prey's presence in the region. When her long range scanners were calibrated and routines set in, she did a perfunctory internal scan of the ship itself. 'No sense getting halfway to nowhere only to find we've brought aboard a pest or parasite...' What she saw however were neither of

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those. “Uh... Captain, would you take a look at these readings?” she said as evenly as she could manage. The Elf strode over to her station and followed Isin's gaze at the monitor in front of her.

“Well, well,” the Elf responded with a raised eyebrow, “very well packed for such an 'impromptu' change in travel plans...” She looked back toward the door to her ready room, “She was genuinely shocked, no mistake about that...”

Senta on the other hand, mused aloud, “I haven't watched a ship being built before...”

The Elf remarked tongue-in-cheek, “Is there a question in there somewhere?”

“Permission to...” Senta began.

The Elf just waved a hand across her face, “Go on. And while you're at it, do you think you can rig a video feed? I wouldn't mind watching their progress either.”

“Done and done!” Senta exclaimed and passed Denalin coming onto the bridge as she was going out.

“Permission to enter the bridge, Captain?” she said haltingly, unused to all the ship's protocols as yet.

“Certainly!” the Elf smiled. “Have a seat at the com. In fact, you might consider learning some of the ins and outs of that station. I should think as an experienced and successful negotiator, you'd make a sterling com officer--in addition to your primary duties as Guild Liaison, I mean.”

Denalin spread her hands over the glassy panels in front of her. “Oh, do you *really* think so?” Obviously flattered and pleased at the suggestion.

The Elf rose and went to stand behind her. Mim leapt to sit at Denalin's back, peering over her shoulder at the Com, while Yula remained guarding the Captain's chair. The Elf pointed out the functions of each of the controls, the properties and general arrangement of the panels and monitors, their usefulness and a few tricks of the trade as it were to their more arcane applications. Denalin was fascinated. A light blipped on and a voice came over the speaker in front of her. She was startled. “Did I touch something I

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shouldn't have?"

"Captain, you can test the video feed;" Senta's voice chirped.

The Elf pointed to one of the panels in front of Denalin and encouraged her with a nod of her head to activate the system.

Denalin touched a few of the buttons and the main viewer sprang from the morphing star field to a real-time view of their own hangar bay below. "Ooh! That was fun!" the Seranim chortled and settled into the com seat as if making it her new home. Mim had already done that.

Over the rest of the shift, the three left on the bridge watched the progress being enacted on the erstwhile stacks of disparate 'junk' as it gradually became the more integral hull and nacelles of an actual space yacht. It was like watching a documentary or cinematic production. Their friends at work, labored together like a crack team of experienced shipwrights. Which in reality, they were.

Senta approached Pim and asked a few questions. Pim then realized that they were 'on the air.' She looked up at the camera and waved, "Captain, we will be able to begin reintegrating ship's systems within the next couple days..."

Song and Reia looked around to see how they missed noticing the Captain entering the bay. Pim's finger wiggled up at the camera. "Oh!" Reia's grin was radiant. "Honestly Captain, that salvage guy didn't actually disassemble this baby part by piece. She's going to go back together a *lot* faster than we suspected at first..."

Song finished a little welding and added, "Pretty sloppy dismemberment, but *so* easy to repair. We're just having to be careful to keep conduits and such aligned... This is more like re-attaching severed limbs than ship-building..."

They turned back to the tasks at hand and seemed to ignore the camera after that. Isin asked, "Captain? If we only have you and Reia as pilots, who's going to fly the Huntress and who's going to fly that?"

The Elf smiled, "The thousand enrish question at last!" and she glanced over at a waiting Denalin, then back to a waiting Isin. "First things first, my sister. And who says Reia and I are the only qualified

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pilots aboard?”

“But...” Isin reviewed her knowledge of the others' skills and capabilities. A light began to glow behind her eyes. “Oh! Just because Elenir and Jista *think* it's beneath them to actually pilot...”

“They are two of the best there is!” the Elf congratulated.

At the end of shift, near to seven in the evening, the Elf made a general announcement that all hands should assemble in the galley for dinner. “We aren't always going to be able to be together at one time for meals, so when we can, I would very much like for us to take advantage of the opportunity. Galley in fifteen!” Yula and Mim scampered from the bridge while she set the com to reroute activity to the remote and had the other stations set to stations-keeping, also ready for remote monitoring. To Denalin's delight, the Elf entrusted the com remote into her keeping. “Until Pim or Song can break themselves away from their pet project and give you a more thorough round of instruction...”

“Yes Ma'am!” Denalin grinned and they all headed down to the galley. The aromas of Elenir's cooking pulling them like a magnet a little quicker than they would otherwise have made the short walk. Mim and Yula were already waiting for them there.

“What are we going to call our new little ship?” Denalin asked innocently.

Elenir mused, “The naming of ships has a long and interesting history, and especially on Lascor. All of our vessels were the rejects, or salvaged, or in some cases commandeered from some other people---and always had to be re-named. We are more than a little proud of our ability to capture the essence of a ship and give her a most fitting name---and without exception far more apropos than the name she'd suffered under before.”

Denalin was listening attentively. Reia noticed that she was gazing, staring even, into the Elf's eyes. She leaned over to Denalin and whispered, “Intoxicating, isn't it?” Deni nodded absently.

“On the long hauls we made over the last several years, Jista, Song, Pim and I would do the exact same thing. It's like an addiction... So euphoric... the world becomes so perfect! It conjures

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in you the most loved, sensual, empowering, satisfying...” Denalin was nodding whole-hearted agreement, her eyes never leaving those of the Elf. Reia intimated, “But be careful. Staring into the eyes of a Lascorii is more addicting than any drug devised or refined---Even with the greater part of their atmosphere dampened down, their eyes can scramble your brains and before you realize it: you're a hopeless slave to their merest glance. In spite of *realizing* that fact; I *know* that has to be at least part of why we four would follow her to the gates of hell... Just a word to the wise...”

The Elf was talking, “...Actually, this ship, the Huntress and her elder sister the Reaper are the only two ships in our entire history, commissioned to be built from the ground up, if you will. And not, as the Chief explained, re-built as our little yacht is experiencing just now.”

“Amendment noted,” Elenir acknowledged and inclined her head to the Captain. “Be that as it may, Let's look at the possible names available to the Huntress's little girl now taking shape;” and she listed, “She was originally the premier yacht of her class, hand crafted by the best artisans the Nurlii can field...”

Reia added, “Many pieces of her original equipment were one off installations intended to enhance her handling, range and comfort...”

Song pointed out, “She's got the sturdiest exoskeleton ever fitted to a space yacht. That level of engineering typically only goes into the constellation-class vessels...”

Pim had to say, “And she's going to have the only cloaking device in the quadrant that even its makers won't be able to track or trace. And I'll have her able to cloak whether she's lifting, landing or wrinkling! Let's just see a Naud ship do that!”

Reia continued, “She needs three crew, and can accommodate a company of seven comfortably---not including the crew---for long range cruising. She has the classic lines of a racer, with the grace of a luxury liner. She should maneuver like a a ship half her size and out run the Huntress if it came to it...”

Denalin's eyes flickered back and forth between the speakers

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and her expression reflected her admiration of their professional observations. “Sounds like the Huntress's catikin is already preparing to vie with her mistress for the affections of the Elf.”

The chatter at the table ceased abruptly. Denalin looked around, “Was it something I said?”

Elenir held a quiet conference with her fellow Lascorii officers and the shipwrights. The Elf and Denalin were overtly excluded. “What gives gang?” the Elf had to know.

The impromptu conference ended as quickly as it began, Elenir spoke for them. “Captain, with your permission, we think we have the perfect name for Huntress's catikin, as Deni just referred to her.”

Denalin was pleased, both that she'd been useful---*and* that she was getting a nickname; and one she didn't mind hearing. Most importantly, it was so feminine; an aspect of her life she'd dreamed of developing, but under the conditions of her profession and her culture, that just hadn't been a likelihood for her.

“And?” the Elf prodded.

Elenir grinned, “Lúthien!”

Ravena elaborated for Deni, “You see, in Lascorii mythology, the most beautiful enchantress of all our people...”

“Or of the Elven folk of Elhehrim!” Deni exclaimed, “Even the Seranim know this name: She was the enchanting daughter of the starry evening twilight.” Deni was obviously impressed with these 'Elven folk of Elhehrim' she kept on, “I haven't actually met any of them in person; I don't think anyone really has, but I have seen the few holos in the Guild archives, so someone has to have at some point. Even if it was just one person. The amazing thing to me is that, and I didn't even realize this until coming aboard the Huntress the first time... I mean you... that is to say the Lascorii are exactly what those holos showed the Elhehrim looked like! Same beauty, same spots, same shapely ears... even robed as I notice y'all prefer to be...” She was quiet then, but as suddenly chirped, “Oh and their hair was white! Just like Senta's.”

Ravena had to chuckle. Elenir, Isin, Senta and the Elf each wondered why she found that humorous. Yula and Mim were rapt

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with attention over the present conversation. It gave the Elf the impression, again, that these two were far more than just clever creatures. “There is a legend that thousands of years ago, the venerable Matriarch, perhaps Reja Grenassia III, like our own present Matriarch has to some degree, initiated a program of 'public relations' to curb the vitriolic suspicion and loathing the other peoples of the Spur continued to maintain toward us. She allegedly assigned a task force of our finest warriors to set up a colony not too far distant from Lascor---so that their activities could possibly be traced to us---and those activities were supposedly to include the random acts of kindness and charity towards any with whom they made contact. The sole stricture laid upon them was that they avoid overt personal detection when possible... seems rather self-defeating really if their charter was to improve Lascorii reputations and all. But that's the gist of the tale, obviously it's *had* to have been exaggerated over the centuries. The point that caught my fancy is that our mythology included those elven people---children of Lúthien...”

The Elf brought the conversation back to the present, and posited skeptically; “And this is all somehow a tribute to the coincidence that I am Captain of the Huntress and my name has been corrupted into: the Elf?”

Elenir nodded but added, “It so happens that in one of our myths it's suggested that Lúthien was sired by the creator, Eru Ilúvatar, and the great Pantheress, Bast---the supreme Huntress and protector of women!”

Again there was a spell of silence at the table. And again Deni broke the pause with: “I love it!”

Grinning faces looked back at her. The Elf admitted, “Fitting, truly fitting. Lúthien it is then.” They all clapped spontaneously at the verdict.

Elenir turned once more to Deni and added, “That's kinda what I meant when I said, the Lascorii have an interesting way of naming their ships.”

The Lúthien looked more and more like a reflection of her namesake as each day of re-construction passed. At the end of the

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twelfth day after leaving the Balosian station, Pim announced to an expectant company that, “Our cloaking device works better than I'd hoped. And that's not all...”

Song whispered to the Captain, whose eyes widened and nodded most excitedly. “Make it so!”

Pim added happily, “We can build modified versions for the Huntress herself!”

Ravena crowed, “This is going to make strategic planning a lot more interesting! I'd given a great deal of attention to tactics for the Lúthien, but to now have the *Huntress* capable of popping in and out of scanner fields... Well, this is going to take good and thorough review.”

Reia and Song assured, “Lúthien will be ready for flight trials in the morning if the Captain wishes.” “Naturally, we'll have to drop from wrinkle, boss.”

The Elf glanced at Senta. “Captain, there is *one* system that I've scanned and rescanned over this afternoon. It's well before the area described by our salvage guy... And although I can't get a *conclusive* reading... It may have residuals of a Naud wrinkle signature. I'd really like to take first-hand readings.”

The Elf smiled. “Kismet! Make it so. Jista arrange the side course and feed the data to the helm. ETA?”

Senta answered, “It's half a light year; that a way,” and she pointed through the starboard bulkhead.

“So, we put Lúthien through her paces in the morning,” the Elf finished, “while Ravena, Senta and Isin inspect our suspicious star system.”

Ravena hesitated then announced, “If our primary business is concluded, I would dearly love to offer a tour of my gardens...”

The Elf stood up and carried her dishes to the galley, “Consider that our next company activity!”

As they walked the short distance to the gardens, with everyone chatting about their own favorite topics du jour, Mim and Yula walked out of the galley with them but suddenly darted away and toward the bridge. The Elf noted that little curiosity, and especially

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as it was followed instantly by a simultaneous beeping and alarm going off on their station remotes. Through the ship speakers came a mechanical voice, "Wrinkle compromised, dropping into normal space."

As everyone headed to stations in a dash, Ravena scowled, "So much for showing off..."

The main screen showed that they had indeed dropped from wrinkle, as if every display at the helm wasn't proof enough. What captured the bridge crew's attention however was the field of destruction into which the Huntress was now gliding. Her shields insured that none of the debris collided directly with her hull, but the constant collisions were strewing the destruction in every direction. "All stop," the Elf commanded. Reia shut down their forward motion as Senta scanned the field more closely.

"Report!" the Elf demanded.

"Captain, we are not even a quarter light year from the center of the Illian system," Senta added, "and this debris isn't just space trash..."

Denalin strode onto the bridge. "Permission to come on the bridge," she uttered but only as a formality. She carried an interesting little device in her hands and was pointing it at the larger chunks of jetsam visible in the main viewer. Looking up from the little display in her hands she muttered, "Naudi signatures all over this lot. Weapons fire, probably a core breach, no survivors, and..."

All eyes were on the Seranim. What other surprises was she going to produce? The Elf sat back in the Captain's chair and asked calmly, "And where did you get a hand scanner with that kind of range?"

Denalin looked up more than a little embarrassed. She answered with a curt, "A girl has to have her things about her; I like gadgets..." that's all she'd offer on that score. She hurriedly continued, "Captain, this is a mystery. Who or what destroyed a Naud cruiser way out here?"

Senta added to the riddle, "Not just a cruiser; there's too much debris for just one ship. There must be pieces of at least a dozen

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scout ships or fighters or whatever---there are weapons signatures in the majority of the smaller bits out there...”

The little surprise of the Seranim's 'gadget' aside, the Elf made a decision. “Flight trials for the Lúthien have just been moved up.” She turned from staring at the main screen, “Isin, Reia, Pim; make a tour of the catastrophe out there. If there are more cloaking units, send them back to the Huntress, and gather any functional weapons from out of that mess. We'll not leave dangerous playthings for just any passing vessel to accidentally encounter. That would be reckless and thoughtless of us as perhaps the first ship after our beneficent salvage proprietor to encounter this... uh...” 'Disaster' was the word she was about to use, but then any occurrence that reduced the Naud, in her mind, couldn't be deemed a disaster. “...situation. Remember: even the salvage ship that was here before didn't realize what they were scavenging. Be vigilant!”

“Yes Ma'am!” The three of them happily headed for the hangar with uncharacteristic excitement---considering the task. Mim and Yula gazed at each other for a moment and Yula leapt to the deck and ran out after the trio, who were anxious to put Lúthien through her paces. The grim task of scavenging the catastrophe around them was wholly secondary.

Then the Elf turned to Deni with a little smile at the corner of her eyes. “Any other little gadgets I should know about just now?” Mim's eyes never left the Seranim, as if she were interested to see how much of what she knew would be aired aloud.

Denalin shoved the scanner into one of her pockets like a child hiding a stolen candy cane. “Uh... Nope, Captain. Nothing interesting...” the Elf nodded, and let it go. Mim still gazed at Denalin with a blank expression on her feline features. If Deni wanted to play it coy, the Elf decided, she'd just have to keep her guard up---Second nature anyway.

Ravena finally looked up from her displays and monitors. “Captain, I've finished compiling a few scenarios that could account for the patterns of destruction---as it was before we waded into the mess, I mean.”

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“And?” the Elf was as curious as the others, who were waiting with full attention on the security chief to continue.

“In the simplest scenario, there was an accident in the main ship that caused a chain-reaction through the little fleet...” she offered without conviction.

“And the other scenarios?” the Elf probed.

“That's where it gets weird.” Ravena took a deep breath, “The other marginally reasonable assumptions---that still fits the facts at hand---aren't as innocent. One: there was an enemy who completely over-powered the convoy---and I do believe it was a convoy of sorts. The problem there is that we don't detect any non-Naudi weapons signatures. Two: It was a mutiny of some kind—a self-inflicted disaster if you will. That is plausible but to suppose that a score or even two of Naud fighters could wreak such destruction on a battle-cruiser-class vessel... that's a stretch. The third scenario, even more troubling, is that there is some one or some people capable of so manipulating the minds of the Naud that they destroyed their own vessels out of blind obedience to powerful suggestion...” She sat back, “Sound familiar?”

The Elf stared back at her chief of security. “Yeah, *really* familiar. That's how *we* have historically dealt with insurmountable odds.”

Ravena nodded, “Strategic Responses 101.”

Elenir muttered, “The Elhehrim...?”

The Elf countered, “Not many fairy tales could bring down a Naudi convoy and leave it in this condition. If your last deduction is even a little accurate, our mission just got a whole lot more interesting.” She looked out at the mess around them again, “And where are the other wrinkle signatures if it were an outside agency. No; I don't buy it. Even the boogie man has to leave footprints.”

Song looked up from the com, “Lúthien is calling...”

“Captain,” Isin's voice sounded, “we have found that our salvage guy---if this is actually the field he rummaged---left several cloaking devices... or just didn't look for them; Pim thinks she can cobble together parts from each for the Huntress and avoid having to start

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from scratch. That's the good news.”

“And the bad?...” The Elf waited.

“Captain, it's hard to believe, but there are no armaments to be found out here. I know we showed Naud weapons signatures. But there isn't a single gun, cannon or pea-shooter to be found. We're halfway through our recon, but that's the upshot. Oh; and this cat seems to agree. She was all agitated as we left, but as clam as ever now... Out.”

“Curiouser and curiouser...” Ravena muttered and turned back to her monitors and panels, entered more variables and reran her analyses. “Make sense!” she commanded the machines in front of her.

By the morning, nine women stared at each other across the conference table in the Elf's ready room. Mim and Yula sat at the Elf's side near to her hands on the table top. On the table in front of them lay the only evidence of any weapons gleaned from the sweep of the debris field: one thoroughly folded, spindled and mutilated Naud side arm.

“That's it?!” Ravena repeated.

“We could go out again, but we made micro-scans the first time. That's it.” Isin affirmed. Mim just chirped and was silent.

For the everyone else, the previous silence vanished; the room burst into chatter.

“Oughta use the opportunity for target practice...” --Ravena

“Check for signatures coming or going through the ISM...”
--Elenir

“And from where did the first explosion originate?” --Isin

“White hair? Really?! Like mine or silver?” --Senta

“Can cloak even in the hangar!” --Jista

“Interesting surges in the scanners the closer to the system...”
--Pim

“Wouldn't like to meet anyone who could have done this so completely; have to be as lethal as the Boss...” --Song

“Love to meet the people who could do this and leave no trace...” --Reia

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“When's breakfast?” --Deni

On and around they went, some answering, some questioning, the Elf was inclined to second Deni's concerns: “Let's continue this over breakfast. And Isin, bring that 'artifact' along.”

They did. It was dawning on the Elf that they just weren't going to get enough data to make a valid assessment of the conundrum facing them. “All we can report to our Guild partners is:” and she listed simply and slowly for Deni to record. “First; The Naud ships are at least infrequently in this region of space. Second; we have found remains of 'things,' but no Naud remains---another mystery. Third; We have reason to suspect there are other players, perhaps more dangerous, perhaps just as unfriendly to the Guild and Alliance---but perhaps not. That's it so far. Have I overlooked something?”

She waited. Deni stood and asked, “Permission to transmit findings Captain?”

“Permission granted;” As a precaution the Elf asked Song, “Would you please accompany Deni to the Bridge when she makes her report? I would like a reconfig of our imaging systems. Take Pim with you if you think you'll need assistance...” The Elf wasn't letting Deni have carte blanche on her ship until the little mystery of the scanned arsenal in Deni's room could be unraveled. If Denalin didn't want to fess up yet, fine. But she wasn't getting free rein yet then either.

Song cooed to Deni, “And we can see what we can do with your hair...” Deni smiled. 'Coiffeur advice from a bald lady... great.' But Denalin *did* want to become more 'feminine,' especially now being surrounded by the Lascor beauties all the time. Senta asked to go along as well, “I have a few ideas for your wardrobe, too...”

“On a related topic,” Mention of the imaging systems jogged Elenir's memory, “Might we make a detailed survey of the planets in this system. Besides finding out if it was something here that attracted the Naud, we *could* add valuable resources to our lists of 'nice places to get free stuff’...” Yula and Mim were instantly alert.

“Make it so;” turning to Jista, “Plot a standard sweep of the

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system, forward it to the helm.” The Elf had a little smile playing at the corner of her eyes, watching Jista's lithe form glide from the galley toward the bridge, followed by the two cats. “And I'm taking volunteers to accompany me aboard the Lúthien. I want to see for myself what all the excitement's about.”

Everybody's hand went up. Yula strolled back in and resumed her place next to the Elf; the cats weren't going to be left out if volunteers were gathered; it must've been Yula's turn.

On the Lúthien, the Elf, with Isin, Song and Ravena---and Yula---as the lucky company, pushed the yacht into a hard tight orbit of one of the smaller moons orbiting the largest planet in the system. The looks on her companions faces didn't offer any indication that they were in fact about to pee themselves. “And who taught you to fly like that?!” Ravena uttered through clenched teeth, wishing now that she'd waited for Reia or Jista or Elenir to pilot her first excursion in the yacht. Someone with less... enthusiasm. Yula appeared to be enjoying herself.

“Jista...” the Elf giggled, thoroughly relishing the freedom Lúthien offered. Ravena made a quick amendment to her wishes; scratch Jista.

Yula was already gazing at it and had begun to whine. Isin had to look anywhere but at the little moon's surface which looked for all the world like they were going to become a part of at any moment. That's when she saw it. “There! Look!” she cried.

The Elf had slapped the engine controls to kill acceleration the moment Yula began her protests. She pushed the thrusters into full reverse as Isin pointed out the viewer, skewing their view of the moon but bringing the 'thing' to fill the screen.

“How did our scanners miss *that*?” Song muttered in disgust at herself---she'd done the last recalibration to them and this was embarrassing.

The Elf bumped the thrusters just enough to center the familiar looking ship on the screen. Ravena muttered, “E-Class. That's a *really* old vessel; we have one for cadet training. I thought it was the last of its generation.”

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“More to the point,” the Elf insisted as she brought the Lúthien within a hundred meters of the vessel, “what’s an obsolete Lascorii E-Class starship doing here?!” She tapped the com; “Senta? Lock on our position and tell me what you see on the scanners.”

“Sure, Captain,” came Senta’s voice through the connection. “Just let me adjust for range...” There was a moment’s pause, Mim’s mewling was plainly audible in the background. “This cat has been yowling for the last several minutes. Very annoying. Okay, got it. What am I supposed to see besides the Lúthien---and that cute little moon?”

The four people in the Lúthien looked at each other then back out at the ship just a stone’s throw from the viewer. “Really?!” the Elf exclaimed, “Just us and the moon?”

“Well...” Senta’s voice wavered, “there *is* an anomalous sorta ‘smudgy’ thing, like a shadow between y’all and the moon.” Mim was howling in the background now. “But honestly, we get that kind of reading on all kinds of stuff from comets to space junk. It’s nothing to worry over, just an artifact of the scanner beam refraction... At least that’s what Song told me that Pim told her it probably might be.”

The Elf, Ravena and Isin looked at Song. She blanched, “Senta, bring the secondary antennae array on line,” to no one but herself she muttered, “that *should* buffer any refraction.”

“Okay...” Senta replied casually, then her voice squealed, “What the hell is *that*?!” In the background, Mim’s purring replaced her excitement of the minutes before.

“*Right*?!” The Elf, Ravena, Isin and Song yelped at once.

“I’m going to lasso it and bring it back to the Huntress; get some help and make sure there’s room in the hangar bay. Seeya in twenty.” The Elf cut the connection.

“We’re going to have to rescan *everything*...” Song moaned. “Sorry Boss, I had no idea.”

Ravena comforted, “Those ‘smudges’ in the scanning data are *well* within tolerances. Don’t beat yourself up over this. Live and learn.”

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Isin volunteered, "Captain, I'll go out and make the tether fast..."

Song interrupted, "Not necessary. Captain, that control by your right leg that looks like a drawer handle..." The Elf nodded as her hand felt for and found it. "It is. Pull it out," Song suggested.

The Elf glanced at the contraption, raised an eyebrow toward Song; "And this is a joystick for..."

"Harpoon and tether. Just press the green button to scroll through the choices till it says 'magnetic' and put your hand to the control;" Song instructed. The Elf did and at once there was a super-imposed crosshairs filling the main screen.

"Nice!" The Elf praised and aimed the harpoon at the likeliest target on the vessel in front of them: the nearest nacelle. "And just pushing the button on the top of the control will..." She did just that as she was saying it and a line snaked away from just beneath them and stopped dead at the center of the crosshairs.

"Good shooting!" Ravena crowed. "I want several of these for the Huntress!"

"Just pull back on the control now and it acts as a winch control instead of aiming the harpoon." Song was glad this little gadget was working as designed. Her sister really was the best 'Gadgeteer' around.

In the hangar bay aboard the Huntress...

Denalin was waiting with her little scanner and was already combing the antique ship with it as the Lúthien crew came down the ramp. "...No energy signatures of any sort..." Deni looked up a little hesitantly at the Elf, she quickly read off the rest of the results. "No apparent damage to any systems, I mean everything appears to be tidy and orderly inside. Just empty and off."

Ravena stepped forward to the boarding hatch. "If it's like the one at the academy..." she pressed a coded series into the adjacent panel. "...This should do it."

Nothing.

Pim came bounding into the bay. "No power. Gotta jump start 'er to even get the access panel to register or the servos for the hatches to do anything." She clamped the suitcase looking equipment

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she carried onto the hull. "Shouldn't really matter where the induction field is... This is as good a place as any I should think." She smiled at Ravena. "Try it again."

This time there was the hum of motors and servos. The hatch opened and a ramp slid out toward them, they hopped out of it's way and the Elf made to enter.

"Hold it!" Isin held her back by her arm. "Just a precaution..." she reminded and went ahead of the Captain into the now dimly lit ship, following Mim and Yula, naturally. They were apparently as concerned about the Elf's safety as the Princess sisters---or they were more curious. "Looks like they just left for a sandwich and will be back any minute." She went to the control panels beneath what must be the main screen. "Ravena is right, this *is* just like the one at the academy; but this one looks like it just came from the shipyards. So pristine and..." She gulped. "Captain!"

The Elf looked over her shoulder at what had arrested her sister's attention so completely. She read aloud: "Elhehrim Starship, Lorien!?" her voice was nearly screeching.

That brought every one of the company aboard to see for themselves. Elenir summed it up, "Fairy tales strike again."

A most thorough search of the vessel yielded nothing further. "Senta, please find out everything you can lay your hands on about the program Elenir said she remembered Reja Grenassia III inaugurated all those years ago." the Elf directed. "It may be a wild goose chase but I want answers and all we're getting now is an ever-burgeoning volume of questions!" Mim and Yula were out of their depth on that assignment; they seemed to realize it and so remained close to the Captain.

Later at the Security Station on the Huntress's bridge, "NO; we don't have any 'special black ops' with secret weapons that could do that!" Ravena was plainly insulted.

"I mean," Elenir restated in as calm a voice without accusing as she could manage, "it's becoming clearer and clearer that there is a Lascorii trail to follow here and we are groping in the dark!"

"Well it's not a program that got authorized under my watch!"

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Ravena wasn't mollified.

"I'm not saying it was per se; just if you heard any rumors, any gossip, any..." Elenir struggled to be tactful, "*Anything* at *all* that might shed some light on this..."

"Ladies?" the Elf asked as she came onto the bridge; "Is there something you'd like to share?"

"Captain," Ravena pledged, "I swear, if I had *any* knowledge of *any* operation in the past or going forward that might help to sort *this* mess out, I would've have told you instantly!"

The Elf nodded, "I trust that is the case. Why?"

"It's my fault, Captain." Elenir admitted, "I've never fully trusted the Security Directorate. *There* I've said it out loud, for the record." She quickly turned back to Ravena. "It's not you personally, darling. It's the..." she put her hand to her mouth and struggled against a very pressing emotion it seemed. Straightening herself up and shaking herself, "It's that ever since the debacle over the needless sacrifice of so many..." her nerve broke and she rushed for the door. "Permission to leave the bridge..." she was crying and didn't stop all the way down the corridor outside.

"It's the Tursii Affair." Ravena was ashen and contrite. The Elf nodded for her to go on; Isin and Senta looked sullen.

"The what?" Pim asked innocently. "Never heard of it."

The Elf still looked to Ravena adding a shrug of ignorance as well. Ravena closed her eyes and took a deep breath, "It was long before the operation that liberated you from that Naud facility so there's no reason you would have heard of it. The Directorate sent an entire graduating class from the Selective Service on a final training mission---sort of a graduation exercise---to monitor freight; that was it. There were complaints of shipment irregularities between the Tursii and their nearest neighbors. It was a simple enough contract laid at our door, the Security Directorate I mean. We were *supposed* to merely tag along mind you. Well the chief at that time was chummy with the director of Selective Services... one thing led to another. The Directorate proposed to kill two birds with one stone: the soon to be grads needed a few more days of practicum

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and the Service didn't have anything on line in the near future for them, the contract was one those 'hands-off' arrangements, so---win-win, right? Of course neither the Service *or* the Directorate are supposed to meddle with the Contract Board's assignments ever, in the least---and *especially* not when the operatives in question aren't *even* trained Lascorii agents... Heads rolled.”

She sat down and talked more to the deck plates than to the people around her. “Turned out that the Tursii hadn't mentioned that the shipments in question were *mining explosives*---and that the irregularities in question were *shorted shipments*.” She was clearly still angry about something, she spat, “I mean how in the name of the Matriarch does a 'little' item like *that* escape the bloody Contract Board?!” She sighed and continued, “Hindsight. Anyway, the cadet ship was only just entering the traffic lanes around the Tursii trading partner's facilities in that system's asteroid fields when all hell broke loose. One after the other of the mining installations began going kablooey! It appeared that a full scale worker's revolt was underway and our ship showed up as the curtain went up on the first act... Before the Commandant in charge of the cadets, or the First Mate of the ship could even voice the order to reverse course, the nearest facility erupted in a fireball that looked more like a nova than a mining disaster. The ship, it's company and crew were gone before they knew what hit 'em.”

Ravena's voice was barely a whisper now, “Elenir's niece was crewing that ship, the Wayfarer, as that First Mate, and on that run she was essentially taking orders from the Commandant *only* regarding the cadets. Running the ship was her own command and her first voyage at the position... and... last.”

She gazed out the view screen, “I saw Elenir's face when we came up on the Illian debris field out there. Her memory flashed to the Wayfarer and the Tursii Affair in a split second. And then with the mysterious find of the Lorien... well, I don't blame her for her emotions being pretty close to the surface these days. And I of all people *know* how she loathes the Directorate...” Her voice was almost a whisper, “My daughter was that Commandant. I wasn't

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even in the sector at the time... Another longterm insertion assignment, incommunicado, all that. When I finished my contract and was briefed over the Affair..."

Her voice broke, "Let's just say Elenir and I both had a reason to seek out each other's company and develop a mutual loathing of the Directorate administration..." She wiped her eyes and sat up straighter, "When the Matriarch made me Chief of Lascor Security, I did some real cathartic serious house-cleaning in the Directorate. Petty perhaps, but there you go."

"Your daughter?" Senta repeated.

"Elenir's niece?" Isin felt ill.

Ravena only nodded, drained from the torture of reliving the nightmare. "So you see Captain, if I knew of *anything* at all that could shed light on our *own* riddles..." She stood and her usual confident posture was absent. "Permission to go to Elenir."

"Yes, do;" the Elf encouraged.

Ravena nodded and left.

The poignant silence on the bridge seemed to stretch on interminably. Song came onto the Bridge quite a while later, and not noticing the maudlin expressions around her, she excitedly announced, "We got the Lorien all charged up and the logs are mostly intact!"

The spell was broken instantly. Song continued, "I ran into Ravena and Elenir, they're down there now."

"Put the bridge on auto; we'll hear it all before leaving the system!" The Elf exclaimed and followed Song from the bridge, trailed by Mim and Yula, then the others as they set their stations for their absence.

It was like gathering for a lecture or a cinema; the crew huddled around the log recorder sitting out on a workbench in the hangar. 'Mostly intact' was a generous description. The thirty or forty percent of the log they could make out---that wasn't the incessant static---seemed pretty routine ship's stuff: waypoints along the voyage, commendations for service, maintenance and upgrade notes... then it got interesting. 'Met a new people'... (static) ...'eranim

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call them Enhiides'... (long static) ...'ways more like them. We shouldn't have any interference from the Urgas or those new pests the Naud we have been told'... (long static) ...'eranara promises to be as welcoming as Hanur or Melnith. We have had to activate the shields; giant blossom of'... (static) ...'unimaginable force. I have directed that we transfer all essential personnel and equipment to the surfa'... (long static) ...'n't have to say farewell to a fine ship, but we won't be needing two'... (long static) ...'is final log as Captain of the Lorien. Tenrith is as beautiful a home as'... (static) Silence.

“That's it?!” a communal gasp voiced.

“Tenrith? Never heard of it;” Elenir mused aloud, her voice stronger after the time with Ravena in their rooms.

Jista's bright voice announced, “If it's an actual planet, I can find it! Just give me a little while to figure out if the Lorien drifted here, or was fixed here, and where it traveled.” She looked at the Elf, “I can do this Captain!”

“Get to it, then. Do you suppose we'll need to stay in the vicinity?” The Elf asked expectantly, she would really like to put the Illian system behind them.

“Just long enough to be sure our data sets of the surveys are complete; say...” Jista put a finger to her chin and looked for a moment just like Elenir; very flattering. “Is seven hours too long to wait?”

The smiles that met her guestimate said it all. “Make it so!” The Elf commanded and went to stand in front of the Lorien. “Pim? Reia? Song? Do you suppose you can turn this old girl into Lúthien's sister?”

“Pim's already sketched out the first few phases!” Song announced with glee at her sister's industry.

Reia nodded, “Looks like we'll have something to fill our time the rest of the way to the Olnish system...”

The Elf turned to Elenir, “And that will take?”

“Another almost four weeks---providing we don't make any more little side trips like this one...” she looked to Denalin.

“Don't look at me!” she defended, “It was that darn cloaking

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device that got all this started in the first place! I just couldn't imagine how it could have still had any charge in its power cells if it hadn't been recently acquired and relatively locally..”

The Elf put a hand on her shoulder, “And you just keep on wondering and asking questions. You're a treasure, Denalin of Breuges. A real treasure.” She blushed most completely at the praise.

“That reminds me!” Isin dashed off to her quarters. Soon she came back carrying a little bundle. She explained, “I finished this last night, but with the white knuckle Lúthien ride and the Lorien and all... well, here” and she placed the bundle in Denalin's hands.

“For me?” she was wholly uncertain.

Isin gave one of her rare face-splitting smiles, “I know I may not look like it, always wearing this same old thing and all, but I appreciate fine fabrics as much as my sister loves dressing in them. She suggested I make you something special..”

“I just think a girl with Deni's figure and bearing and pretty hair should have...” Senta tried to explain; Deni's sudden outburst as she opened the bundle cut her short.

“It's beautiful! You *made* this?!”

Senta was the proud sister all of a sudden, “Isin is the best weaver of all our sisters. The Matriarch *only* wears Isin's productions you know... I mean except for state functions and all.”

Deni held up the resplendent shimmering robe for everyone to see. “I... don't know what to say. I don't have anything to offer you in return.” A *truly* embarrassing situation for a Seranim. Traditions demanded a transaction and she didn't even have all her *own* luggage aboard she reminded herself again.

“Not necessary! I just thought you'd look pretty in it is all.” Isin was becoming more her usual self the longer this took. Deni should just take the gift, put it on, look beautiful and that be the end of it. That's what Isin thought; that's not how it ever worked though.

Song, the other member of their company who shared Senta's penchant for over-dressing, insisted, “Do put it on!”

Deni surprised them all. She instantly stripped on the spot and wriggled into the luxuriant robe; obviously more than just a little

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anxious to comply with Song's encouragement. "Ooh, divine! It's like wrapping myself in a cloud!" She twirled and turned. "Maybe you'll teach me the way Lascorii make their robes come to life?" she looked up at Senta and Isin.

Song had been waiting for the right time to ask that very thing herself. "Can I be in that class too?"

Senta looked to the Elf, who shrugged, "As long as y'all are on task with the little chores I request..." an understatement for: Be on time and don't miss a shift.

The four ladies, and two curious cats, disappeared to Senta's quarters.

The Elf looked back up at the Lorien and the Lúthien sitting as silent observers to the on-going 'show' that was her company. Reia noticed the gaze. "Captain, if Pim and Song are right about being able to bring the Lorien up to even half the Lúthien's capabilities, we'll have the fastest little phantom fleet around."

"And it is becoming clearer and clearer that we shall need all that and our best into the mix before this contract is consummated."

Ravena coughed to get their attention. She nodded her head to the workbench behind them. They turned and looked: Jista and Elenir had their heads together over the bay's nav monitor, giggling for a moment, then suddenly becoming quite the professional navigators but shortly just as quickly breaking into a fit of giggles again. Ravena whispered, "Great therapy! Jista's just what the doctor ordered for our Elenir!"

Reia spoke next without thinking, "And what do *you* do for therapy?" She realized what a breach of etiquette, let alone how intrusive that sounded. "I'm sorry, I just meant..."

"Shush, now," Ravena smiled. "I have my garden and books. I assure you, I am well therapized. Just like 'the girls'..." and she indicated the four who had gone off to practice robe fluttering and play dress-up; "...have their wardrobe and bangles to relax with. Or how Pim has her gadgets and ships to play with, or..." and she cocked an eye at Reia. "And what do *you* do for therapy?"

Reia laughed, "Touché! Mostly, I guess, just whatever is the next

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thing that needs doing; I'm not the anxious type. No haunting memories to escape, no pressing worries to speak of..."

The Elf cackled. "There you have it then! We are a well therapized company of lunatics chasing fairy tales across the Spur--- who it may turn out aren't legends and myths after all---*and* stumbling onto inexplicably destroyed hosts of Naud---saving us the effort of doing it ourselves. *And* the icing on the cake: '*earning*' a *very* liberally generous compensation for our troubles at the end of the contract! Let's see... what have I left out?"

Ravena and Reia winked to each other. Reia cleared her throat and nodded toward the Lorien, where Pim was just coming down the main hatch ramp dragging some---to her own standards---unnecessary chunk of bulky equipment out of 'her' ship and pushing it out of her sight.

The Elf added, "Oh yes; And remodeling every ship we come across to our own high standards of crazy: we want beautiful ships that no scanner can detect or person can see with their own eyes!"

"Shall we at last take that promised tour of Ravena's gardens then?" Reia encouraged.

"Yes!" the Elf clapped and took each of their arms in her hands as her escort and let them lead her out of the hangar.

Three weeks and not a blip on the scanners or urgent communiqué over the com. Just the sedate activities each or several together of the company enjoyed during the hiatus from their ongoing mysteries. The Elf rolled up her sleeves and pitched in with Pim and Song to refit the Lorien. Under Senta and Isin's patient tutelage, Deni and Song became adept at the subtle movements required to perform the basics of the Lascorii Court 'dances and rituals' which is what the robe flourishes were used for to begin with. Those lessons had another benefit: Isin softened even more her otherwise taciturn aspect amongst the others. Reia introduced Ravena to her collection of 'games.' Games is a little misleading; holo flight training simulations is what they actually were and the highest level of advanced techniques at that. Ravena turned out to be a natural pilot, or so Reia insisted.

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When the Huntress dropped from wrinkle and set up orbit around Elenessa's nearest neighboring planet, the crew split into teams aboard the new avatar of the Lorien and the Lúthien. "This is a two-fold away mission," the Elf had explained. "We are performing the usual surveys of the planets and ISM in this system... *And* we are going to test our yachts' cloaks and maneuvering capabilities. So with that in mind, Reia and Ravena have put together these flight plans which Jista and Elenir have graciously consented to make operative as pilots for this mission."

The Elf paused to allow the back-patting to ebb. "I will remain on the Huntress with Deni. Crewing with Jista on the Lorien: Isin, Pim, and Reia. On the Lúthien with Elenir: Song, Ravena and Senta. Oh!" the Elf grinned, "and provided we don't have any interlopers or newfound mysteries leap up into our faces---I thought we might make this more interesting: Deni and I will monitor both ships for cloaking consistencies, thoroughness of surveys, etc. Here's the deal: which ever ship is back in her bay first, selects our next week's desserts! Sound compelling enough?"

Her last few words were to an empty hangar deck. The two crews were already in their ships and preparing to bounce.

Deni laughed, "Okay then... Off you go... Don't dawdle."

They followed Mim and Yula up to the bridge and set the main viewer to split screen. Each of them took down the survey and tracking data for her assigned 'team.' Every so often the com would announce this or that milestone in the progress. Otherwise it was a rather quiet several hours. The Elf kept an eye on the long range sensor monitor as well. While Deni kept vigil on all com channels not being used by their own ships. Eyes and ears open at all times.

Elenir, Song, Senta and Ravena had very particular tastes in desserts... As it happened, there was nothing of any threatening nature in the Olnish system. However, what they couldn't fathom was the presence of six small evenly spaced 'moons' joining Elenessa's two larger moons in orbit around her. It was just one more in the string of mysteries piling up at their doorstep the further they ventured toward the frontier.

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Denalin made her required report to the Guild and sent it off. She went down to her rooms then and came back to the bridge with the next sealed envelope and handed it to the Captain. "Where to next?" is all she said.

The Elf slit the flap open and read off the list of next three destinations. "Hanur in the Firefly system, Reshta of Ying and Melnith of Corona Alpha---and naturally all the little systems in between." She looked to Jista. "And do we have any of our own destinations to include in our upcoming itinerary?"

Jista grinned, "I've narrowed the path in search of Tenrith to a band of systems that aren't *too* far off the track suggested by our Guild contract. I just need to unravel a couple more permutations that I'm certain they *had* to have undertaken to have left the Lorien where they did---which *wasn't* in the Illian system by the way!"

Nine expectant faces looked back at her. "I'm not saying I know *who* took it to the Illian system... but it *wasn't* the original crew and they *didn't* pilot it there. Someone acquired her from..." she flipped a few controls on the nav panel. "This'll be easier if I just show you on the charts..." The region of space to which she'd narrowed the search sprang up on the main screen, and she pointed. "There in the Zeta Gabulon cluster is where the Lorien was apparently abandoned. The logs offered waypoints, sightings... a treasure trove of clues---if you know how to interpret them. Who knows? Maybe the someone who found her took her as a trophy. Pim has assured me that they couldn't possibly have figured out how to power her back up... technological impediments... Pim can elaborate on those. Anyway, so maybe *that's* why we found it tucked away where we did... like a buried treasure or something."

"And?" the Elf asked.

"And that's all I've got so far. Sorry, Captain..." Jista shrugged a little disappointed at the quiet ambivalence from her mates.

Elenir couldn't stand the lack of response and had to say, "Captain, fellow officers, you don't actually realize, I'm sure, just what an *amazing* accomplishment it is to have tracked the Lorien this far. Jista is a genius, with unequaled insight and intuition, in my

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experience. She's *better* than I *ever* was *and*---all things considered, I don't think it's immodest to say---that's saying an awful lot!" She then made a deep bow of respect to Jista, who just stood there blushing to her toes.

The bridge erupted into cheers and clapping. The Elf summed it up, "It's true. We just take for granted that we want to go somewhere or ask for directions and y'all just answer so easily, we forget that navigating the stars isn't like remembering how to get to our favorite restaurant or something.. Especially since the diner stays put, while the cosmos is in constant motion---Now you see it, now you don't sort of motion. You have, as you have always had, my personal gratitude." The Elf bowed again to Jista and then to Elenir.

Like a light going on in her head, Jista looked back up at the chart on the viewer.

"That's it! Captain, thank you! Look..." and she proceeded to trace a circuitous route filling in gaps and adding new trceries from the little cluster she'd at first indicated until the glowing path wound around and around... She stopped suddenly and looked between the screen and her notes, which she had to sort through to find the one page she wanted. With an artist's flourish she made a last connecting trace on the course and grinned at the rest of them on the bridge.

Elenir's mouth was just hanging open. Ravena sidled over and put a finger to her chin. Elenir chuckled, shut her mouth and tried to shake off her disbelief. "How did you *do* that?" was all she could offer.

Jista grinned, "Simple. Like I said: the ship's recorder gave up a wealth of information about the space they were *actually* traveling through---if one does a bit of historical sleuthing. But..." she beamed, "It was what the Captain just said that *really* shredded the one curtain keeping me from seeing the end of this little riddle: 'nothing stays the same!'" For Jista that was it and enough.

The Elf asked cautiously, "And the end of that line is Tenrith?"

Jista really had a great laugh at that. "No, that's Lascor!" She went up to the screen and pointed with her outstretched finger, "*That* is Tenrith!"

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Elenir again was unsettled that the crew wasn't getting it. "Read the list of our next destinations please, Deni..."

She picked up the paper, "Hanur, Resta..." Elenir cried 'Stop,' and nodded her head to Jista still pointing to Tenrith on the chart. "Resta is in the Ying system; *that* little cluster Jista is pointing at is not thirty light-years from Ying. And *that* is Tenrith!"

"Home of the Elhehrim..." Deni whispered. Elenir nodded.

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Disguises

"Disguise our bondage as we will, 'Tis woman, woman, rules us still."
---Thomas More

“We are setting course for the Firefly system via the two waypoints we know to be en route;” the Captain announced once Jista's chart on the main screen was recorded and the star field beyond again glowed softly into the bridge. “I am as anxious as anyone to bolt straight for Tenrith. However that is not what we have license to do at present. We are on contract---not a personal quest...” She grinned slyly, “Should the two happen to become mingled... Well, who am I to reject the gifts of fate?”

Her crew set about their duties with new enthusiasm. Pim and Song headed down to the hangar bay to recommence the reconstruction of the cloaking equipment destined for the Huntress herself, with Deni tagging along.

“How does a cloaking thingie work anyway?” Deni asked to no one in particular.

Pim was just crossing to the workbenches. She stopped in the middle of the open bay as if arrested by an invisible field. “Are you familiar with how a wrinkle drive functions?” Deni shook her head. “How about how a replicator... Sorry; a "Three-dimensional-Pattern/Matrix-Regeneration module is able to make a cup of soup on command?” Again Deni had to just shake her head.

Song giggled; but hastily apologized. “I'm not laughing at you dear. Honestly. It's just that my sister takes for granted that what she knows and understands must per force be simply: common knowledge. It's a curse. Funny! I laughed.”

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Pim turned on her heel and crossed the rest of the way to the makeshift workshop, muttering; “No common language to answer the question... Should be able to correlate the transverse parallax imaging systems by amplifying the resonant sine wave signature through the...” and her sub-vocal conversation with herself disappeared into the esoteric and unintelligible.

Song and Deni stood nearby to fetch a tool here or hold a gloved finger on a circuit board there. They were as useful as they could be under the circumstances. For them it was not so much 'helping' as watching an extremely competent artist at work. Like a instrumental concert, or a cobbler making a beautiful shoe, or a premier court dancer... just witnessing the deft and efficient empowers the soul.

In the lulls of their more active 'assistance,' Song braided Deni's hair, or Deni styled Song's now growing but still short curls. The Atrian women---those from Pim and Song's home world---ritually kept the hair of their heads cropped close or shaved. It was more than tradition and the taboo of long female hair was so ingrained in them that while Song was at last turning her back on the practice, it felt like a supreme break with her own self. Pim on the other hand didn't give it a thought. Long hair was a nuisance and an impediment. She couldn't fathom why anyone would voluntarily add another chore to their routine; *and* there was the potential for personal injury that long grab-able, tangle-able hair *just was...* *That* was ridiculous in the extreme.

Now, that being said, she *also* was certain that the Boss, in particular, and the Lascorii aboard in general were the most beautiful persons she'd ever encountered, and that the Captain had the longest auburn locks of any woman in Pim or Song's memory; *that* was just as it *should* be. No judgements, no recriminations. The Elf was perfection, and Pim of all people couldn't conscience messing with perfection. She had the same prejudices *and* 'reasonable' exceptions to her inherent and trained cultural biases as any other living woman.

“If y'all are finished preening for a minute,” Pim pointed to a power module stored on one of the bay shelves, “I'm ready to power

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this up and see if it goes pop or hum.”

Song and Deni scurried over to the shelves and with Deni on Song's shoulders they carefully plucked the unit off its perch and delivered it to an appreciative Pim.

The galley gong rang through the ship and three women's smiles lit up the bay as Pim made the last connection. “Good timing!” she clapped as the bulky equipment that occupied her work bench suddenly vanished, leaving only a humming noise to mark its continued presence. “Now, for two more of these little darlings and we can move to installation!”

In the dining hall, Deni again had questions difficult to answer. Not because they were inquiries into the unknown or unknowable, but because the supporting knowledge required to convey the understanding was absent in her. She wasn't alone in that deficit, but since the others wanted to know also, Pim sighed and looked at the ceiling, still chewing. “Okay, how about this...”

She set a napkin in the middle of the table. “You see this, right?” she glanced from face to face at the nods of certainty. “Alright now, what if I turned this so that all you could see of it was from the edge...” and she held it up by the corners and directed its edge to one after another of the company. Again they nodded; it was nearly invisible as a line: the edge of a plane, versus head on as the fragment of a plane itself. Simple. Pim smiled, “That's kinda how the cloaking module works...”

“But how can it be an edge to all of us at once?” Deni was sure there was a discrepancy here and her mind clasped it instantly.

Pim sighed. “Think of it this way...” she took the strands of pasta from her plate and arranged them as rays emanating toward each of those at the table from the napkin still laying in the middle. “Okay, you can only see the napkin because it reflects light striking it from the lamp up there...” she gestured at the fixture above them. “Of course out there,” and she waved around them to indicate the space through which they traveled, “light comes from all directions at once... well almost; close enough...” she began curling the ends of the bits of pasta closest to the napkin in a pattern that made them

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look like they were swirling into each other like water going down a narrow opening. “So what must happen to keep you from seeing the reflected light of the napkin, is to have the napkin always present its edge to you no matter from what vantage you view it. That is accomplished by refracting the incoming light such that the parallax of the light from the opposite side of the object, relative to the viewer, is presented to the viewer without the reflected light of the object itself. A 'hole-in-space,' if you will, is constructed artificially.” She was actually enjoying this now. “So the little babies I'm tinkering with in the shop do essentially the same thing with incoming radiation, whether that is in the electro-magnetic band of visible light or at the wavelengths employed by sensors and scanners. Every 'observation' that encounters the presence of the object---in our case: our ships---is 'tricked' into seeing only what is beyond our ships, *not* our ships themselves!”

Deni was smiling with the light of perception. “That's so simple! Why didn't you say so before?” Pim's face contorted into mask of confusion. The peels of laughter were a salve, not an annoyance.

Ravena was still curious. “Okay so the units themselves do that 'now you see me, now you don't' little trick. How do they convince the ship to join in the fun? I mean... I mean... I'm not making the leap from module to entire ship.”

Pim nodded, “That's the big question then isn't it! And the most difficult to accomplish, let alone explain. In simplest terms...”

“Oh yes please!” came the unanimous response. She had to giggle.

“Yeah, so, in simplest terms, we make the ship itself part of the device, so that when the gadget does its thing it affects the whole ship. Like an extra skin or integral casing of the gadget itself. That's the best I can describe it without going all alien on you...”

“And you need three of them, calibrated and 'harmonized' together to cover the whole of the Huntress. While the Lorien and Lúthien only need one apiece?” the Elf was grasping the gist of the discussion.

Pim winced, “Sorta. It's not the mass---well it is and it isn't---it's

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more the attenuation of the field necessary to... That is to say, there's an exponential inverse polarity in the... Uh..." she was losing them. She tried a direct tack: "I can't make a whole moon disappear. It just has too much effect on the space around it---That whole 'gravity' thing? You know?---not to be noticed even if you *could* see the space beyond it. There's no way to put the starlight back where it *might* have gone if the moon just weren't there... See?"

"Deni's robe wouldn't keep the Boss from appearing naked!" Isin clapped.

Pim's grin at the suggested imagery was sincere. "In one!" She pushed back from the table, "And now to get the other two modules cobbled together and we should be the phantom huntress of the Spur before we reach..." she looked to Jista and Elenir, "Where are we going?"

The Elf answered, "Our first waypoint on the way to Firefly is an embedded cluster actually. We will likely have to spend more time there than any of us would prefer; but it's an excellent place for a fleet of ships to hole up and stay hidden. So..."

Pim mused aloud, "Cluster... hmm, denser ISM, packed with diffuse light... Challenging..." and she meandered back to 'her shop' in the bay.

True to her word, the first test of the Huntress's fancy new cloak was tested at the fringes of the Waghtnin Embedded Cluster, their initial destination on this leg. The Lorien and Lúthien were dispatched as the observation ships and The Elf gave the command to 'Cloak'!

Instantly, she disappeared from normal, visible space. Pim had set up secondary sensors just for their own ships' cloaking fields that functioned in tandem with the standard sensor-scanners which were original equipment. The crews of the yachts looked between the two monitors on their ships. On one set the Huntress had completely vacated normal space; on the other Pim-improved monitors the ghostly shadow or silhouette of the Huntress could be plainly detected. Success.

Aboard the Huntress before they formally entered the

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Waghtnin... “And there's no way another ship might, even accidentally, stumble on a way to replicate your tweaking of the sensors to allow our detection?” the Captain persisted.

Pim's head was still shaking back and forth. “Our own detection equipment is tuned to resonate perfectly with our cloaks---all of them are harmonically identical—and *that* resonance is algorithmically encrypted. Not only do each of our ships have the same signature, but that signature can't be detected except by our own sensor-scanners. Odds are in the realm of non-existence that anyone else could intentionally, or as you stipulated: accidentally, stumble upon that encryption. But, even if---by some cosmic fluke of a miracle---they did, they'd *still* have to break the encryption! A statistical null. But the slickest part of all is that *we* can detect *any* active standard cloaking module we encounter, but *no one* can detect us!”

“Then into the breach!” the Elf commanded and the Huntress entered the denser field of stars and stellar nurseries. It got a lot brighter on the bridge. “Report!”

“Captain,” Elenir responded from the science station, “the cacophony of radiation is a mess on our sensors; however our scanners are, as Pim said they would be, still cutting through the soupy mess. Nothing out there yet that shouldn't be there.”

“Now then,” the Elf smiled, “Let's expand our eyes and ears, shall we? Launch probes!” Mim and Yula, sitting on either side of the back of the Captain's chair as usual, twitched their whiskers at the main screen as the next show began.

Ravena pressed the panels at her station that sent the half dozen specially designed sentinels hurtling out into the far reaches of the cluster around them. The cats' eyes were riveted to them as they soon vanished from view. “Data sets coming in, Captain.” Deni announced happily from the com.

Elenir confirmed, “Reassembling data signals now, Captain. We should have visuals in...” and she smiled and nodded to Ravena, who pressed one more panel in front of her and the main viewer split into six real-time views of the space in the region, causing Yula and

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Mim's heads to swivel and rock to keep track of all at once. "The additional scanning and sensor data is filtering now. If there is anything or anybody trying to hide in here..."

"We'll know it before they know we do!" Ravena was like a kid with a new toy. This was the best thing that had happened on the voyage to date... as far as she was concerned. She purred to herself, "Every girl's dream come true..."

"Lorien, Lúthien, you are cleared to launch," the Elf announced to a waiting pair of crews in the hangar bay. "Copy that!" Reia announced from the Lorien with Isin and Pim, as Jista called from the Lúthien with Senta and Song. The two ships cloaked and left the invisible Huntress.

"We should be able to work out any unnoticed kinks in your script for this side mission," the Elf smiled to Ravena. "Not that any of us could punch any holes in it to begin with..."

"Just providing for instant acquisition and interception, Captain." Ravena was smugly satisfied, "Having *three* phantom ships just begged to have as huge an area under our direct influence as possible---while still maintaining a cohesive interconnection between our several positions..."

"And cut down on the amount of time we have to spend reconnoitering this 'backwater'." Deni muttered. It was apparent to all of the Company that their Deni was more eager to find her 'Elves of Elhehrim' than anybody in the Spur.

The plodding transformation of the stuffy, though good natured, tight-suited, no-nonsense, bordering on the verge of self-righteous Guild Agent was changing their Deni into not only a more assessable person generally, but was also providing herself with insights into her own emotions and psyche---more than she even suspected could be available.

"Not a backwater if you live here..." Elenir retorted fondly. "No matter where you go---someone calls it home..."

"Let's just see if any of our pirate prey have adopted this particular neighborhood;" the Elf concluded and continued to watch each of the scenes before her---simultaneously. "Sector five!" The

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cats fixed their gaze on that portion of the screen instantly. “Lorien! Do you have visual on Probe Five's present position? Was that movement?” the Elf was pointing futilely at the screen in front of her.

“Isin's voice responded, “Captain, Reia is altering course to intercept; report forthcoming.”

“There! It *is* moving and,” she glanced at the progress display floating above the helm of *their* relative positions *and* those of their probes---all in the three dimensional holo-depiction, “it's headed toward the probe itself.”

A flash momentarily illumined the Sector Five view on the main screen then it went dark.

“Unacceptable!” the Elf was not happy. “Follow that whatever it was and find out where it came from. I want to know which side of their heads they part their hair before the Huntress gets to within striking distance!”

“Yes Ma'am!” Isin's voice answered instantly.

“Lúthien, you copied that?!” the Elf added.

Senta replied quickly, “Jista is already on her way to take up Lorien's wing, my Captain.”

The Elf had already leapt to the helm and was making a bee-line for Sector Five also. “Huntress ETA,” she glanced at her panels, “Thirteen minutes.”

“Copy!” both ships responded.

Ravena rubbed her hands together; “I needn't remind the Captain that I'll have weapon lock the moment we are in range...”

“Which should be in,” the Elf allowed a little smile, “...less than a minute.” To her little fleet she reminded, “Just like we drilled ladies...”

“Aye, aye,” chirped the com.

The next half an hour witnessed, had anyone but themselves been able to actually *see* their performance, a space ballet of precision and beauty. The vessel that had fired on their probe was initially obscured by a particularly dense patch of a illuminated dust cloud, it had to poke its bow out of the dust to aim and fire on the 'intrusive'

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little probe. Then just as quickly it sank back into its blind. The Huntress's scans through the mire revealed not one but a dozen corvette-class nasties.

“No mother-ship detected in the sectors already investigated, Captain,” Elenir volunteered from the science station as she rose and crossed to her nav post, transferring the sensor and scanner data to her own station. “It would appear that these are an independent phalanx, separated from or perhaps assigned duty out of reach of their Cruiser.”

“Or they are just a bunch of pirates gone to cover,” Ravena smirked at the screen.

“Either way,” the Elf gloated, “we'll know more about their business than they do before this night's watch is through.”

The Huntress and her 'girls' were sitting right on top, beside and beneath the formation tucked deep inside the dusty stellar nursery. Every conversation, belch and sneeze on their bridges was being recorded by another collection of Deni's 'secret' little gadgets. This time however, with Ravena's internal ship's scans as a viable inventory of the Guild supplied arsenal, the Elf herself made the specific request of Deni for those very modules---much to Deni's chagrin. She had tried so hard to keep her masters' secrets... well... secret. Amongst the Lascorii, that was a most futile exercise.

What they gleaned of the little phalanx was that: They weren't attached in any way to a Naud Cruiser. They only had a tenuous affiliation with each other. There was no 'central command' per se and finally: they were absolutely piratical. There could be no mistaking the glut of stolen goods, equipment and as it turned out enslaved peoples from the majority of the closest systems and beyond. What they couldn't get from their eavesdropping were the answers to the primary questions they had about the renegades---the whys and wherefores.

“That complicates things...” Ravena was disgusted that the Naud had reversed their own traditions and begun 'conscripting' crew. But what was worse, for the Huntress, those slaves were living shields preventing the sort of confrontation she'd prefer.

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The Elf on the other hand wasn't hindered in the least by the presence of the innocent. "Lorien, Lúthien set a tracker on each of the vessels and rejoin Huntress at our insertion point. They aren't going anywhere without us from now until they can't go anywhere at all..." She turned to Deni, "Dear, please wait until we clear the Waghtnin to send an update to the Guild." Deni nodded an affirmation, then realized perhaps nodding was too casual or familiar.

"Yes, Captain;" she answered clearly.

The Elf curled a finger for her to come closer, which she did. Her uncertainty and nervousness didn't show... much. "Yes Captain?"

The cats leaned in closer to the nearly touching pair's heads. In a voice Ravena and Elenir couldn't hear, the Elf assured, "You are not 'technically' under my direct command--as the sovereign representative of the Guild aboard my ship. *So* you are not *specifically* constrained to offer me the fealty demanded of the others. But... thank you for adhering to protocols, it is reassuring to know you are at our sides heart and soul. Still, if I ask for something prefaced by 'Dearest' or 'Darling' or any of the myriad modifiers I'm likely to use off-hand, please know that I am *trying* to maintain a casual familiarity with you, even though it is *very* difficult for me to do so. Is that copacetic?"

Deni glanced at Ravena and to Elenir, neither of whom were paying the Captain and herself any notice. She quickly put a hand on the Elf's arm and whispered, "My Captain, I offer you that fealty, though I am not constrained to do so. I have admired you from reputation for *years* and to now: be on *your* ship and so constantly in your *presence*... I am the luckiest Seranim woman, or man, ever to go to space!"

The Elf inclined her head. "Very well, Denalin Grinta Taborus of Breuges, I accept your fealty." Deni was taken aback momentarily, few people *anywhere* knew her full given name---*that* was something the Seranim didn't *ever* let into the public domain. "And I shall expect nothing less than your best!" The Elf concluded, "Consider yourself

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on active duty henceforth, with a probationary rank of Assistant Comm Officer. I shall put you into the shift rotation.”

Deni couldn't have been more ecstatic. She glowed with pride. “Yes, Captain!” she accepted aloud for the whole bridge to hear.

“Return to your post; but know this: I will not intentionally influence your sworn obligations to the Guild. That is a sacrosanct bond between you and themselves alone. Therefore do your best to remain faithful to the charge of service they have laid on you regarding this contract. Clear?”

Deni nodded solemnly as she answered, “Yes, my Captain.”

The Elf added lightly, “What you do about your ties to the Guild *after* the contract is consummated... *that* is another matter entirely.”

The com came alive; Deni touched her panel. The speakers blared, “Lorien requesting docking...” Reia's voice added, “And Jista's right behind me...”

“Come aboard, and let's get our snares taut and ready;” the Elf declared. “Ravena, let's you and I take a little stroll in your gardens...” Yula and Mim were already purring; they loved the gardens. If they weren't supervising the Elf's handling of the Huntress, they were most often found in the gardens, chasing butterflies, cavorting through the shrubs or napping in the short trees---which bent under their considerable girth.

Ravena knew exactly what the Captain meant and set her station to auto. “Happy to offer you company, Captain. I have just sowed some rather unique little exotics I think you will enjoy...”

“Elenir you have the bridge. Oh and give our Deni a quick lesson in command protocols for the bridge; she may be called on to put them into practice sooner rather than later.”

Smiling to the Seranim, Elenir replied, “As you wish my Captain.”

The Captain and her Security Officer took several turns around the gardens and only the cats, vegetables, flowers and various seedlings were privy to the intricacies of the scheme of actions the Huntress held in store for the loosely federated renegade pirates

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'gone to ground' in the Waghtrn.

It took days of analyzing the recordings, they were still making, of the several pirates' bridges before enough data allowed for the Captain's initial plans to coalesce sufficiently.

When the company was assembled together at last in the Captain's ready room, the Elf sketched in for them the first gambit of the strategy. "...I am loathe to *assign* these tasks, but I am equally reticent to ask for volunteers. I would much rather take the road of direct confrontation and be done with it. However," and she looked each of her officers briefly in the eye, "*that* path will not yield the intelligence we will surely need going forward---Even if we could somehow insure the safety of the conscripts who don't have a dog in this fight that we know of, other than the obvious. We *have* to know what is the extent of this trend toward increasingly disconnected random, roaming bands of Naud, why the shift toward conscripts, and what is up with gathering these 'allies' from other peoples?!---very Un-Naud-like to say the least. And this unsettling break from their historic blind allegiance to the Supreme Council on top of their traditional disregard for any but their own kind we are used to confronting."

"Captain?" Senta responded first, breaking the pregnant silence, "begging your pardon..." and she took a deep breath, "Have you been staring into a mirror?! Empty the Huntress? Get us 'captured' aboard *separate* ships? No communication available for coordination? *Somehow* escape? Make our way back to the Huntress with no support?! Your brain must be going to mush! No offense..."

The Elf stifled a burst of laughter and it sounded like snorting. Deni quietly asked, innocently, "What's a *mirror* got to do with anything?"

Reia leaned over to her while the interlude of uncertainty gripped the rest of the company over Senta's near mutinous outburst. "Deni, dear, you remember I cautioned you about making a habit of staring into the eyes of a Lascorii?" Deni nodded, embarrassed that her new little habit hadn't abated. "Well, that effect is as dangerous for themselves as others. There are rumors that some

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of the best and brightest of them have become tangled in the addiction of staring into mirrors until as Senta just alluded, their brains go soft.”

Isin couldn't help but overhear, and reinforced, “You'll *not* find a mirror aboard any Lascorii ship---unless it's secreted aboard by a sister with self-destructive tendencies... Or in the possession of a *non*-Lascorii that is.”

The Elf had regained her poise and was speaking. “...No, my vigilant sister, I am *not* masterbating my brains out in front of a mirror.” Deni blushed to her toes.

Ravena put a different spin on the brazen scheme. “Firstly we are not *emptying* the Huntress. Neither Elenir nor I are as fit for this sort of thing as we once were, so we cannot be tapped to perform the duties y'all are most capable of. And of course though Song and Pim, Reia, Jista and Deni are *very* capable in their own right; they are *not* Lascorii warriors and cannot *possibly* be tossed so thoroughly into harm's way---they shall have to go *at least* as pairs. Secondly, the Captain isn't suggesting that anyone go out unsupported...”

The Elf resumed, “From what we've determined thus far of our prey, this dozen are knotted up into three distinct affiliations. The Huntress, the Lorien and the Lúthien shall be tasked to shadow a group apiece---always seconds from intervening if required.”

Senta was visibly relieved. “Then sign me up for the nastiest one. I can survive a few hours---days if pressed to it---without my silks and jewelry...” That got a few chuckles. The white headed Lascorii princess's over-developed 'fashion-sense' pervaded her every interaction---lethal as she and her sisters were, nothing impeded her looking the part of courtier to the Matriarch. Now Deni was even more impressed that Senta could always look so immaculate; and *never* use a mirror?! “How do you do it?” she muttered aloud.

The Elf continued, “Any other *pertinent* questions?”

Isin stared out the ready room view port; “So, the Elf and Senta are tasked to the lead vessel of the largest group. Song and myself, and Jista, Reia and Pim get a ship apiece from the other two... Ravena and Elenir and Deni are left to keep up the Huntress, Lorien

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and Lúthien? Alone? One officer per ship?...” She gazed at Deni uncertainly. “How's that supposed to work again? If I need an instant evacuation, no offense, but I want someone with experience pulling my favorite ass out of the fire!”

Deni opened her mouth to argue that she had been training, and both Elenir and Ravena hadn't said so, but hinted that they thought she was a natural. The Elf rejoined however as ombudsman. “Our Deni isn't the meek bean-counter she was when she was tossed into our company by her scheming masters in the Guild...” She nodded to Ravena again who continued.

“Denalin is a thorough and meticulous bridge officer, who has mastered both the Com and Science Stations' principles, activities and routines. She is currently advancing her piloting skills and has turned out to be a gifted strategist. I have discovered personally that the Seranim aren't the soft folk we've taken them to be. They have a latent talent for martial activities and their physical bodies seem to be constructed of brass and leather rather than sinew and skin. Any other challenges?”

Deni pushed her braids to her back and puffed her chest out a little further. The schedules and training inflicted on her by Ravena and Elenir had been nearly twenty-four/seven and extraordinarily grueling since being accepted by the Elf as crew. This was the first she'd heard her taskmasters *specifically* commend her on any bit of her 'education.' It felt good.

Isin wasn't so readily mollified. “That may be as you insist...” she gave Deni an uncertain glance, “but there *has* to be *something* you're not telling us. I am as ready as Senta to walk boldly into the hyena's den, but this isn't a hit and run assignment you're suggesting... This is a deep cover-can't come up for air-pray they never suspect gig.”

“But not indefinite.” Ravena was firm on this point. “As the Captain was about to spell out...”

The Elf continued; “We must discover only the verity of three things---besides the nagging discordant changes in their command structures---from this particular collection of vermin: Do they pester only select systems; if so which ones? Are their conscripts abetting

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them willingly or are they truly abused into service? And most importantly: How many more gangs like this are there out there? I realize that last bit of data may be the most slippery to determine. But if we are going to get anywhere meeting the conditions of this contract, we have to get a better handle on what's facing us ahead." She let that sink in for a little while. Allowing for any discussion, more questions, whatever her company felt they needed before committing to this course.

Reia stood, "I'm no Lascorii warrior; that is as plain as the beautiful spots on your precious skins. What I lack in genetic heritage, I more than make up for in determination. I've been with the Boss for nearly seven years now, and I'll serve her till I'm no use to her anymore. And I speak for my mates when I say, the Elf has taught us more and trained us better than you have been told, or realize. We may not be able to mesmerize or cripple an enemy at a distance with just our eyes... but other weapons can be just as effective and we are deadly with those. Sign me up for a corvette of my own---if need be. It's the Naud you should worry about, not me or my mates!"

Song and Pim and Jista stood instantly up next to Reia. Deni wanted to so badly. Song winked to her and jerked her chin. Deni was up and standing with them in an instant.

Isin wasn't taking this sitting down. "I never said I didn't want to have a crack at them! I'm just trained to have all my ducks in a row before commencing upon a plan of action..."

Senta stood with her and the others. "Good to have y'all's company! Never doubted it for a second!"

The Elf winked to Elenir and Ravena. "Alright ladies, we kick this little scheme into gear as soon as I hear from each and everyone of you that you are confident in our Deni's ability to 'pull your favorite asses out of the fire!' And I'd rather that be in a few days---not weeks! Deal?"

"Deal!" was the unanimous reply.

Deni defended, "I'm really pretty good at this stuff..."

Isin and Senta took an arm apiece and escorted her toward the

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training rooms. “Just let us satisfy our curiosity then? We *may* just have a *few* tricks to share that should spin most situations to your favor. Whether at the helm, or hand-to-hand...” and they disappeared down the corridor.

In less than the 'suggested' days given them by the Elf, Senta and Song stepped onto the bridge and waited for the Captain, Elenir and Ravena to look up. “Ahem...” Song interrupted.

“We would like to introduce our newest sister...” Senta crooned, barely containing her delight. They stepped aside as Mim and Yula led in a woman behind them onto the bridge. She had an imperious gaze that took in the entire room at once. Energy and sheer power were barely concealed beneath her tightly clad, tawny matte body suit. Her blond tresses were tied back in a severe knot that gave her face the aspect of imminent attack. Song announced, “Dena of the Huntress!”

She strode to the Comm and her movements were as precise as they were confident. “Ready for assignment my Captain,” she breathed in a tone devoid of any hint of doubt or uncertainty. This was a new Deni; even her new nickname was stronger. She was Dena the warrior. Dena the avengeress.

Isin and Pim, with Reia and Jista joined Senta and Song at the entry to the bridge. Isin proclaimed, “This is our new sister and we are *very* proud of her!”

As if to make the debut as dramatic as possible, Song held up spiked ball and hurled it at the Captain's head. Dena's hands were a blur as she drew and fired a plasma bolt, evaporating the projectile before the Elf was in any danger at all. Just as quickly the little weapon was tucked back into its hiding place, and Dena was poring over the panels in front of her---as if keeping her Captain in absolute safety were the most mundane of tasks.

“Superlative!” Ravena's voice held genuine awe.

The Elf stood and began, “As it must be. Elenir, you have the Lorien. Ravena your command is the Lúthien. Dena you have the bridge of the Huntress...” She turned to the others. “You know your assignments. Let's get this masquerade into full swing!”

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All left the bridge save Dena, who rose, strode to the Captain's chair and sat slowly down. Touching a panel on the arm of the chair, "Ship's log, Acting Commander Dena of the Huntress, the company under the Elf's absolute direction is initiating Operation: 'Sleep-Over.' I accept command of this vessel until my Captain's return---an unforeseen duration. Pim has made upgrades to each of our ships that will allow the helm, com, and scanners---even fire control---to be marginally controlled from each vessel's Captain's chair. My own task during this operation is to continuously monitor the Elf personally, as well as Senta who shall be with her on the dominate ship in this particular pack of thieves. Commander Elenir of the Lorien has the charge of performing like duties on behalf of Jista, Reia and Pim who shall board the command vessel of the next largest group. Commander Ravena, aboard Lúthien, shall attend Isin and Song's foray aboard the wild card ship. We have ascertained that that vessel and its wing ship are the latest to join this little federation of pirates. End of log entry."

She touched a second panel and announced, "Huntress moving into Waghtnin. ETA to separation... twenty-seven minutes. Good hunting!"

She sat back into the seat and watched the stellar mists enfold the Huntress on the main viewer. "Well Dena, failure is not an option!" She took a deep breath and readjusted her posture. "Just wish I'd had time to take a decent shower instead of coming up directly from the training rooms..." Only Mim's purring answered her single regret.

The Elf and Senta came back onto the bridge shortly, but they were as transformed into the hollow shadows of themselves as Dena was her own powerful avatar. "How do we look?" the Elf baited.

Dena squinched up her face, "Wretched!"

Senta clapped at that. Dena continued, "Y'all have less than ten minutes to make any last touch-ups to your costumes and such. Might I suggest you have a bite to eat? That may be a luxury you'll be missing for a while."

"Way ahead of you Commander Dena," Senta smiled. She really

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loved repeating Dena's new position aloud. "We gorged last night. Hopefully we'll still be able to fit into the escape pods."

The Elf sighed, "Dena, run tracker-checks please."

Dena touched one after other of the buttons on one of the new panels affixed to the arm of the Captain's chair. The lights blipped on and off in series as she pinged the individual trackers. She then checked the adjacent little panel as one at a time she checked her charges' vitals. "Y'all are healthy and I'm tracking. Pim stressed that if y'all have to be evacuated instantly---and can't make it to the pods for the call---your audial implants have only enough power for one call---so make it count!"

"Aye, aye commander," both of them replied, smiling.

The Elf added, "It is a great comfort knowing you have our backs. Now..." and she turned to leave the bridge. "...we have very important rendezvous. If you will excuse us; we are going to put Pim's micro-cloaks on the pods to the ultimate test."

They hurried down to the chamber housing the Huntress's escape pods and they each wriggled into one. The Elf had to physically remove Yula from squeezing into her pod with her. "Not on this junket sweetheart. Mama's got to find where these nasties have been and where they may be going next..." Then she and Senta each vocalized, "Comm check..." through their individual pod's systems; they were answered by Dena, "Loud and clear."

"In position;" Dena broadcast to the little fleet. "Release at will!"

Seven pods from three ships spurt into the cloudy space of the Waghtnin and became invisible. While a dozen corvettes in their midst remained oblivious to the incoming 'volunteers' intending to join their crews. Dena, Elenir and Ravena set themselves for the long chore of constant monitoring. Every half an hour they would broadcast status to the other two ships---Constant communication regarding their incommunicado sisters. Seven pods silently closed and clamped onto un-surveilled sections of three of the pirate ships. Within seconds, access holes were cut into their hulls and seven new crew mates were aded to their ranks. The game was afoot.

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Not Nice

*"You can't be truly rude until you understand good manners."
---Rita Mae Brown*

“**N**o my lordship, I haven't been hiding any supplies of any...” Through the dim and murky light of the Naud ship's lower corridors, there could be heard another vicious slap across her mouth and she recoiled, cowering against the wall. Other crew passed by through the gloom without even a glance. If the Quartermaster wanted to let off steam beating one of the ilk to death, more power to him---at least it wasn't one of them.

A young Naud junior officer rushed up to the Quartermaster. “Sir; there is a row beginning at the back of the stores rooms. Apparently...” he didn't get to finish the explanation as his superior changed targets and smacked him for interrupting his diversion.

“Let that be a lesson to ya: Don't butt in!” and he stomped off toward his most precious dominion, the ship's storage rooms and the hold. Crew and conscripts alike gave the lumbering devil a wide berth as he passed.

The beaten 'ilk' struggled to her feet, “Pardon me for saying so, sir, but he really doesn't swing as hard as he used to.”

“I'll thank you to keep your gob shut!” as he back-handed the impertinent conscript.

“Yes sir,” and as quickly as the young officer turned, the conscript disappeared round a bend in the corridor and into the cabin she'd been edging toward when the Quartermaster cornered and accused her.

“That wasn't so bad...” Senta breathed to the other ragged form in the darkness.

“It won't get any better I'm thinking;” the Elf replied. “The

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recordings certainly didn't prepare us for the near darkness and..."

"This stench! It's everywhere! Don't the Naud ever bathe?! And their breath..." Senta groaned.

"You'll get used to it. You take the starboard holds and I'll work my way up through the port side. As soon as you can attach yourself to a work gang, do it;" the Elf opened the cabin door just a crack and prepared to go.

"I know my job." Senta countered in an irritated voice and caught herself. "This place just *so* needs a good cleaning."

They slipped back out into the momentarily empty hallway and separated. The Elf quickly attached herself to a group of four 'ilk' dressed as she was---in tatters---and carrying large containers. They wound through the lower decks, the miserable muffled moans and whimpering sounds of agony and abuse escaping each open chamber they passed in the darkness. The Lascorii had an advantage here, their eyes could pierce the thickest gloom---a legacy of their arising. That was one of the reasons Senta had such a decidedly strong opinion of the Naudi housekeeping abilities. What the shadows hid from their fellow conscripts' eyes was all too apparent to them: the Naudi habit of treating all things as disposable made their ships floating garbage bins in space.

Meanwhile, Senta ducked from one cabin to the next; she wasn't going to have a repeat of her first 'welcome' by Naud officers if she could help it. Ahead of her was a brighter bay, perhaps one of the 'work rooms,' she suspected. What met her eyes as she sidled up inconspicuously to the opening, wasn't exactly what she was prepared to witness. Crouched in little huddled clumps of threes and fours, the tattered forms of 'conscripts' scraped, cracked, chewed and sifted out even the smallest bits of ore from the mounds of rock and debris surrounding them. Several swaggering Naud taskmasters roved through the huge bay. A crack of a rod on bone, the snap and sizzle of plasma goads into flesh and the near constant cries of pain sprang from one part of the room then another as if part of some grotesque concert of agony and torture.

What would anywhere else have been performed by ore refining

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machines, here was being done with the broken teeth and bleeding fingers of slaves.

Senta wrenched her gaze from the scene and sneaked passed the gaping maw of the bay opening as quickly as she could manage. Her body shook from the sights that were now etched into her mind---the empty faces, the twisted and emaciated bodies. "Okay," she recounted to herself, "Definitely *not* volunteers... and *not* the work gang for me!"

The four with whom the Elf had attached herself emerged from the bowels of the lower decks onto the ship's main promenade and the Elf had to squelch a yelp of surprise. The light wasn't any brighter, but the conscripts weren't in tatters up here. In fact they were a stark contrast to the misery just yards beneath their feet below. These were the 'lucky' ones no doubt. She recognized Lanorians and Gorim, a few Nourii and some Hanurians. These weren't menial servants to the Naud, these were tasked to maintaining the essential services: galley workers, lab techs, and most obviously as the personal sex slaves of the officers... And the Naud officers weren't squeamish about how and when they disported their near constant animal urges.

Her little knot of conscripts entered what appeared to be a galley, though the only 'food' was a gloppy gelatinous muck that the Naud gulped and slurped with relish. They all went into the back; two of them brought out empty containers, while she assisted the other two at refilling and replacing them. Her 'partners' commented in whispers, "...takes some getting used to, but this batch even I would eat..." "...even knowing where it came from?!" "...better than what them's below gotta swallow..." the other pointed with her chin at the room at large and the several 'ministrations' certain slaves were performing for their masters; "...or what those poor souls have to..."

When they reached the main corridor once more and passed another group heading further up into the ship, the Elf shifted and attached herself to the new little group. These weren't in the tattered wear of the lower decks. As they reached a sharp turn, she decided to 'make a costume exchange' with one of her companions about the

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same height and build.

“And just what's this about then?!” the 'volunteer' gasped as she sidlined the fellow into an empty alcove.

“I am changing stations,” the Elf replied evenly, “And you are going to assist me. I have to get as close to the bridge of this ship as I can.”

His eyes narrowed at her as his tunic and pants were pulled from him in her deft hands. “Hold on now; no one *tries* to be around even more of them Naud... You been overdosing on happy pills or something?”

“Is that how they keep down revolt then?” the Elf quizzed as she pulled on the new costume.

“Where are you from?! We haven't taken on new slaves in at least two weeks...” his voice was uncomfortably loud. She put her hand to his mouth.

“Let's just say, I'm only here for the matinee. My tour guide assured me it was not to be missed,” and she smiled. “Now shall I tie you up and gag you? Do you need an alibi?”

He was still sorting through the realization that anyone would voluntarily come aboard a Naud ship. “I don't need that...” He seemed to come to a decision. “I'll come with you. Been hoping to get a bit of my own back from these... these...”

“I'm pretty much a solo act, I can't...” the Elf began to say. But he leapt up and darted back out into the corridor.

He poked his head back round the corner. “Coming?”

The Elf straightened her tunic and joined him. “Best if you walk ahead of me, won't do to have me,” and he gestured at his rags for clothes, “leading a techie around up here.”

“What technical work are you tasked with?” The Elf wondered what she'd be expected to account for if questioned.

“Oh it's *complicated* it is...” his voice was tinged with sarcasm, “I keep the heaters running. That seems to be something fairly arcane to our hosts.”

“No surprise.” the Elf retorted glibly. “You look to be Lanorian... and you mentioned a restock of 'volunteers' a couple

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weeks ago?”

“Yeah, wrong place at the wrong time...” he muttered. “Against my better judgement to have gone all the way to Firefly. I been an inmate of hell here for thirteen weeks, four days and change. Just lucky, I suppose that their air exchangers and heating crapped out just then... Been assigned to making the rounds ever since.”

He reached forward a hand and tugged on her sleeve to turn down a lateral passage. “I’m Renno, by the way. Service access three up here is the next stop. It’s two bulkheads over from the bridge and as close as I’d like to *ever* get.”

“Well Renno you’ve been more than informative and helpful;” the Elf commended as she opened the access door.

“Uh... I’ll just find a nice little niche to curl up in in here, if you don’t mind;” Renno made for a ladder leading up to a cat walk that seemed to branch out across what was probably most of the command deck.

“Hold it!” The Elf had her hand on his ankle. “Those catwalks. They pass over the bridge?” His look of disgust was answer enough. She was climbing up passed him and sneaking along the narrow grating before he found his hiding hole.

Senta made it up through the most wretched of the lower decks and stumbled up into what had to be the less abused conscripts’ ‘dormitories.’ She startled a pair of women just entering from the same hallway she had left. “What’s a scrunge doing in here?!” one of them gasped at the sight of Senta.

The other one made a move to grab Senta’s shirt, supposedly to kick her out.

“It’s not what it looks like...” Senta evaded her grasp and was behind them holding the door closed quicker than they could see. More gasps. She eyed their outfits and asked with a sly smile, “Which of you would like to donate to a good cause?”

A few minutes later, she was on the same promenade the Elf had just left half an hour before. Senta took in the scenes in front of her and realized unhappily that she’d adopted the costume of one of the sex-slaves. “Uh oh... this is *not* good...” She backed into the

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nearest opening and a hand gripped her shoulder.

“Fresh! How fortunate...” the Officer grunted as he unbuckled his belt with his free hand.

Senta's next movements were too fast to follow. Next she was dragging the cumbersome weight of the lieutenant, his arm over her shoulders, into a secluded corner of what appeared to be a lounge or something. Slapping him to consciousness after binding his hands behind him and stuffing his own socks in his mouth, she opened the interview. “Just nod for 'yes' and shake for 'no.' We are going to play twenty questions! And you are my first contestant. Ready?” and she loosened her masking body suit just the tiniest bit.

The officer's puffy and protruding beady eyes, his distended nostrils and near flopping ears were all very much focused at that instant on the obviously demented wench in front of him. Without recourse and helpless, he forced his head forward in a nod.

“Good!” Senta's voice was sweetness and charm. The goon in uniform, the Naud, was beginning to waver; his mind was swimming with fantastical images. The woman wasn't a wench at all, he realized, she was... a shining and beautiful goddess and he was her favorite servant. He wanted to help her... Senta realized she may have over-exposed the beast. She glanced around the rest of the dank and dark room. Those who had been there had left.

“I want to know where is your phalange Admiral and his cruiser?” she purred, and confident of her spell, she pulled the socks from his mouth, holding a finger to her lips to remind him to speak quietly. He nodded in a devout assurance.

“We ain't got an Admiral...” he whispered. “...Only *the* Husim...”

“How did that come about?” she mused. “Deserters then?”

“Oh no...” he shook his head. “Cruiser and fleet destroyed is all.”

“Pity.” She pushed ahead with the interview more quickly. She was certain she heard the clomping of booted feet up the corridor outside. “And your Captain turned to piracy to keep you all fed and supplied?”

The Naud grinned then and nodded. His eyes no longer

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focusing on her directly. His hallucinations were crowding out all reality.

“And you found playmates who had also become very naughty?”

Again the nodding and fawning expression.

“How many others?”

His mouth tried to form the answer, but it became clear that he couldn't convey the numbers. He attempted, “So many. So many. Scattered from here to the edges of the frontiers they are...” And he began weeping. The goddess asked for a number, and he didn't know it. His tears filled his vision and he began blubbing like a child.

Senta rolled her eyes, and loosened her body suit very wide. With an intense effort of will she forced only a small bit of her enchantment to surface in a burst and only for a split second, then she pulled her wrappings tight once more. The Naud lay plopped face forward on the table. His breathing labored and erratic. “That's going to be some headache when you come to... in six or seven hours...”

She crossed to the door and peered at the backs of the passing patrol, the clomping that she'd heard before. “Perhaps just changing shift?” she wondered only for a moment and shadowed them, flitting from doorway to doorway, alcove to alcove as they ascended from one deck to the next. “And the air isn't so heavy and rank up here...”

The three-soldier patrol stopped at a dead end in the hall before a set of heavily armored and locked doors. Without entering, they turned and set up sentry duty instead. “Great!” Senta breathed, “Dead end and no way to backtrack without being noticed...” She scanned the deck and ceiling for any possible avenue of retreat. Nothing. “So... do I tip our hand or wait it out?” She settled into a crouch. “And what's a set of armored, locked doors need with three guards?” That clinched it. She rose, pulling her body suit loose around her torso as she did. “Let's just see...”

As the Elf scrambled around a last turn along the catwalk she looked ahead and had to shake her head to clear her eyes. She blinked hard and stared. Poised, and staring straight down through a ventilation grate into the bridge was Yula. “How the hell?!” The Elf

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advanced to Yula's side and gazed down at what she had found. "Aren't you the mystery then? And found just what Mama said she wanted!" her voice hadn't been actually even completely audible. She added, "We are going to have to have a heart-to-heart chat when we get back."

Dangling by her feet over the convenient ventilation grate Yula still presided over, the Elf took in the bridge activity, but her focus was on the monitors directly below her---the navigation consoles. The record of this ship's travels was repeating and repeating in a very long loop. As the Naud were nearly completely inept at stellar navigation, the best they could hope was to only ever venture a little ways from wherever they had been before; hence the looping reminders.

The Elf memorized every twist and turn through the systems flickering passed her eyes. Over and over it looped and looped below her. Once she was certain she could recreate the path, she pulled herself back up to the catwalk and retraced the way she'd come, which wasn't hard as Yula led the way. Once at the service closet again and making sure that 'Renno' had his own tunic back, she made her way to the insertion point; wondering as she did so, just where Yula had gotten off to. "It's been five hours. Senta must be there by now..." The ship erupted in alarm. "Great!" the Elf smiled slyly. "Like they knew I was coming and wanted to make me feel at home!" She hurried toward her destination with less caution than before.

Senta 'let' the last guard, still standing, unlock and open the armored doors for her, then she made sure he took a 'nap' with his mates. She stealthily entered stepping over his slumbering, noisy, body. "Of course they're wicked snorers... With snouts like that..." Her eyes took in the stores room in a single scan. She crossed to the central aisle that led to the main entry, perhaps fifty yards or more from where she'd entered and peered around at the crates and shelves. "Naturally that lump of a quartermaster would even post guards at his locked back door. Now then let's take a quick inventory. See from whom they have been commandeering their livelihood."

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She climbed to the top of the racks nearest at hand and used the elevation to race around the room, noting as many containers' origins as she could. The main doors suddenly swung wide and the slightly brighter offices beyond them splayed shafts of light into the warehouse. She ducked into a cleft between some crates marked as being from a system she recognized the name of at once. She gasped, "Lascor textiles?!" The two people who had come into the storage area, stopped what they were doing.

"You hear that?" one snorted to the other.

"Yeah, you farted... so what..." came the sniveling answer.

"Did not! It came from over there..." the first insisted.

"Oh, well you're a regular magician you are. Throwing your farts across the room..." was the mocking reply. "Just get the bottles he demanded and hurry about it. I'd like to keep this cushy assignment. So much better than the hold down there... All those aliens and... I can't think about it without shuddering..."

Then they noticed the back doors were standing wide open and a screech rose up out of them. "Your Lordship! There's a breach! And it wasn't us!" they ran back the way they'd come.

Senta listened as the clanking bottles crossed beneath her and she realized her routes of escape were dwindling rapidly. She leapt up and circled round to the wall and followed it to the front, still hopping from one crate top to container high above the deck. The familiar looming form of the Quartermaster filled the threshold causing his two minions to skid to a stop at his feet.

"What's this? Somebody trying to pilfer from me?! And through my own back doors?!"

"Not us Lord... Not us."

"We only just discovered it..."

"Just this second..."

And as he looked up the main aisle they slipped passed him to the relative safety of the offices beyond. He took a few steps toward the breach.

Senta jumped, as silent as death to the gap between his back and the only avenue of escape. She ducked under the first offer of

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concealment she encountered: a day bed. The poor sex-slave outstretched and bleeding there took no notice of anything in her vision. Senta calculated the distance to the opposite office doors and the corridor beyond. She listened for the heavy steps of the toad of a quartermaster. "Now or never..."

She had just reached the corridor and vanished into the dull gloom of an alcove when the Quartermaster burst into the hall after her. He slammed his thick hand against the alarm set into the wall and the ship came alive with sirens and bells. Through the din and clamor, Senta smiled. "Chaos is our friend."

She set off for the insertion point so much less cautious than when she'd arrived. One conscript looked like another, one soldier or officer like the next. That and there was a sudden run on the stores room to take advantage of it having already been presumably looted. So Senta had to work her way 'upstream' after a fashion, and none of those pushing and gouging their way passed her took any notice of just one more tattered servant. Make that *two* tattered servants.

The Elf emerged from a side door and grabbed Senta's elbow. "Down this way... I found the highway home. How did you make out?"

Barely breathing hard, Senta chuckled, "It's almost like they really wanted to tell me whatever I wanted to know."

The Elf scowled at her, "I really hoped you could keep your shirt on;" then she softened. "As long as they don't remember a thing, no harm, no foul."

They reached the juncture they were looking for. The shaft that led out to the nacelle service hatches. The pods were just where they left them---clamped tight to the hull---and Yula waiting patiently. Senta gasped, "I thought you left her on the Huntress!?"

"I did;" was all the Elf offered at that moment. A touch of the access panels and they opened at once. Yula darted into the Elf's pod ahead of her and so quickly even the Elf's sharp eyes didn't notice. After squeezing inside, the Elf looked up into the vacated access shaft. "Now where has that cat gone?!" A muted 'mew' rose up from near her feet. She rolled her eyes, and touched the com, "Ready for

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pick-up once the shift change comes around again, Dena.” Senta and the Elf settled into their pods and took a much needed nap. Four more hours and the Elf’s pod beeped at her. “Times up,” she murmured. She and Senta de-polarized the magnetic clamps holding them to the ship.

Two tethers instantly snaked out from the cloudy space beyond the Naud corvette, apparently from nowhere. They were reeled away into the murky nothingness. The invisible Huntress backed away from the little cluster of ships and once beyond the Naud’s limited scanning range, reeled them the rest of the way into the reception bay. In a little while Dena was standing over them as they wriggled out of their metal cocoons.

“Y’all are the first to be retrieved;” Dena announced. “Nine and half hours---marginally behind our initial timetables. You did acquire some decent answers to our questions?” Her tone was as a mother scolding her children for truancy. Senta and the Elf were nearly doubled up in giggles at the sight of Dena, alternating hands on her hips then arms crossed, waiting for a better response than their laughter. Then Yula crept out from the Elf’s pod. Dena’s eyes narrowed even tighter. “And as for you!”

The Elf intervened, smiling, “We have something to go on, yes;” she assured Dena and pulled her to herself. “Nice shooting out there, by the way.”

That was enough to warm Dena’s chilly reception. “I have just been beside myself worrying! Y’all didn’t train me for *that* part of the assignment!”

Nine and a half hours before on the flagship of the Naud pirate fleet...

“What I wouldn’t give for a little enchanting pheromone ability just now.” Jista chuckled as they crawled out of their pods into the empty service shaft.

Reia chuckled, “We’ve been on dozens of these sorts of missions...” Pim nodded silently. “...We didn’t have that trick up our sleeves then. And see how we ended up?”

The three girls had to laugh at that development. Pim opened

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the fold of her jacket and produced a little scanner, waving it up one way then the other she nodded, "This way and stay close. We'll be separating soon enough. No rush..."

Jista took point as they moved with uncanny speed up into the heart of the starship. She slowed and came to a crouch at a juncture leading straight up and down from the lateral shaft they'd come up. "Wonder why the Boss let us have the obvious flagship?"

Reia shrugged, "Special treat for good behavior?"

Pim shook her head, "Uh uh. The recordings we made showed that it was clear this Captain, at least, had some intimate experience with Lascorii. It wouldn't do any of our sisters any good to revisit his abhorrence of those memories. Simple solution: us, not them."

Jista remarked, "So the Elf and the Captain mutually detest each other for *genuine* reasons?"

"Oh, you don't mean he was..." Reia gulped.

"...The Commander of the Naud ship that attempted to remove the 'special' inmates---including the Boss---from 'the Institute' when the Lascorii liberated it. They were none too kind to him or his crew." Pim let out a sigh. "Let's get this over with."

"And his just reward for the loss of face, after his escape," Reia deduced to herself, "was to be assigned to the remotest frontiers of the Naud realm."

They reviewed last minute schedules and separated. Pim went on ahead down the main shaft to set up their monitoring base; Reia took the one down, Jista the one up. They were to reconnect on the other side of the ship from Pim, make their way together up through the middle of it, gathering as they returned any intel on their list of 'need-to-know,' which chiefly included for them: the cause of blatant lack of allegiance to the central Naud High Council---or maybe there wasn't such a thing any more? Or maybe this was a new paradigm of Naud strategy? Or... Well, that's what they needed to discover, if possible.

Reia peered out the slightly ajar hatch she'd reached, waiting for Jista to peer back at her from the one opposite her across the corridor. There was the briefest glint of light from that door just as a

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pair of lab-coated 'inmates' approached from around the corner.

"It just won't do any good to put that into the log, again. They don't want to know, and it's plain they don't care if these particular clients are over-medicated or not..." one was chastening the other.

As they came abreast and between Reia and Jista's cover, the two sprang out and pulled their quarry behind the separate doors. In a moment they emerged once again wearing the white smocks and carrying the appurtenances of their adopted offices.

"Okay, this may get us up to the command decks a little more quickly;" Jista straightened her hair and inspected Reia's costume.

"Shall we?" and Reia set off back the way their two donors had come. They peered into the little windows set in most of the doors they passed. Inside each bare room was a table with some poor soul strapped down and either struggling against the restraints or complacently staring at the ceiling.

"Reconditioning? Torture? What could the Naud need from the minds of their captives?" Jista was flummoxed.

"I'm thinking the Captain of this ship," Reia postulated, "if it is in fact the same goof who tried to keep the Boss from her freedom, he may have an ulterior agenda regarding his little fleet's ultimate objectives..."

"And he thinks *these* saps can lead him to his 'treasure'? What in the Spur could that be?!" Jista wasn't buying that explanation so easily. They rounded a couple bends further and came face to face with a small band of like-garbed Naud---evidently the supervisors of this collection of 'cells.' Jista continued aloud, "...Report it if you feel you have to, but I..." she stopped suddenly, pretending to only just notice the three grimacing faces confronting them.

Reia continued the ruse. She glared at the one in front of them who looked most like a head of department---meaning not carrying anything. "What my colleague is chastening me concerning is that clients ten, fourteen and eighteen," she hooked her thumb over her shoulder at the ward behind them, "are clearly over-medicated! The Captain can't possibly expect to have what he wants from clients stuck in la-la land all the time!" Jista held her breath, this was a

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dangerous gambit Reia was playing.

The two attending the head of department began chattering at once to their boss, trying to explain as they did so, just why those particular clients had had to be dosed like that. Reia and Jista edged toward the far wall and were casually trying to work their way passed the arguing group---pretending to continue the monitoring activity of each client's cell as they reached it.

“Hold on you two!” Came the abrupt command from the head guy. “Show me your data, and,” he leered at Reia, “perhaps you'd like to let me in on how you know what the Captain is looking for, when only my boss and myself are supposedly in that loop?!”

Reia covered smoothly without hesitation. “Actually? Rumors mostly.” she shrugged, “That and my cousin Entin was a 'guest' of the Captain a long time ago, before he undertook this particular adventure...” She yawned, “If that's all you're going to do about the issue at hand,” she passed over her notes---rather the original tech's notes, “then we've got a date with our bunks. Wish our shift replacements had shown up!” She yawned again, very convincingly. Jista just nodded and turned again to leave that deck.

Reia didn't wait for the trio to respond, she followed Jista at as leisurely a pace as they could manage. Once to the lifts, and inside one, Jista pressed for the deck they needed to get to and slumped back against Reia. “And you wonder why I won't gamble with you any more?! You are a crazy person!”

The lift doors parted and two giggling women stepped out. They had to stifle their humor at once. The lead of the passing band of patrol glared at them; muttering loudly to his men, “Ilk in pretty coats is still ilk. Oughta know their place!”

The two lab techs shuffled quickly toward what they hoped to be an actual lab. Not being able to decipher what the Naud used for writing, it was an educated guess. Once inside what was clearly not a lab, they exchanged their white smocks for the tunics of executive galley servants---they knew that because the two people who 'offered' them the disguise were just then headed to the executive officers' quarters with trays of food on their carts.

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They navigated the maze of side passages and corridors to reach the first of the listed rooms. A knock and a gracious, "Something to eat, your lordship?" prompted open door after open door as they made the rounds required. Into each cabin they proceeded as if the most mundane of tasks. Each of them scanned the chambers for any hint of the Captain's intentions for the fleet.

It was only as they made a last delivery that their calm nonchalance was truly challenged. "The Captain is not here at present!" Came the gruff dismissal from the lackey who answered the *Captain's* door. Though shocked at hitting the jackpot, Reia shrugged, "No worries for us mate. It's won't be us that he belts if he ain't gotta snack when he wants it..." and she pulled the cart and Jista to return to the galley.

"Hold on, there!" the lackey waved at them, "I only said he wasn't here... Not take it away! Come on bring it in, bring it in, don't dawdle in the hall! Hurry up now..."

Jista and Reia sighed together. "Make up your mind then..." Jista muttered as she passed in behind Reia. A sharp slap across the back of her head sent her splaying into the room and landing at what appeared to be the Captain's desk.

Reia countered, "That wasn't necessary! We're just a trying to do our duties as well as the next of them that has the honor to serve!" She positioned herself carefully between the lackey and Jista and kept up a running monologue about the privileges of service, how they'd risen to this lofty level of responsibility... All the while setting out the covered platters slowly and methodically and glancing surreptitiously at Jista's progress at the desk.

At length the lackey had heard enough, he pushed Reia out of the way and removed the remaining items. Reia broke her fall against a piece of furniture and hurriedly put back all the displaced 'things.' The lackey bent to rescue a few of the 'baubles' from her too hasty hands. Exasperated, he went to the door and opened it, "I'll arrange the rest myself, get out!"

Jista leapt to be the one to push the cart out behind Reia's receding form through the door. Jista winced convincingly as she

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passed the glowering lackey. The door shut crisply almost before she was through it.

“Now to ditch the cart and get to rendezvous post haste,” Jista grinned, “I think we hit a gold mine here.” Reia looked over her shoulder back the way they'd come with a curious look in her eyes.

As Dena was just beginning to scold Yula properly for her antics, the com remote pinged around her neck. She touched the button, “Huntress...”

“Lorien reporting the retrieval of our pods,” Elenir's voice crooned. “Rejoining the Huntress. Out.”

Dena left Yula to her own devices and headed to the bridge, touching the remote once more, “Captain, the Lorien is docking. From the sound of Elenir's voice, she's pretty tickled with her team's results.” She rounded the last turn in the corridor and stepped onto the bridge. There she saw the Elf's head between Yula and Mim's backs on the Captain's chair. She did a double take at the sight of Yula whom she'd *just* left in the pod chamber, and Mim whom she hadn't been able to locate all day. Yula turned her head toward her, sniffed and turned away again.

“I relieve you Commander,” the Elf smiled as she turned.

“I stand relieved,” Dena sighed distractedly, “*Very* relieved in fact!” She continued, more herself, “It's only a moment before it's time for an update from the Lúthien... now that the Lorien is... probably docked and hopefully with as good a news as you were able to glean.”

“Understood,” the Elf nodded and touched the com panel on the arm of her chair. “Lúthien, report?”

Ravena's voice answered immediately, “Reeling 'em in as we speak, my Captain. Good to hear your voice.” There was a muted burst of laughter over the channel. “As you may hear, it appears Isin and Song have had a bit of luck. Returning to Huntress now. Docking in a few minutes. Out.”

Once all the company was again assembled in the Captain's ready room, Isin gave their report.

“That was one of the most pristine vessels I've ever stepped on

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that wasn't Lascorii, I mean..." Isin opened, to the gasps and confused looks staring back at her from the others. "What?" Isin hesitated.

Song nodded, "Truly! The hard part was finding alternate costumes as quickly as possible..."

Isin continued, "The conscripts on the Gammadil---that's that ship," she gestured out the broad view screen in the direction of the fleet they were shadowing still. "Anyway, they are pretty much in charge of all labs and research being performed under Captain Ustra's vigilant oversight. He's a stickler for detail. Never encountered a Naud like *him* before."

Song explained, "The Gammadil joined up with this phalanx after a very persuasive invitation from Captain Husim..." The mention of that Naud's name, though the Elf knew he was commanding the flagship, still caused an involuntary shudder to race through her frame.

"And?" she coaxed, without missing a beat.

"It is clear now," Song continued, "why he needs the Gammadil and her Captain."

Isin asked teasingly before dropping the bombshell, "Do y'all know what Husim is after?"

Jista spoke up, "Actually: Yes;" And she unclasped the thick leather thong at her neck, from her costume aboard the flagship, and put it into Pim's waiting palm.

Pim explained, "As hoped, these two clever sneaks got an eyeful of the Captain's private papers."

Reia interrupted, "Of course we don't read those scribbles the Naud call 'writing!'"

Ravena was jolted upright, "But can you recreate them for me? I certainly *can* read them!"

Pim grinned, "Better!" And she placed the necklace on top a little module in front of her, pressed a button and a holo display of the recordings Jista had made sprang up before their eyes. "Just let me fast forward to the last bits..." she fiddled with the controls.

Images of the service shafts, familiar to all of them, raced by,

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then there were the rooms of 'clients.' The Elf's face paled as the holo of the interior of one of the cells on the ward Reia and Jista had passed through lingered in the air above them. There were the same stark walls, the straps on the table/bed, the vacant gaze of the inmate... just as in her own nightmares and waking terrors of memory. Just as quickly other scenes rushed by till Pim slowed them at the tumble Jista took to roll into the flagship captain's desk of papers.

Ravena and Elenir gazed carefully at the Elf. "Captain, are you..." Ravena began.

The Elf's eyes grew larger and her nostrils flared slightly. "Excellent! Let's see the show."

Pim enlarged the scene and adjusted the focus. Ravena watched as page after page was flipped across their view. "Stop! THERE..." She pointed and crossed to stand behind Pim. She asked, "Can you bring just that portion up and display it so we can all see it?"

Another bump of the little module and Ravena pointed at the diagrams and notes clearly handwritten across the page. She explained:

"These here are, as you can deduce yourselves, the coordinates for a star system." and she read them off in easy translation. "But the diagram..."

Jista interrupted, "That diagram isn't of those coordinates. The coordinates are for the nearest star cluster to the Illian system we surveyed after leaving Balos. The diagram is..."

Elenir took over, "...a fair depiction of the Ying system and its eight neighboring systems..."

Dena gasped, "Including Tenrith?!"

Ravena nodded, "Just so." She continued, "This other set of marginal notes are an excerpt from another text---at least that's how Husim has recorded it." She cleared her throat and recited, "It's not a Naud verse; they don't actually compose verse themselves. If I had to guess I'd say it was..."

"What's the gist of the citation?" the Elf asked, maintaining an air of directness without any frustration in her voice.

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“Yes,” Ravena nodded, “Hmm, 'counting years until a union...' No, that's 'reunion', sorry. 'beneath the glowing star of Arimayr...' That's the mythological deity of bounty revered by the ancient people of Elenessa---they just disappeared ages ago without a trace, you know... Anyway, 'stand like the pillars of greymarin oh chosen of the guardians, behold the gift of Sarimayr, Enthilé...' That's the devoted servant of Arimayr. '...the star of the Elhehrim shall be one with thee...'”

Dena and the others gasped; followed instantly by: “And?” they demanded as one.

“No, that's it; that's all Husim records of that text---and I'm pretty certain it *is* ancient Elenessan---though this bears a really strong resemblance in syntax to another very ancient script... I just can't put my finger on it.... Forgotten languages have been a hobby of mine for years. Though the inclusion of the relatively recent advent of the Elhehrim legend into *this* language, by *these* people... Well, that *certainly* casts a shadow on my initial interpretation of the source material... Anyway, the rest of these notes seem to be a checklist of sorts: Gain free access to the frontier; Assemble tools for expedition; Narrow down location of Pillars... Next page please, Pim?”

Pim slowly advanced the holo, but instead of a next page there was the hurried closing of the folder as the scene panned quickly to the exasperated face of the lackey. “Crap!” Jista yelled. “Sorry Captain...”

Isin interposed, “Not so terrible. That's what I was going to say a minute ago. Captain Ustra isn't actually a product of the Naud Military Complex. In fact he's probably one of only a hundred or so that the Naud can boast of as 'scientists.' Ustra is an archaeologist and Captain of the Gammadil because his own research vessel was lost in that mysterious debacle at Illian. He was on the Gammadil at the time and returning from... well all we could get was: the far frontier. Anyway...”

Song continued, “Husim needs Ustra to take him to this Arimayr star. *That's* why Ustra has the Gammadil, *and* why *that* ship

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and her complement of crew and conscripts is treated with such kid gloves by the rest of the fleet.”

“Also,” Isin added, “why it was so relatively simple to waltz right up to the chief of research and gain an audience with Ustra personally---we sorta suggested we were envoys from Husim and...”

Ravena grinned, “There was *such* a sudden and *unexpected* complete field of static on all frequencies that confirmation of their identities was passed over as a given by security...” she shrugged innocently and winked to Isin and Song. “That and a certain little Command memo inserted into their Com logs...”

The Elf rose slowly and turned to step toward the great view screen. She gazed across the murky space at the shadowy outlines of the corvettes nearest at hand. “And I’ve fed Elenir the looping routes that all these support ships have followed in service to Husim on his demented quest. Their range is greater than we’d feared.”

Senta added, “And more of them than we could have suspected.”

The Elf continued, “That Husim is still mining the memories of innocent victims to aid his schemes isn’t so very surprising I suppose. That he is aware of the Illian destruction, but knows no more about it than we do, suggests that he took it as divine providence guiding him to his chosen destiny---a new Naud Empire cast in his own image, with himself as sole Lord of all.” She turned back to the company. “That *was* his dream years ago---I happen to have *that* tidbit of intel firsthand---and it hasn’t changed over the intervening intervals of setbacks he’s incurred. Now he is almost poised to act.”

She gazed at each of her crew in turn, “...With only the Huntress between himself and the object of his heart’s desire.” Her growing wicked smile of resolution overshadowed any hint of her previous malaise, and it was infectious.

“‘Sleep-Over’ is a success then, Captain;” Ravena chuckled. “On to Operation: ‘Cockroach’ then?”

The others looked between Ravena and their Captain. Dena shuddered in spite of herself and her training. “Cockroaches?!”

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And Where She Stops...

*"Fortune converts everything to the advantage of her favorites."
---Francois de La Rochefoucauld*

“Just a metaphor, dear Dena the Magnificent!” the Elf retorted consolingly with a warm smile. The others were just as curious. She continued, “Our next little encounter with the legend in his own mind that is Husim, shall play even more to our own historic strengths than the 'Sleep-Over' we just had as his guests.”

Pim had left her little module on. Mim and Yula were taking turns leaping back and forth at the frozen holo of Husim's lackey, swatting at his head as they passed.

Over the next couple days, the company set about making arrangements for what the Captain had in mind for their coup d'grace. It was almost surreal: the Naud phalanx, just meters away all around the Huntress, had no inclination that their fate was being shaped by just ten women aboard an invisible ship nestled in their very midst. The Elf was uncommonly reclusive during all those preparations, but on the third day she stepped onto the bridge.

“Ravena, please read our sisters into the end game of this operation while I go and get into costume. I've been looking forward to *this* play's debut for a long, long time...” The Elf strode from the bridge, through her ready room toward her boudoir with Mim and Yula skipping close on her heels.

All eyes were on Ravena, “Before I detail the brief thrust of this particular operation,” she nodded to Pim. “Commander? If you will tell us what *else* you accomplished on the flagship while waiting for Reia and Jista to rejoin you?” The others spun on Pim. She grinned

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and her shoulders rose perceptibly.

“Just a little fun, really. You see...”

As the company was finishing taking in the limited background Pim supplied then absorbed their responsibilities in this next chapter of operations, the Elf sauntered from her apartments down to the hangar bay. She boarded each of their yachts and set them to cloak. Then standing in what appeared to be merely a vacant hall, she went to the control panel on the wall and set the bay doors' field to active. Then she touched the Com switch. “All ready down here. Please ping me when you're ready up there.”

Song's voice answered her from the bridge, “Reia is maneuvering the Huntress as we speak my Captain.”

Pim added, “Transferring controls to your arm band, Captain. And Captain?”

“Yes my clever girl?” the Elf smiled.

“It *will* work!” she confirmed.

“Not a doubt in my mind, dearest.” She walked toward the huge bay doors and there was a 'ping' from her wrist. She glanced down at the addition to her formal Court robes and smiled. The Elf was dressed as if she were attending her ascendency rite. Never as long as her company had known her had she been so immaculately regal. She was an imperious vision of beauty to behold. She touched a couple buttons at her wrist and the lighting of the bay dimmed as a single spotlight on herself alone followed her approach to the hangar doors.

“Showtime!” she announced, and the main viewer on the bridge shifted to the video feeds of the loading bay. The Company was holding their breath as they watched the back of their Captain silhouetted in the murky ISM beyond the opening great bay doors.

“Huntress to the Borantus,” she called aloud.

On the bridge, Pim touched a specific series of controls in front of her.

The main view screen on Captain Husim's bridge aboard the Borantus sprang from the gloom of the Waghtnin embedded cluster that was their refuge, to be filled with the illumined face of the Elf.

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The Borantus's First Officer's eyes grew as round as saucers; his com officer shook his head back and forth futilely trying to rid the screen of the uninvited vision. The now frantic Commander stabbed at a com link, "Captain, you should come to the Bridge, NOW.."

The Elf didn't smile, she asked simply, "Is Husim taking his beauty rest? I can wait."

In a flurry of clatter and commotion, Captain Husim barged onto his bridge and stopped suddenly as his eyes took in the image filling his screen. He seemed to gather his dignity and slowly approached his proper seat.

The Elf finally allowed herself a wan smile, "Ah, Graunta Anteron, how lovely that you came so quickly when I summoned you."

Captain Husim was visibly struggling to squelch his temper at hearing her condescending remark---to him and without a shred of evinced respect! Then his eyes narrowed and a flash of recognition pervaded his countenance. "Tera Inghean Elphinstone of the insignificant planet: Earth?" His face settled into a sneer and his voice was pure disdain. "Gone native I see by your tattooed spots and silly surgically pointed ears... tut, tut. I thought you would amount to more than a..."

On the Huntress's bridge, Pim touched the next series of controls and the Elf was projecting to every bridge on every ship in the little fleet.

"Silence!" the Elf commanded and every bridge's speakers reverberated so loudly that their Captains and their command crews had to press their hands to their ears. She continued in a more pleasant tone, "Graunta Anteron..." she continued to use the absolutely forbidden familiar first names of Husim---extraordinarily demeaning to him personally and his command by association.

"...I haven't time to listen to your driveling opinions and spurious speculations. I am only offering this communication as a courtesy. Your little fleet has ten minutes to surrender your ships and stand down your weapons systems, before I am forced to give the order for your complete destruction." In a wistful voice she added,

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“The Illian apocalypse was almost a spiritual experience for me, I do hope you refuse...”

As she was speaking she manipulated her wrist control so that only the main viewer on Husim's bridge slowly panned. Her own face began to recede as the murky star field of the Waghtnin gradually replaced the dimness around the spotlight that expanded to include her fully robed form, flanked on either side by two very large, very fearsome looking temple guardians whose tails flicked back and forth hungrily. As she spoke the last line: 'I do hope you refuse...' Husim and his bridge crew were staring directly in front of their ship's bridge at the *actual* form of the Elf standing with her attendants in the opening of her loading bay that looked to them like a narrowly illumined dais---floating in front of their eyes *without an attendant ship! And not thirty yards from where he stood on his own bridge!*

He gulped and turned to his officers apparently trying to voice a command but nothing came out, so whelmed into total shock.

The Elf made an expression of ennui. “No clever words? Hmm? No vitriolic defiance? Have it then as you please; I care not at all.” As if as an afterthought, “I suppose this shall be a little different than Illian... All this dense and explosive ISM everywhere.”

She touched her cuff and at once the Naud bridges' view screens returned to their own control and her own image vanished from Husim's. All that was left of the encounter was a superimposed timer counting down in front of their eyes. It was passing eight minutes and was still counting down.

Husim found his voice, “Fire all plasma cannons off our bow, you idiots!”

The officer at the weapons control stabbed over and over at his triggers. Nothing. Husim advanced on him; tossed him aside like an old coat and stabbed at the firing controls himself, futilely. Still Nothing. He turned back to the empty view screen and screamed a long piteous wail, “Elf!”

The timer on their screen passed seven minutes and still no order had been given to evacuate. His officers weren't certain what more terrorized them at that moment: their Captain's debasement

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and impotency, or their imminent destruction as condemned by the Elf before their very eyes. Just because Husim's ship wasn't escaping yet, that wasn't true for the others in the fleet. The Waghtnin was no longer a safe refuge and they were wrinkling out from it in all directions.

On the Huntress, the Elf strolled back onto her bridge accompanied by Mim and Yula. She glanced up at the main viewer set to track the escaping fleet. Her company grinned at her in devout respect. She mused, still looking at the mini-diaspora, "Like cockroaches when the kitchen light comes on..."

She seated herself in the Captain's chair with a flourish of her robes---a very imperial gesture. "Let's give 'em a taste of Illian. Pim?"

With a glance at the timer, Pim held her finger poised over the last of her well-designed controls. The timer slid to the last ten seconds, Pim uttered, "On your command my Captain."

The Elf looked out at the *distant* Waghtnin embedded cluster on the main viewer. "Light 'er up, Commander."

The shock wave of the near nova-like explosion wouldn't reach them for several minutes. The Huntress had been wrinkling away from the cluster, since the Elf retired to her boudoir to change, toward another much smaller stellar dust cloud so similar in density to the Waghtnin it made a most convincing stage for their show. The effect of the destruction, the image of the almost divine Elf condemning them, would be imprinted on the psyches of the escaping Naud ships' crews for all time. And the mere whisper of the Elf's name would be enough to send them scurrying to cover. That she had in fact only ignited a separated portion of the Waghtnin that had been mined for this spectacle as soon as her probes had discovered the anomaly, *that* needn't ever come to light.

The Elf rose, "I'm going to put on something more appropriate for stations-keeping;" and left the bridge.

Most importantly of all however: Husim had to advance his plans before he was ready. The Huntress really only *had* to track *one* member of his disparate fleet---Ustra's ship, the Gammadil---Husim

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wouldn't let his only lead toward his prize out of his grasp after finally acquiring it. Then of course the Huntress could neutralize the rest of them one after the other, track the remainder to the yet undiscovered 'rest' of the Naud on the frontier and still comply with the terms of their contract.

Before the Elf returned to the bridge, Pim clapped her hands in delight, "My greatest masterpiece to date!"

Isin chuckled as it dawned on them all what had actually just taken place. "A holo transmission to the Borantus main viewer?"

Pim just nodded.

Senta added admiringly, and a feedback loop fed into their control systems for communication and fire control?"

Pim's grin was even broader if that were possible.

The Elf returned to her seat; Mim and Yula took up their customary perches.

"Pursuit course of the phalanx under 'command' of the ship you and Senta reconnoitered is laid in Captain," Reia announced.

"ETA to the Corona Zed system—as you anticipated," Jista added, "twelve days, two hours."

The Elf held up her finger then as slowly dropped it forward, "Engage!" As an after thought she added, "Melnith, Reshta and Hanur will just have to wait a while... We are on-task; just not per the Guild's 'specific' wish list..."

The Huntress sprang into the wrinkle toward their next destination and would arrive well before the much slower Naud corvettes. Dena asked, "Captain? What about all those conscripts aboard those ships?"

"Sadly, we weren't able to effect an immediate remedy to their plight," the Elf consoled, "However, we shall have our work cut out for us---as each of this little fleet is overtaken---returning the Naud captives to their respective home worlds. It might be an easier task if you were to make a request of the Guild to dispatch Sargassian assistance for that chore; maybe even fill them in on our further developments... ask for recommendations regarding the refugees? Whatever strikes your fancy to parlay for shall be good by me."

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Dena brightened, “That shall be a pleasure, my Captain. Right away!” She went to sit next to Song at the Com and began entering the data and request.

“Now, Reia?” The Elf sighed melodramatically, “whatever are we going to do for entertainment on this next leg of our voyage? Now that we already have *two* most effective and---to our eyes only---attractive yachts and no more little construction projects...”

Reia glanced to the rest of the company; they smiled back at her. “Actually, my Captain, we have been preparing against the first opportunity to not be creeping around Naud ships, crawling through construction projects and making our Dena the best she can be...”

The Elf offered the appropriate expression of 'oh?'

“Indeed,” Dena supplied as she sent off the communicate to the Guild. “We have a little surprise for you---that *doesn't* involve our contract in the least!”

Elenir and Ravena rose after putting their stations on remote, “We'll just pop on down to the galley and...” Senta gave them a 'Don't say another word' expression.

Isin and Senta rose, and following the rest of the company, led a bemused Elf off the bridge and to the galley. “What could possibly be such a surprise that not a word of it has slipped?” She stopped and looked at her sisters, “You've heard from the Matriarch?!”

Isin chuckled, “You wish. No, our Auntie the Matriarch has not deigned to check up on us...” Senta added, “Seriously? Why would she? The Matriarch *does* have an empire to run...” Isin sighed, “Much too busy to follow the progress of just one contract, of just one ship among the thousands that forward the Lascorii people's aims.”

They reached the galley. Senta and Isin held the Elf's arms and made her to understand she should wait where she stood. They went to flank the rest of the company now standing shoulder to shoulder in front of the main dining table facing her. “Okay! Y'all's sense of drama is duly noted,” the Elf crossed her arms. “What is so secret that you nine rascals must make such a show of presenting it?”

Elenir and Ravena, in the center of the line stepped forward and away; the others parted likewise until the Elf saw what was on the

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table behind them. She gasped and her hands went to her mouth; tears began to form at the corners of her eyes as she looked from one to the other of her officers. Each smiling face beamed warmly back at her, unheeding of the effects of gazing into the eyes of an impassioned Lascor Princess---*the* Princess of all---then she was staring at the cake with candles and the one beautifully wrapped gift in front of it.

On a silent cue, they began: 'Happy birthday to you; Happy birthday to you; Happy birthday dearest sister...'

"Wait!" the Elf held up her hands. They stopped, still grinning like school girls. "How could you? Where did you find...? What in the name of Reja the first have you..."

Dena spoke for them. "Highness; it took a bit of research, but..."

Pim laughed out loud, "Like enough com traffic to drain our reserve power cells."

Dena blushed a little and continued, "But we really wanted to impress you..." Song rushed to continue.

"...And once Jista pointed out that it was on this day..."

Jista added sheepishly, "...That you always holed yourself up in your quarters; no matter what contract we were on, no matter where we were."

Song completed, "Well, like Dena said, with a little research we found out why."

"And Ravena knew your home world's traditions for such an event." Isin said confidently.

Ravena shrugged, "When the Matriarch first began down the path of bringing you closer and closer to herself, I was assigned to find out all we could about the Earth from which you had arisen."

Elenir added, "We really didn't know how many 'candles' to add..."

Senta finished, "Twenty-nine is just such a wonderfully prime number!"

The Elf's eyes were fixed, she had to hold up her hand to stop the chattering explanations, still looking at the little wrapped gift.

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“You are all the most wonderful sneaks a girl could ever count as dearest friends. But, what's with the present?”

All eyes turned to Jista. “Uh... Well, it seems my little escapade rifling through Husim's personal papers allowed for us to turn up something we kinda forgot...”

“'Overlooked' is more like it;” Song interrupted.

“Anyway,” Reia tried to explain, “while we were so intent on finding out what he was looking for, by scanning his papers...”

Senta confessed, “...that it wasn't until Pim...”

Pim rolled her eyes; “I didn't find it, though! Isin sensed what it might mean...”

Isin ducked an imaginary blow. “No! Ravena's the one who translated the clues, and...”

Reia pushed back her shoulders, “But I stole it.”

The Elf held up her hand again and the quibbling ceased abruptly. “I get it. You all had a hand in 'it;' whatever 'it' is.”

Pim took a deep breath; reached for the gift and went to stand at the table, behind the waiting be-candled cake. “You're supposed to make a wish and extinguish the burning wax---that's what Ravena said.”

Ravena looked very 'knowledgeable' all of a sudden and nodded her head officiously. The Elf had to laugh. “Alright...” and she stepped forward, took a deep breath and before even letting a whisper of air escape, she flicked a finger over the candles and they went out at once. She let out her breath slowly. “Now. What have my dear friends found to be the ideal gift to accompany such a wonderfully thoughtful cake and party for my,” and she winked: “‘twenty-ninth' birthday?”

Pim humbly knelt on one knee; the rest of the company did likewise. She held the gift forward to the Elf on raised arms, saying, “A token of our greatest esteem and fealty to...”

Reia continued, “...the greatest Captain...”

Followed by Jista, “...the most cherished friend...”

Then Song, “...the most beautiful and gracious...”

Elenir nodded, “...brightest and merciful...”

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Added Ravena "...Wisest and honored..."

Dena smiled through tears and bowed deeply, "...Wealthiest in heart and spirit..."

Senta and Isin finished together, "...grandest Princess Lascor has known since the dawn of our people's arising." "Take this which is yours by all that is right and just." She took the gift from Pim's outstretched hands and placed the gift into those of the Elf.

The Elf reached to unknot the tidy little bow and ribbon around the box, its only adornments. As the ribbon fluttered to the deck, the Elf looked at her company, "I am already so whelmed that whatever this is it cannot bring any more happiness to my heart than that which you all have showered upon me this day." With that said, she pulled open the lid and looked inside. Her forehead furrowed in confusion. She reached inside and removed the contents and held it in her palm before the assembled crew. "A rock?"

She thought she'd perhaps held all their eyes too long and mushed their brains. They erupted into a deafening laughter that took several minutes to subside. All the while the Elf recounted to herself everything the Matriarch had told her about how to remedy as far as possible any unintended damage she might wreak on an innocent victim.

Ravena regained some control of herself, enough to take a page of paper from her vest pocket and unfold it. She smoothed it out on the table next to the cake. "Not a rock, my grand lady. It is in... uh..."

"Disguise!" Isin, Elenir and Senta exclaimed at once. The others nodded gravely, all mirth gone from their expressions.

Reia recounted how when she was brushed aside by the most frustrated and exasperated lackey, she inadvertently strew all the things from the top of the sideboard that broke her fall. "The mess was all over the floor; I put everything back as quickly as I could... Then something happened I haven't told y'all about yet... But since the Boss said Yula helped *her* and even the Boss couldn't imagine how Yula got there... well..." She looked at the others who were now *very* interested that there was even more to the story---especially Jista who was right there too!

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Reia continued, "I haven't brought it up because it's just so improbable, but this is what happened: Yeah, I bumped the sideboard, and yes everything was strewn on the floor, and yes, I got busy putting everything back as quickly as I could... but then, I'm on my knees with just a few baubles left, I glance sideways to see how Jista's wrapping things up and when I turn back," Reia pointed to Mim. "*She* is staring at me, with that little rock between her paws! She looks down at the stone then back up at me---and I swear it all took like the blink of an eye... I know because I blinked. Seriously I couldn't believe it. So I cock an eye at the lackey; he's picking up pieces with his back to me, Jista is done with the desk... so... I sorta kinda felt compelled to pocket *that* little bit---I got the distinct impression she," and Reia nodded to the most serene face of Mim again, "She really *wanted* me to bring it back to the Huntress... to *you* actually." Reia heaved a sigh of relief. "You know I don't care if y'all believe me, it felt good to get that off my chest."

Once the rest of them recovered from the odd tale, Pim explained, "So Ravena and I were going back through all the images these two recorded in that room and *that* page leapt out at her..." she pointed at the sheet smoothed out next to the cake.

Ravena attempted to mediate Reia's breach of protocol, "*We* are constrained by *our* oath to: 'never take anything but our shadow and leave nothing but our spent breath.' Reia isn't *actually* so constrained. And, well, when Pim and I saw what was actually written *here*," she pointed again. "And with Reia's little 'souvenir' sitting there between us..."

Ravena added, "And with the ancient text's description of it sitting right here in his *own* notes!" she thumped her hand on the page.

Pim finished, "It's actually even more bewildering how the 'Hus-a-goof' *never* put two and two together as easily as we did..."

Reia offered, "The lackey even *said* that the brick-a-brack I dislodged were the Captain's valued trophies from his travels thus far on his quest. But he never put *that* little treasure together with *that* description..." she gestured between the stone and the page.

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Jista shook her head, "...Couldn't see the forest for the trees---or in this case the one tree amid the forest..."

The Elf extended her upturned hand with the 'rock incognito.' "It's a very compelling disguise then..." She assured them; "It certainly *looks* like *just* a little rock." Her memories drifted back to a time... the longer she looked into it. It was familiar somehow.

Dena and Ravena pointed again to the paper on the table. "As well it should be!" Dena insisted; "The Elhehrim *never* appear at first sight as just what they actually are..."

The Elf rolled her eyes. "*This* is an *Elhehrim*? Again with the Elhehrim?" Mim and Yula murmured a quiet purr of mewling and leapt up onto the table.

Every one shook their heads slowly. Ravena pointed reverently at one line of the ancient script scribbled on the page. "*If* it is *truly* what is described here, it is *supposed* to be a *fragment* of the Star of the Elhehrim!" And she read a snatch of the description, "...the guardians shall choose, and *the golden, clear dappled beauty of the star* shall become one with the chosen..." She looked up, "See? Pretty good description of this little treasure, wouldn't you say?"

The Elf snorted. An involuntary noise that just came out between shock and utter disbelief. Staring into the dull smooth surface of the translucent heavy stone in her palm, more thoughts and memories tried to force their way forward in her mind. It was unremarkable other than the unique speckles and the amber translucent color of it---very much like the description just read. Ravena leaned to her and whispered, "Unfortunately, this," and she gestured at the paper, "doesn't offer any more than that to go on. What it's purpose *actually* is is a bit of a mystery."

The Elf looked up from the stone. "Can no one unravel this riddle, then?"

Mim and Yula hopped across the table at once. They placed their paws on the Elf's chest and raised their muzzles to either side of her head close to her ears. The Elf's eyes sparkled at their 'secret communication.' She fixed her eyes into the depths of the stone as directed, and aloud repeated what she *thought* she'd just 'heard,'

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holding the stone a little higher... “Ai á nir Arímayr enthilé!”

The dullness of the rock's surface glistened at once, its translucence became transparent, then crystalline, and became warmer in her hand. In a moment, it shone so brightly that the well-lit room around them appeared dim. That illumination spread down from the Elf's hand to her arm then enveloped her whole body. Mim and Yula moved as close as they could to the Elf's still outstretched hand, then each placed one of their paws onto that hand. The others, however, backed off instinctively. As soon as the cats touched the Elf's hand, there was a blast of intense light so magnificent, the company could feel it rush through them, shuddering their very bones. Just as suddenly, the room returned to its former merely well-lit self with a table, a cake, and nine women staring at their Captain holding her empty hand out---the stone was gone and so were Mim and Yula!

“Where'd it go?” Pim wondered quietly when her eyes readjusted and she looked first into the Elf's empty hand.

Dena was looking around the room, “And where did Mim and Yula go? They *were* right *there* with the Captain!”

Ravena glanced at the paper once more and then up at the Elf. Isin, Senta and Elenir did likewise. She whispered in almost complete disbelief, “The star is *you* and you are *it*.”

“What?!” the Elf exclaimed and her shook the room. A wave of comprehension spread across her face unlike those of her company. In a calmer tone she added to Dena, “Mim and Yula aren't actually cats; are they.” It wasn't a question.

Dena shook her head and tried to explain that that particular 'breed' wasn't a breed of cat at all... That the Seranim and others who tended them didn't actually... “They are... or were... I mean to say: when people first encountered them, we thought they were an emergent sapient species, so they were cared for as such. But what we've only found out in the last couple years---and I didn't believe it, personally---was that they weren't 'emergent' at all, but fully wakened individuals...”

As Dena was hemming and hawing over that little history, the

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Elf listened to the two new voices in her own mind. They were so like her own thoughts that at first she supposed that the explanations---the one from Dena, and the ones spilling out in her mind---were just curious echoes of one another. Then she focused on the ones only she could hear and everything about the events of the last several minutes came into 'crystalline' clarity. The fragment of Arimayr obviously wasn't a star at all, but a crystallized accumulation of, what the voices in her head called simply, the Tears of the Enthilesté---a substance so imbued with the vital power of the cosmos that it had a life of sorts all its own. It could bring life to the inanimate, and what effect it had on the already living was to transform that life immutably into an eternal avatar of itself---*if* that life was 'prepared' or rather: developed enough for such a transformation already. That was the job of the Guardians: discern the prepared from the merely curious and bestow it on the deserved.

Then she understood clearly as if it were her own personal history that Mim and Yula weren't just members of a sapient species---newly emergent or otherwise---and certainly were *never* pets. They were literally children of the ancient Enthilé---or as the Elf had thought at first seeing them---servants, the guardians of the temple in which the Tear of the Enthilesté was placed as a hope and promise that should there arise one who was properly prepared, or developed... Then another realization sprang out of the explanation: Mim and Yula weren't the sole representatives of their folk and *they weren't from this Spur at all!* Most importantly it was plain now that those 'Enthilesté' *weren't* some mythological creation. They were the Shepherd-Gardeners of Stars and Planets, as well as the revered guides and mentors of the Elhehrim---and *that* people weren't what, or who, Dena and the others supposed them to be at all! In her mind's eye she saw the temple in which the the 'star' had been resting... Where Mim and Yula had been as stone sentinels... That was the very spot she had been standing when that Naud cruiser... When the life she'd known was forever ripped from her...

So much data, so much information at once and in such a flash of vision; the Elf's eyes readjusted to focus on the present. Dena was

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just concluding with, '...fully awakened individuals...'

The Elf smiled, "This is going to take some getting used to..."

Everyone was staring at her.

"What now?" she mused aloud to prod them out of their 'stupor.'

Isin pointed, "Your spots... they aren't dark like they're supposed to be... I mean like ours... Look! They're *golden* and..."

The Elf glanced at her hands, then her eyes grew round; "And what about..." She pushed up her sleeves and gasped. "Where are my scars!?" She tore off her clothes with a mere wave of her hand. No scars anywhere. In their stead, her be-spotted skin pulsed with the light of the discreetly self-illuminated spots of the Lascorii, now transformed.

The company could only stare. That wasn't all. She slowly looked around her side to what the others couldn't take their eyes off of---she had a tail! Running along the upper side of her new appendage were what appeared to be shimmering scales—like what dragon-skin was supposed to be. She instantly ran her hands up her back as far as they would reach. The smooth touch of it even ran across her shoulders, beneath her hair line and... She held her hands out in front of her and flexed them. Claws rose out of her fingertips. She retracted them quickly.

She felt the stares of her companions like a chill on her bare skin. Skin?! That was another thing: It wasn't really her skin. It was covered, ever so imperceptibly, with a layer of fur that was so like her former skin as to be unnoticeable. But *she* noticed. With a mere thought to shield herself from the sensation, she was instantly clothed in her favorite robe. She didn't need to hear the gasps around her to know her crew was in shock even more than she was. She didn't just sense their confusion and surprise, she could actually hear their muted thoughts. Chief among those was the realization that they could stare into her eyes and not be under even a glimmer of enchantment!

The Elf shook her head and focused, just as an experiment, to see if she could still evoke the Flame. Nine women fainted to the

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deck with a unanimous thud. “That answers that little mystery then...” she said to herself and shrugged. “Hopefully y'all will come out of it shortly...” She eyed the cake. “In the meantime...”

A while later, still in the galley, “Welcome back to the land of the alert. I left y'all some cake!”

“What just happened?” Ravena was rubbing her shoulder.

“I just wanted to see if I still had *it*,” said the Elf, “Sorry.”

“And what *else* do you have now?” Isin and Senta voiced at once.

The Elf closed her eyes and the panoply of images and history flashed once more across her mind's eye. 'What would I have done if you two hadn't joined me as you did?!' she thanked Mim and Yula for their generous gift of union. Their thoughts answered, 'The boon of the Enthilesté could not be reconciled on one's own; too much to learn; too much responsibility; too much to handle without a guide. It is our duty to serve the chosen of the Tear.'

Aloud the Elf replied, “It would seem that I shan't be worried about counting birthdays any longer, for one thing...” she laughed and the room sparkled with the tinkling of chimes or of a pattering spring shower.

“Really! What has *happened* to you?” Isin asked directly.

The Elf spent the next hour recounting all that her 'guides' had already shown her and they even began to elaborate on what were a few of her new abilities. “...I apparently can at least sense the thoughts of those around me; even hear them clearly if I focus;” she explained further. “I can see what my grandma used to call 'auras,' but I'm pretty sure Nanna wasn't talking about what I can *really* see: it's an instant perception of astral or spiritual development---that's the best way I can put it. Anyway, what else...” she hummed a little to herself and it came out as purring, very much like what Mim and Yula used to sound like.

Dena's eyes seemed to be trying to look inside her, passed the dragon-skin and glowing spots.

The Elf turned and her eyes fixed on something beyond the ship. “We are coming up on a really beautiful, very young little system about a couple light years off that way...” she pointed. The

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others instinctively followed her gesture only to look at one the galley's bulkheads.

Elenir and Jista had to laugh, "It would seem we are going to become superfluous as navigators..." "If we aren't already!"

The Elf rolled her eyes, "Don't be silly." Then she extended her gaze and saw for herself that indeed she could easily perceive the star systems around them... but they weren't just stars and planets. They were like friends whom she hadn't yet met... "Curious feeling to say the least!" she said aloud, but added to Jista and Elenir, "Don't quit your day jobs just yet."

Senta, Ravena and Isin could only shake their heads slowly back and forth. Isin voiced what they all were thinking, "If we'd had *any* idea that 'rock' could have... would have... I mean, had *such* an impact on you... could change you so completely, so..."

Senta gasped, "What about the Matriarchy?! Does this make a drastic change in the direction of the Lascorii transition of power? What will the Matriarch do when she realizes her Heir is... that the Elf is..." she had to stop. "Who *are* you?"

Again the Elf had to laugh, and her company was enfolded in that feeling of complete safety, as in a mother's arms. "I am the Elf! Just more myself than ever I have been." She considered for only a moment, then added, "I am, what was once known as, among *those* lofty ancient circles: a child of the 'First Water'---that is a fancy epithet meaning: No one's the boss of me! If I choose to continue down the path I've already chosen, so be it. I do, however, also have certain obligations to the One..." she caught herself using her guides' language without interpretation. "Sorry. That is: to the singular creative and nurturing force behind all that exist in this 'galaxy'---the One."

Her sisters and the others were instantly cautious, "What sort of obligations?" Ravena probed.

The Elf only smiled, "The same as each and every arising and realized individual in the cosmos actually: to aid the most rapid perfecting of all beings, irrespective of their exterior coating, up to the level of the sacred Martfotai... Sorry, that is: individual of light.

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Like myself; essentially. Which means I not only have the best interests of all Lascorii at heart, but of all beings everywhere also.” Her tone was casual, even matter-of-fact. That she was conversing so easily about so grand a subject and so vast a realm of responsibility caused her companions to doubt their grip on reality. Their eyes were numbed to the expression of staring they'd adopted nearly exclusively over the last of this day's events.

Song muttered, “So the Huntress still has her Captain? And we are still under contract? And we are supposed to go about our normal lives as if nothing is 'really' different?”

Pim's hysterical laughter caught everyone off guard and helped to dispel completely the shock they were just overcoming. “*Normal!* Define your terms! Since when has *anything* about the Boss been even *remotely* 'normal'!?”

Sighs all around the galley were sufficient answer to that. The Elf was always her own person. Now, she was just so obviously her own person, it couldn't escape a blind girl's attention. That prompted another question from Song, “How are you going to go on an away mission ever again? Seriously, Boss? You stand out like... well, like a goddess among mortals---if that's not being ridiculously redundant.”

Then the Elf surprised even herself. With a lot of assistance and guidance from her unified mentors, she spun on her foot and faced her company. She was *exactly* her old tail-less, be-spotted self! ...in appearance at least. Then just to 'show off' a little, she did another spin and was suddenly the white-haired twin of Senta. She spun again and was the raven-haired twin of Isin. She just kept at it until her friends hadn't a shadow of a doubt: the Elf was the absolute master of disguise beyond the greatest any Lascor had ever produced.

“So? Thank you for my birthday party,” the Elf concluded sincerely. “This day is *truly* my *birth*-day now, and I can't imagine a greater cadre of companions with whom to share it... Pity mother wasn't with me too.”

Isin and Senta smiled, Isin explained, “Auntie, the Matriarch, needn't have been here to love you any more than she does already.

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You have always had all your sisters' fondest love and respect for that reality. *That* is why, so unlike certain other historical Court situations, you as Heir aren't having to face down a *single* challenge to your ascendancy."

Senta admitted, "Isin and I are the eldest. If there *were* to be a challenge at all, it would have to come from us... at least first. We're pretty sure that's why Auntie sent us with you: partly to remove a potential challenge at court, partly to allow us to eliminate any hint or trace of doubt we may have harbored toward you. There is none now, nor has there ever been." Her tone was final and the Elf knew the veracity of it integrally.

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Timing

"How can you prove whether at this moment we are sleeping, and all our thoughts are a dream; or whether we are awake, and talking to one another in the waking state?"
---Plato

One day slipped into another almost without the company realizing it. The Elf, under the unseen tutelage of her integrally unified mentors, amazed her friends with one astounding new ability after another. Those twelve days or so en route to the Corona Zed system to wait on the arrival of the Huntress's prey flew passed and were over. The company of the Huntress had witnessed with their own eyes only a hint of their Master's new talents.

"Please let someone know before you go outside to sit in front of the view screen! I've nearly peed myself twice taking the bridge only to look up there and suddenly see the *back* of you!" Dena chided her Captain before she'd censored her thoughts, they were just there in her mouth. "Uh, I mean..."

The Elf smiled warmly. "I shall be more considerate from now on, dearest. I am sorry to have unsettled you."

"Speaking of being 'unsettled'," Senta and Song grinned, "do you really *have* to have been somewhere before, to be able to just 'pop' there if you want to?!"

The Elf was nodding. "I have a lot more to learn yet, but for the present: yes, just like our own ship's relatively short bounces, I have to have been there before. But, if you think about it, I've been to more places across the Alliance than several people put together."

Isin announced, "Coming out of wrinkle just within the orbit of Corona Zed gamma."

"All stop," the Elf commanded. "Now then, we have another

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week or so before the first of the renegade phalanx reaches us---not enough time to visit Tenrith and get back here, but plenty of time to set our snares for any other vessels that may rendezvous with them here. So here's what I propose..." They had been coached on this scenario over the recent days, but the twist the Elf included now was inspired.

Dena mused aloud, "Too bad we didn't have your birthday party *before* Operation Cockroach..."

Ravena cooed, "Then all Pim's hard work would have been superfluous."

Pim shrugged, "Would've been worth the show, though."

"Captain?" Reia asked, "Does that thing you can do with your appearance? Can you become anybody?"

"It helps if I can have physically touched them before," the Elf replied smoothly, "But yep."

Song asked quickly, "Even a man?" the Elf nodded.

Senta mumbled, "Why don't y'all just ask her to do some tricks or something?!" and her voice got louder, "By the Flame! She's not a sideshow magician or something---she's practically a deity!"

The Elf turned in her chair to face the science station. "Sister dear, you are correct, but it really *is* going to take some adjustment for *all* of us. In the meantime, I appreciate the questions. For one thing, I don't know all of what I can actually do. The guardians are immaculate teachers, but I have to ask the right question, the right way, to get the answers I want. And secondly, that y'all aren't fawning, bowing and scraping before me is precisely how we began this voyage to begin with, remember? No special treatment?"

Senta nodded. "Yes, I do remember, vividly. However, on that subject, I suppose you might like to amend the cautions against having your identity revealed inadvertently... I mean now that you're indestructible and... how did you phrase it? 'Virtually' immortal."

Pim had to know, "Yeah! Why 'virtually'? I would think either you are or you aren't."

"I am." The Elf let that linger a moment. "And my sister is correct, the Matriarch shall have her Heir, so the protocols we agreed

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upon at the outset of our contract are lifted.”

“Indestructible?” Ravena shook her head, “*Nothing* is indestructible.”

“Nothing in *your* experience,” the Elf corrected, “and that is as accurate as I can be. Just in the last week I have walked around outside this ship---in wrinkle and out---and been hit by more space lightning than a girl should think even naturally occurs---with nothing other than a bit of singed fur. I heal almost instantaneously; my vital organs have back-ups, my skin is impenetrable except by my own hand. What part of 'indestructible' don't you think applies?”

Ravena shrugged, “No offense meant. I just haven't wrapped my head around the fact that there are such entities---in reality; not fairy tales---that are as far above us,” and she waved a hand to the bridge officers around them, “as we are to the plants in my garden!”

“Actually,” Elenir had just entered the bridge and caught the gist of the dialog. “I find it *immensely* comforting! *And* that *our* Elf is just the sort of individual these lofty entities want in their club---*that* is beyond satisfying. It's like being vindicated in one's faith.” She looked to the Elf, “I can't help but face the apparent fact that that Tear wasn't just left under its guardianship yesterday or last season. It's been sitting, waiting for the right candidate---the properly prepared and developed individual---perhaps from time out of memory. Or so it appears under pretty strong evidence.”

Isin chuckled, “I hope I get to see the Hus-a-goof's face when he gets to the end of his quest and realizes that he actually had the treasure in his hands but that it is his nemesis who is the embodiment of that treasure---that all his efforts were as futile as...”

“...As wondering just how futile *that* is, perhaps?” Elenir tsked.

Dena asked, “Do you think then that the Illian field was the result of a really pissed off Enthilesté?”

“It was three of them, actually;” the Elf replied assuredly. “Though the destruction wasn't in the Illian system at all; it took place around Elenessa. The debris that couldn't be 'recycled' as it were, was removed to the asteroid belts of that system and then what *still* couldn't be situated there and balanced, was removed to the

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Illian system's asteroid belts, where it *could* be balanced.”

“*That's* why we didn't find any weapons residues other than from the Naud themselves!” Pim clapped the panel in front of her--finally solutions to a few of the mysteries behind them were being revealed.

Elenir asked cautiously, “And those extra moons? The little ones that shouldn't have been there around Elenessa? Were those gifts of these Enthilesté also?”

The Elf slowly shook her head. “A gift of the Tahoe, actually. Useful to the Enthilesté who purged that system, but put there by the Captain of the Tahoe. And that is just a matter of Guild record--classified records...” She spun around to Dena, “*You* could request a search of *those* records if our Elenir is unconvinced.”

“Oh no, Captain!” Elenir erupted, “If you say it is so---it is.”

Ravena smiled, “The Tahoe. Fond memories of that visitor to Lascor...”

The others around the bridge were all ears. “You *met* the people of the Tahoe, *personally*?” Jista exclaimed. “I was only a babe in arms when they visited the Islands.”

One by one, the company shared what direct experiences they'd had, if any. Mostly it was the indirect experiences that dominated the conversation. It had been the Tahoe that had opened up new vistas of trade, added new members to the Alliance, opened the frontier even further, and inspired the succeeding generations toward a greatness that hadn't beckoned them before there was a Tahoe.

“And back to the task at hand...” the Elf drew their reminiscences to a close. “Are we clear about this? We may be invisible, but a stray plasma blast at the wrong moment will still cause as much damage as if we were sitting ducks.”

“Clear!” her officers agreed.

There was time for the Huntress and her two yachts to perform a most thorough survey of the Corona Zed system, as well as the neighboring system not two light-years---four days---away. The evidence of Naud visitation was everywhere in the two systems: moons and planets carelessly mined, automated refineries left here

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and there to rust and decay on the otherwise nicest real estate, having already clotted the atmospheres and generally made a mess of those worlds and their systems. For her own part, the Elf, under the careful instruction of the Guardians, was taught how to manipulate the forces within herself, the planets and parent stars, to restore balance as much as was possible for *her* as a novice trainee. To her gaping crew mates her activities were nothing short of the miraculous, and they said so.

“Honestly Captain,” Senta was summing it up for them all, “It was one thing to *know* you were this awesomely capable person---who even impressed the Matriarch to the degree that she made the ultimate choice for..”

The Elf was listening, but even still, it was a moment before she realized that Senta had stopped mid-sentence. She looked up from her chair arm monitor to see that Senta's mouth was frozen forming her next word. In fact as she looked around her bridge, each person was stopped in the midst of a side conversation, or movement, or like Dena: crossing the bridge with only one foot on the floor and her weight already carrying forward---no one could balance like that!

“Permission to come aboard.” Someone was hailing, but it hadn't come through the com system; this was directly to her thoughts. The Elf looked up at the main viewer and there, standing and making a little wave of her hand was the most resplendently beautiful woman she had ever seen---and she was Enthilesté! She looked just like what the Elf had become in transformation.

“Uh...” the Elf responded quickly.

The person on the other side of the viewer chuckled, “Cat got your tongue?” She stepped directly through the screen and onto the bridge. “I'll take that as a qualified: permission granted.” The 'guest' glanced around the bridge. “Not to worry; they are just captured in the moment; there is nothing wrong with them in the least. I just needed a little audience with you without interruption.”

The Elf nodded. She heard all the words, but this was well outside anything she'd encountered or envisioned. Summoning her poise, she cleared her throat. “Yes, do come aboard... um..”

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“Excuse me!” the stranger crossed to stand right in front of the Elf. “Introductions. Most people call me GingerKat; and as you can see, I am Enthilesté, just like you. What you likely cannot perceive as yet even with your extraordinary development is that I also am First Water.”

The Elf blinked hard. The 'GingerKat' was still standing in front of her smiling genially. “And I am Tera Inghean...”

GingerKat interrupted, “...Elphinstone Emiclairsenne Tei I, born in the highlands, adopted daughter of the Matriarch of Lascor---and her chosen Heir---onetime captive of the Naud, and now pre-eminent Contractor of the Lascorii Selective Service renowned across the Alliance as: the Elf. Of course *now* you are also: First Water, and it is about *that* little addition to your resumé I have come to have a little chat.”

“I don't... I mean I haven't met...” the Elf sputtered.

GingerKat chuckled again and raised a hand out to the Elf, who responded in kind. As their hands touched, they were suddenly not on the bridge of the Huntress. The Elf looked around her, surprised at herself that she wasn't the least bit disturbed that she'd essentially been kidnapped from her own bridge. “Where...”

“This is the Enthilesté Temple on Sheranara---Beloved of the Enthilé and Enthilesté in the Sixth Orchard: the Orion Spur.” GingerKat walked over to the dais in the center of the vast hall, sat down and patted the platform next to her. “Do come and have a seat, we need to have some girl-talk...”

The Elf walked as confidently as she could manage, to do just that. As she crossed the space between them she made note of her surroundings. It wasn't so much that time was standing still here also, it was---a few leaves hung in the air just inside the tall latticed windows, a small bird was arrested in mid-flight, even the dust that would otherwise be swirling in the rays of the sunlight were merely sparkling in place. What captured her attention was the illumined tracery of writing around the capitol in the hall---she could actually read it!

“Yes. About that;” GingerKat began, “Our little guardians have

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begun your training in a most excellent fashion and are to be commended. However there are aspects of your existence that only an individual with the proper experience can elucidate for you.”

“You are *the* GingerKat. Aren't you.” The Elf formed that as a statement. “*The* GingerKat that led the Tahoe from Selena to Rutin, and out into the Alliance. The GingerKat that rumor suggests became immortal... that single-handedly removed the Naradin horde from the Spur... That...”

GingerKat smiled, held up her hand and nodded. “In one. As long as we are getting to know one another, let me fill in some gaps for *you*. The Star of Elhehrim, the *crystalized tears* which we left for you to find...”

The Elf gasped. GingerKat cautioned her to just listen with a slight movement of her eyes. “...But you were captured by the Naud on that very planet---Tenrith---you won't have remembered that was where you were at the time; so caught up in your surveying assignment and all. Anyway, we had hoped you would at least *acquire* it then, but that was not to be. Mim and Yula took it pretty hard that they were unable to prevent your capture---after having you right there and in their company. They really are pre-eminent guardians, but having failed to effectively protect you, and *then* to also lose the Tears... Well it took a lot of consoling for them to get back in the swing of things, you might say.”

She saw the expression of incredulity on the Elf's face and heard clearly the raging thoughts pouring through her mind. “...It has caused us not a little re-evaluation of our intentions before that 'stone' finally came back into your possession. You know, you *did* hold it once, hence Mim and Yula's deep depression after your capture.” She prodded, “That ruined temple your Gorim guides took you to on your visit to that out-of-the-way little planet. You remember *that* much?” The Elf nodded slowly; that was just what she had begun to recall dimly as well. That *was* the last memory she had before the shadow of that Naud Cruiser blotted out the sky above them and they were snatched up like so many sheep for shearing... She shuddered involuntarily.

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“Anyway,” GingerKat continued, “At the time, I was relatively new to this,” she waved a hand to take in her entire self and the Elf’s physical form as well. “And Sire Alviss assured me that you would come out of the experience even stronger, and far more prepared.” She sighed, “He was right, of course... That’s the short and the long of that. Let’s discuss the present. But before we begin in earnest, have you any lingering questions?”

That set off a cascade in the Elf’s mind. She just didn’t know where to start. “Shepherd-Gardeners of planets...” was all that came out at first. GingerKat nodded and waited. “First Water...” Again GingerKat merely nodded and waited. “Mim and Yula are a part of me now...” Again a nod of encouragement; GingerKat added, “for the time being.”

“I was *supposed* to have the Tear?!” More nodding. The Elf looked around the hall again, “We are... I mean, time has stopped?” More nodding from her host. “That writing up there. I can read it.”

GingerKat said simply, “Please do.”

“Blessed is Sheranara, golden measure of the Shepherd’s care, Of the many she is the beauty above compare. Life to the weary she offers and her bounty is unending, The waves of time washed at her feet and overwhelmed her not. Neither could the storm loosen her from her foundations. Her children shall be many and her radiance shall be as a beacon across the seas. To those who have eyes to see, behold the eldest sister, the Gardener’s joy. Her treasure she yields to all, while her heart is bound to the One. Maiden bride of the Enthilesté, betrothed of the One, Ever-proud, Ever-loved, Ever-honored; Bright Sheranara, the undimmed beauty.” The Elf turned from the capitol script and looked behind the dais upon which they sat. “There’s a pit behind us...”

GingerKat’s laughter rang in the hall as a chorus of chimes and strong fresh breezes. “Unappealing descriptor; try: cavern. Yes, would you care to take the complete tour then?” She stood and again extended her hand to the Elf. This time the Elf hesitated a split-second. GingerKat’s smile overwhelmed her trepidation. Something about this individual wouldn’t allow for suspicion or fear.

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“Yes.” The Elf smiled at last, “I very much would!”

They plummeted deeper and deeper into the cavern. Just as the Elf was starting to wonder how deep they were descending, they reached an ancient ledge, an immense terrace or balcony, wrought from the living stone of the planet. That was only taken as a glimpse, what filled her eyes to the point of weeping was the sight from the terrace: the living heart of Sheranara, Beloved and Betrothed of the Enthilesté. Her breath was caught in her throat. “But she's alive! I mean she is moving, while everything else is frozen in time...” the Elf looked up at GingerKat for an explanation.

“Yes. Sheranara is very much alive and yes; like you, like me... and so many others like us, we have a very, uh, *unique* relationship with time.” Then she held out her arms to the fiery heart vast and beautiful before them. “Sheranara!” she called in a voice only an Enthilesté can conjure.

A single whirling glistening and sparkling cloud of vaporous mist rose from the surface below them. It reached up to the terrace and coalesced in front of their very eyes. The Elf beheld a tall, perilous beauty whose eyes and face, her very skin radiated sheer energy, her immense power was a palpable, tangible experience. She spoke, “Lord GingerKat!” and Sheranara bowed to *her*. The Elf's eyes were as round as saucers. “Who is this person, really?!” she wondered, staring at GingerKat.

Sheranara rose and turned to face the Elf. “Like us, Lord GingerKat is the betrothed of the One.” There was a pause as the Elf adjusted her mind to the realization none of them were actually using words to communicate. This was all from one mind to the other, or rather they shared one mind... hard to say. “Of one mind; yes, that is well-said,” Sheranara inclined her head to the Elf, then she did what was wholly unexpected, she bowed to the Elf as well. “Welcome beloved, youngest of the First Water.”

The Elf responded by bowing in return to each of her companions. GingerKat 'spoke' next. “Our Elf, like my daughter ChériAna, has become One with us through a most circuitous path. She shall be embraced.” As commanded, Sheranara reached out her

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arms toward the Elf. At her slightest touch, the Elf felt the resonant power of the planet course through her, and suddenly she was suspended over the most incredible... language cannot define nor describe the experience of beholding the One face to face.

After how long, she had no clue---time simply did not matter---she was once more standing beside GingerKat on the terrace and gazing out over the burning heart of Sheranara. The Elf's own radiance rivaled that which shone below them. "You'll be right as rain in no time, but we have quite a bit yet to accomplish, so we must carry on..." They were suddenly back on the dais of the Temple and GingerKat was still speaking, "...As your guardians have informed you, as First Water, unlike other Enthilesté, Enthilé, or even AltaEnthilé for that matter, we are unbound by discreetly formed obligation or generic responsibilities. We are the incarnation of Will itself; the avatars of the One's triune nature---As such, we are the 'wild cards' of this realm, if you will..." and she giggled, "pun intended. You have been guided through the elementary disciplines of shape changing---to protect yourself from forces you are not yet able to confront. You have been practicing transiting from place to place, and quite proficiently I might add. You have had a taste of balancing the forces within a planet so that it might heal itself in time; very useful, that. You have also, I believe, taken to heart your very indestructible nature and have you then come to grips with what it is to face life without an end save by your choice alone?" She gazed into the Elf's heart. "No not entirely. But that does take some getting used to---it's a paradigm shift of the greatest magnitude, to be sure. Took me at least a... let's just say 'a while' to wrap my head around it."

They strolled out of the Temple proper into the very still world on the surface of Sheranara. They were on an island in the middle of a very large lake or inland sea. Sea birds were frozen in the air along the shore and above their heads. Sailing vessels were stopped on the main, the curling waves at their prows, frozen. "We have a few more introductions to endure..." and the next steps they took along the little path they were following suddenly became a cobbled path along

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a river and it was clearly evening here, not mid-day. Above them on a balcony over-looking their bend of the river, two nice people waved and called out to them a greeting. GingerKat returned the greeting, intimating to the Elf, "Yes. They are not frozen in time either. We are all living inside the eternity of a single moment. And these two here..." and suddenly they were on that balcony facing those two people. "...are Tohm and Kate---they are the AltaEnthilé, they are the One in physical form."

Kate giggled, "Not so physical, but then that's as good an introduction as any." She put her arms around the Elf and embraced her. Again the Elf experienced the ineffable as she had in the presence of the One, just a few minutes... or had it been hours, or days ago...

Tohm laughed aloud, "Yes, Time is the uniquely subjective phenomenon." He held out a hand for her to enter their home. "There are others who are anxious to meet you..."

In the large living room/kitchen of the ranch house were seated and standing perhaps a dozen other people; each of whom looked as ordinary as did Tohm and Kate. But the Elf could perceive clearly that these were *not* ordinary folks at all.

"Quite so! But we do try..." A tall man held out his cheek towards her, she rubbed her cheek to his as if that were the greeting she had been accustomed to all her life. It wasn't. And she was astonished at herself. "I am Jonibob," he gestured around the room. "GingerKat, you've met now, these are our partners Leva and Vashi..." Each person bowed as they were introduced. "Over there are our pride and joy: HanaRin and her partners: Rudikins, ChériAna, and..." as he was about to introduce the fourth person, when she leapt up and was in the Elf's arms before her name was out of Jonibob's lips. "...Tei."

The Elf's eyes grew to the size of saucers, she held the woman close to her breast, whispering, "Lei'tressa Reja Tei Emiclairsenne VII, *Sister!*" The Elf's tears were just forming and tumbling down one cheek. There was a rush around the room as little vials came from everywhere to gather the drops. As they were gathered, the

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vials were sealed and all appended to a chain that was placed around the Elf's neck.

Tei whispered back, "Sister, indeed! I am so proud of you! And of course that mother made such a good decision... Not that she's incapable of good decisions as a rule, it's just that..."

The Elf giggled and finished, "...balancing the people's welfare with that of her personal obligations and responsibilities is a juggling act she can't always essay with grace!" Tei was beaming.

"Spoken like a true Princess of the realm!" and she embraced the Elf again, held her hand and led her to a seat. "Those tears around your neck," she nodded and the Elf acknowledged it. "...It was the Enthilesté tears that catalyzed your own transformation, you know..." The Elf nodded. She had been told that; it just remained more metaphorical until that moment.

ChériAna added, "Those are more potent than you can possibly realize just yet..."

A thought that had been growing in the Elf since her transformation finally rose to the surface. "...More potent than I can imagine?" ChériAna nodded, smiling encouragement for her to continue. "But the Star of Elhehrim... that *really* was Enthilesté tears... I mean actual tears... but like a rock?" More nods around the room answered her. She held the little vials in her hand at her breast, "But these are... well... liquid! And what I held... when I was..."

GingerKat held up her hand. "Your sister there," she nodded to Tei, "asked that we keep tabs on you before you ever left Earth."

"Actually," Tei admitted, "it was Chéri who saw the signs before anyone of us. She volunteered to monitor the Alta project, which led to the Ganymede project..."

The Elf exclaimed, "That was my first assignment off-planet for the Drummond Group!"

GingerKat commenced once more; "Yes dear; that's when Tei and Chéri approached us to have a looksee for ourselves. Since Tohm and Tani had *finally* filled the rest of us in on the backstory of the Enthilé family tree, so to speak, we had to suspect that certain of our families still on Earth might someday produce an individual not

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only *capable* of seriously higher development, but *actually* developing..”

Kate interjected, “The MacLarens, the Elphinstones, the Livingsons of course, the Mastersons... and on and on...”

GingerKat sighed, “But even though we could plainly see the rapidly developing potential in you, you were immersed so thoroughly in your chosen vocation...”

Tohm pointed out, “And it is the inherent prerogative of the First Water to choose for themselves, remember.”

“...We kept hands off.” GingerKat spoke with a tinge of remorse in her voice now. “But we,” she gestured to ChériAna, Tei and herself, “were as determined as ever to not let such a valuable individual slip into obscurity. The One needs every bit of Consciousness that develops in this realm, the stakes are too high. So, with the tears of the existing First Water...”

The Elf’s eyes narrowed, “There are more than just you two?”

Tei beamed, “Nothing gets by *my* sister!”

GingerKat continued, “The others will be along shortly. *So*, I approached Tohm and Kate to perform a bit of 'magic!'” The room erupted into laughter again. Even the Elf was caught up in the absurdity of referring to anything amongst these folks as 'magic.'

“It wasn't as mysterious as all that,” Kate demurred, “Changing the states of elementals is pretty much our stock and trade you know.”

GingerKat smiled, “And Voila! We had the Star of Elhehrim!”

Tei giggled, “That part was my idea. I decided, once you were assigned that survey task and would be methodically sampling world after world, culture after culture, that to hide the Tear in plain sight was our best recourse. So I told them about the Lascor myths of the Elhehrim...”

“That particular mythology is a pretty common one shared by a majority of Alliance worlds---in one form or another. In fact, it isn't entirely based on imagination or fantasy...” ChériAna informed them.

“Anyway...” GingerKat was as patient as she could manage considering the fact they were using actual verbal communication,

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when it would have been ever so much simpler to relate this through direct thoughts. "...as Chéri has intimated, we selected the legendary home world of the Elhehrim, used the actual ruins of one of their actual temples..." ChériAna was smiling a most vindicated smile. "...knowing that your Gorim guides on one leg of your tours would inevitably make that particular planet a side trip---Chéri is quite right that many cultures share these stories and some are prouder of their heritage than others---the Gorim and Seranim are two of those. And well, you probably know the rest."

"And Mim and Yula?" the Elf asked hesitantly.

GingerKat smiled, "We don't just leave something as unimaginably potent as Enthilesté tears just sitting around! I happen to have come across in our travels some rather amazing individuals, but in this case it was Siress Frigga herself who offered the services of her... uh... very *special* children for the task: the Nephlii."

The Elf narrowed her eyes, "But Dena acquired them from a breeder or something on Balos..."

ChériAna nodded, "It could have been a smattering of planets besides Balos; we dispatched quite a number of of the Nephlii volunteers. We had to be sure that when you and the Tear were united at last, at least one of them would be close at hand. Mim and Yula are the most adept of their kin; they could find a needle in a stack of needles you know..." She looked at HanaRin, "Did I get that phrase right?" HanaRin giggled and nodded. "Close enough."

Jonibob continued the introductions; smiling, he added before going further, "Reunions are the highlight of our existence." He turned to the other four people in the room just then. "Now then, where was I? This is Yantin and his wife, Randi---our daughter and son-in-law actually." They inclined their heads to the Elf. Jonibob turned to the last young couple. "And these are the 'Elder Statesmen,' you might say, of our little group..." the girl blushed and the fellow waved a hand at Jonibob as if deflecting the honor of the title. They rose and nearly skipped across the room to the Elf's side.

"I am Tanu---everyone calls me Tani, and this handsome lad is my husband, Yonmin..." He leaned his cheek close and whispered,

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“Just Yoni is fine...”

The Elf repeated all the introductions, pointing to each as she repeated their names, until she was certain she had it clearly in her head. “Now, who *are* y'all?” The room broke into echoes and waves of laughter.

Tei recovered, squeezed the Elf's hand a little tighter and began, “While GingerKat was the obvious ambassador, to fetch you up, introduce you to Sheranara and the One, it is my turn to fill in the blanks for you---being my *sister* and all!” She nodded to Tohm and Kate, “You heard GingerKat's introduction of the Nuncii;” the Elf nodded. “They, and Yoni and Tani, Yantin---that's their son by the way---and Randi, they are the Enthilé of the One. We have no others. Enthilé are the cherished servants---hear: guides, mentors, teachers---of the Enthilesté of the seven Orchards. So needless to say they are very busy folk. And of course Tohm and Kate don't even have to be here doing that, or anything else for that matter at all. They *are* the One. And really should have already started over as the One for another Galaxy of Orchards by now...”

Kate interjected, “We will, in time. There's just so much to do yet, right here.” Each person in the room nodded whole-hearted agreement to those words.

Tei continued, “GingerKat and her partners, and me and mine, are the elder Enthilesté of the Sixth and First Orchards. There are at last others beginning to fill the ranks of Shepherd-Gardeners in each Orchard---hear: arm or spur of the galaxy.”

Tohm sighed, “A long time coming, but it is a New Age, and the One shall now have the greatest hope of fulfilling the destiny of life at last.”

Tei went on, “As GingerKat explained, rather eloquently, I thought,” GingerKat elbowed Jonibob who was evidently pointing out a few other things she might have mentioned. He stopped and smiled, bowed to Tei and admitted, “True.”

“Anyway, there is GingerKat---the first-born of the First Water in our time---there is ChériAna---her daughter through my tears; long story, a good one, but long--There are our own children:

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Darshi, Manny and Jules, then Yani and Randi's son, YBir make six... There are Ru, Misha, Elena and Mi'ah---Manny and Jules' mates, they were the most recently found before you. That makes ten. And now there is *you*." She let that sink in. "Eleven from the breadth, depth and vast arms comprising the *whole* of the realm of the One."

Kate sighed, "There may be more at some point..." Tohm's head was shaking slowly back and forth and holding only a single finger in front of him. Kate added, "Of course, Tohm says not likely more than perhaps: one; and he does have more experience and knows our history better than any of us save Yoni and Tani."

The Elf looked again to those two last mentioned. They appeared, to her Lascorii enhanced eyes, to be a girl of maybe twenty-something and a guy of the same age... Tei whispered, "Yeah, they love the way even *we* can't see their age. *Very* aggravating!"

Tani squealed, "But do keep trying sweetheart..."

With the reference to her Lascorii nature, the Elf had another bothersome riddle she wanted resolved. "Did y'all have a hand in the Lascorii intervention that led to my liberation from the Naud?" She faced Tei directly, "And what about my becoming so tight with the Matriarch?!"

Tei took a deep breath. "Listen carefully, because I cannot say this any more clearly: That was *all* between you and the Matriarch. We had *nothing* to do with it. Sift through our memories and you can verify it for yourself. We are most anxious that you are as confident of your abilities and personal history as possible. Yes; we meddled a bit by putting the Tear in your path---but it was *still* up to *you* to do something about it."

ChériAna purred, "You really can't grasp how 'magnetic' is the nature of the First Water---*All* assistance you've received along your journeys has been the result of your own development and nature..."

"Anyway," Tei tried again, "While you *now* have the guardians to assist you in your training--and that *was* assistance that *had* to be offered, you must recognize that much..."

"Union with them was my idea, by the way!" ChériAna piped up again and giggled. "They all said it wouldn't work, but... Tada!" and

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she took a bow to the applause they offered her spontaneously.

The Elf was beginning to be certain she was actually dreaming and should awaken at any moment. These before her were 'supposedly' the most powerful creatures in the galaxy, and here they were giggling, poking each other in the ribs, playing little jokes on each other, and generally *not* acting like the staid, dour, divine beings *anyone* should have anticipated...

"True," Tani agreed, "We are most certainly not what just anyone would expect or anticipate us to be. That and a few other necessary precautions, 'keeps us under the radar,' to use a turn of phrase Jonibob explained to me.

Tei smiled, nodding her head. "We are as normal as we can possibly manage, considering our day jobs and all. To continue," And she glared at the others, daring them to interrupt her again. "Mim and Yula shall not always be there for you. We just had to give you some perspective on your unique position and situation, before we introduced you to the One---*that* insured your complete immortality and indestructibility---trust me on that one; it did. Primarily though we just wanted you to know that you are not alone, will never be alone; and of course that you really needed to realize---really understand to your bones that you are one of eleven in the whole of the realm. *That* in itself is a blessing and a curse I'm afraid..."

GingerKat cleared her throat; it sounded like a roaring purr. Tei stopped at once, and looked to her. "MamaKat? Am I leaving something out?"

"Only that we don't want to weigh our little Elf down *too* much with the gravity of it all. Just tell her what's in store for her in her near future and let's eat!"

Tei quickly outlined to the Elf the regimen of training she was about to begin under the masterful direction of Tohm and Kate personally---with some vital firsthand input from the other First Water as well, "...Naturally." Tei concluded as briefly as she could manage, the others were already gathering round the smorgasbord laid out in the kitchen and out on the patio tables. She intimated as she guided the Elf to the platters, "Good meals are the one real

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pleasure we all are able to enjoy that has nothing to do with the other pressing issues of our lives. So reunions like this are especially wonderful.”

ChériAna added, with her mouth full of salmon, “That and as you may or may not have begun to notice, we have a rather specific palate these days...”

The front door burst open and eight giggling, laughing and very attractive young people strode into the house. “Did we miss supper yet?!” called the young man with a girl on his arm who was the spitting image of GingerKat and ChériAna. GingerKat corralled them and led them over to where the Elf had just settled into a chair with her sister, Tei, at her side.

“Yßir, Darshi this is your Auntie Tera---the Elf.” Then she turned to the Elf, “This is my grandson, Yßir, and my granddaughter, ChériAna's daughter Darshi.” They bowed first then they all rubbed cheeks. GingerKat continued by waving over the other six. “These two pair of twins are Ru and Mi'ah, Elena and Misha. Manny and Jules over there,” and she waved again to get them to stay nearby. “Ru and Misha handle Jules---Tei's son, your nephew; while Elena and Mi'ah try to do the same for Manny---he's HanaRin's son, my other grandson.” The two fellows were suddenly being hugged by their mothers, HanaRin with Manny and Tei presenting Jules to the Elf personally, “Julian, dear, this is your Auntie Tera...”

Jules grinned and leaned to her, “The Elf, herself! Mother, *everybody* has heard of Auntie Elf...” Once Jules had broken the ice, the Elf was mobbed by the eight 'kids.’

“And... Uh... Are y'all really the ages *you* appear to be?” the Elf posited uncertainly.

Darshi giggled, nodding over to Yoni and Tani and Yani, “Yep. But really? Nobody, even Uncle Tohm and Auntie Kate *truly* know for certain how old they *really* are...”

Yßir, whom the others called just: E, added, “But Tohm's mother Enthilia, now we *do* know how old she was, and Tani's her sister... or is it cousin?”

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Ru and Misha dimpled at the Elf, “Auntie Elf! How wonderful Auntie Kate...” they called across the room to the patio and Kate came as summoned, “Did you tell the Elf that y'all are practically cousins?!”

Kate sighed and faced the Elf. “It's by marriage, of course, but my sisters---we are triplets, though actually nothing alike---married Tom and Paul Elphinstone; your own cousins I believe?”

The Elf's face split into a grin she hadn't worn in... a long time. “Tommie and Paulie! Really?! They were my closest playmates as a little girl---they were older than me but so kind and nice and really fun!”

Kate smiled, “Yes they are all that...”

Elena and Mi'ah laughed with delight, “That means that we're practically cousins too!” They turned on Manny, “Tell her!”

Manny grinned, “Mama's a Livingson by blood, Trici and Tia, Auntie Kate's sisters are also my Aunties---so we're *sorta* cousins...”

“Sorta!” Elena and Mi'ah scolded as they put their arms around the Elf's shoulders as if protecting her. “Don't listen to our Manny, we are *absolutely* cousins and shall ever be at your service...” Mi'ah added, “All ya gotta do is call and we'll be there in a jiff!”

The other 'kids' added their own 'That goes for all of us,' to Mi'ah and Elena's pledge.

ChériAna and GingerKat joined them, Chéri mused, “This may be the first and only time all eleven First Water shall be in the same place at the same time.”

“Maybe not...” GingerKat added. “In the first place, our little Elf shall have her finishing training, and we are integral in that endeavor. Then there is her...”

The Elf interrupted, “Training? Y'all keep referring to that. How's that supposed to work? I mean, I *do* have a ship to run...”

ChériAna made a sly smile and responded, “Do you?”

Darshi clarified, “What mother isn't adding is that we are just now in the heart of a single moment of time,” she looked the Elf squarely in the eyes, “You do recall being told that?”

The Elf nodded, a little embarrassed that that fact had so easily

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not sunk in completely.

Darshi continued, “What that means in practical terms is that: Even if you were as dense as Elena or Misha here...” they each elbowed her in the ribs, “...and your training took all of the next decade or so...” more elbowing and giggling. “So what?!”

Ru concluded, “You'll just step back onto your bridge and everything will proceed, finally, to the next moment and the next in the 'normal' progression of time...”

“Oh;” was all the Elf had to offer on that score. She asked then, “How is my training supposed to proceed then? I'm a little confused; am I supposed to graduate or something before resuming my life?!”

The eight kids, Darshi's mama and grandmama suddenly smiled together. Neither ChériAna nor GingerKat could help but laugh, even though the Elf was perplexed by their response. “Sweetheart! You *have had* the most immensely impressive advancement during the trials and hurdles of your life.”

ChériAna explained, “These eight here had almost the same concerns when they were at last faced with the prospect of fulfilling their promise as who we are.”

GingerKat took up the challenge, “I'll tell you what we told them:” The others around the room and the patio hushed to listen as well.

“I needn't have been coated as Enthilesté, but Sire Alviss wasn't taking any chances. And if he'd met Jonibob and Vashi during that first encounter, he would have granted them the same... ChériAna *chose* her coating using myself as the paradigm... Long story.” She took a deep breath, this wasn't something she preferred to announce, but the Elf deserved the best.

“I am Enthilé-Enthilesté---the first child of the First Water in the New Age---just like ChériAna, just as these eight are. I was not speaking lyrically nor metaphorically earlier when I said we are the incarnation of Will---*You* shall have to *choose!*”

The Elf gulped, “*I* decide? I thought that when Sheranara or when the One... I mean, wasn't that like my authorization to be who I am or something?”

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ChériAna responded, “Here's a little secret---Sheranara, even all her sisters, including Sigrid, are *also* of the First Water... Purest fractals of the One, actually built from a bit of the One. The AltaEnthilé, Uncle Tohm and Auntie Kate, *are* the One---The Nuncii have ultimate dominion. The First Water: myself, GingerKat, these eight, you---and perhaps your children after you---we are the embodiment of Will, of Choice itself. Hence: purest fractal of the One. Our outer coating is just that---a coating. Which is why, as you are now likely realizing, your 'family' can adopt any coating required in the moment. Enthilesté, Enthilé, First Water, even AltaEnthilé... labels are only to assist perception---they are *not* the reality behind the manifestation. Form follows function in this instance as it does in so many others. Like the AltaEnthilé, we can transit whither we will throughout all the Orchards of the One. Like the Enthilé, we are imminently qualified to train---as Ru and Mi'ah, Jules and Manny so illustriously demonstrated with Elena and Misha years ago. Like the Enthilesté, we are responsible for maintaining the wombs of consciousness---*but in every* Orchard and Garden. Like the Beloved, we possess the authority to grant gifts and boons, and like them, we are compelled to bestow those blessings for the asking to those whose need is real.”

Tohm stepped up and graciously added, “What it means in practical terms is that we are vital to the administration of the Orchards. In just what capacity *you* shall serve is unknown---as teacher and guide, as Shepherd-Gardener, even up to the development of yourself to join the AltaEnthilé---the first generation of First Water in millennia *choose* to serve. Now with there being eleven of you... well the situation is just so unprecedented, so new under the One---this truly is a New Age. You may or may not choose to dabble in any or all avenues open to you and never choose a single 'role,' as we have chosen---all *anyone* knows for certain is what the First Water did at the dawn of the First Orchard: they opened the realms of the One up to the seeding of Reason everywhere. The entire history of this galaxy, the rise of Consciousness in every system capable of harboring sapient life, everything we know---*that is*

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their legacy. And it now appears to be beginning again. As your Auntie Kate likes to put it: It is a rebirth in every way.”

ChériAna concluded, “This is what we know. This is all Tohm and Kate know, this is all anybody *can* know. Perhaps you now see why we've spent so much time talking *about* you and not so much *to* you. It is just so auspicious and unknown. But know this: How you present yourself to others is up to you. How you aid the administration of the cosmos is up to you. We know how this understanding can inhabit your being; truly MamaKat and I understand like nobody's business. Only the Nuncii have a similar understanding, and you can see for yourself how they have mastered their *situation*.”

Yßir added, “When we were told essentially the same thing you've just heard, we were honored, shocked, confused and a little excited. Darshi thanked these folks for the explanations we had for so long sought. She said, 'We are honored and gratified to have this data regarding our existence. We are also very proud to have such impeccable models as yourselves and the Nuncii as paradigms for our way forward. We serve. Ask and it shall be given.' Then we were left to ourselves for the most part and we still haven't chosen one *single* thing...”

Darshi explained, “What my darling dense man is trying to say is that we've dabbled at thousands of avenues of assistance on behalf of the people and planets, and systems with whom we come in contact. We all were trained from birth, and we trained Misha and Elena ourselves. You are pretty much at the place they were at the time. So...”

Misha and Elena stepped forward with Ru and Mi'ah, “Your training is in *our* capable hands now!” “With Kate and Tohm's stamp of approval, of course.”

The Elf smiled a most sincere and genuine smile. “When do we start?!”

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Into the Fire

"There is in every true woman's heart, a spark of heavenly fire, which lies dormant in the broad daylight of prosperity, but which kindles up and beams and blazes in the dark hour of adversity."

---Washington Irving

“**T**he long months are at an end.” Darshi mused as she, Mi'ah, Ru, Misha and Elena strolled with the Elf up the last stretch onto the promontory overlooking the chasm. “Across there are the Teshun Temple grounds;” she finished. The Elf couldn't grasp why Darshi was so intent on pointing out the obvious. This was just supposed to be a pleasant walk to allow her to ask any other questions.

“Yes. There's the rock garden, the temple... I can see it plainly enough. What am I missing?” the Elf probed.

Misha and Elena had been with the Elf every moment of every 'day'---there had only ever been the *one* eternal moment in which the Elf's final training had proceeded. Elena replied, “Missing? Likely nothing. Darshi is simply emphasizing, eloquently I might add, just how imperative it is to always know precisely where you are and what are the circumstances of your existence from moment to moment.”

A wave of comprehension swept over the Elf. “I do tend to inhabit the past or the future...”

“While the present is all there is or can ever be...” Darshi began.

Ru stressed, “We can wander in and out of Time itself, but we shall always be 'now'.”

The six women crossed the space toward the base of the gardens, but instead of arriving there, they stepped through the main view screen on the bridge of the Huntress. The Elf gasped but steadied herself at once. Ru and Misha, Elena and Mi'ah went from one 'statue' of crew to the next, glancing at what they were looking

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at, studying the monitors, panels and readouts; generally making themselves right at home on the ship.

Darshi curled up in the Captain's chair and purred, "I'm missing the Sheranara Triquetra, already." She looked up into the Elf's face, "You know, I'm the Captain of *my* ship too!"

The Elf shrugged, "The Huntress isn't the magnificent beauty that the Triquetra is, but she's my little slice of heaven---and she's a fast girl..."

"Oh!" Darshi leapt up, "That reminds me. YBir made me promise to have a look at your wrinkle drive if I got the chance." She looked expectantly at the Elf. "May I?"

The Elf wasn't sure where this was going but, "Certainly! Right this way..." They vanished from the bridge, transiting to the engine room. "Best drive in the Lascorii Fleet!"

Darshi smiled pleasantly back at the Elf, then looked over the configuration and calibrations of the drive. "Would three times her present maximum velocity be something you could get used to?" and her eyes stopped on one particular set of junctions comprising the core of the drive's efficiencies. Your ship is at all-stop just now... I mean in real-time, not just inside this particular moment."

"Three times!" the Elf repeated and stared where Darshi's eyes rested. A glimmer of recognition and far deeper understanding of the wrinkle phenomenon welled up within her. Darshi continued, "It's grandpa Alfie's contention, and he says it was his great, great-grandfather's before him, that all the technological advances invented by any people are really just reflections of what the realized individual is actually capable of performing..."

The Elf's head was nodding eagerly, she was seeing for herself, now that she had so much greater a grasp of her own abilities and potentials, just how and why the wrinkle drive worked as it did and just how Darshi's assertion that it could be increased in efficiency to a magnitude of three. She reached to the main control panel and began entering sequence after sequence. Then she smiled at Darshi, reached for the manual calibration of the main drive interface. "Like this you mean?" and she tweaked one little module on one seemingly

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insignificant sub system.

Darshi beamed, “Good! YBir will be so pleased I remembered to mention it to you. And that reminds me that Mama wanted you to have this...” She went to one of the empty walls in the room and set a little cylinder there at the base of the wall and deck. “Ready!” she called aloud to someone else, not with them at the moment. The Elf glanced from Darshi to the spot on the deck where the cylinder was. Now, however there were rack upon rack of those cylinders.

The Elf ventured, “That was a Reference Potential?” Darshi grinned and nodded.

“And those are *all* RPs?” the Elf ventured further.

“Labeled and ready for use! Straight from the Sheranara herself! As Captain, I do have certain latitudes concerning my ship's stores and equipment. I am certain your Pim will be able cobble a few more tangle-tossers together... If she hasn't already.”

The Elf smiled, “Sure she has, but we just haven't assembled much of a library as yet. We only got that technology once Dena joined us---and only then after she *finally* decided to 'go native' if you catch my meaning. The Guild really had loaded her up with all sorts of nifty goodies, stuff only *they* apparently had full access to...”

They transited back to the bridge where the other girls were playing with the 'statues,' fixing their hair, coloring nails and generally playing dress-up with the frozen figures. The Elf had to laugh out loud at their antics.

“I'm sure Isin and Pim will shudder to their core when they realize they could truly look as good as you've made them up!” she announced between bouts of giggling. “And lovely Dena, who so wishes to be the femme fatale of all Seranim... She totally looks the part now!”

Ru and Elena put the finishing touches on Dena and strode up to the main viewer. Mi'ah and Misha did likewise. Darshi put her arms around the Elf's neck, their foreheads touching; “Sister; if at any time you need someone to bounce an idea off, or another perspective on anything at all...”

“I shall have y'all here, or MamaKat or MamaChéri as quick as I

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can stop the moment..." the Elf finished, "I promise. Now that I know I have family: sisters, brothers, more parents and grandparents than a girl could ever want... I shall *not* be a stranger!"

"Oh! Where is my head these days?" Darshi wilted. "Mama told me to tend to Mim and Yula after your training was complete, and here I am about to leave..." She stretched out her hands to the Elf, "They really needn't remain stuck in your head you know, they do have lives of their own..." Mim and Yula were suddenly sitting in their favorite places on either side of the Captain's chair as if it were just where they'd been all along.

Ru and Misha reminded her, "Your tail is *not* just for getting the guys to look at you; it's a vital part of your balance, and an extra hand..." The Elf had been *really* poor at catching on to several of her more physical training exercises over the last months, primarily because she couldn't adapt to having that tail.

Darshi grinned, kissed the Elf's cheeks and offered one last word of advice as she joined her sisters to leave.

"Remember: Our path is toward empowering people---not solving their problems for them. That goes for planets, moons, stars you name it---The struggle always to direct and create conditions; not necessarily to help, in the traditional sense. Like MamaKat always says: Only a fool doesn't take advantage of help that's available! Aloha..." and they were gone---all their 'dress-up' attempts were gone in a flash as well. The Elf heaved a sigh of relief. 'Wasn't looking forward to explaining *that* away...'

Senta was just finishing her sentence, "...but to have seen with our own eyes who you *really* are and what you are *truly* capable of... *That* is the most awesome experience of our lives!" The rest of the company on the bridge clapped loudly at her pronouncement; they were genuinely thankful to be part of the Huntress's crew.

"I still have a lot to learn..." the Elf demurred and she settled into her chair again for a well-earned rest. Her thoughts reached out to her family, 'I shall not forget!'

ChériAna's voice rang through her thoughts, "We are one together. Enjoy all!"

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Dena looked over at her Captain and her eyes glistened, “Mim! Yula! Where have you two been?!”

“Avoiding mundane ship's duties no doubt,” the Elf passed off casually and stroked each of their heads. The glint in their eyes were voices in her thoughts of honor and appreciation for the opportunity to atone for their having lost her to the Naud all those years ago. ‘I am the honored party amongst we three..’ she acknowledged directly in kind. Their purr-roars were heart warming.

The Elf took another deep breath and wondered how she was going to explain to Reia not to punch the wrinkle drive to maximum until Elenir and Jista had reconfigured their travel models to accommodate the Huntress now being capable of two light-years a day in velocity... Or for that matter how to explain the appearance on the Huntress of the most complete RP library in this quadrant... Instead she asked, “ETA of our guests?”

“Less than twelve hours...” Isin called from the science station, “...their wrinkle signatures are just now coming within range of our sensors.”

“Very good!” the Captain smiled, “Ladies? I have a few tweaks to add to our well-laid plans...” The plan was a simple one, inspired by their recent talk of the Tahoe in part; but then with the advent of the tangle-tossers new ranges as a tool in their arsenal, they had a lot to arrange in a short amount of time. But after that, with still an hour or so before the arrival of their guests...

“Bringing the holo fleet on line now, Captain;” Pim grinned.

Ravena reminded, “We'll only have power from our ships for five hours, max, to keep 'the fleet' around; so let's get those conscripts off those vessels as quickly as we can manage.”

Song and Senta announced, “The Lorien and Lúthien have been cleared of everything inside except the bridge controls. We can certainly load up at least seventy to eighty folks apiece on them.”

Isin confidently said, “And between the empty hangar bay and our own storage bays---off-loaded temporarily---the Huntress can accommodate over two hundred with ease.” She glanced back at her monitors, “Two are entering the system now... there will be another

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wave of three in perhaps..." she did some mental arithmetic, "six hours at the outside."

Ravena nodded, "Good! That'll be an hour and a half for the first and perhaps a couple hours for the second with plenty of time to recharge!"

The Elf nodded to Pim, who touched her panels. Outside the Huntress, an entire fleet of Sargassian Alliance ships, from minimally armed liners and scout ships to fully armed cruisers and fighters, sprang into existence. Pim added, "I have all the holo-generators set up for really quick attachment to their ships." She turned to Reia, "Brilliant stroke to have them escorted to the Resha facility by themselves, essentially!"

"The big job is going to be getting those conscripts off the corvettes and onto the Huntress as quickly as possible..." the Elf sighed.

Dena grinned, "Captain, perhaps you might add a little something to your demands for their immediate surrender? I don't know maybe something like: As an act of good faith... or something to that effect?"

"Delightful!" the Elf crowed, "Everybody got that? That's the new signal to begin evacuations. Okay ladies take out the Lorien and Lúthien and lets mingle! There's no reason our guests should suspect that *our* three ships are the *only* one's they can hitch a ride on. Download to your capacity, bounce to our Gorim friends' stations around Sheranara and bounce back here for another round. Chop, chop!"

There was a brief rush from the bridge as the assigned crews headed for the hangar in obedience to their Captain.

Dena was the Elf's sole companion on the bridge. The Elf turned to her, "Dearest? Shall we flip to see who gets to stay up here and who goes to the greet our emigrants?"

Dena sucked in her breath, "I have a choice?"

"I should hope so!" The Elf added, "Or perhaps you'd like to trade off?"

Dena pushed her hand through her flaxen locks, "I'll take the

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first wave and we can see if the Naud are capable of taking the orders of a Seranim seriously or not..."

The Elf nodded, "Hmm, perhaps we should stack the odds in your favor..." and she rose, crossed to the Com and stood behind Dena. "Let's see if we can touch up your image just a little..." And she proceeded, with extraordinarily deft hands to recreate Dena as Ru and Elena had done a little while before. Then, as an after thought, "Dena, dearest, is it against any closely held Seranim morals or anything to be... uh... how shall I put this delicately..."

Dena spun in her chair to face her Captain, "What?"

"Taller. There I've said it and I'm sorry if it's offensive. Truly I am. I am just curious is all."

Dena laughed aloud, "Captain! Ever since our first contact with other peoples---all of whom are at least head and shoulders taller than we are; *Every* Seranim has secretly wished with all their heart to be an inch or two taller. But even our best geneticists haven't broken that tough nut. It seems *that* trait in our genetic code is tied inextricably to certain other of our traits and *those* are vital to our nature, after a fashion. But thanks for asking..."

"Hmm, I'm no geneticist, but I do have resources they do not;" the Elf replied cryptically and extended a hand to Dena.

She looked at the offered hand of her Captain and asked, "Am I missing something here?" But she put her own hand into the Elf's.

"Well, step down from the Com station..." the Elf encouraged. Dena had always had to make a little hop to get in or out of any seat on the bridge. Not this time. She made to make that usual 'hop' and was shocked to her bones that her foot was already on the deck!

She stood and faced the Elf. Her face, in fact *did* almost come to the Elf's face! She nearly swooned, she slumped back into the chair. The Elf chuckled, "Afraid of heights?"

Dena sprang up from the chair this time, but just as suddenly a cloud of doubt shadowed her features. "Is this permanent? Or just an illusion, or a 'spell' or something..." Her voice was as timid and fragile as ever the Elf had heard her.

"If what I've been told is accurate, and I've no good reason to

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doubt it,” the Elf explained, “as long as *you* continue to see *yourself* as you are now, it *is* the way you are---should you lapse into an old image of yourself... *that* becomes the reality of your being. It's literally up to you.”

Dena's confidence grew as quickly as had her new stature. She bowed deeply, a new sensation from her taller perspective to be sure. “I serve the greatest Captain and friend any Seranim has ever had the grand privilege of serving. I am yours heart and soul.”

“You are most gracious. However, let's not say anything to our companions about this,” the Elf cautioned, “I will come up with a plausible explanation for you... just give me a bit of time to think about it. It wouldn't do to have everyone petitioning for a total make-over.”

Dena ran her hands over her body, thrilled to the touch of so much more of her than there had been. “If it's any help, we of Breuges have always privately held out the faint hope it might be some cosmic phenomenon that would do for us what our scientists couldn't...”

“That'll do then; after our first bounce it is;” the Elf giggled, a notion already gelling in her thoughts. “Which means I'll play hostess on this first go around. We'll save *your* debut for the following ones. Deal?”

Dena was ecstatic. She threw her arms around the Elf's neck and for the first time didn't have to stand on a stool and her tip-toes to do so. “Absolutely!”

The initial operation that extracted over three hundred and sixty prisoners from the two Naud ships went as quickly and as smoothly as any of them could have hoped. But it was an excruciatingly long time for Dena to remain on the bridge, *not* able to be seen as she was now!

They were the last of the three ships to bounce to the Gorim stations and turn over the refugees into the Alliance's emergency responders' care. The Elf came back up to the bridge after supervising the hand-off. “Okay, Dena darling, you 'toddle' on down to the engine room and reset our tossers--just as Pim directed. But

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with a twist: before you get down there, I'm going to set up a static wrinkle bubble so the engine room records will match my story..."

Dena looked confused, "Which is?"

"That you were caught up in the field, and activated the tossers at the same time, while whistling Goodnight Irene, of course!"

"Huh?" Dena's forehead was knitted up in utter confusion.

"Trust me on this one..." the Elf giggled. Dena sighed and left the bridge. The Elf called out to Darshi, "This may not be exactly directing and creating conditions, per se, and I realize I'm *really* meddling with Dena's life..."

Darshi's thoughts returned, 'oh what a tangled web we weave...' then there was her unabashed giggling ringing in the Elf's head. 'Honestly? Where's the fun in being *able* to grant boons, if we *never* do! Enjoy!'

"Ready down here, Captain," Dena's voice came over the com.

"Okey dokey, Dena Darling, you can bounce us back for our next haul and your big debut!"

The star field outside the main viewer shifted in the blink of an eye and they were once again sitting in the orbit of Corona Zed gamma between the Lorien and Lúthien. The Elf brought the bridges of the yachts up on the viewer. "Well, let's evaluate our first performance and fix any glaring goofs..." the Elf opened.

Ravena's mirth was clear as the rest of the crew's aboard the Lorien. "Actually Captain, we're not entirely sure that having a holo-fleet at our disposal is at all necessary."

Senta's agreement from the Lúthien was quick on the heels of that, "Y'all thought so too?! I mean, as soon as the Elf's face appeared on their viewers in the hail..."

Song's voice finished, "We were certain we'd be stepping into corridors of self-urinated Naud! Of course the stench of some of their ships suggest that's a regular thing with them anyway..."

Insin summed it up, "If these next several encounters go as the first, *and* Pim's holo emplacements on their own ships get them all the way to Resha, then I'm ready to board as many Naud corvettes as you can find for us."

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The Elf was shaking her head, "I'm rather counting on a few of them, at least, slipping off during their wrinkle to Resha. It would be a really good thing for as many of the bands of Naud from here to Mrona know precisely *who* is hunting them down."

Dena entered the bridge and stepped over to the science station behind the Elf. Eight stunned faces filled the split screen main viewer. "Captain?" Song was trying to point over the Elf's shoulder through the viewer---comical at best. "Is there something screwy with this connection? It sure looks like our Dena has white hair and is about two feet taller!"

The Elf carefully swiveled in her chair to look back at Dena. Her next performance was melodramatic at best. "Oh my!" she gaped and put her hand to her mouth. "Dena! You are almost as tall as me! And your hair... What has happened?!" The Elf stood and took a couple steps toward her.

Dena offered her best look of confusion. "Pardon me Captain?" She stood also and the gasps from the speakers from the other ships sounded like a hull breach or something. Without betraying a single smile between them, Dena added, "I wondered why this outfit was so ridiculously snug!"

The Elf reached out and touched Dena's shoulders with her hands, "It's really you!" and she sucked in her breath, "Did you get caught in the tosser field and the wrinkle field at the same time? The instructions the Guild sent along with those pieces of equipment *specifically* cautioned to avoid that encounter at all costs!"

Dena's expression was the epitome of horror. "Oh my Bottom Line! What have I done? Is this just a symptom? Am I gonna die?!"

The Elf produced a hand scanner and waved it over Dena from head to toe. She was shaking her head and Dena's voice grew more shrill. "It's real bad; isn't it!"

The Elf shook her head again and shrugged, "I can't find anything different than what your last physical showed... I mean other than you're a *giant!*"

At the mention of that epithet, Dena's composure cracked and a grin from ear to ear split her face. "A giant! Ooh, say that again! It's

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music to the ears of any Seranim!”

The faces staring on in wonder at their little performance were still riveted to the screen. The Elf turned back to them and as seriously as she could manage, “We may just have gotten lucky this time. Make absolutely sure we move the RP library and our stock of tossers to a *completely* separate chamber from the engine room. I don't want a repeat of this if we can avoid it. Clear?!”

Eight heads nodded back at her from the viewer; and Dena, with a far more sober expression, nodded along with them.

“Alright,” the Elf returned to her seat, with sideways glances back to Dena. “Any other comments? Questions, suggestions regarding our continuing operation?” With that, the company shifted back to professional mode. The masquerade was a success and both the Elf and Dena had to keep from bursting into songs of victory.

Ravena struggled to regain her composure, “Really Captain, everything went according to script. I suggest we play the next rounds in the same manner.” Everyone else agreed.

“Very good;” and she looked back again to Dena. “ETA of next wave?”

“Twelve minutes, Captain.”

“Let's bring up the holo-fleet anyway, please,” the Elf directed, “Let's not suppose that every single Naud we hail is going to crap their pants at the sight of me... although it won't give me a complex if they do. Huntress out.” She closed the channel and heaved a great sigh. The screen shifted back to the star field around Corona Zed gamma and there suddenly appeared the 'security fleet' all around them.

Dena cackled, “Do you really think they bought that?”

“If not,” the Elf stroked her chin, “they at least don't have to come up with alternatives of their own to explain it away. Yeah, for all intents and purposes, they bought it.”

Dena leapt into the air and pressed both hands on the ceiling of the bridge. “I've have *so* wanted to do that!”

The Elf looked surprised, “Dena, it appears your native abilities haven't been diminished in the least! That medical scan I just took of

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you *definitely* showed you have the *same* ridiculously tough skeletal and muscular system as ever.” She looked up the eighteen foot high ceiling. “And unless you've reset the weight surrogates on the bridge, that was at least a twelve foot vertical leap---flat-footed!”

Dena smiled, “I'm loving this!”

“This opens up new vistas of assignments for our away teams. Consider yourself at the top of the lists next to Isin and Senta from now on...”

“Yes, my wonderful, glorious, beneficent, powerful Captain!” she bowed again just to relive the pleasure of taking so long to get her upper body so close to the deck. “Heaven...” she murmured.

“It's not heaven where you're going next,” the Elf nodded to the blipping lights on the near-range scanners. “Company calling and you are 'it' this time around...” Dena skipped all the way to the loading bay, whistling Goodnight Irene.

Twenty-two hours, and nine Naud ships later, the Lorien and Lúthien returned to their berths aboard the Huntress. Their total count of recovered and relocated refugees: one thousand, eight hundred and fifty-two. The three Naud vessels that did not show up, as anticipated, were the Borantus---Husim's flagship---the Gammadil and its wing ship. That little fleet of three were supposedly being tracked to the Ying system and from there they expected a new course thirty light-years on to that cluster that was home to Tenrith.

Once her celebrity had settled down to mere infrequent glances from the others, Dena wondered aloud during their early breakfast in the galley, “What I don't get is why, if the Husim-guy has already been to Tenrith, and even had the Star of Elhehrim---which I get, he didn't recognize it as such---and the Gorim visit that planet often enough on archaeological missions, why hasn't *anybody* found traces of the Elhehrim yet?”

Jista shrugged, “Maybe they also don't know what they're looking at?”

Ravena and Elenir had a different take, “We are assuming that there are a real people behind the myths.” “And we in particular are supposing that they are our long lost sisters from a legendary

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mission of dubious veracity.”

Isin and Senta agreed, “There isn't actually any evidence to point to a Lascorii connection with the Elhehrim myth.” “Other than the coincidental log entries we found on the Lorien and the reference to Tenrith.”

Reia interjected, “Y'all aren't forgetting the fricking name plate on the Lorien itself---Elhehrim Starship, Lorien?! They are, or at least really *were* a real people---starships don't just spring into existence by themselves! And how do you explain that the Lorien was the same service class vessel as those used around the time this 'legendary' mission was supposed to have taken place?”

The Elf had been particularly silent on the subject. Pim and Song confronted her about it. She pursed her lips, “I can't verify what I've been told, so I don't think it's wise that I should add more fuel to the bonfire y'all are setting to blaze just now.”

Dena stared at her, “You've been told something directly about the Elhehrim? By whom?”

That 'by whom' piqued the interests of all the company. The Elf struggled with the desire to spill the beans about her newfound 'family' against her inclination to keep mum on the subject and let the cards fall where they may. “I've said too much already I'm thinking.”

Telling nine women---no matter where they arose and in which culture---that: 'you've got a secret.' *That* is a doomed experiment from the get-go. She regretted it the moment the first words had left her mouth.

The Elf's thoughts rang with giggles and mock sympathy from Darshi, Mi'ah, Ru, Elena and Misha. 'Sister, you've put your foot in it this time!' they teased.

With a roll of her eyes, the Elf sat forward and her companions imitated the posture instantly. “Okay. Here's what I have been told...”

“First: *who* told you?” Ravena qualified and the others nodded gravely. That was as important as the data.

The Elf squinched up her face, then took a deep breath. She suddenly burst into laughter. “The entire thing is so fantastical,

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you're not going to believe a bit of it anyway, so here. Here's the whole tale..." and she proceeded to recount every detail of the 'GingerKat Intervention,'--leaving out the Mim and Yula part--the heart of Sheranara, being bathed in the radiance of the One, being introduced to the Nuncii, the Enthilé, meeting the ten First Water, the source of their RP library... Even the constant communication she maintained with the other First Water. Everything. "*That's* who!" she concluded.

There was a pregnant silence in the galley. Followed by a unanimous wave of side-splitting laughter so intense some of the company really did pee themselves.

Gasping, Elenir wheezed, "And you were worried we wouldn't trust your sources?! *That's* rich!"

Fortunately the Elf was already filtering through their thoughts and satisfying for herself that they did indeed each consider her story to be absolute fact. Not just because she had told them, but because, to a person, they truly *wanted* to believe it. After the cathartic episode of hilarity, which was completely reasonable, the Elf thought: what else would a person do when suddenly faced with a reality more real than anything directly experienced.

"So, the Elhehrim are a real people. Or rather they were... are... this is where it gets dicey. See, they were already on Tenrith when the Lascorii had to make an emergency landing; that planet was the nearest and most hospitable choice at the time. Hence, the connection to the Lascorii legends. As for the rest, well, they were a space-faring people and had built a strong relationship with one people in particular: the Enhiides of Hykorna." Dena gasped.

"The Servants of the Enhiides saved the Seranim from total destruction when our home star went nova. And they have always figured prominently in our myths around the Elhehrim..."

"And well they should!" the Elf assured her. "It was the Enhiides--I mean the Enthilé Yonmin and Tanu personally--who trained the Elhehrim, and our Lascorii sisters as well. Those very fortunate women were the first to reassemble the arcane traditions and customs of our people--the Lascorii, I mean--into an

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intelligible, cohesive compendium of training and instruction. That understanding, and the underlying knowledge that supported it, made it's way back to Lascor, but the Matriarch reigning at the time only allowed the Great Knowledge to be shared amongst the royal household for their own benefit. And even at that, it was so deviated and ritualized it became virtually unrecognizable for what it was---except by my own predecessor: Tei. And of course she escaped Lascor to forge her own destiny---a singularly potent destiny at that. Y'all *did* recognize that when I said my sister Tei was one of those who greeted me, it was *the* Tei? Didn't you?" A few nods.

"So having made oaths of service to the Enhiides, and not wishing to be bound to any single system or planet in their desire to, essentially, proselytize the Great Knowledge they'd acquired, they became nomads. Becoming immersed in culture after culture over the space of centuries, from planet to planet. And when I say 'immersed' I mean marrying into clans and families, bearing children, teaching and guiding... Immersed." She waited for that to sink in. "Where they are as a discreet people in the present day? That's a bit of a mystery. If Yoni and Tani know, they are keeping mum on the topic. And *that's* all I was told."

Dena whispered, "Did they say if they had white hair?"

Again there were the bouts of laughter, and as before it was a cleansing they desperately needed at that particular moment. To be walked through such an amazing history of such a remarkable people... It was overwhelming beyond what they had or even could have conjured up in their own imaginations. While the rest were still wiping the tears of laughter from their eyes, the Elf held Dena's eyes steadily. She winked to her, then she nodded. Dena understood implicitly---her heroes: the *white-haired* Elhehrim were as real as the Elf herself.

Dena stood up, "I have bridge duty to attend to." She left the galley and sauntered up the corridor, entered and stood at the Captain's chair where she eased herself 'down' into it for the first time. "Heaven," she murmured.

She reviewed the data accumulated by their scanners and sensors

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while at dinner, and paused as several readings sent a shudder through her. She stabbed at the com, "Captain to the Bridge!"

The Elf, and the rest of the company came rushing onto the bridge. "Look here..." Dena pulled up the long-range scanning data on the main screen. "There!" she pointed at an anomaly that had caught her eye.

"Shift this data to graphic representation;" Senta directed. Dena entered the commands and the spooling data became three-dimensional. Senta and Ravena were impressed. "And you noticed that!" There was the briefest 'smudge' of three little bright traces out at the very boundary of their scanner's range. It blipped for just a second and was gone.

"Replay that..." the Elf insisted. "Senta, Elenir, Jista extrapolate bearing and course. Back it up to possible origin and give me an idea of possible destinations."

'Aye, Aye,' came their instant replies.

Dena asked, "Do you think it could be the Hus-a-goof and his retinue then?"

Isin and Ravena nodded, "If the wrinkle signatures match, and it appears they were wrinkling at the proper velocity for a Naud corvette..." Isin qualified. Ravena remarked, "...That they were that far afield and avoiding known systems; I would wager that if it *wasn't* our prey, they *certainly* merit a closer look."

The Elf smiled at Dena, "You have good eyes there, Giantess Denalin!"

Dena demurred, "Inconsistencies in data are a Seranim's stock in trade. We *have* to notice the little things." And she recited, "Pennies become enrish, catch the pennies, the enrish will follow."

"Just so," Jista looked up from their calculations, "we've got preliminary trajectories..." and she punched up the results on the main viewer. "There's an eighty-four percent chance that those three ships have been traveling for fifteen days. We're that sure because the only system on that course---in reverse of course---is the Taimath cluster, here..."

Ravena interjected, "That would be the likeliest rendezvous for

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the Borantus to have intercepted the Gammadil and its wing ship after the Waghtnin ignition..."

Elenir continued, "If that can be substantiated, here is the most probable initial destination for them... And light-years off the course we'd supposed for them, as well as weeks ahead of our schedule for them." She panned the view out to where their calculations put the endpoint of the course.

"That's the system where Tenrith is nestled;" the Elf smiled. "So, he's going for broke then. Has to swallow his pride, that he'd been there and missed the very thing he sought. Poor lamb."

"Captain," Jista announced in frustration, "At maximum wrinkle, we can be to Tenrith in fourteen days, but Husim will have been there and gone before that! Sorry."

The Elf's smile never wavered, "I left out a little tidbit from my story a while ago..." She explained the 'adjustments' made to their wrinkle drive.

Reia whooped and leapt to the helm. "Plug in the course, Jista! Let's give this girl her head!" She brought up her engine controls and patted the console. "Mama's going to ride you like a kitten on a hawk's back..."

"Course laid in Captain," Jista grinned. "ETA to Tenrith, "three days, twelve hours!"

"Engage!" the Elf commanded almost before Jista could get the grand news out of her mouth. The Huntress leapt into wrinkle and there was a sudden burst of sub-harmonics resonating through the ship. The Elf's body quivered at the sheer beauty of it; what rose up through her could only be described as pure ecstasy. When she managed to see through the rapture, she noticed that none of her companions seemed to be the least affected. "Chalk one up for Enthilesté physiology... What a perk of new-fangled drives!"

"Excuse me Captain?" Dena, standing at her side had noticed that the Elf's claws had extended and gripped the arms of her chair so fiercely there were puncture marks in the titanium frame.

"Hot flash..." the Elf giggled. She stood, "Ladies; we are well into our final operation in this phase of our contractual

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responsibilities.” She mentioned to Dena, “Please apprise the Guild that we will be delivering the Naud flagship and research vessels into their capable hands within a fortnight. And please add that it may be wise to amend our initially proposed scouting routes.” She nodded to Jista, “We shall be heading into the frontier well ahead of schedule, I'm thinking.”

Jista smiled and pulled up the new data for their forecasts of piratical activities, now reaching deep into the void of the local bubble in the Spur---as far from the snug regions of historical Alliance space as the Guild's influence had yet reached. “Here Dena,” Jista waved, “this is the compilation of the data we've extracted from the navigation systems on the nine 'guests' vessels we 'escorted' to the Gorim stations---*and* the data we gleaned from their command systems that was inserted automatically from all other contact ships over the last four years...”

Dena was composing the communique and muttering as Jista was explaining. “We're really going to Rutin? And Alta? Maybe Enta? Even to Mrona?!” she whispered in awe as she added each of the recommendations into her message.

The Elf tsked, “Only *after* I meet personally with the Guild reps at the Gorim Stations---that was an explicit 'request' in exchange for their participation in the conscript relocation program.” She added in mock frustration, “And I just can't imagine spending less than a week or two 'hammering out' a few other amendments to our contract...”

Song and Senta giggled like school girls, “Two weeks of shopping the grandest boutiques in the Alliance! Heaven!”

Dena's excitement was no less; “I think we might be able to share wardrobes now!” The three of them tittered in exultant expectation of the upcoming retail safaris.

For the others, including Pim, this meant restocking the ship, catching up on the latest trade gossip, trips down to the pristine lands and seas of Sheranara... Yeah, heaven indeed!

The Elf added, “Naturally I shall have to have our own Guild liaison at my side...” and she cocked an eye at Dena. Dena's excitement was deflated in an instant.

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“I'm not exactly the same Denalin that left the Balos stations. How am I *ever* going to explain *this*?” and she stood from the Com to emphasize her obvious stature. “I mean, sure my retinal scans and such will still gain me access to any Guild installations, but seriously? A giant Seranim? It's unthinkable! I'll be a freak!”

The Elf tsked, “Chin up, darling Dena. Denalin Grinta Taborus hasn't been aboard this ship since she was lost in the firefight above Tenrith with some of the nastiest Naud ever spawned. Very sad; a great loss to the Guild and to the Huntress. She was a sterling ambassador, loyal friend and confidant. She sacrificed herself saving her crew-mates in the last blast that completely disabled our shields. Her absence shall weigh heavy on this crew. And it is for that reason, among others, that we shall request that our own Dena of the Elhehrim be made interim Guild liaison until such time as a *truly* suitable replacement can be found...” She muttered under her breath, “By then we shall be as far from any Guild installation as you are from three foot-four...” As a clincher she added, “I do hope the Seranim of the Guild have as much awe and respect for the mythical Elhehrim as you do...”

Dena's face was as blank as the other officers'. She muttered, with a growing smile of bliss, “Dena of the Elhehrim!” she wheeled around like a shot to Isin and Senta, “Can you make a robe that looks more, us *Elhehrim-ish*?”

Senta winked to the Captain, “Permission to *play dress-up*, Captain?”

“Permission granted!” the Elf chuckled as Mim and Yula leapt from the back of her chair to escort Dena, Isin, Song and Senta as they rushed from the bridge. “...And find her some elvish-looking slippers... whatever that looks like...” Mim and Yula's tails flicked up and down at the request. Giggles and squeals echoed back onto the bridge as the doors closed behind the rapidly vanishing trio.

Isin smiled, “With an Enthilesté *and* an Elhehrim as our vanguard among the Alliance folks on the Gorim stations, a few *Lascorii* shouldn't even turn a head. This is superlative!”

Elenir and Ravena actually tittered, “And give up these itchy,

pesky body suits!”

The Elf sighed, “Only if you can avoid staring down any merchants brazen enough to barter with you. Won't do at all to leave a station of mush-heads in our wake.”

“Done and done!” All three women saluted.

She turned to Ravena, “*And* I'll just be the Elf--the familiar one--when meeting with the Guild.” She stood, “Now to wonder down to the *other* 'elf's' rooms and see how the transformation is going..” She chuckled at the tangled web she had truly begun to weave. “Tangled web indeed!” she shot out to her family.

‘Not so bad as all that;’ ChériAna's thoughts returned, ‘imagine what we had to maintain while our little cherubs were growing up on Alta! It's not so easy to realign an over-wobbling set of moons around a gas giant one minute then to shift into the familiar forms of ‘mommies and daddy’ the next! Try *that* for seventeen years, *then* we'll talk woven webs!’

“Touché!” the Elf replied aloud to the empty corridor.

A few days later, on the surface of Tenrith...

“No, the holo-fleet wouldn't have worked as well on Husim. He's too clever and trigger happy not to fire off a few bursts out of habit. *Then* where would our little ruse be?” The Elf shook her head.

The away party, trying to keep up with Mim and Yula, was just rounding the last bend in the path approaching the ruins of a very ancient-looking stone building. “So this is where it all began then...” Senta patted the stones strewn around what appeared to be the primary entrance. Dena inspected the other sides of this building and scanned up the adjoining over-grown ‘avenues’ leading off in the direction of a concentration of other ruins.

The Elf nodded without any of the angst she'd really expected to feel visiting the site of her abduction so long ago. “This...” she strode into the largest open area of the ‘temple.’ “...is where the two stone sentinels were sitting...” Mim and Yula hopped up into those positions and the Elf let out a yelp of recognition. “It really *was* you two then?! I half thought they were exaggerating...” They sat as absolutely still where they perched and were indistinguishable from

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the stonework comprising the rest of the ancient dais.

The Elf continued, "And here is where I picked up the Star... of course I was young, under-developed and a little *too* cocky I suppose for the star to have lit up in instant recognition... And..."

Isin and Senta looked up into the sky overhead, "You didn't have much time with it in any event." "The reports said you and your guides were extracted from this spot nearly as soon as the ship broke into the atmosphere..."

"Uh huh..." the Elf nodded and walked casually around the grassy floor. "My first introduction to Naud hospitality---And from whom else but a young overly ambitious 'research-interviewer' by the name of Graunta Anteron---He was far too junior at the time to be called by his proper surname then. That situation was remedied rather quickly. Between his unorthodox 'interview' methods and his extreme sycophantic charms, he was advanced to chief director by the time the ship reached the 'Institute'. That's where the name Husim became synonymous with loathing."

"Captain," Dena's voice chirped from the com-link on her wrist.

"Report;" the Elf responded easily.

"Mim and Yula aren't the only Nephlii down here..." she responded, "...I'm getting readings of at least a dozen or more others."

The Elf looked to the 'cats' still perched at the dais. They sprang to life and trotted off in the direction they knew from whence the 'readings' had emanated. "Seems our friends have been looking forward to this little reunion as much as I wasn't..." the Elf answered. "We'll join you in a moment."

Isin and Senta, followed by a sauntering Elf went to meet Dena at a crossroads or large plaza area maybe a quarter mile from the 'temple.' From each of the paths through the undergrowth, which likely were once broad thoroughfares, came trotting one Nephlii after another until the 'square' was thrumming with roaring purrs.

"I am certainly relieved that the Guild put a stop to transporting and 'breeding' the Nephlii..." Dena was on her knees stroking the heads and backs of as many of the 'cats' as marched up to her for

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the affection.

“Yes,” the Elf chuckled, “Surprising what just a word in the ear of a Guild Director will do... When that word comes from Master Jonibob.”

Mim and Yula stood up on their hind legs and beckoned the Elf to lean down. She did; and they informed her of their 'family's' intentions. “And why the sudden display of verbal communication?” Senta asked not a little impressed with the Nephlii's surprising abilities.

Dena clucked, “Not so sudden! They've been talking to me as long as I've known them. And I *know* they converse with the Captain regularly.”

The Elf gave Dena a sideways glance. Dena's thoughts didn't betray anything suspicious, but how could she *know* that last bit? The Elf let that pass and related the Nephlii requests. “The upshot is, they are ready to move on. Tenrith has been a pleasant vacation but after years and years of the same planet, they're ready to be back among the stars once more.”

“*Back* among the stars?!” the others repeated to the apparent delight of the several Nephlii nearest them.

The Elf nodded, “Nephlii are an ancient people. They were space-farers with the very first who left the First Orchard---Actaeon Spur---to venture into the worlds beyond.” She chuckled at their amazed expressions and added, “Not these very individuals...”

“Captain,” her wrist com-link pinged again, but with Ravena's voice. “Three vessels entering the system.”

“Yes dear,” the Elf's voice responded. “I've been watching them for a while now.”

Jista's voice added, “Then I needn't tell you that these wrinkle signatures are still an exact match to our prey.” Her voice was a little exasperated at her not being able to 'inform' her Captain of anything any more.

“Hold position until their away parties are dispatched, then start mopping up the mess as planned. Elf out.” She turned to Mim, Yula and Dena; “If y'all would be so kind as to escort us back to the

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temple grounds, we have an appointment with some old friends..." She nodded to Mim and Yula. "And your family is alright with playing statues with you two?"

Yeowls of delight wafted up from every Nephlii voice. "Alrighty then, let's set the stage. Isin, Senta, it's showtime. Get on back to the Lorien and bounce up to assist the others."

"Yes Ma'am!" came their unanimous reply, and they dashed off on a different path than the Elf and Dena continued along with their vanguard of Nephlii.

"How're you holding up, Dena darling? Ready for your first debut as resident Elhehrim?"

Dena cocked her head, "Not as comfortable as I would be if you'd let me have my weapons..."

The Elf laughed, "Nothing unsettles a Naud more than an armed reception party---even if it's just one white-haired old lady. I'll be right here with you, dearest. No worries then?"

"And you're *certain* you won't show up on their scanners?" Dena asked for the tenth time.

"That would be improbable beyond imagining. Calm down and try to look less fearsome..."

The Nephlii were already settling onto perches all through the temple as Dena sat down on the dais with a reasonable facsimile of the Star of the Elhehrim in her lap. "It's not very convincing..." she muttered looking into the translucent heart of the stone.

Sounds of thrashing through the underbrush caused her to take a deep breath and begin her song. It was a lilting melody she'd recalled from her childhood. Her nanny had used it as a lullaby for her and her sisters. The Naud wouldn't know any better. She didn't even look up as they strode in, thumping their noisy boots on the scattered flagstones in front of her.

"And who do we have here?!" the smarmy voice of Husim hissed. Turning to his lieutenant, "I thought I heard you say there weren't *any* life signs..."

The offended adjutant attempted, "Lord, I said there were none of significance. Just this one old woman..." His response was clipped

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short by a slap across his mouth that drew a trickle of blood.

Ustra ignored his benefactor's coarse behavior with his own soldiers, it was of no consequence to him and his staff; each of whom were carefully inspecting the statues that none of them remembered being here on their first visit to the Elhehrim ruins.

"Director?" one of them waved Ustra toward the back of the open 'room.' In hushed tones he related his and the others' troubling inspections, "These..." and he waved a hand at the little statues around them, "...were absolutely *not* here a year ago..."

Meanwhile, Husim had set his boot on the dais next to the white-haired old woman. He leaned in menacingly; she was still humming the little melody to herself and staring into the stone. "Pity I no longer have need of 'informants,' I am very sure your stories would be the capstone of my collection. You are, I deduce, an Elhehrim female." It wasn't a question and she didn't acknowledge him in the least. He puffed out his chest. "I know that it is so; no need to deny it. I am, aside from Ustra over there, the singular authority on all things Elhehrim---it's been something of a life's work."

Still no recognition from the woman. He reached down to her lap to retrieve the stone. "You know, ages ago, I took a bauble like this from the hands of a sniveling girl almost precisely where you sit now..." He wasn't able to dislodge it from the woman's hands and he was instantly infuriated.

Dena spoke at last; "The Star of the Elhehrim isn't for the inferior hands of a pirate. You should leave."

His cackling voice couldn't hide his revulsion at her words. "Such disrespect from a simple 'Guardian!'" Dena's head snapped up to stare him in the eye. His cackling was muted, "I've touched a nerve? Yes, *Guardian*; I have translated the lore of the Star. I told you, you are not dealing with just some... How did you put it? ...'inferior pirate!'"

"Then you know it is my place to choose! Be gone from this place or I shall remove you!" Dena stood and she overshadowed the Naud commander by at least half a foot. He reached again to snatch

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the stone from her raised hand, now high over his head. He made one or two hops to grasp it but wasn't able.

The sounds of laughter like tinkling chimes carried on a soft breeze filled the ruins. On the dais behind Dena and the ridiculously comical attempts of Husim to grab his prize, the Elf appeared from no where. Husim's soldiers raised their weapons on her, but none were able to get off a shot as quickly as Husim.

The Nephlii instantly reached down from their perches to hold the interlopers immobile. Between the shock of the stones coming to life and their intractable grip, Husim was standing alone to face the Elhehrim and the Enthilesté.

The Elf looked down at the smoldering hole in her robe. She tsked, "Fortunately, not one of my favorites..." She looked back up into the face of Husim. "So, Graunta Anteron, we meet where it began."

Husim knew the voice, the eyes, the rather familiar form of the one person in the cosmos who had resisted, spoiled and upturned his plans at nearly every turn since first abducting her from that very spot all those years ago. Yet this wasn't a mere lass from the highlands, or the Lascorii Captain; this was a shimmering and powerful dragon-cat---bane of the Naud and Naradin in the Spur. His eyes narrowed at her.

He sneered in spite of his waning vestige of confidence. "With this stone, I shall overthrow even the Enthilesté to rule a new Naud Empire---where the dragon-cats shall be only a transient memory!" He spat at the ground, raised his weapon again but fired at Dena instead.

The Elf was instantly in front of the white-haired woman, with another smoldering hole in her robe. She looked up from the damage, "Seriously?! That's your strategy? Attack my wardrobe!"

She raised a finger and the Nephlii with their captives vanished. Only Husim, Dena and the Elf remained in the empty ruins.

Husim backed toward the crumbling doors. "Stay away from me! You cannot touch me! I am Lord Husim of the Naud! And even if you should overpower me... You shall always have the Hin to reckon

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with! And my Masters know your kind all too well! Doomed you are, doomed I say!”

Dena tossed the rock to him, he caught it greedily in both hands, dropping his blaster. She had it in her own hand in a flash, but held it loosely at her side.

“I have no intention of *touching* you, Graunta Anteron.” The Elf nodded for Dena to accompany her out of the temple. Husim gave them a wide berth and leapt up onto the dais. He held the stone high over his head and repeated aloud an incantation he was certain he'd translated properly.

Nothing happened.

“We shall be going now. Good luck with your new play-toy...” Dena called over her shoulder twirling his pistol around her finger like it was a child's pop-gun.

They vanished before his eyes. It took Husim a moment to realize that he was in fact alone... on a very remote and seldom visited planet... with no supplies... no soldiers... nothing but his treasure. He held it above his head again and tried the chant once more. It had to work! All his research, the hours and days in moldy libraries, crypts... all those 'informants' who had yielded up their most private secrets and... all but one.

“ELF!!!” his piteous cries hardly even echoed through the deep thicket of undergrowth in the near forest. But it was enough to attract the attention of the nearby indigenous predators.

In orbit of the Tenrith star---the actual one around which the planets of the system spun...

“It took a little longer than I thought to attach enough tossers to his ship, Captain...” Pim muttered in embarrassment.

“But,” Ravena beamed, “it is now so far beyond anywhere they have ever traveled they'll not be finding their way back to the Alliance worlds in their lifetime. Especially since, I'm afraid, those particular tossers were recalled almost at once.”

Dena chuckled, “Unlike Graunta Anteron Husim who shall remain a permanent resident of one particular Alliance world. The Guild should be most satisfied with *that* solution. They still have the

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Gammadil and its wing ship.”

Isin added, “At least until he becomes something's supper.” She nodded appreciatively scrolling through the lists of predators found after their surveys of Tenrith. “If the Nephlii weren't so...”

“Magical?” the Elf offered with a sly smile.

“Okay, 'magical',” Isin surrendered, “They couldn't have lasted a few days on that planet, let alone the *years* they *claim* to have been there.”

Senta sighed, “And to think we *really* thought *that* was the actual home world of the Elhehrim... The planet upon which they arose...”

“It was.” The Elf stated simply and pressed ahead with their next task. “Let's put all this behind us and get to Gorim Station Seven where Dena and I have a very interesting appointment to keep.”

Pim's voice came over the com from the Engine decks, “Ready to bounce on your command, my Captain.”

“Bounce!” the Elf grinned as the little green and blue jewel that was Tenrith was instantly replaced on the main viewer by the sight of the reassuring girth of the Gorim Stations. Filling her attentions however was what lay beyond the orbiting stations. They were suspended over one of the most beautiful sights the Elf had ever seen: the radiant palpable splendor that was Sheranara. “Beloved...” she whispered and her greeting went out to the heart of the planet beneath them.

The crystal clear voice of Sheranara rang out through her thoughts, 'Welcome Lord Elf, First Water and Sister-servant of the One!'

The Elf rose from the Captain's chair. “I promised y'all a couple weeks. Let's not overstay our welcome here, ladies.” She turned to Dena just coming onto the bridge in her new robes that Isin had fashioned especially for her as Elhehrim liaison of the Huntress. She was as stunningly statuesque and imperious as the Elf was herself as Princess and Heir Apparent of the Lascorii--choosing to keep as low a profile where her Enthilesté nature was concerned when around the Guild folk *or* those of the rest of the Alliance.

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The company exited the Huntress and began turning heads as soon as they left the docking ring. Not so much for their being all women, but because each of them were escorted by at least one or two of the Nephlii who were as anxious to mingle on the station as the Lascorii. Senta and Song, and the others, meandered off in different directions. Song commented wistfully watching the Elf and Dena head toward the Trade Guild levels with Mim and Yula as vanguard, "It'd been more impressive if she hadn't insisted on the disguise."

Senta chuckled, "She just wants to negotiate for amendments to our contract, not demand their undying fealty."

Ravena and Elenir overheard; Ravena pointed out, "If she can raise the Lascorii reputation among the Guild and Gorim, even the Nourii will have to re-evaluate their prejudice."

Elenir sighed, "*That* will be the greatest legacy to our folk and the Alliance ever wrought by any Matriarch---Enthilesté or not."

Pim and Isin, Reia and Jista were already haggling with some of the nearest shopkeepers. Ravena nodded over to them, "It's already happening. And look around; these people are smiling at us, not fleeing our presence. And besides eyeing us up and down as women---which Elenir and I haven't effected since we were girls---no one is giving us a second glance. We're not Lascorii so much as just four more people with tourist enrish to spend."

Senta rolled her eyes, "Or it could be these 'cats' scampering around us wherever we're going..."

Song wasn't deterred, "I just mean, what's the point of being one of the most powerful individuals in the cosmos, if she insists on appearing in public as just the Elf?"

That stopped her friends mid-step. "*Just* the Elf?" they repeated almost in unison. Song blushed, "Uh... Never mind."

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