



FIRE WIND
GUY STANTON III

ICE WIND
GUY STANTON III

HARD WIND
GUY STANTON III

DRIFT WIND
GUY STANTON III

RIFT WIND
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FIRE WIND

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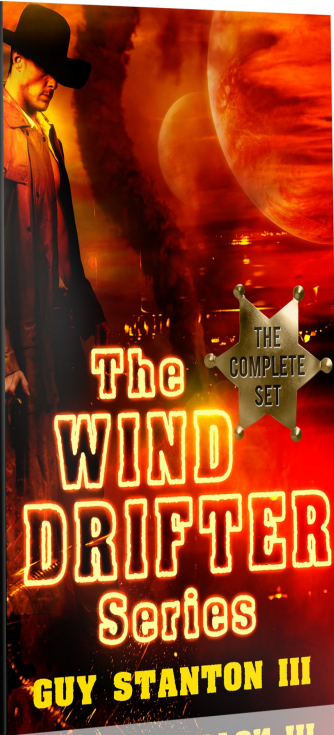
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The
**WIND
DRIFTER**
Series

GUY STANTON III

GUY STANTON III

Series

DRIFTER

The Wind Drifters

The Series – Books

1-5

[Fire Wind, Book #1](#)

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Rift Wind, Book #5

FIRE
WIND
Book One
of
The Wind Drifters

Guy S. Stanton, III

Words of Action

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Available Books

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Book 2: *The Proverbial War*

Book 2: Title yet to be announced,
2015

The Wind Drifters Series

Book 1: *Fire Wind*

Book 2: *Ice Wind, February 2015*

Book 3: *Hard Wind, Spring 2015*

Book 4: *Rift Wind, Spring 2015*

Book 5: *Drift Wind, Spring 2015*

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*Dedicated to one of my
favorite authors of all time
Louis L'Amour.*

Chapter One

Unwelcome Discovery

Lightning flashed among the peaks and thunder concussively rolled down the valley in a continuous echo of sound. Staring out into the rain choked night, I smiled, this was my kind of weather.

I'd always liked storms, even as a kid. Now as I watched the storm crash about me it seemed as if each lightning strike was in a war to outdo the one

before. It was quite the show.

My eyes drifted to an area where I'd seen movement during one brief flash of lightning. With my full attention I studied the dark area of the night from where I'd seen the movement.

I waited for another flash of lightning, gun already in hand.

The stark landscape lit up again and I saw the source of movement better this time. It was an indian, a woman, and she was dragging something.

The way she was headed she'd miss the spot where I was holed up.

I glanced around the dry enclosure of projecting boulders that I was nestled in. The half cave at the back was barely enough for me and my horse, but it was dry. I looked back out and with another flash of color I could see that it was an

old man that she drug along the ground.

They were nothing but trouble for the asking.

The woman was about all done in. It wasn't much further after that thought that I saw her slip down to her knees in the mud.

The despair in the forward slump of her shoulders said it all.

I looked down. That wasn't a good look to be seeing on anyone. It almost made me feel..... feel something for an indian.

I looked up again and saw more movement in the rain, only this time it was a party of riders. I'd holstered my gun at some point, but now I went to my gear on the ground and pulled my rifle free.

Stepping back out to the stone

overhang I sighted down the barrel of the repeater on the lead rider coming up on the still kneeling woman. It was hard to see and I waited for a flash of light, but none seemed to come.

Then it flashed and I saw the riders converge on the woman, who had given up all attempt to drag the old man any further. She turned about on her feet in order to face her fate head on at the hands of the cowboys, who were already hooting and hollering in anticipation of what they thought was to come.

Indian or not, no woman deserved what was coming. The night flashed as clear as daylight and I squeezed the trigger.

The rifle bucked against my cheek and a rider with a drawn handgun about to fire into the body of the old man on the

ground jerked and then fell out of the saddle. In consternation the other three riders milled around in search of the threat that I posed them.

Lightning flashed again and I fired. Flashed again and I let off two more fast shots.

Another rider was down and the other two, one of which clutched at his arm, had enough and took off. The woman was looking around in startlement and with a sigh I stepped out into the downpour and made my way towards the pair.

The woman looked on fearfully as I approached, but I paid her no attention. Walking around I kicked at the two men on the ground to ascertain if they were dead or not. They were.

Two more to add to the growing list.

Would the list ever end?

Doubtful, as there were always more that needed killing it seemed. I turned to the pair on the ground.

The woman knelt behind the head of an older indian with the whitest hair that I'd ever seen on a man. Though he was old he still possessed the athletic look of a much younger man.

The appearance of vigor or not there was little to be argued with a bullet wound through the leg. Kneeling down I studied the wound more closely.

Peering under the strip of leather wrapped around the man's thigh I saw tree moss. That was curious.

Looking up to the old man I heard him say, "Stops the blood and there's no fever later."

I blinked in surprise at the man's

perfect usage of the English language. Very curious indeed.

The woman cried out and pointed at something over my shoulder. Turning I saw a group of at least twenty riders backlit by a sudden flash of lightning on a rise not too far from us.

Not good! Being out here in the open especially not good!

Turning to the old man I hauled him forward and slung him over my shoulder. Rising up I held onto him with one arm only to stoop down in order to reach for my rifle still laying on the ground.

The woman grabbed it up and handed it to me and I took off at a run with her following close beside me. Bullets began ricocheting off boulders all around us, even as I saw mud kicked up into the air to either side of me, while

being splattered with it from behind.

The woman cried out and half turning I saw her start to fall forward as her hands clutched at her hip. I dropped the rifle and reaching forward I caught a hold of her leather dress at the neck and drug her along after me.

The old man was starting to slip, but I'd made it to the safety of the enclosure of boulders and dumping both my burdens to the dry ground I ran back out into the dark for my rifle. The only problem was that it was dark and about two inches of mud covered the ground.

Lightning flashed and I saw the dull glint of the rifle's receiver half buried in mud. Dodging forward I grabbed it up.

Straightening up I was driven backward to land laid out in the mud with all the breath knocked out of me.

Desperation drove me to my feet and back into the safety of the boulders, even as bullets smacked into the ground where I had just been.

Wiping at the mud in my eyes I brought the rifle up to sight down it on the horsemen fast approaching the overhang with all guns blaring. I pulled the trigger, but the rifle didn't respond.

My hand felt at the receiver in the darkness only to feel that it was all smashed up from where it had taken a bullet meant for me. Cursing I threw the rifle aside and drawing my handgun I took aim on the lead rider.

I almost dropped my gun though as a spinning orb of light came out of nowhere to hover above the approaching party of riders and pulse brightly. Light lit the night up as it was given off by the

glowing orb that flashed color more vibrant than any lightning streak I'd ever seen.

The men's horses went wild and I saw the group of ashen faced riders take off in every direction as fast as they could go. The spinning orb pulsed and then it was gone as quickly as it had arrived.

The night was dark again and devoid of light other than that which nature came by honestly. Feeling profoundly shaken I made my way back into the overhang enclosure.

Numbly I holstered my gun and felt around for the wood that I had set out to make a fire with earlier in the afternoon. Finding the dry pieces I set the fire up and reaching forward I felt at my saddle bags and pulled free a tin of matches.

Striking the match off of a rough faced

rock I held it sheltered from the wind by the cup of my other hand around it. I lit a small pile of dry pine fluff that I'd pulled from a deadfall tree.

The fire came alive and I fed it until a bright blaze illuminated the enclosure of the overhang. My horse glanced curiously at me and then at the other two occupants of the space.

The old man had pulled himself up against the back wall of the cave and other than the look of restrained pain on his face he appeared to be alert enough, but the woman was not so good. She lay as I had dropped her.

Going to her I found where the bullet had entered at the hip, but it hadn't come out. I looked up to the old man as I pulled my knife free. He said nothing as I cut into the leather of her dress at the

point of the bullet's entry.

Blood was everywhere. Swallowing I looked at all the blood for a moment not sure what to do.

I cut the dress a little more and when I did my finger slid across something. Looking closer I felt again at an upraised bit of flesh. It was the bullet.

It must've ricocheted off of her pelvis. It needed to come out.

Glancing upward I gestured to my one saddlebag, "Can you toss that here?"

The old man leaned to the side painfully and grabbed up the saddlebag and tossed it to me. Catching it I pulled one of my shirts from it and began to wipe at the blood.

I pulled out a bottle of whiskey that I kept for special circumstances, mainly when I didn't want to remember

anything. Pulling the cork free I took a gulp of the whiskey that burned like fire and then I doused it all over the wound before me liberally.

Thankfully she was unconscious and didn't move. I sure would've.

Pouring more whiskey onto the blade of my knife I then extended it further towards the fire. With a poof of fire the blade burned brightly for a moment before flaming out.

Bringing the knife up I held it by the blade as I used only the lower portion of the foot-long Arkansas toothpick to make a small slit in the woman's flesh. More red blood spilled out and I made another slit to form an x.

Pressing with the fingers of my one hand to either side of the wound I squeezed even as I dug the tip of the

knife into the wound. I felt the bullet and levering the knife to the side I watched the bullet pop free of the wound with a gush of blood.

What was I going to pack the wound with?

My shirt was far from being clean even to start with before all the blood that it was now caked with. The old man was gesturing to a pouch that lay half under the woman.

Pulling it free I found it full of the spongy tree moss that I'd seen the old man's wound packed full of. Grabbing a handful of it I packed it into the back entry wound and then getting more of it I stuffed the wound that I had made.

Taking my shirt I slipped it under the woman by briefly lifting her and then adding more of the moss I tied the shirt

off tightly over both wounds. Glancing up to the old man I saw him smile approvingly and say, "Thank you!"

There was just something odd about his grasp of my language and nodding slightly I backed out of the enclosure. It was still raining and I held my hands under a runoff fountain of water that sheeted down off the boulders overhead.

My hands clean I washed at the mud on my face. Holding my hands to my closed eyes for a moment I asked the question of myself of why I'd gone and involved myself in the plight of a couple of indians.

There was no answer other than that I didn't hold with the mistreatment of a woman and that was what I had put a stop to. That whole ordeal aside what had that glowing orb thing been about?

I'd never seen the like of it, let alone heard of such a thing. Why had it come when it had? What was it?

There were no answers to be had of the night. Turning from the rain laden night I stepped back into the warmth of the fire light in the enclosure beyond. I came to a dead stop as my eyes took in the opposing wall of the enclosure for the first time.

The wall had cave drawings depicted all over it. How had I missed it before, when I'd made camp this afternoon?

Though crudely done there was no mistaking the orb like structures that had rays pointing off of them as if to replicate the rays of light that I had seen. Dry mouthed I let my gaze fall to the old man, who was watching me knowingly.

Gesturing to the pictures above his

head and then with a jerk of my thumb towards the enclosures entrance I asked, “You know what that thing was?”

The man nodded but asked instead, “Would you have something to eat?”

Blinking I nodded and moved forward toward my saddle bags. Digging into the saddlebag I brought out some jerky and holding my arm out I reached to offer it to the old man, only he wasn't there! The woman was gone to!

Pulling my gun I backed up to the cave entrance and glanced out into the night. A flash of lightning showed me nothing. Almost nothing.

Pressing back against the stone I watched as an invisible structure lifted off the ground. I said invisible because I saw nothing, but the falling rain was pounding on something and sheeting

rivulets of water were running off in a described pattern.

I was about to fire at it, when a hand closed over my shoulder. Pulling free of its grip I pulled off to the side and was on the verge of pulling the trigger when I saw it was the old man.

“How the.....?”

“Be silent!” The man whispered.

My words stopped, but I kept the gun where it was. My eyes were drawn back to the invisible object that the rain was continuing to sheet off of. It was now moving off towards the fallen bodies on the rain soaked plain.

It paused over top of them and I saw a red light appear that fell like a veil over top of the bodies. The hovering shape came back to us and the same red light appeared.

The red shadow went up and then down. It passed right through me!

What was going on here?

I turned to the old man, but he held a finger to his lips and I left my question unasked. All of a sudden the invisible was visible as light glowed out into the night.

It was like the first such orb of light I had seen and yet very different somehow. Not as impressive and somehow malevolent feeling.

It streaked away impossibly fast then and I was left standing there wondering what on Earth I had just been witness to.

“What is going on? I breathed out.

“Your life.” Came my companions answer.

“What?” I said blankly.

The old indian smiled before reaching

out to touch my chest over my heart, “Taran Collins it is good to have met you. I will see you again.” He said before pointing off toward the West. Then unbelievably he began to walk out into the night unimpeded by any injury!

“I don’t understand?” I called out, as I stepped out into the rain several steps after him.

He paused and looked back and I gestured with my gun to the enclosure, “The woman? Your leg? That..... that thing?” I sputtered out for lack of words to describe my cluelessness before I summed it all up by asking, “Is any of this real?”

“Oh yes! It’s very real Taran. So real that you would be dead now, if you had not intervened like you did.”

He made to leave and I couldn’t but

still clarify what I knew, but couldn't believe to be true, "The woman wasn't real?"

"No, she was not, but your actions were. You would do well to put aside past hatreds and see people for who they are Taran."

He started walking out again and I called out, "If I had not saved her you would have let that thing kill me?"

"Very perceptive of you Taran. We all make choices so choose wisely."

"I....." I talked to nothing, the old man was gone.

I stood there soaked to the skin utterly shocked by this night's events. Turning I reentered the enclosure only to see my fire was gone as well as my horse!

Then like some parlor magician show the fire was back and so was my horse.

Ted was looking at me with his ears pricked forward, but seemed otherwise unalarmed by anything going on being out of the norm.

Everything was not normal. Feeling cold I took off my drenched shirt and laid it out on a rock by the fire. I saw my other shirt laying on the ground still for the most part folded. It didn't have any blood on it.

I brought my shaking hand up to my face and mopped at the cold sweat I found there. Going to my saddlebag I looked for the bottle, but it wasn't there. Looking to where the woman had lain I saw that it lay on its side completely drained of all its contents.

Sitting down before the fire I faced the fact that I was going to have to face the events of this night stone cold sober.

Why had I done what I had? I had no love for indians and yet if I hadn't stepped into saving them I felt very much that I would be dead right now. The old man had said as much.

Somehow he had made me invisible and not just me, but an entire horse and a fire!

How was something like that even possible? It wasn't and yet I was witness to the reality of it.

I glanced up to the paintings on the wall. For the most part it seemed as if the stick shaped people were on the run from the orb like machines in the sky. Why had the first orb seemed to be different than the second?

The first one had dispersed the attack on me, while the second had seemed interested with only the elimination of

life.

I pulled my second shirt on and sat staring into the flames in a debate over what to do. I thought about it and it came to mind that I should ride west. Previously though I'd planned on heading south.

I didn't want any part of what was going on. Tomorrow I'd head south and do my best to forget that this night had ever happened.

Chapter Two

Southbound

The storm was gone in the morning and saddling up I headed Ted towards the south. I was about an hour into the ride when I felt the wind pick up dramatically.

To my astonishment dust began to blow. Inches of rain had fallen overnight and yet I was riding into a turbulent storm of dust and flying debris!

Tumbleweeds came flying through the gale with enough force to startle Ted into almost bucking me off. Regaining control

I headed for the sheltering rise of some hills that were off to the west and immediately the storm winds abated.

I looked about in consternation. It felt as if I was being played with!

Anger began to mount and I turned Ted and spurred him on towards the south. The wind was back and with it the tumbleweeds. Ted spooked as one skipped up and hit him in the face and he spun too sharp for me to hold on and I fell from the saddle to land hard on the ground.

The fall had hurt, but the burning in my arm was the worst. It was almost as if I'd been bitten by something.

Scrambling backward from the coiled snake I drew my pistol and shot its head off. The brightly banded snake flopped about on the ground without its head and

breathing hard I tore at my shirt sleeve.

Pulling my shirt sleeve up revealed two fang pinprick impressions in my forearm that gave proof to the changes I felt even now taking place within my body. Oh God I was going to die!

My eyes were going in and out of focus and my heart felt like it was coming out of my chest. I lay back on the sand as all the wind left and the day became hot and still.

I could barely breathe. Of all the ways to go out this was the least of the ways I'd thought most likely. I think I would've preferred a bullet.

Oddly my soon approaching mortality did not feel peaceful. I came very much to the conclusion that I'd rather go on living than to die right now.

I should have gone west like the old man had indicated to do. Strangest of all then, as I faded from consciousness, was the image of the old man staring down at me on the ground.

“Remember what I said about choices?” He asked.

I nodded or at least I would have if I was still in control of my body.

“You haven’t made very many good ones.”

Hysterically I felt on the verge of laughter, but even that was too much for me right now. Good choices in comparison to my actions were complete opposites.

“You can change.”

“I’m going to hell and I know it.” I mumbled out and it was the last thing I was aware of other than the old man’s

disapproving shake of his head at my words.

Chapter Three

Needed the Money

Sand.....

Wind.....

Heat.....

Cold.....

It was the cold I came aware of first. Feeling as stiff as a board I tried to move and managed to make it to my knees.

I was as parched as a dry river creek bed, but glancing around I saw no sign of Ted. I looked about the moonlit landscape, but saw nothing that moved.

I felt at my arm only to feel that it was swollen to almost twice its normal size. I shouldn't be alive and yet I was.

Gaining my feet under me I tottered uncertainly for a moment as I waited for the world to stop moving. Everything finally stopped moving and looking up I saw from the position of the moon where west should be. Locating a rocky spire in the distance I headed for it as a guide stone.

I didn't know what the big deal about heading west was, but I'd learned my lesson.

I walked all night and as the next day's dawn opened up behind me I topped out on a rise and saw a town situated in a valley below me. A town meant water and I headed for it with as much eagerness as my legs could

manage, which wasn't much.

Heading for the buildings of the town all the colors of the world seemed to mix and fold over into madness. Dimly I felt myself falling forward as the dream of water was forgotten.

My face smacked hard against something that was moving. I was moving.

Gradually I became aware that the motion I was experiencing was that of a wagon. Then the feel of hands and being jostled around. Then water. That I remembered the most. The taste of water then nothing.

I opened my eyes and then willing myself to move I sat up. Dizzily I held on to the side of the cot for a moment.

Blinking my eyes I looked about the room. In startlement I saw that I was in a jailhouse!

The cell doors were all open though. Still it was not a good feeling to awaken to.

I swung my feet over the side of the cot and glanced at my arm. The swelling was down considerably and other than some leftover fogginess in my head I felt all right. Standing upright I stepped forward and eased the ajar cell door further open.

I stepped out of the cell in expectation of being yelled at, but nothing happened. Making my way clear of the cell bay I stepped into the main office and a younger man looked up from a book and said, "Ahh my patient has awakened! Not only awakened but has risen! Truly

fascinating. Here take a seat.” He finished with as he vacated his chair and set his book down on the lone desk in the room, which I took to be the marshal’s desk.

Feeling the need to sit I took him up on the offer and sat down. Looking around I asked uncertainly, “Why am I in jail?”

The man laughed, “Oh that! My doctor’s office is being built and so for now I’m using the jail as my practice. Edgar Farling is the name.” He finished with enthusiastically as he offered his hand to me.

I took it and said, “Taran Collins.”

“Ahh an Irish man! It must be the luck of the Irish behind your survival. Tell me did you see the snake that bit you?” He asked with keen interest all the while

looking at my arm.

I nodded and began describing the snake to him and then adding I said, “I’ve never seen such a brightly colored snake before.”

“And that would be for good reason as they do not exist anywhere else other than for the surrounding area.”

Inclining my head to the side I asked, “And how do you know that?”

“Well in addition to being a doctor I dabble in the science of crypto zoology.”

“What is crypto zoology?” I asked dumbly.

Edgar waved his hand through the air and said, “It’s just a fancy name for looking for dead or extinct animals that one may think still have some members surviving to the present day.”

“Oh I see.” I said, although I didn’t.

A speculative gleam came into the man's eyes, "What's even more fascinating is that you are the first survivor of such a snake attack that I am aware of. Most people die within seconds."

I shrugged at the open question for answers that I saw in his eyes.

"Yes, as I was saying from my analysis of this snake's venom I have determined that its impact on the body unlike that of the venom of a rattlesnake is that of a paralysis of the nervous system rather than a poisoning of the blood."

"What you're talking about is Greek to me." I said shaking my head.

My response seemed to garner even more interest on the doctor's part, "Greek you say? You must be a well-

traveled man and an educated one at that to know of the land of Greece.”

“It’s just an expression.” I said looking away from him.

“That may be. Tell me stranger, your people, extended family I mean by that, would they happen to hail from the Appalachian Mountains in the East?”

Looking the man over closely I said, “They would. Why do you ask?”

Edgar retreated from his interested verbal probing by saying, “Just a hunch given your last name.”

“What about my last name?”

Edgar had gotten up and opened the door to the jailhouse. Holding it open he gestured to the outside, “What say you to getting a bit of fresh air and something to eat?”

I didn’t like him not answering my

question, but the mention of food overwhelmed everything else. I got to my feet and headed for the door.

Passing through it we began to make our way down the upraised boardwalk. A sudden sensation of nakedness had me feeling at my side for my gun.

“It’s back at the jail. Do you need it?”

“No, I’ll be fine.” I said, but the truth was I felt naked without it.

On the heels of the revelation of my lack of a gun I remembered that I no longer had my horse and without the saddle bags it bore I was stone flat broke.

“I don’t have any money to pay you or buy food with.”

Edgar waved my statement away, “No matter. The mystery of your survival is payment enough to satisfy my penchant

need for discovery for many months to come.”

The man made no sense and yet I liked the affable nature that he had about him. It didn't sit well with not being able to pay my way though.

Sitting down in the town's café I found myself the source of attention of almost everyone in the room. I nodded to them and for the most part that seemed to invoke the response of receiving the same back from them and the return to their own business.

The door of the café opened and a tall middle-aged man that had a presence largely brought about by his size of stature stepped in. Seeing Edgar and I he headed straight for our table and extended a big hand to me, “Welcome to Orlaca! I'm the blacksmith and when

misfortune calls the undertaker of our small community.”

I took the man's hand and met his iron grip with all the strength I could muster of my own rightly figuring he was the type of man who liked to crunch others hands by way of asserting his dominance. It had been fine as a boy, but now I didn't care for that game anymore.

The man looked at me approvingly before releasing my hand and asking Edgar, “Mind if I join you?”

“No, have a seat Thaddeus. Taran Collins this is Thaddeus Smith.”

I nodded cordially as the big man pulled up a chair and sat down. The atmosphere was getting a little close, as by nature I am a private individual, and the close proximity of others at the table was growing wearisome.

A kindly looking woman arrived at the table with a rustle of skirts and began pouring cups of coffee, “Well now look what the doc drug in. Ya do look in the need of some fattening up. Just be a moment and I’ll be back with some fiddles to do the job of welcoming you back to the land of the living.” She said, as she gave me a good-natured smile before hurrying off.

“That kind lady is the Widow O’Brien.” Thaddeus said before turning his eyes to me to size me up speculatively.

“So Taran where are you headed for?” Thaddeus asked.

Putting my coffee cup down I said, “No place in particular. Not anywhere for a while seeing as I lost my horse and have no money. Are there any jobs to be

had in this town?”

Edgar and Thaddeus shared a glance before Edgar said, “Well there is one I think you would be uniquely qualified for. You see we need a Marshal. What do you think?”

“Aye what do you think?” Thaddeus commented boisterously as well.

Looking between the two I asked in a measured out tone, “Why do you think I’m uniquely qualified for the job? You don’t know me.”

“Ah Taran there be more ways of knowing what a man’s about then by what he says and the look about you is all of one that spells out confidence. Ya have the look of a man that can get the job done every time. Don’t you think so Doctor?”

“Oh yes I do. A most intriguing man.”

I looked between the two before asking, “Are there any other jobs?”

“Well I could use some help in the mortuary business. Have you ever built coffins?”

The food arrived and thankfully I was saved from having to answer that question. I’d never made a coffin, but I’d filled too many that at some point I’d lost count.

The food before me disappeared and with it came the growing realization that I’d like to continue eating.

“How much does the Marshal’s job pay?”

“Forty bucks a month. You get free meals and any on the job expenses are covered.” Thaddeus said helpfully.

Glancing between the two I asked, “On the job expenses?”

“Yeah things like bullets and the such.”

I nodded and stared at my empty plate for a moment before saying, “Okay I’ll do it.”

Thaddeus reached forward with a beaming smile and slapped my back. He then stood up and addressed the café at large, “Everyone may I introduce to you your new sheriff, Taran Collins.”

There were some halfhearted nods and waves of acknowledgment, which I returned just as weakly.

Thaddeus pulled a watch from his pocket and exclaimed, “I’m late! I’ll see you later Marshal. Edgar are you coming?”

Edgar nodded and the two hurriedly left the café.

I watched the two make their way

down the boardwalk quickly in the direction of the hill that I could see at the one end of the town. It seemed every Western town sported its own Boot Hill.

The Widow O'Brien was back with more coffee that she filled my cup up with and I asked, "Where are those two off to in such a hurry?"

"Oh there's to be a funeral today."

I glanced from the pair of men to her, "Who died?"

Her mouth quirked to the one side slightly as she said, "Twould be the former Marshal, whose job you've just taken over. Would you be wanting more to eat now?"

"No, I'm not hungry."

She nodded and I rose to leave. Giving me a look she asked, "You do have a gun now don't you?"

“Yes ma’am and I think I’d better be getting back to it.”

“Aye I think that would be good.” She said with a nod.

As I opened the door of the café she called out, “I do hope you take a liking to your new job. You seem of the decent sort and we’ve had a hard time keeping a man of the law about.”

I let the door fall shut behind me and hurriedly I took off down the boardwalk. Reaching the jail I looked for the gun I was rarely without and spying my belt slung on the back of a chair I relaxed.

Pulling my gun free I checked it over and spun the cylinder. Looking out at the street side window of the jail I couldn’t but help wonder how I had allowed myself to be swindled into accepting this job.

I had went willingly and the truth was I needed the money and coffin making wasn't to my liking. I holstered my gun and slung my belt on. Instantly I felt better.

Chapter Four

Clean-up Begun

The door jingled as it closed behind me. The man I took to be the shop owner looked up from the paperwork laying before him on the counter.

As I advanced into the room he pushed his glasses up on his nose and regarded me more closely. His gaze had a way of taking everything in and I immediately felt respect for the man far separate from the diminutive physical presentation he presented the world with.

He couldn't be much past five feet tall and other than his balding head he had nothing else distinguishable about him except for the intelligence of his eyes.

“Can I help you sir?”

“I need a few things.”

The man's eyes took in my appearance again and a slight smile reached his thin lips as he said, “Yes, I can see that.”

Tilting his head to the side he asked, “You're the man they brought in that survived the snakebite aren't you?”

I nodded.

He closed the ledger before him with a snap and said, “Well let's see then, I think a change of clothes are in order and perhaps some new boots and.....”

I held up a hand forestalling him from going further, “I don't have money to pay

for anything, but I've just been hired on as the Marshal. I'm told the position in addition to my wage of forty dollars a month comes along with on the job expenses. I need some bullets and I would like a knife. Can I look at your selection?"

"Certainly! They're right over there." He said pointing to a display case.

"Thank you. I'll be back next month to buy what else I need." I said, as I went over to the case in question.

The shop owner moved busily about the store as I debated over what knife to get. I'd lost my Arkansas toothpick and I was sorely tempted to get the biggest knife in the case, but the workmanship of it was shoddy and I couldn't bring myself to replace the best knife I'd ever owned with something so inferior.

It wasn't practical either. As a Marshal it would be for the best to have a knife that was more discrete so I chose a long slim boot knife.

I tapped on the glass and the shop owner came over. He nodded approvingly and slipped the knife out of the case and then pulled free another knife as well.

The second knife was quite small and of a curious design. Its blade was little bigger than an arrow head and it had a rounded ball of a handle too short to grip a hold of with the entire hand.

The shop owner pulled it free of its tiny sheath and demonstrated its application. He made a fist. The rounded ball of the handle was within his palm, but the blade of the knife stuck out between his fisted middle two fingers.

Nice! That would make quite the punch.

I took both knives and headed to the main counter in order to collect my bullets. I came to a stop as I took in the folded pile of clothes, the pair of new boots, and various other items all set out on the counter.

I started to protest, but the shop owner preempted me by saying, “Can’t be having our new Marshal not looking his best now can we?”

It really hadn’t been a question.

I studied him as he bagged up the items for me. “You’re taking quite the risk on me being around for a while seeing as how your last Marshal is being put under today.”

He looked at me again with his implacable gaze and said, “I’ll take the

risk. The names Angus McLean and it's been a pleasure to meet you Marshal.”

He held his hand out and I shook it. Taking the bags I left the store feeling very much in the man's debt. Of everyone so far he seemed to respect me the most and I didn't intend to disappoint him.

Stepping back out on the boardwalk I made my way to the wash house just down the street and opened a tab. The Chinese owner was only too glad to offer the new Marshal a bath.

The water was cooling off, but the feel of just water against my skin, after the feeling of being parched without it still vivid in my memory kept me staying within the tepid water overly long. The bath had helped to take the residual sting

out of my arm too.

The doors of the wash house busted open and three men with a jingle of spurs strode into the room. With stated harshness the leader of the three jerked a finger at me and asked, "You the new Marshal?"

"One and the same."

"Well I want to know what you're going to do about the squatters that have moved onto my range! The last coward they had to wear a tin star didn't do a thing! The gutless wonder! Now how about it?"

"And your name would be?" I asked calmly.

"Doug Stryker. I own one of the biggest spreads around Orlaca."

I nodded, "Well Mr. Stryker I'll look into it and I'll let you know what I find

out.”

The man swore viciously and said, “You’ll look into it right now! Boys pull the tinhorn coward out of that tub!”

The timbers of the barrel tub shattered and all three men stumbled about trying to keep their footing as the sudsy water washed about their legs. Standing up I shoved the two enforcers towards their master and stooping down I grabbed a hold of the metal band that had held in the staves of the washtub.

Bringing the wide band of metal up and over my head I then rammed it down over the heads of the three men. It was a tight fit and with startled exclamations the men fought against the metal band that held their arms to their sides and kept all three of them pressed tightly together.

Cursing they fought against each other in their bid to be free. Picking up one of the slats of the tub I proceeded to conk the three foulmouthed individuals on the head and with startled grunts of pain they fell to the wet floor still bound together.

I wasn't done yet though. The three banded together men were silent party to me picking up three bars of soap, which I then rammed into their unconscious mouths.

"There maybe that will clean your mouths out and teach you to leave a man taking a bath alone!" I said with satisfaction.

I turned to see the Chinaman, who ran the place, looking upon the whole scene with shock.

"Sorry about the tub." I said.

"No! No! It okay." He said, as he

dashed forward and rifled through Doug Stryker's pockets and came out with several coins, which he held up triumphantly, "See!"

I nodded, even as I noted for future reference not to leave loose change in my pockets when I came to take a bath.

The Chinaman blabbered on excitedly as I dressed and then abruptly sobered up at a sudden realization, "What about when they wake up? Big trouble! They come for you!"

I shrugged and said, "They're welcome to come."

Chinaman said pointing to my chest, "You brave man! Make good Marshal Man, maybe I should....." He trailed off, as he made a gesture, as if wringing a chicken's neck before pointing to the three metal banded men.

“Wong that would be murder and I’d hate to have to hang you.”

He shrugged and offered hopefully, “Less trouble for all?”

Smiling I shook my head no. Adjusting my new clothes, which fit me perfectly, I slid my feet into my new boots and slung on my gun belt. “Behave yourself Wong.” I called out as I left the wash house.

I walked on down the street to the jailhouse. Looking around the town I wondered for the first time about the key aspects of my job. Just what did a Marshal do?

Such as what was in my authority to do and how far did my jurisdiction extend from the town?

A host of other questions suddenly plagued my mind and troubled I headed

on into the jail. I walked in only to see Edgar packing his stuff up.

“All done with the funeral?” I asked.

Edgar looked up guiltily, but I didn't overly care now about how I had been fooled into accepting this job.

“Are there any books on law or the such in the town?”

Edgar blinked in surprise and then gesturing to the desk he said, “Yeah I think there's a couple of books in one of those drawers.”

“Thanks.” I said going to the desk.

Edgar went back to packing up, but after a moment he went back to watching me as I cracked open one of the dusty books from the bottom drawer. After a while he went back to packing.

He was all but out the door with his stuff when he came back to the desk and

laid something on it. Breaking my focus from the rather boring treatise on law I saw that it was a badge that he had laid down.

There was still blood on it. Edgar backed away silently and went out the door and closed it.

I looked from the badge to the boring book of laws in my hand. I dropped the book back in the drawer and rooting around I came out with a Bible that reminded me of the one that my mother had read from.

Fingering its worn edges I snorted absently in disgust. I hadn't even been sworn into office as Marshal over a Bible as the custom was to do. Such inattention to detail spoke a great deal as to how long these people expected me to survive as Marshal.

I cracked the Bible open and read for a while. It had been a long time and I found myself absorbed into the stories that I'd heard read to me by my mother.

Chapter Five

Lobo Marshal

It was evening when I stepped free of the jail. Time to make my evening rounds. I smiled hollowly at the reality of how I of all people had been elected to the position of keeping the peace.

I made my way past people enjoying the cooler air and received cordial hellos and introductions, which I responded to in kind. I kept the conversations to a minimum and I revealed as little about myself as possible.

If these people only knew half of what I'd been caught up in. That didn't matter in the here and now.

I needed a horse and some money and while I was at it I would do my best to be the Marshal this town needed. My life had no real direction or purpose to it so why not do something meaningful and risk my life in the protection of others from the rougher element of humanity such as myself.

A wolf guarding the flock from danger so to speak. I'd never fit in with the pack anyway. I'd always been a loner.

In the world of wolves they had a name for such a loner, lobo. If a pack of wolves came across a lobo wolf they would do their best to kill it, but lobo wolves didn't go down easy. There was always the chance that the lobo wolf

might kill the alpha male and take over the pack.

In the end it was usually best to just leave the lobo wolf alone, but men like wolves were always challenged by those few who didn't adhere to the law of pack mentality that the majority of individuals found themselves constantly bound up in.

They should try being out on their own more, I mused absentmindedly. They might take a liking to it.

The town was already shaping up for me into a visual representation of hierarchy. There was at least one roving pack on the fringes of the herd represented by Doug Stryker.

There were likely others, maybe even a few lobos.

The herd in town was more complex.

You had those filling their faces over at the café content to be led wherever the best grazing was to be had. Then you had the store owner Angus that kept to himself like a lone bull content to let another boss the herd, while possessing of all perhaps the best attributes for leadership.

Thaddeus the blacksmith featured himself to be the he-bull, but he lacked the mental capacity to lead the herd well and the town as a herd seemed well led. So who was the unseen hand directing the course of events?

Edgar? I doubted it instantly. He had intelligence, but he was more interested in discovering the story than writing it.

There were a lot of people I hadn't met yet and I had no doubt that the pieces of the puzzle would fill in with time.

Stopping my walk I listened to the sounds of music on the night breeze. Surprisingly it wasn't coming from the dance hall saloon just up the street from me. I turned down the side street beside me and the source of the sound became clear as I saw a small church, which had light streaming from all its windows.

It was Wednesday. I turned back as I acknowledged that the town had a significant element of faith to it to be going at it like they were on a weeknight.

Reaching main street I noticed I was beside the general store. It was closed, but the hours indicated that it closed early on Wednesdays. Angus therefore no doubt was a part of the church fellowship.

It only confirmed what I already thought of the man. The preacher very

well could be one of the leaders of the community as was often the case in small towns.

If he was though he wasn't favored by the main headship, as he would've been involved in the hiring process and I no doubt would've been sworn in over a Bible. I stopped as I thought deeply for a moment, Angus hadn't been involved either and I felt very sure that Thaddeus hadn't had the bright idea or the clout to make such a big decision on his own.

I started walking again, maybe I was overthinking it all. But the more I thought about it my hiring seemed to originate from the darker element within the town.

No one knew anything about me. So who would leap at the opportunity of hiring a recovering snakebitten individual?

Someone who expected me to be an easy target for execution if need be. I was also a man without money. Nodding to myself I made a mental note to keep track of whoever was the first to offer me money in order to look the other way.

I stopped, as I felt that I was the source of someone's focused gaze. Slowly I turned to face a shadowy form alongside of some barrels.

"Glad to see that you made it!" The shadowy figure said rather jovially.

"What is going on?" I asked roughly, as I stepped up to the old indian from the desert.

I would've grabbed a hold of him, but well, I wasn't sure that was a good idea. He had after all disappeared on me before and then there had been that freak thing with the lights that floated on air.

Then the freak sandstorm when I tried to go south instead of west. Then.....”Did you sick that snake on me?” I asked, as the question dawned brightly in my mind.

“No my friend.” The old man said completely serious.

“You’re not my friend!” I affirmed roughly.

“Perhaps I am not, but then again perhaps you will find the need to have a friend. Taran things are not what they seem.”

“How do you do that? How do you know my name?”

“It has long been prophesied among the indian people that you would come and now you have.” The old man said with a smile before he turned and started to walk away.

“What did you mean that everything isn’t what it seems?” I asked a little desperately.

“This place is a gateway Taran.”

“A gateway for what?” I asked puzzled, as to me this was nothing but a backwater town of little importance to anything.

“Not so Taran. You would do well to continue looking for what lies hidden. That which is done in secret can’t bear the light of day and things done in darkness bear no good deed to mankind.”

“Evil? A gateway of evil?” I clarified and smiling the old man nodded approvingly, as if rewarding me for being a good student.

At a loss I asked, “What kind of evil?”

“All kinds Taran. You would do well to read 1 Timothy 6:10 in your Bible back at the jail.”

He began disappearing and stepping forward I grasped a hold of nothing but air. I spun around, but nothing moved. The old man was gone.

A Bible verse? What indian knew enough of the white man's Bible to reference Scripture? This one apparently.

Spooky. The whole disappearing thing, how he set me up with helping a woman that didn't even exist, and now this town. What was he up to?

What did he have to gain in all of this? And why was he pointing out Bible Scriptures to me and speaking of great evil? A gateway of evil?

Shaking my head I headed toward the

building that I expected would be the source of most of my grief as a marshal, the town's dance hall saloon. Combine whiskey and women and you had a recipe to turn the tamest of men into a bull on the prod eager to tear down and destroy anything that got in his way.

The sound of the laughter of women and the notes of a terribly off key piano reached out to clamor against my nerves. I had no love for saloons or the women they offered.

I preferred to do my drinking in private and as for women..... it had been a long time.

My hands closed over top of the batwing doors, as I stared into the festive scene of the saloon beyond. Thaddeus was there, but not Edgar. That

was good to see. I didn't know why, but it just was.

Things were beginning to add up and the old man, indian or not, had taken the high road with me. In fact I didn't think that I'd be alive right now if not for his intervention at the cave.

Intervention from what I did not know, but the fact remained that he'd been a friend to me. His appearance just now out in the street surely couldn't be coincidental, when in fact, he had halted my approach to the den of wickedness inherent to every city of man.

If God was behind all the strangeness that had suddenly come to full bloom in my life then surely He'd made a mistake this time in order to send a messed up case like me into a situation that needed fixed. Funny how my mind leapt to the

fact that God must be involved somehow.

I pushed on into the bar and immediately became the focus of all eyes. It was a new experience for me.

I was always looked on as a threat, but never had I felt such instant hatred by so many. The silver star on my chest carried a weight of its own.

I made my way off to the side and sat down at an empty table and the barroom scene soon picked back up into the usual ebb and flow of a night dedicated to the usual debaucheries.

A barmaid came close to my shoulder and leaning in close so that my cheek almost grazed her mostly exposed chest she asked softly, "What can I be getting yuh handsome?"

Her overuse of perfume was on the

verge of choking me and I didn't care for the much groped view she offered. I raised my eyes to hers and all the false joviality fell from hers as her face reflected the need to escape from the unknown that I represented.

“Whiskey.” I said flatly.

She nodded and hurried off quickly.

Thaddeus sat down heavily at the table beside me. His face was flushed from drinking and his demeanor was even more jovial than earlier in the day. He was the happy drunk version apparently.

“How did the funeral go?” I asked casually.

He blinked at me before responding, “Ahhh well.....well as you can expect for a funeral anyway.” He finished with, as he floundered about with what to say.

I nodded.

I wanted him gone from my table. I didn't like him.

My whiskey was set down before me without the view this time and I said, "Thank you."

She nodded and hurried away.

Thaddeus was talking about what I wasn't sure as I was intentionally doing my best to ignore him. I had something else occupying my attention. Someone was watching me.

Many people were looking at me off and on, but this was different. I was being studied, even probed by some unknown source within the room. I didn't like the predatory feel of it at all.

Every nerve within me felt alive and throbbing with the alarm I felt at the presence of the unknown watcher.

“Aren’t you going to drink that?” Thaddeus asked blearily.

I glanced to him, “No. I don’t have any money yet. Would you mind taking care of this for me?”

“Not at all my friend!” Thaddeus said greedily, as he reached out and grabbed up the shot glass of whiskey and brought it to his lips to slurp noisily at it.

I missed the numbing affect the alcohol would’ve had, although in truth it would have taken most of the bottle to forget for a moment and enjoy peace from my memories of the past. Now was not the time to drink though, if there ever was a time for that.

I stood up to leave and noticed Thaddeus staring moodily at the chipped surface of the table. Perhaps not the happy type after all.

I turned to leave and that's when I saw her. She'd sat off in a booth to my rear out of view.

Her eyes were calculation itself and her beauty was far from the usual sordid prettiness common to these saloon environments. She smiled and I sensed the predatory feeling I had felt before all over again.

She crooked a finger at me and I found myself rather hesitant to move forward toward her. There was just something different about this woman.

She was too fine in appearance for the place and yet she seemed at home here. I walked to her booth feeling every bit the lackey for obeying her command, but I was curious.

"Welcome to my establishment Marshal. I trust that you have found all in

order?”

Everything about her was eye-catching and yet I found her off-putting. Why was that?

Forcing myself to nod I said, “You run a tight ship. I’ve noticed only a minimal amount of dealer fraud on the part of your blackjack dealer and the whiskey smells genuine and not the creation of a bar of lye soap dropped into a bucket of swamp acid.”

She laughed out loud. She had very white teeth.

Smiling again she showed me all of them as she said, “You do paint a rather grim picture of establishments in my profession. I do hope you come to enjoy yourself here anyway. I have a lot to offer.”

Her eyes drifted down me and then

back up to mine and there was little to be not guessed at what she meant by that.

I started backing away, “Alas I am a man of limited means and what money I will make, should I survive, is best put elsewhere.”

She shook her head, as her dark brown hair coasted about her bare shoulders, “Your credit is good here Marshal. Come as often as you like. Play cards, have drinks on the house, and enjoy all my girls have to offer at no charge.”

“What if I prefer to enjoy something more expensive?” I asked suggestively letting my eyes run down her and all that the red dress partially exposed and yet still hinted at.

She laughed again and with that predatory look back to her eyes she said,

“Now that Marshal will cost you.”

Meeting her eyes I said, “I thought as much.”

I turned and left the saloon quickly. The cool air outside on the street was a welcome relief.

I looked back at the double doors of the saloon and shivered. I'd rather cuddle up with the snake that had bitten me than stroke my hand down that woman's form!

There was just something about her that said playing with a serpent would be safer than what she held secret behind her hard to read eyes. I walked away in deep thought as I realized that I had gotten my answer from earlier.

I'd had my first offer of money, booze, and women. The staple delights of most men in these Western lands. No thanks.

The temporary forgetfulness of alcohol was never enough and money beyond fulfilling the necessities of life, only ran to acquiring more trouble for oneself and life was already full of that. As for women.....I was kind of weird in the fact that I preferred a woman that was exclusively mine and no one else's.

Those kind of women were rare. I'd never met one yet, which included the wife that I had once had. Memories beckoned and I found myself caught up in them, when a commotion up the street drew my attention.

“Elizabeth! I'm sorry! Please stop! We need to talk!”

A young woman of the decently dressed sort and not at all hard to look at hurried past me. Edgar followed along

close behind.

Reaching out I arrested his flight of pursuit after the woman. He tugged to be free and angrily said, "Let go Marshal! That's my fiancé and I need to...."

"Women respect strength Edgar." I said cutting in before adding, "Going after her and continuing to beg does not serve you well my friend."

"But I hurt her feelings! I need to make it up somehow!" Edgar protested.

"No doubt you have blundered, but such is the way with men when it comes to women. You've no doubt apologized a thousand times already, but I tell you now Edgar if she will not forgive you then she's not worth having."

He stared at me his eyes continually blinking with surprise. No longer did he struggle to be free and so I let go of him.

Glancing after the escaped focus of all his fantasies Edgar said, “Perhaps you’re right.”

“I know I’m right Edgar. Now I ask you this, what are you going to do when one day you find out that she’s lied to you about something of importance?”

Momentarily looking, as if in lack for words, he managed to say after a moment, “Why, I’ll forgive her.”

I patted him on the back, “I hope you do. If you don’t you’ll end up like me and that is something to be avoided my friend.”

I left him there staring after me. I’d revealed too much with that last statement. It was best to tell no one anything of oneself.

It was better to keep everyone distant, because the chances of being hurt were

far less if one never allowed oneself to care deeply for another. The side effect of that however was a life with little left worth living for.

I climbed the jailhouse steps and moving inside I locked the door and turned one lantern up higher. Picking the lantern up I went toward the cellblock and snatched the old Bible up off the corner of the desk as I went.

Reaching the first cell I entered it and hooking the catch of the lantern on the overhead bars I lay down and cracked open the Bible in search of the book of 1st Timothy in the New Testament. I wanted to know more. I already had forgotten so much over the years.

Tonight I truly had seen a gateway of darkness open up. The saloon keeper's eyes haunted me yet and I didn't know

why. Finding the verse the old indian had mentioned I read, *“For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.”*

How true that was. I continued reading and the torment that I had felt from earlier ceased, until eventually I slipped off into peaceful rest.

Chapter Six

The Dark Side

Abrupt knocking at the door of the jail had my feet falling to the floor and my eyes opening in startlement. Blinking I looked out the window of the jail cell only to see that it wasn't yet dawn.

Getting to my feet I made my way out of the cell bay and to the door of the jail and opened it partially. An older man with hair graying at the temples stood waiting in the dim light outside.

I opened the door all the way and took my hand off my gun, "Can I help you?" I

asked not overly enthused about having been awakened so early.

The man before me looked me up and down and then asked me a question that I would never have expected at this hour of the morning, “How do you feel about indians?”

Blinking I regarded the man with new awareness and cautiously I asked, “How should I think of them?”

“As your equal.” The man said without hesitation.

It was a new thing for me, but I was willing to turn over a new leaf, “Okay, I’ll agree to that. Now can you explain what any of this has to do with waking me up?”

The man’s face was suddenly very tired looking and glancing away I saw his features starkly outlined in profile

against the early gray light of dawn. He spoke, "Last night at the edge of the town a sacrifice was performed. A satanic sacrifice. An indian child is dead."

The man's words impacted me strongly and I stepped out of the jail not bothering to get my hat and asked, "Which way?"

The man pointed and I took off in that direction with the older man close behind.

I saw the form lying still on the ground. A few candles arrayed in the sand around the body still fluttered weakly against the morning breeze.

As I drew closer I noticed lines drawn in the sand around the body. Strangely there were no footprints leading to the actual body. There were

no footprints of any kind at all. It was as if the surrounding sand had been wiped smooth like warm butter giving way to the passage of a knife.

I was way out of my league here as I knew nothing of the symbolism involved in the sacrifice, but to tell it simple I just didn't care. I kicked through the lines to kneel down by the body of a boy of about ten or so.

The boy was cut up all over, but most notably his heart had been removed. For all the damage done there was no blood on the sand. It was almost as if all the blood had been sucked dry from his body before he'd been cut up.

Staring hard at the boy I tried to understand why anybody would do something like this. Looking around I noticed that we were not too far from the

church. In fact the way the body had been laid out was as if positioned in opposition to the church.

I glanced to the man that that knelt in the sand across the boy from me, “You the pastor?”

He nodded still looking at the boy.

“Why would someone do this?” I asked helplessly, even though I’d seen far worse sights in my life then the sight of this destroyed young life.

The Pastor looked to me, “You have the look of a man who’s come through war. Have you?”

I nodded.

“Then you can understand there is no explanation of why something like this should ever happen. This boy is a casualty of war. A war not fought with guns, but one that goes on the same

between good and evil.”

I shook my head as anger burned brightly, “Reverend I don’t know what kind of war you speak of, but this I can tell you, whoever did this is going to pay!”

I stood up to go, but the Pastor caught my hand, “This isn’t a war won with a pistol Marshal!”

I pulled my hand free, “It’s the only way I know how so it will just have to do!”

I stalked off to do what I wasn’t sure. I heard him call out behind me, “Marshal I’m glad to see you’re a man that cares. I will be praying for you.”

I shut his words out as I stormed off to where I had last seen the old indian the night before. It was getting more on toward daylight when I reached the spot.

“All right where are you at? Come out now!”

I looked around, but saw nothing. That is almost nothing. As I turned about my eyes connected with the wide-open eyes of a woman busy at work kneading dough. We stared at each other awkwardly through the glass window of the house for a moment.

I raised my hand awkwardly to her and hurried on down the street with the sure knowledge that she thought I was crazy. Eventually I ran out of boardwalk and when I did there he was before me.

Pointing a finger at him I accused, “Did your people do this?”

He looked at me askance, “When you came upon me, who was shooting at whom?”

I combed my shaking fingers through

my hair, “A woman that doesn’t exist, exotic snakes, dire warnings of gateways of evil and now child sacrifice! I don’t understand any of this! What does God want from me? I left off serving Him years ago!”

“And yet He is near. You can find the end that you’ve sought for years in this town if you want to Taran or a beginning to something far grander.”

“What do you mean?” I barked out in anger, as I turned to face him.

His face was serious as he said, “Taran if you approach the job you have to do in this town with just yourself for backup you will not survive. I suggest you learn to deal with the past that haunts you yet and face the future with renewed faith and an attitude of prayer.”

“Why?”

“Because your Heavenly Father would rather have the Taran of old than this embittered shell of a man that you’ve let yourself become.”

I turned away and pressed my face into the rough timbered edge of a porch awning post. I heard the indian..... angel..... whatever he was come close.

His hand squeezed warmly at my shoulder, “Newness of purpose is to be found in this desert of your life. Don’t let this invitation go by. It may well be your last.”

I nodded in full awareness of that. I turned but the angel was already gone.

I needed to get out of here, at least away from the town for a bit.

I went to the stable yard. The stable owner, a young man that I knew went by

the name of Nathan, came to attention at my approach.

“I need a horse for a couple of hours.”

“No problem sir. I’ve got just the one and I’ll be back with him in half a second.”

True to his word he led an Appaloosa gelding that impressed free of the stable barn, only a few short minutes later.

Mounting up I said, “Collect whatever I owe you from one of the Town Council members.”

The young man waved my words aside, “Don’t worry about it. That ain’t my horse. He’s the old Marshal’s horse and as the Marshal had no will I figure it makes sense enough for you to have the free use of him being as you are the new Marshal. All I’ll charge for is the price of feed.”

“Thank you.” I said oddly touched by the young man’s generosity. It wasn’t often that one came across one of his age that wasn’t out to make a buck.

I pulled the Appaloosa into the street and let it go in an energized cantor towards the open desert beyond.

It was like a breath of fresh air to be free of the stigma that the town had become to me in two short days. I stopped the horse.

I looked about the scene of calm tranquility. There was peace to be felt all around, but in me there was none. I got down off the horse and tied it off to a shrub and walked on for a ways.

Folding my hands together I bowed my head and waited for words to come, but none came. There was so much to

say, but no fit way of expressing it. Finally in desperation I said, "I'm sorry! I've made a mess of my life. I thought I was justified to live outside of the law after what happened, but I'm not. Can you forgive me Jesus?"

"Always."

I sank to my knees in relief and rested there in the peace that followed. Looking up I asked, "Can you help me clean up this town?"

"Yes."

I looked around, but saw no one. I'd asked a question and gotten an answer. I was no closer to solving the boy's murder perhaps, but I'd have to take it on faith that help would come.

Getting up I moved back to my horse and swung into the saddle. I caught a hint of movement off to my right and my eyes

focused in on a solitary wolf standing there.

The wolf noticing my attention turned and loped away out of view. Following a hunch I chased after the wolf.

When I gained the ridge I saw the streaking form of the wolf headed out across a small valley. I kicked the Appaloosa forward until its hooves thundered in an echo of how fast it could run.

By all accounts the old Marshal hadn't been too bright of an individual, but he'd had good taste when it came down to horses. I rode through a thicket all the while looking for the wolf.

I'd lost sight of him for a while now and I was beginning to despair of seeing him again, when he casually appeared on a promontory point not too far from me. I

picked up speed and incredibly the wolf didn't move off as if sensing that I was of no threat to him.

As I neared him he turned his intense probing eyes to look out over the land to the other side of the promontory point. Reaching the crest of the ridge I did too.

The first thing I saw were the buzzards congregating in the distance. That was enough of a lead for me.

I looked about for the wolf, but he was gone. I eased my horse forward with reluctance to a scene that no doubt held more violence spread out upon the sand. Remembering the details of the boy's carved up body my pace quickened as my anger took over once more.

Within minutes I was slowing to a fast trot as gun in hand I rode in and among

the remains of what must surely have been an entire tribe of indians. They lay scattered about on the ground as if running from something.

There were burn marks on the ground as if from lightning strikes. Some of the bodies were literally blown apart. What had wrecked such carnage as this?

The scene before me reminded me of the Civil War back in the East. Getting down I walked toward a man who I thought I still saw breathing.

Reaching him I saw that he was still alive. Grasping his shoulder I watched his eyes flicker and hoping he knew English I asked, "Did white men do this?"

He shook his head no almost imperceptibly. He tried to speak, but his voice was beyond the ability to form

words because of dryness.

Rushing to my horse I grabbed the canteen hung on the saddle and hurried back. Putting it to his lips I let the man drink for a moment.

He half choked on the flow of water and I pulled the canteen back quickly. He nodded and muttered out, "Kind of you for a white man."

"Who did this?" I asked pressing the man to talk, as I didn't think he had much longer.

His eyes opened, but what he saw was somewhere else in time, "We thought it was the skin walkers. We are always cautious of them, but you whites have them walk among you all the time! So foolish, but it wasn't them. It was the white hairs. They have not hunted us for long time. They kill us now because we

know the secrets of the wind. They do not like us for they know we the people are not deceived! They fear we tell you white people secrets, but you are so blind!” The man rasped out in exasperation.

“What is a skin walker?”

“A very old being from before the great flood that wiped the world away. I speak to the first flood and not to the one you call Noah.”

I stared at the man blankly. It was obvious to me that this indian had a firmer grasp on matters of theology than I did. I didn't have a clue as to what he spoke of.

“They are serpent like.”

“Come again?” I breathed out not sure I'd heard what he'd said correctly.

“They can look like you and me, but

spill a little blood and see what happens!” The man rasped out in a dry chuckle that looked like it hurt.

“The ones that did this to you, did they move about in an object that looks like a glowing orb of light?”

The man’s eyes opened and for the first time he seemed to actually be seeing me, “You saw them?”

“I saw the vessel I speak of once. Actually I saw two vessels, but they were different somehow.”

“There are three kinds I know of. One very small and childlike, ones that are giants with white hair, and then the ones that are fiery spirits of flame. The fiery ones are good. They help us or else we would all surely be dead long since.”

“Who do they work for?”

“The Great Spirit.”

I nodded, as I accepted how that fit in with what I knew.

The man was looking at me strangely. Reaching up weakly he poked at my chest, “You are not of this place. Where do you come from?”

Why did this indian want to know this?

“My folks are from back East, back in Tennessee.”

The man shook his head, “No, you are one of the Star People.”

“Star People?”

“Long ago people of every nation were taken as slaves into the heavens. Some of them returned. You are one of them. You will kill these white hairs that do this to my people?”

“I’ll try.”

“It is enough. They are the enemy of

all men regardless of color or nation. In this war we are unified.” That said the man died in my arms.

He'd left me with more questions than answers. Just how much of what the man had said was to be believed as fact or disregarded as the ravings of a man near death?

Looking around at the scorched burn marks and blown apart bodies I went with the former option on almost every issue except for the Star People thing. I came from Tennessee and that was that.

Standing up I took stock of the situation. Some entity called a white hair, an admittedly evil entity, had made piecemeal of this tribe and then not satisfied they'd taken a boy and barbarically sacrificed him in front of the church in town.

This war wasn't reserved on indians only. It was a war on humans in general.

Why not just blow the town up like they had this tribe?

I thought about it and then I realized something. These beings were evil and their offensive action against the town had been a satanic rooted one and one targeted against the church primarily and those who attended it.

Truly this was a battle between God's people and these beings of evil. How had I lived without any knowledge of wars such as this one for so long? The dead man had said as much in concern to the ignorance of whites.

Looking at the burn marks that must constitute the power of the enemy's guns also confirmed how they had dropped the boy's body off without leaving any

tracks. Their ships floated over the ground and it would've been a thing of ease to set up the sacrifice spot in such a way as to stroke the suspicious fears of those prone to being superstitious.

Truly this was a battle that would require more than just the physical could offer. I turned and headed back to my horse. I mounted up and rode off a ways.

I was bothered by something. Were the people behind me, so seemingly more aware of what was going on, in a better place right now or were they in hell?

“There is only one way to God, Taran.”

I turned to the side and saw the old indian. It was a hard thing that he insinuated.

“You're one of the good guys aren't

you? Why didn't you stop this? You must have the ability? Not only that, but you also have the ability to make them believe!"

He shook his head no, "Not so Taran. Humans have a free will to choose. Simply knowing a lot and not acting on it gets no one anywhere of consequence. As to stopping the bloodshed all I have to say is that this is not our world. This world belongs to the fallen one and we but do the will of our Master in heaven as we are assigned."

"That's your response to this wholesale slaughter!" I exclaimed.

"Yes, Taran, but for you it is different. You are human. Behind you lay members of your fellow kind, unjustly slain, now what are you going to do about it?"

"I'm going to hunt these white hairs

down is what!”

“No, they will come to you. Pray that we are able to come to your aid.”

“What? You’re saying these people died because someone wasn’t praying for them?”

“Many battles are lost in the spirit realm before you see the results played out into the physical realm. It is good to pray Taran. And not just for yourself, but for others and there are many others, both here and elsewhere.”

He started to fade, but catching on to the last part I exclaimed in question, “He was right about me! Tell me what you know!” But he was already gone and I stared futilely into the empty space where he had just been.

Riding into town I stopped as I was

hailed by Thaddeus, “Find the killers Marshal?”

“Not yet.” I said noncommittally.

“Well that’s all right. He was just an indian boy anyway.”

I rode on trying to hide how much his words had irked me. What had changed in me?

I, who a week ago wouldn’t have cared one way or the other, but now I found myself wanting to smash his teeth out and then give him a kick to the ribs for good measure.

I dismounted at the livery and Nathan was back out almost immediately, “How did he do for you Marshal?”

“Really well. Thanks again for the use of him.”

Nathan had started to lead the Appaloosa away when I asked, “Do you

go to the church in this town?”

“Sure do Marshal.”

Nodding I asked, “Is the next get-together going to be, Sunday?”

“Actually Pastor is holding a prayer meeting right now. I’d already be there, but I knew you would be back so I waited. You’re welcome to come if you want.”

Nodding I helped him unsaddle the Appaloosa and then together we headed for the church.

Chapter Seven

Creation Overseen

The door opened noisily and I cringed at the noise along with the sound of my echoing boot heels on the wood floor. Only a few of the thirty odd people gathered looked up from the silence of their prayers to see who had come in the door though.

Nathan quickly made his way down the aisle and stepped in to sit down by a sweet looking girl, who greeted Nathan with a smile. They made a cute couple.

Looking from the innocent infatuation

of the young couple with each other I made a prayer on the spot that whatever happened in the coming struggle that these two would be together in the end and survive whatever happened.

I caught the Pastor, whose name was Lonigan, motioning to me from the front of the church. Inwardly I cringed. Longingly I looked at the last row of pews in the church before making my way to the front hat in hand.

Pastor Lonigan stepped in close to whisper, "I'm not trying to embarrass you, but as a man of leadership in the community you need to be up here."

I looked at him in wonderment. A position of leadership in the community? Yeah right, only he wasn't joking.

Awkwardly I sat down on the first pew of the church and the Pastor sat

down beside me and in a whisper asked, “What did you find?”

I stared at the hardwood floor for a moment. How to answer the man?

“Do you know what the indians refer to as a white hair?”

The Pastor’s face tightened and he nodded.

“Well then could you explain it to me, because I don’t know what I’m dealing with?”

The Pastor nodded in understanding and I went on, “I keep getting visited by the personage of an old indian, which I think..... I know, is an angel. I don’t know why all this is happening or how I got dragged into it, but I am!”

The Pastor looked from his folded hands to me and asked softly, “Do you regret being involved by God in this

war?”

What kind of a question was that?

The more I thought about it though the less I could come up to argue against my new spiritual awakening. Finally I just shook my head no and went back to staring at the floor.

“Let’s pray Taran.”

“You still haven’t answered my questions.”

Sighing he said, “I know as much as you do, which is next to nothing in terms of these white hairs, but in prayer perhaps God will reveal more to us. They are evil that much I know. I also know that our best hope for victory lies in our faith. Pray Taran.”

“I’m not much good at this praying stuff.”

“That’s fine. The Lord loves a humble

attitude.”

The Pastor seemed to close off from me then and I was left alone on the bench for the most part. I stared at my hands as the whispered prayers of those gathered in the room helped create a complex atmosphere of mood that was hard to explain.

I began going over in my mind everything that had happened of late, only I made note to thank God for my deliverances, my second chance, and the courage to take it. I started to find myself praying for almost everything, even things unconnected with the situation at hand.

I began to feel sleepy, but then it all evened out somehow. I wasn't in the church anymore, but yet somehow I was. It didn't make any sense as nothing of the

church was around me and yet I knew what I knew.

I walked forward into what I knew had to be a dream of some kind. Whether past, present, or future I did not know. “What’s going on God?” I inquired.

“Look and see.”

I looked again and there was nothing. Literally nothing!

The land before me, the Earth, literally everything was gone.

“God?” I quivered out in great fear.

“Watch what I did with nothing.”

I saw it all transpire as a fast-moving blur of realization after realization. The heavens and earth were made and sights strange to me and yet similar in some ways passed by with blinding speed. It was as if I was a spectator over countless eons of time and change that

had transpired upon the planet that had been created from nothing.

Then the pictures that I was looking at became marred by war, death, and violence beyond any comparison I could offer. I shivered within the framework of my mind at the terribleness of the once glorious creation now being destroyed before me.

“I can’t bear to see any more!”

“Watch!”

I did and I watched the world as it had once been destroyed beyond seemingly any repair. My view shifted until I stood as if in the air above the planet from a great distance away.

Earth, if that was what it was and yet I knew it to be, was before me. The planet was cold and lifeless. All the light was gone from it and the surface was barren

ice for as far as could be seen. It was a forbidding landscape of hopelessness.

I looked and looked but could not place what I saw within the framework of what I knew of Biblical history. A warm wave coursed by me and pierced through the darkness surrounding the planet and seemed to hover over the surface of the ice.

Ice began to crack up and where extreme cold had been before warmth began to rise as steam that seemed to wipe away the ash of the world's former destruction. I then watched six literal days of creation play out before me and then as if in a blink of time I saw the passage of several thousand years pass by as if but a few seconds had gone by.

In the brief time after the planet's rebirth I saw the same elements that had

destroyed it over eons of time still present within the new creation as if hovering on the edges of a herd of bison waiting for the herd to sicken before moving in for the kill. In that brief moment it was as clear to me that they intended to do no less than what they had done before.

As if to back up that thought I heard, ***“As it is written, ‘The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun.’”***

The creatures I saw, no matter their origins, were now morphed forever into the form of being destroyers of worlds.

My view expanded past the Earth and I saw the devastation of both ages past and those quite recent almost

everywhere within the greater created cosmos. The sight of it all sickened me. Destruction was being carried out on a daily basis almost everywhere!

“There is an end, but yet for now time remains. My Spirit is yet upon the waters and I have not withdrawn My Divine favor from mankind, whom I created in Mine own image. My order to My creation of man remains. Be fruitful and have dominion.”

I was suddenly back in the world I knew looking out over the desert towards dark. Before my eyes the wind blew up a maelstrom of sand into the air which then abruptly took flame and burned as if oil caught on fire. The swirl of flame seemed to call to me, but in hesitation against the heat of its brilliance I drew back and suddenly I

was falling.

With a start I reared up. Gasping for air I looked about the darkened church in fright.

“Easy! Easy! It’s all right!”

I looked to the Pastor kneeling beside me on the floor to then stare about the darkened church.

“I don’t understand! How long was I out?”

“About eight hours. What did you see Taran?” The Pastor asked, with keen interest.

I clutched at my head with both hands. What had I not seen?

Looking to him I said, “Some of what I saw I understood, so much of what I saw at first I have no comprehension of.”

“What did you see?” The Pastor asked patiently.

“At first a period of time that seemed without end. The Earth and its surface was all different. Creation as you and I know it was different. It took time, but eventually it all became destroyed. The planet was left cold and dark. It seemed to be covered in ice. Much how you read in Genesis I then saw the days of creation unfold over six literal days. From there I could comprehend what was going on, but the time before? Is such an expanse of time even possible? I thought we were the only thing God created.”

The Pastor shook his head and leaned over to snare a Bible off of a pew. Turning it he showed me the binding and said, “The Bible wasn’t first written in

English. This is but a translation off the original scrolls written in ancient Hebrew and there are quite a few flaws with the translation. Most notably in the first few verses of the Bible. For years I believed that the creation of the Earth occurred in the six days of creation, but looking further I discovered a translation error. Here I'll read it to you in the English first and then I'll read how the verses should've been properly translated. *“In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.”*

Pastor Lonigan looked up to me and said, “The most notable translation issue is with the word, ‘was’. It should have

been translated as the word, “*became*” from the ancient Hebrew and perhaps a better way of expressing the meaning of the Hebrew then saying, ‘*without form and void*’ would be to say, ‘*ruin and uninhabitable*’. Instead of “*moving*” in verse two the correct translation from Hebrew is ‘*vibrate*’. Here’s what the first two verses should read as, “*In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth **became a ruin, and uninhabitable**; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God **vibrated** upon the face of the waters.*” Tell me Taran did you see the ice covering the planet broken up?”

“Yes I did!”

“Well that explains that part of the mystery to me now. I always wondered what ‘*vibrating*’ could have to do with

the Spirit of God. Now I see. It seems hard to fathom, but it's rather simply laid out that there was an indeterminate period of time between the first two verses of Genesis and then verse three where God actively starts the re-creation of His earlier creation, by making a great light, and a separation of light from darkness, which at the completion of He said was the end of Day 1. It seems rather clear that the creation of the heavens and earth in verses one and two are separate from verse three and yet many do not see that distinction, but choose to loop the first two verses in with verse three and claim that it all transpired on Day 1, in spite of the fact that God specifically outlines exactly what transpired on Day 1. I think it interestingly collaborative that God's

first action of recreation in verses 3-5 was to create a great light and thus the creation of heat by which a frozen planet could begin to be thawed out by. Well what do you think Taran?

I stared at him astonished at the possibilities, “So you think the great expanse of time I saw could’ve happened?”

“Yes, I believe so. Indeed I believe you have been gifted with a great insight, but tell me how what you saw is of help to us now?”

“I saw them, the white hairs and many others. I saw what they were before and how they came to be. They are old and their hatred for us is real. They have no hope and they hate us for the redemption we have in God’s Son. They would’ve killed us long ago, but the Spirit of God

has been holding them back. They are far more advanced than us.”

“Then how do we fight them?”

I looked him in the eye, “I didn’t say they were stronger than us.”

Just then I heard a peel of laughter drift into the church off the evening breeze. I glanced from the open windows of the church to the Pastor and mentally sized him up.

I felt different somehow now and going on the faith inspired in me by all I had seen I said, “Last night this church, indeed your whole congregation of believers was spiritually attacked. Are you ready to defend the faith and claim victory?”

“I am!” The older man said thumping his Bible to his knee.

Smiling I got to my feet and extending

a hand to the Pastor I said, “Well come on preacher man I know where a monster of old exists in the flesh.”

He looked at me oddly, but took my hand. Pulling him up I headed for the door with him close behind.

Twilight was passing by and the evening of the day, when life seemed to settle down was upon us, but tonight I felt alive with the challenge of what I felt to be my new commission in life. Whether I died or lived I didn't much care, because for the first time in years I had the joy of feeling completely alive.

My God had brought me this new life and to Him I would dedicate what remained of it.

Edgar and his lady love of the night before were together just outside the café. I tipped my hat to both, but didn't

stop.

Angus was putting his 'Closed' sign in place and I stopped to tap him on the shoulder and say, "Come along Brother Angus. I have need of you."

Angus blinked, but didn't hesitate to drop in alongside of the Pastor and follow along behind as I continued on down the boardwalk.

Thaddeus stepped into my path with his usual overbearing manner. There was a queer anxiety to be seen in his beady eyes as he said, "I heard you got religion Marshal."

"Get out of my way!" I said testily.

"Now Marshal don't be going and doing something you might be regretting later. I for one don't think it's a good thing to be mixing too much religion with a position of governance and all. Now

maybe we should just simmer down and.....”

Angus cut in hotly, “What are you blathering about man?”

“He’s just doing as he’s been trained Angus. Thaddeus, the towns under new management and if you can’t change then I think it’s time for you to be moving on.” I said point blankly into his face.

Belligerently Thaddeus drew himself up to say, “Who do you think you are to threaten me? I hired you and I can fire you!”

“Well since I’m fired there’s nothing to be said about me doing this!” I said, as I slugged him in the gut.

He pitched over gasping and I straightened him back up with a roundhouse right that had his eyes doing strange things. He started to fall, but

grasping ahold of his collar I drug him along behind me as I made my way towards the dance hall saloon.

Reaching the double doors I busted through them with a quite sizable party of townspeople in tow. The eyes of everyone in the place were on us.

With gasps of exclamation saloon girls cleared out of the way and shot glasses of whiskey toppled off their trays to crack onto the floor loudly. Men forgot their poker chips and drawn hands of cards as they tumbled out of their chairs and to their feet in sudden fear of incarceration for past misdeeds.

In general a state of alarm gripped the saloon and everyone in it except for the woman in red, who stared at me with cold disdain.

Coolly measured words flowed

smoothly off her lips, “Look what the tomcat drug in. My my Marshal come to raid us already? I already offered you more than any man in your pathetic position could ever hope to achieve for himself.”

She could talk a good case all she wanted, but I was through with formalities. Shoving Thaddeus onto a nearby poker table I took my hand and wiped it across his broken nose and then smoothly I spun to drag my bloodied hand down the side of the saloon mistress’s face.

“Take that Princess of words and be damned!”

She’d drawn back from my touch, but not quickly enough. Wisely I stepped back, as I watched her torment begin. The dying indian in the desert had been

right.

The blood on her cheek was a red stain of crimson against the white of her skin, but her skin was changing. The struggle in her eyes was disgusting to behold as with increasing euphoria she tried to gaze at the blood on her face out of eyes that were suddenly very much not human.

A forked tongue sprang out to swab at the blood on her now scaly cheek and with gasps of horror everyone in the place drew back in fright. Everyone that is except for me and the two men that I'd asked to come along. Both stood behind me with hands on my back as they fell into deep prayer.

With the blood gone the creature of green scales, cat eyes, and a forked tongue slid out of the booth. The size of

the creature increased and the red dress fell off from her in shreds.

The look in its eyes was insane hatred that was centuries in the making for the likes of me and my kind. Feeling the directed anger of the skin walker at me I responded out of the anger that I felt, "I've seen much. Enough to know that your kind and the kind that killed that poor boy and his people are at enmity with each other. At least most of the time. Then there are those times that you unite around a common cause. A sincere man of faith along with a faithful following of believers in the one true God constitutes such a threat, because their access to power is far greater than your own. You run the town, but the Pastor was too much for you so you brought in outside help. The white hairs

performed the sacrifice, but you were the one who ate the boy's heart and drank his blood. Unfortunately for you your enemy of old brought in outside help too. I'm not letting you leave this place alive!"

"You pathetic man! I will feast on your impudence!" The reptilian creature roared out at me.

I drew my gun, but its long tail whipped out and wrapped around my wrist and tugged me forward toward the recently elongated jaw full of teeth. Hiking my knee up I pulled the boot knife free and jammed it through the thick scales of the tail gripping my arm and the reptilian screamed.

The hold of the tail released and whipped away with my knife still embedded. As the reptilian grasped at

the knife still lodged in its tail I spun close and punched straight into her throat.

Her reptilian eyes pulsed with fear and I ripped the small bladed knife in my fist to the side and severed her throat wide open. The creature fell forward gagging, as I stepped to the side.

Stooping down I picked up my gun from where it had fallen and coolly emptied all six shots into the back of the reptilian's head and the body that had already begun to regenerate new tissue to repair what I had severed. The six shots were too much though and it slumped out to lay immobile upon the floor.

Leaning back against the corner of a table I thumbed new shells into my gun idly as the room watched on in

paralyzed shock. My voice carried well throughout the room as I said, "I know how strange this must all seem to you. Truly I do, but the fact remains that now faced with the reality of what you now know what are you going to do? As I see it you have three options. You can leave this town as fast as possible and take up a life elsewhere and pretend this never happened, but you would only be deluding yourself though because the darkness you see before you exists everywhere and one can never run from the darkness of one's own soul. The second option would be to stay here and pretend that nothing is different. That false utopia will soon be impossible to play along with, because all hell is about to break loose. That ladies and gentlemen leaves us with option three.

Option three sees you all heading over to the church to plead for the redemption of your immortal souls. Whether you leave or stay in town after that I don't care. Take my words to heart friends and get right with your Maker or.....” I kicked the green pile of scales before me and continued, “or you could be spending eternity with the likes of these monsters.”

People flocked for the double doors like a parched herd of cattle stampeding for water.

Angus and Pastor Lonigan both wore huge grins, as they turned to shepherd the bunch on over to the church, which had likely never been filled to such capacity before. Before I knew it I was alone within the bar that had been the setting for many a man's fall from grace.

Going to the bar I picked up a bottle of whiskey. I stared at it for a moment in contemplation.

Never again! Turning I smashed it into the bar. The amber liquid spilled out everywhere and I walked for the double doors as I left the stains of the past behind.

I had a strong temptation to set fire to the place, but it would accomplish nothing other than to likely catch the whole town on fire. The choice to not frequent such places and the delights they offered came from within rather from the physical absence of such places.

Where there's a will there's often a way of accomplishing it. The same is true whether people are rebelling or doing that which is right.

I walked out the double doors and saw that most everybody was at the church. It had to be standing room only in there. Behold the power of prayer. Nodding I walked down the boardwalk my boot heels echoing with the noise of my passage.

The war wasn't over by far, but a victory had been attained. Now that victory would need to be pushed beyond the borders of the town.

How to achieve that I wasn't sure, but I prayed that it would even be so. In pride I walked down the street of my town.

Chapter Eight

Legacy Explained

It was dark and yet I felt an urging to awaken. Looking up I saw the crate that the lantern was sitting on begin to shake slightly.

I came to full awareness then and I bailed off the cot and out of the cell, only taking the time to grab up my boots and my gun belt. I didn't bother with the jailhouse door and its multitude of locks. Instead I exploded through the glass panes of the window to land on the boardwalk outside.

I rolled on toward the street and fell into the dust as the jailhouse exploded into a fireball behind me. Heat scorched over top of me and I covered my ears with my hands as the flames burned unabated.

I crawled forward and then someone was helping me up. It was Edgar and I took his hand and got up.

I made it across the street and sat down to put my boots on. Looking up it was to see that the jail was gone. A virtual crater was in its place.

Thankfully no other buildings had caught on fire and the burning boardwalk was even now being brought under control by others who'd been roused by the explosion in the night. Edgar handed me my gun belt and I strapped it on as I stood up.

I had blood on my face and arms from where they'd gotten cut up by the glass. In a bit of a dazed shock I looked at the evidence of what would've been my demise if I hadn't heeded the sudden urging to come to alertness.

Glancing off to the side at the crowd that had gathered in the early morning gloom I noticed the old indian watching me. I nodded and he smiled before disappearing.

He'd saved my life again. I looked around and in sudden horror I saw that the fire before me wasn't the only one in town!

"Oh no!" I exclaimed and took off running towards the Pastor's house at the edge of town.

Reaching the burning blaze I saw that it was a mirror image of the jail in terms

of the crater in the ground with just bits of splintered pieces of wood smoldering about on the ground. There were no words to be said by the silent throng of people ringing the debris of all that remained of a good man.

Angered at the attack in the night I turned away only to see a man approaching from the church out of the gloom of early morning.

“Pastor Lonigan!” I exclaimed rushing forward.

He gripped a hold of me firmly, “I’m glad you’re okay Taran! I had the urge to pray and I thought they might try to do another sacrifice in front of the church so I went to pray at the church late last night.”

“Thank God!” I breathed out, as I turned to glance at the crater and what

little remained of the Pastor's house.

“Indeed.” The Pastor commented dryly.

Gripping my arm then he pulled me away from the others and said, “I saw it all Taran. A spinning orb of light came out of the desert and hovered over the town. It pulsed what looked like a solid beam of lightning into the jail and then it swiveled to take out my house. I was praying in the church's steeple up by the bell and I had a good view. It spun away and headed off in that direction.” He said pointing to the south. Before continuing with, “You can't see it from here, because of that rise of the land, but up in the steeple I saw the craft fly up a canyon and I'm positive that it is still there. The canyon I speak of can't be much more than a mile from here.”

I patted him on the shoulder, “You did good! I’m going to go investigate, but you should try to get some rest.” I said before hurrying off to the stable yard.

I had my horse about half saddled, when another rider pulled up beside me. It was Edgar. I gave him a curious look and he said, “I heard you and the Pastor. I would like to come along and see for myself.”

“You know we might not come back, right?”

Edgar nodded.

I shrugged and said no more. Mounting up we took out of the town as the sun began to make its way over the horizon. The beauty of the sunrise was lost on me though as my mind was full of the complications of how to combat such

an advanced foe.

I felt reasonably confident of not being discovered as the creatures seemed to prefer the darkness of night to move out and about in rather than broad daylight.

Reaching the canyon I pulled up and Edgar followed suit. Daylight or not I didn't feel comfortable riding up the narrow canyon.

“Let's circle around and find a way up this mesa so we can ride along the rim of the canyon.”

Edgar nodded and we backtracked. He led off to the right and I followed him figuring that he knew a way to get up onto the mesa that the canyon cut down through.

Easing forward on our bellies we

inched closer and closer to the edge of the canyon rim. The deep hum we'd been hearing for several moments only intensified the closer we got to the edge.

Reaching the edge, both of us now hatless, we peered over. Daylight revealed the metallic surfaces of the object that had been somehow cloaked from view that night at the enclosure.

I thought it had spun and perhaps it had, but right now it remained motionless as it hovered just above the ground. The question of how to defeat it was on both our minds.

We both drew back from the edge keeping our heads down. Edgar put it best, "It's like a buzzard floating on the breeze."

I nodded thinking. The concepts at play with the technology below us was

far beyond me. Staring at the blue sky overhead I prayed for help.

A shadow crossed over me and in alarm I blinked and made to run for it, but I relaxed at the sight of a buzzard coasting by. True to Edgar's words it did seem to just hang in the air. What if the ship below operated on the same principle, at least partly?

"What makes air thinner? You know, less buoyant." I asked thoughtfully.

"Gas." Edgar replied.

I glanced at him. I knew he was an educated man and his answer piqued my curiosity, "Gas?"

He nodded and then hesitatingly he said, "At least I think so."

"Explain."

"Well back East I saw this experiment done. I was thinking of becoming an

engineer before I chose to be a doctor and I took some extra classes. Ships aren't just built willy-nilly. There are mathematical formulas that go into the making of them or they wouldn't float or move about right. They might even break apart or.....”

“Alright alright I get it! Get to the point!” I said in a harsh whisper brought on by the dire grimness of the situation.

Edgar sighed and said gesturing upward, “Imagine the sky above was all water with that cloud up there being a ship floating on the surface. Well I saw this professor release a burst of methane gas from a cylinder located underneath the water.”

“Methane gas?” I asked blankly.

“Yeah the stuff that gets let off in swamps and from the rear of cows.”

“Got it.”

“Well anyway this bubble of gas rose through the water because it’s lighter than water. When it reached the ship the ship sunk beneath the water all the way down to the bottom of the container. The gas made the water less buoyant. Maybe that could work with adding gas to just regular air. It’s a theory anyway.”

“A shaky one, but who knows. Where do we get this methane gas?”

“Your guess is as good as mine. I mean we don’t exactly have the time to follow a herd of cows around.”

Not being able to help it I chuckled. The gravity of the situation had me sober again rather quickly though.

“What’s that cave down there that there parked outside of? It looks like its seen active work before.”

“Oh that’s the old gold mine outlet that got the town it’s start. It’s all played out now though. It’s been vacant going on ten years now. The towns really suffered without the mine. It would’ve gone belly up if it weren’t for the outlying ranches and.....”

“Mining?” I said cutting in.

He nodded.

“Are there any mining supplies still laying about the town?”

“Yeah there’s a whole warehouse of them. Whoa wait a minute, if you think you’re going to take that thing out with dynamite, I think you better think again!”

I waved his protests away, “No, no, I agree with you. That ship is way beyond dynamite, but what if we try the gas thing and see if the ship will sink and then we use the dynamite to cover it up? In

essence the rock we cover it up with will replace the air it needs to float. What do you think?”

“I think that’s insane, but I’m down for trying it. There’s only one problem though. We don’t have any gas.”

“Ahh my friend I bet we do. We need to get back to town and check out that warehouse.”

We scooted back from the edge until we reached where we’d left our horses and then we lit a shuck out of there.

Coughing lightly I held my hand to my face to help filter out some of the stirred up dirt from having to break down the door. There had been no choice but to break the door down as the hinges had been rusted shut.

Walking into the warehouse I could

only make mental comment to the honesty of this town's residents. The warehouse was piled high with supplies from the now defunct mine and yet the supplies had laid dormant in this warehouse untouched and unclaimed for going on ten years.

Oh there was plenty of dynamite for sure. Going to a case I cautiously peeled the lid off and looked inside. Amazingly the dynamite had not yet begun to sweat nitroglycerin.

It was good to know that the dynamite was at least still partly stable. It would be no good though if the most vital element needed for the plan wasn't in supply.

I saw some headlamps and I hurried over to them. Angus being shorter had to run to keep up with the lantern he held

high to illuminate the warehouse.

“What is it?” He asked excitedly.

I skipped by the lamps and began pulling the lid off of a box, which was one of several stacked up in the corner of the warehouse. Angus arrived with the lamp as the lid came free.

“Whoa! Not today buddy!” I said, as my hands flashed out to grasp the snake that was striking out at the paralyzed form of Angus holding the lantern nearby.

I threw the snake to the floor and stomped its head into the ground. It was one of the same brightly banded snakes that had bit me.

I looked up from the dead snake to Angus. Looking a little pale he said, “You just saved my life!”

I patted him on the shoulder, “Don’t

thank me yet. I may get us all killed come nightfall.”

Angus shrugged and offered a wan smile, “I haven’t had this much fun in years. What is this stuff?”

I picked up one of the chunks in the box, “Calcium carbide. I grew up in the mountains in the East. Coal miners used this stuff in their headlamps. You combine this with water and it produces acetylene gas, which is highly flammable but controlled enough to be used in a headlamp.”

“Well I’ll be!” Edgar breathed out, as he reached into the box and pulled out a chunk.

“This could work! Do you remember that pool of water near the mouth of the canyon? If we could dump all this in the water, but then how do we get the ship to

pause in flight in order to be affected by the gas cloud? I don't know for sure, but I would be willing to bet that this won't work if the ship is under power and moving. It needs to be hovering.”

Nodding I said, “I have an idea.”

Glancing at the large group of people who had filed into the warehouse I said, “All right we have a lot of work to get done before nightfall. I'm not going to lie to you, the plan I have in mind could get a lot of us, if not all of us dead. On the other hand I think what I have in mind could work. I need your help, but it's your choice to come.”

Nathan shrugged and glancing around asked, “What do you need done?”

Smiling I said, “Get all the wagons in the town teamed up. Load the calcium carbide and the dynamite along with the

drill steel over there leaning up against the wall. Make sure two wagons are sent to the saloon. I need several men to help me at the saloon. Be careful with the dynamite.” I said, as I hurried out of the warehouse.

Edgar caught up with me, “What on Earth is of help to us at the saloon?”

“You’ll see. Hey when there’s a moment I need to talk with you about something.”

“Sure, but what do you need at the saloon?”

“Mirrors my good man. Big long bar length mirrors.”

“What would we need those for?” Edgar exclaimed.

Slapping him on the shoulder I pushed on into the vacant saloon and said, “Why a mirror reflection. We’re not alone in

our fight against this advanced enemy. Angels of God have much the same way of moving about as our foe does.”

“How do you know that?”

“Nevermind.”

“These angels are going to help us?”

“Doubt it, but the enemy doesn’t know that.” I said good humoredly.

“I don’t understand!”

“You will. Now help me get these mirrors down. Time is wasting.”

“What makes you think these beings aren’t going to be onto us doing all this work at the mouth of the canyon?”

“Two reasons. Most of their activities seems to occur at night and two I’d say they spend most of their day mining the left over gold out of that defunct mine of yours.”

“Really? You really think there could

still be gold!”

“Yes, now less talk and more work.”

Work went better than expected with almost the whole town helping out and the upshot of it was that we now had some time to kill. The sun wouldn't set for at least another two hours.

Both Edgar and I had crept back to where we had seen the alien vessel hovering in the narrow canyon. It had still been there and that fact verified we had eased back from the canyon rim to wait for sundown.

In a low voice I asked, “Edgar when I first got here there was something about me surviving that snakebite that troubled you. What was it?”

“Not troubled, intrigued is a better word.”

I decided to go all in and confessing softly I said, “I’ve been led to believe recently that my origins lead to places not from this world. Does that make any sense?”

“It certainly does.” Edgar affirmed.

I glanced at him and he explained, “As I told you before that snake that bit you exists nowhere else other than this immediate area. Do you know what an elephant is?”

I nodded and he continued, “Well by my nearest calculations of the potency of a single bite from that snake I’d say even an elephant would succumb to a bite.”

“You’re saying I’m not human?”

“Not at all. There are plenty of venoms, diseases, and you name it that generally always kill their victims, but there are those few who survive. Those

few survivors mate and share their immunities with the next generation and then you see immunity in the next generation after that. Given enough time almost everyone comes to have immunity to something that once killed almost everyone. Look at Europe for instance. The black plague virtually wiped the population out, but those who survived are now for the most part immune to it. My theory about these snakes, especially now that I see all that's happened in the past few days, is that they came from somewhere else. I'm not referring to somewhere else in the world either. It's possible that ancestors of yours came from the same place off world where these snakes live, and thus had a built up immunity to the venom.”

Shaking my head I said, “I know I was

born in the mountains of East Tennessee. As a boy my great grandfather was yet alive. We were all born in the mountains, not some other world.”

“No doubt you were, which would explain through the length of generations away from the exposure to the venom of that snake why you almost died from it. The more time that goes by the less resistance there seems to be to things not exposed to in a long time.”

I shook my head still finding it all hard to believe, but the facts were what they were.

“Your name is of great interest and I believe a clue to the off world past your ancestors experienced.”

Looking at him I asked, “Taran?”

“No, your last name of Collins. Collins and another name, that of

Gibson, along with a half-dozen others form an Appalachian bloodline of some note. Ever look at yourself in the mirror Taran?”

“Of course I have!”

“Well then I bet you’ve noticed that while you’re white enough to be thought of as European your features are somewhat darker and more exotic than the typical individual of European descent.”

“It’s said that there was some intermarrying with people of black skin color early on in our family and I think my grandmother was part Cherokee.”

“All probably so, but your ancestry is even more complex than that. Feel at the very back of your head.”

I did so and felt a protrusion of bone off the back of my skull that formed a

sort of round nodule. I'd known I'd had it, but never really thought twice about it.

“What you're feeling my friend is referred to as an Anatolian Bump. The more scientific name for it is Tuberculum Turcum. Anatolia is the region in the Middle East where the Turks of the Ottoman Empire came from. Their people group it's said migrated there from Central Asia. Now the question you have to ask yourself Taran is how did a man, who comes from the mountains of Appalachia, come to possess so many diverse traits from peoples all over the world, but in all the history of your family I doubt there have been few who have actually married outside of the mountain families of the surrounding communities much less left

the area as you have done.”

I had no answer for him. Going on he said, “Melungeon is the name for the unique bloodline of your family and of the others I mentioned. The meaning of the word is hard to come by as it finds elements potentially derived from the languages of at least five different people groups, which would be West African, Turkish, European, Asian, and even Jews. It’s a mystery Taran. What’s even more interesting is that there is old folk lore in the mountains of Appalachia that there were white men existing in the mountains before the first colonists came over from Europe. As colonists kept making their way westward they kept running into communities in the mountains that they couldn’t place the date of origin to. There’s little to be

conclusively said as it's all been poorly documented, but the stories do remain. I'm sure you've heard a few of them.”

I had. I looked toward the edge of the canyon still hearing the humming of the alien vessel. Looking back to Edgar I asked, “What do you think happened?”

Edgar shrugged, “Pastor told me about your vision, well not exactly, I had to beg the story out of him. What if there are other worlds out there such as you saw? With the kind of technology back there in the canyon on display I don't see it as an impossibility for such vessels to be able to travel between worlds. We know these creatures from the time before the creation of man obviously hate us. What if some time in the past they took slaves of this world to serve them on worlds outside of the dominion

of the authority that God gave to man to possess and rule over this world? On such foreign worlds with relocated people gathered from all over the Earth the resulting mating of them would've resulted in blended features the likes of which you exhibit. For such a blended people to reappear on Earth in an unlikely spot it would seem to echo of some past strife off-world. Perhaps your great ancestors escaped and were able to make their way back at some point. They settled in the mountains and have been blending in with the rest of humanity ever since. It's a plausible theory anyway given all the facts and circumstantial evidence to support it.”

I nodded. What more was to be said?

Had my ancestors really overcome such obstacles as these beings in the

canyon below us in order to return to Earth?

It seemed like more than just a plausible theory to me as I mentally took in the unique looks of my family's appearances in comparison to people away from the cloistered mountain community I had been raised in. My great-grandfather's skin had been very dark. Since his time most of my family had married lighter skinned European women and the tone of our family's skin had lightened considerably from what his had been.

More than that were some of the stories I had been told as a child, stories about fantastical lands and the monsters that dwelled in them. Stories that didn't fit into the reality of Earth, at least not for a very long time.

I remembered my great-grandfather singing once in the forest in a language I couldn't understand. It hadn't been Cherokee or any European language and certainly not the backwoods English that we'd spoken almost exclusively. He had been an intense individual. Most of my family were.

Above all as a family we craved the right to be free to do as we pleased. That was something I strived to maintain to this day and it had gotten me into a lot of fights.

I stared upwards into the darkening sky overhead that stars were already faintly starting to appear in. Did I have a legacy that had come from up there somewhere in the distant past?

Did I have a destiny to return?

Glancing at the sun now low on the

horizon I touched Edgar's sleeve and said, "Let's go and get this party started."

Chapter Nine

Mirror Reflection

I wasn't too sure about this plan, but we were people of limited means faced with desperate circumstances. Some things were just going to need to be hoped for. I certainly knew that I was praying that my hopes would not be denied.

Edgar had been for the idea of me riding up the canyon with a lit stick of dynamite in hand to which I then threw at the said enemy beings before lighting a shuck the heck back out of there. Even by

my standards that was a bit obvious in terms of raising suspicions.

Instead I had chosen misdirection of a more innocent nature. I was deliberately hunched over the saddle as one might expect of an old man and behind me I led a mule packed down with all the essentials needed for gold mining.

Where the dynamite ploy might fail to attract the desired response I was pretty sure that the threat of their gold discovery being found out by humans was something they wished to avoid. They'd have no choice but to chase after me and kill me. Being killed was an all too real possibility in this scenario.

Rounding the last bend in the canyon separating me from the mine I beheld the hovering vessel and several of its occupants. They stood taller than me by

at two feet and just as the indian had said they had white hair that fell down past their shoulders.

I'd never been creeped out more other than having to witness the body of a woman metamorphosis into a reptilian form of dark ugliness. With a faked shout of surprise I let go the leads of the mule and wheeled the Appaloosa back the way I'd just come. He bucked forward with a will even as two electric bolts of power zipped by me to blast solid rock into crushed powder.

The Appaloosa ran hard in our attempt to escape and I prayed that it would be enough. We turned a corner and became blessedly out of range of their weapons, if only for a moment.

I heard the droning hum behind me up the canyon abruptly go high pitched and I

urged the horse faster. I still had a quarter of a mile before I reached the mouth of the canyon.

I hung over the horse's mane doing my best to aid the animal in its flight from certain death. I glanced back and gave a start at the sight of the hovercraft closing in fast.

I jerked the reins hard and the horse swerved to the right. The canyon wall off to our left exploded terrifically and rock chips slammed into me and the horse.

Glancing to the side I saw the ship right there flying sideways so that its observation window faced us. Once again I saw the faces of beings I never wished to see any closer than I already had.

Drawing my gun I fired it in rapid

succession at them. Hopelessly I watched my bullets smash into the glass of its observation window to only then bounce off and go pinging off elsewhere.

My actions though impotent did seem to anger my enemies enough to the point of distracting them from realizing the narrowness of the canyon. The vessel bumped hard into the side of the canyon and then ricocheted over to my side to crash off my side of the canyon with a metallic chink of grinding metal.

The ship's progress had slowed radically and rounding the last corner I saw the mouth of the canyon. The canyon narrowed to a narrow channel that two wagons would've spanned across and just where it opened up onto the plain it divided into two channels with an up-thrust remnant of stone dividing the two.

The channel to the right was higher and clear of obstruction. It had been the route used by the minors to transport supplies and gold bullion through. The other route led to a depression where runoff water collected just before where the canyon opened up onto the plain.

I reached the turn and swerved the Appaloosa down the left channel of the canyon mouth. Two power bolts slammed into the up-thrust of rock that divided the two channels.

The Appaloosa hit the stagnant water pond and sent muddy scum flying everywhere. We hogged on forward through the slop tripping the ropes holding the calcium carbide in suspension above the murky water. Several wooden crates worth of calcium carbide slid into the stagnant water and

immediately a steamy vapor began to rise up.

We hauled up out of the muck and I barely had the time to duck under the wooden underside of the mirror wall that we had constructed out of the room length mirrors of the saloon.

The mirror had been in ten foot segments of which there had been three. We'd stacked the three ten foot sections of the mirror one on top the other to form a ten foot wide by twelve foot tall wall of reflection.

I rode clear of the mirror wall before pulling the Appaloosa up. I glanced back just as the enemy craft peeled around the corner into the left channel of the canyon mouth. The vessel came to a gravity defying stop over top of the stagnant pool of water at the sight of what

must've seemed to them for a moment to be another ship.

The angel, in the form of the old indian, had possessed the ability to summon such a ship of a similar design howbeit one that was grander somehow than the one now before me. My hope was that in the rush of the chase they would mistake the reflection in the mirror as that of a ship belonging to their angelic enemies.

That seemed to have worked, but our plan for the gas to thin the air enough for the hovering craft to sink hadn't!

A cloudy smog rose up and engulfed the craft, but still it did not sink. The bright power of its weapons pulsed and the mirror wall shattered to pieces, but that wasn't the end of it.

The very air of the canyon channel

seemed to disappear in an engulfing outburst of flame. The shockwave of flame knocked me off my horse as the Appaloosa bucked in terror.

Looking up I blinked at the sight of the hovercraft half sunk into the muddy pond of water. I hit the ground hard with my fist in jubilation!

We hadn't thinned the air, but what we had done was create an explosion primarily rooted above the craft, which had drove it downward into the muck of the pond of water. Somehow our venture had worked, just not the way we had planned it though.

Looking to the mesa I prayed Edgar hadn't failed on his part of the plan. With an explosion that knocked me flat again the walls of the canyon and the up-thrust of rock that had divided the two

channels completely disintegrated and spewed outward to pound down on top of the vessel mired in the mud.

The longest part of our preparations of the day gone by had been taken up by drilling holes with the drill steel augers into the sides of the canyon walls. We had packed the holes full of dynamite and then we had laid the leftover boxes of dynamite all along the canyon wall's base.

The air hung heavy with smoke and dust and coughing on it I felt a massive headache form instantly as I breathed in the cordite fumes of the exploded dynamite. The wind blew and the dust drifted back up the canyon.

Looking up I confirmed that all trace of the enemy had been buried beneath a load of rock and debris. I waited to see

if it would pull free of our trap, but no movement occurred. We'd done it!

Suddenly I was mobbed by screaming people and I about passed out from the pain of the sound.

“We did it Marshal!” Edgar was screaming.

“Yeah, now easy with the noise will yah.” I said groaning, as I clutched at my head.

Fresh air was helping the headache go away and before long I could bring myself to open my eyes. When I did I beheld a town unified.

Chapter Ten

Ministry Begun

Six months later

I made my way down the busy street. Buildings were going up almost everywhere. In the past several months the population of the town had swelled by at least four times in volume. The town of Orlaca was once again a thriving place thanks to the resurgent supply of gold discovered in a different vein from the one mined out previously.

Business was booming, but for me it was time to leave. I hadn't had much of

any trouble in being marshal these past few months, but with the return of prosperity I knew that would be short-lived.

Drifters from all over would flock in. Miners and prospectors would be killed in ambushes for a few pinches of gold dust. Saloons and their ilk would open up everywhere.

The old saloon was already back up and running. The first shipment of dance hall girls had just arrived yesterday and another saloon was going up just down the street not too far from the church.

Truly the Bible had it right in stating that, "*The love of money is the root of all evil.*" The town had been a better place without its newfound wealth for sure.

Perhaps I was old-fashioned, so what

if I was. I preferred life away from the maddening crowd.

I stepped into the general store and Angus looked up. He leaned down to lift several parcels onto the counter.

I stepped close to the counter and smiling I said, "I knew you'd have it ready even though I only gave the list to you an hour ago."

Angus shrugged, "A man has priorities and you are of the utmost priority in my eyes."

I reached my hand across the counter and Angus shook it firmly. I'd made good friends in this town. The town I wouldn't overly miss, but the friends I had made I would.

Gesturing to one of the new repeating rifles on the wall I said, "I'll take that to and about a thousand rounds of

ammunition to go along with it.”

Angus grinned and took the rifle down and laid it on the counter and then began stacking boxes of bullets on the counter beside it.

“Fixing to do some shooting Marshal?” The Widow O’Brien asked, from where she stood off to the side.

Looking to her I smiled, “Maybe. I like to be prepared anyway.”

Coming to me she grasped my forearm briefly before saying, “May God be with you in your travels Marshal.” Before then moving on out the door.

Turning back to Angus I dove into my pocket for the money to pay, but Angus waved his hand and said, “Your money is no good here.”

I dug out the bill money in my pocket anyway and laid it on the counter, “It’s

liable not to do me any good anyway Angus. I appreciate the gesture, but if a man deserved to profit it would be you.”

Grudgingly he took the money, but then said, “I’m taking this, but if I run across someone in need I’ll give it to them.”

“Sounds good to me Angus.” I said with a nod.

I’d tied a mule I had bought up outside earlier and now I began to make trips in and out of the store packing the mule down with supplies. Fully loaded I led the mule down the street to the stable yard.

Finding the Appaloosa I saddled it up and then taking a small pouch of gold from my pocket I laid it in a drawer of Nathan’s desk in the barn. It was a fitting wedding present for the young man and

his new bride.

They'd just gotten married yesterday and of all people he'd asked me to be his best man. It had a been an experience that I had cherished and now looking around smiling I wondered how long it would be before Nathan could manage to drag himself away from his new bride. Not for a long time was my guess.

Life went on and so would mine one day. The wedding yesterday had lit a yearning once more in my heart to someday try at love again.

Leaving the stable yard I mounted up and headed for the last place I intended to visit before leaving town.

My boots sounded loud as I walked down the central aisle of the church. I'd learned a lot here and experienced God

all over again. The place for me would always be hallowed.

Stopping at the front pew I sat for a moment and turned my hat in my hands. Pastor Lonigan had been and would always be one of the most influential people in my life.

He'd taught me so much and I'd wished for years of instruction by him, but a month ago he had gone on to be with the Lord in his sleep. I missed him deeply.

The sound of shoes had me looking up into the eyes of the new pastor. He was a young man. I really hadn't formed an opinion of him yet. My prayer though was that he'd grow into the man of faith his predecessor had been.

I patted the pew beside me, "Take a seat Pastor."

Hesitatingly the man responded as I had commanded and sat. Letting my arm lay along the back of the pew I regarded him with an unwavering stare. The man stared back at me nervously, but to his credit he didn't break the stare.

“You have a great responsibility before you Pastor in the spiritual management of this growing town.”

Nodding he said, “I know.”

“You're not going to be able to do the work that needs done in this community on your own. I wish I could stay to help you, but my place is elsewhere. There are good men and women in this town that will be your friend through thick and thin, but your help doesn't lie with men alone but in God.”

The man nodded resolutely and looking away I said, “Battles have been

won in this place and wars fought, but one day, even perhaps this day, evil will return. It is your duty as a shepherd over this community to stand in the gap as your predecessor did.”

“God so help me I will!”

Nodding I stood up and stepping forward I emptied most of the rest of my money both gold and paper into the offering plate. I turned away and putting my hat on I came to a stop before the still seated Pastor and fixing him with my hardest stare I said, “If I hear of you misleading the flock entrusted to you into any heresy of belief outside of the Bible laying beside you on the pew so help me I’ll be back to put an end to you myself. Understand?”

The man nodded and I headed for the door my boots loud in the still

atmosphere of the church. I heard the Pastor stand up and I stopped as he called out, “Where are you going?”

“I don’t rightly know, but if I had to say it would be somewhere that’s in need of deliverance.”

“Well then you better take this.” He said rushing forward with one of the church’s Bibles.

Smiling I accepted it and said, “I already have one packed, but I don’t suppose it would hurt to have more than one to take along with me.”

I patted him on the shoulder, but he grabbed a hold of me and looking into his face I saw the sincerity to be seen in his eyes of the words that he spoke, “I’d like to pray over you before you go.”

The last bits of unease over leaving the town unchaperoned went away and

smiling I said, "I'd like that very much."

The town behind me, I headed westward. At the sound of hard riding I looked back to see a rider fast approaching. Now what?

It was Edgar. Pulling even with me he gave me a smile and said, "Going West?"

Looking over the supplies strapped to his horse and the out of place looking gun belt around his waist I asked, "What of Elizabeth?"

He shrugged and looked away with a pained look to his eyes, "She's taken a liking to another."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I thought you two were all but hitched."

"Yeah, me too."

Patting him on the back I said, "Better

you find out now instead of later once you were married that she wasn't the one for you.”

“You were married?” Edgar asked with keen interest.

“Once.”

“What happened?”

“If you're going to ask questions all the time then feel free to go back to town. If you want to go along with me I suggest we keep the personal stuff to a minimum.”

Edgar remained silent and I immediately felt bad for my harshness. He'd stumbled across a still raw issue for me though.

Sighing I said what I knew would make him happy, “I was raised in the South, but there in the hills things were different. I never had a slave and I didn't

hold with the South fighting to keep men of color still bound up in the yoke of slavery. Besides the moral objection to it I have as you've noticed a darker complexion than many so-called whites. My wife came from a high society family, which owned several plantations. When it was suggested to her by others that I had slave blood in me things changed. She left me and went back to her family. I went to get her and her family ambushed me and carted me off in chains, while she stood there saying nothing. I managed to escape, but even the mountains weren't safe, because there are a lot of desperate people there and her family put a bounty on my head to be paid in gold. I packed up and went north and joined the North in the fight against slavery. At least I

thought that was what the war was about, but now I know different.”

“What was the Civil War about Taran?” Edgar asked interjecting softly.

I shrugged bitterly, “No doubt for some it was to free the slaves, but it was really a usurpation by the federal government to seize the rights gifted to the states by the Constitution and set up the federal government as the dominant power in the country. The issue chosen to go to war over just happened to be slavery. A noble endeavor of ideal meant to mask over the true intentions of a few evil men that wanted complete control over the nation as a whole. Republican or Democrat it does not matter. Among the losses of untold men caught up in a merciless conflict the loss of individual state liberties is an often

overlooked thing. No longer can the voters of one state truly do as they wish if their desires lie outside of what the federal government wants. I'm glad the slaves were freed, but freed to what? The whole nation back East has become its own prison and it will only get worse with time as the federal government seizes more and more power from the people. It's one of the reasons why I came West. Out here there's still some measure of freedom to be had, but that will likely disappear in time as well."

Edgar nodded and was silent for a while before asking, "What happened to her Taran?"

"The men of her family were hauled out into the street and hung by a mob of black men under the watchful eyes of a group of Yankee soldiers. She escaped

to Charleston. There to keep from starving she became the mistress of a Yankee Lt. Col. in charge of administering the town. When I found out I beat the Col. practically to death and landed myself up in a court-martial proceeding. During the holding process before the trial my wife died in childbirth. In bitterness she wrote me a note as she lay dying. In the note she told me of how I was at last having my revenge upon her for leaving me years earlier and for what she'd done after she'd left me. She'd been pregnant with my child when she left and not wanting to bring a child of mixed blood into the world she drank some herbal potion of poison that an old hag gave her and aborted my baby. She looked at her death during childbirth as divine

judgment finally catching up with her.”

Edgar’s face wore a horrified expression and shrugging I said, “Now you know the wisdom of marrying the right woman. I married based almost solely on outward appearance and for what I thought I really wanted in life and what I got was heartbreak.”

“Were you court-martialed?”

“No, I’d done too many exploits during the war to be hung for beating up a Lt. Col. that had been using my wife as a whore. They stripped me of my rank of Captain and dishonorably discharged me. I’ve been drifting ever since.”

Edgar nodded and said, “Thanks for telling me. I don’t feel so bad now about things.”

Smiling I said, “Glad I could be of help.”

Miles of riding drifted behind us and casually I said to Edgar, “You know the journey I’m embarked for is not an easy one, right?”

“Will there be danger?”

“Yes.”

“The discovery of ancient places and the unraveling of mysteries held in place since the dawn of creation?”

“Most likely.”

“Then what are we waiting for?” Edgar said, as he quickened the pace of his horse.

Laughing I called out, “Get back here the mule will only go so fast.”

Chapter Eleven

In need of Deliverance

It was getting on towards sundown. Edgar was looking at me with curiosity and finally he asked, “Shouldn’t we stop while there’s still a little light?”

“No, we keep going.” I said, as something drove me from within to quicken the pace.

The light was fading fast now. On a ridge up ahead I saw his outline against

the fading light and inwardly I relaxed even as I urged the Appaloosa and the mule to go faster.

“Who is that?” Edgar asked with concern.

Instead of directly answering I said, “It’s not too late for you to return Edgar, but soon it will be.”

“No! I’m along for the journey!”

“Okay then. Don’t hesitate to follow after me though when we get to what’s on the other side of that ridge.”

“You’ve been here before?” Edgar asked in surprise.

“In a dream.” I said absently.

Reaching into a pocket I pulled free a letter I’d wrapped in oilskin. I held it for a moment with my eyes focused on the dim figure ahead before I released the letter to fall to the ground.

As we crested the ridge the old indian disappeared with a smile. We stopped and breathing hard Edgar asked, “What was that all about?”

I didn't answer as the wind picked up with the fading of light from off the land. The wind got stronger and seemed to blow at us from behind. I eased down off the ridge toward the circular basin below us even as a rising column of fire began to form.

“Oh my!” Edgar breathed out, as we rode toward the flames that reached higher and higher into the sky.

Strangely neither the horses nor the mule were put off by the flames. It was a towering inferno of flame before us, but oddly the closer we got the cooler the temperature became. What an optical illusion this phenomena was!

I rode straight for the heart of the flame, as outrunning bursts of flame leapt out over the ground beneath the animals. Looking to the side I saw Edgar still there beside me in the flames. So be it then.

I stopped within the column of fire that was all about me and yet felt as if it was but cool breath against my face. Edgar sitting beside me wore an expression of profound shock. I felt rather mesmerized myself.

Looking down I, to my astonishment, viewed myself as something that was disappearing. I was still all visible, but my image was fading as if bits of me as a whole were being transported elsewhere.

Looking upward I saw the old indian standing beyond the flames. He waved

goodbye and I lifted a mostly faded away hand in like manner. I looked my last at the dark shrouded visage of this world cast in night and then I was gone from it.

Blinking I took in the foreign quality of my surroundings. The air was thin, but crisp and of good quality. I was glad I had packed warmly for there was a light dusting of snow upon the ground.

Looking to the side I took in Edgar, who was staring in rapt focus at the multiple celestial bodies of what appeared to be close orbiting moons that lay in the sky above us. Everything was breathtaking to behold in the newness of our initial discovery of it and yet looking around I acknowledged the very real possibility of the dangers that this new

world could hold for us.

“Well what do you think Doctor? Still glad you came along?”

“Are you kidding? This..... this is beyond any of my wildest expectations of what life could hold for me!”

Chuckling I eased the Appaloosa forward in the snow, “Just remember my good Doctor that it’s a highly probable likelihood that we are in for a war just to survive from this moment on.”

A howl swept through the chill air. It was like a wolf’s, but a little different.

I watched Edgar swallow nervously and I chuckled out loud. Outward humor or not I eased the trigger guard free of my pistol.

Rounding an up-thrust of stone a settlement of some kind lay before us in a depression of the land. Edgar and I

looked at each other and then headed forward again.

It was a relief to see some rather normal looking horses hitched up outside of a ramshackle construction of metal and stone that though very foreign in appearance had saloon written all over it. The other mounts at the hitching rail were not normal at all though.

I pulled up beside one that looked to be more bear than horse. The Appaloosa looked to the side in nervousness and leaning forward I patted his neck, "Its okay boy. There's bound to be a few hard to get used to things and for you this is one of them."

The beast beside us turned its hitched head to look at me and snarled. My fist slammed into its nose and it gave a

surprised snort of pain before then sidling away from the Appaloosa and me as much as it's tied off thick reins would permit.

“You leave my horse be or you'll get more from where that came from!”

The beast almost twice the size of my horse whined piteously. The thing was as timid as a puppy!

Shaking my head I dismounted and moved towards the door of the establishment. It was an odd door. I wasn't quite sure how to operate its rather complex looking latch system.

Edgar reached out and flipped some levers and the door sprang open quite unexpectedly. Edgar cleared his throat and said, “After you.”

Yeah. I ducked inside and headed towards the bar. Some things didn't

change apparently.

Reaching the bar I stared down an individual beside me that stood at least a foot taller and had the face of a cruel brute. He growled threateningly like an animal and made to grab at me, but I sidestepped and kicked his feet out from under him. In the process of him falling my hand found the back of his head and I slammed it down to connect hard with the metallic surface of the bar top.

The oaf grunted and fell unconsciously to land on the stained floor hard. Among other things the floor showed a good bit of blood both old and new.

The atmosphere the place reeked of vomit and unwashed bodies. Yet apparently one more thing universal about saloons whether on Earth or

elsewhere.

The atmosphere of the place now seemed much more relaxed though. I moved down a spot at the bar and immediately a woman of middle-aged bearing was before me.

She was Chinese in appearance, but thankfully she spoke in English of all things, “What will it be gents?”

“How’s the water?”

“Growing new worms every day. I got some Yarka milk?” She finished with hopefully.

“Yarka milk it is. Make it two.”

She nodded and stepped off the stool she had been standing on and moved away. She couldn’t be an inch over four feet in height.

Looking about the room I saw a mixture of many races present. Oddly I

felt like I'd come home in some ways.

“Yarka milk?” Edgar asked questioningly.

I shrugged.

“What if it's poison?”

“Then I'll shoot her. I think she knows that to. Relax Edgar and enjoy the adventure.”

The woman was back with two glass mugs full of a thick bluish looking fluid.

I picked my mug up and drank deeply. Putting it down I slapped Edgar on the back and said, “Try it.”

He did and with surprise he tried another longer sip of the cold blue milk.

Glancing to the woman I asked, “Would there be any work to be had in town?”

The woman looked around before leaning as far over the bar as her

diminutive stature would allow and said, "We could sure use a man of the law in town! You wouldn't be interested in the job would you?"

I started to speak, but she waved me to silence and said, "Forget I said that. Men of law don't last long and you have a good look to you and I'd hate to stand at your ash scattering ceremony on the morrow because of something I said."

Leaning forward I said to the woman, "I'm not much for law, but I do have experience at keeping the peace. I'll take the job."

The woman gave a gap toothed grin and loudly said to the whole barroom, "Take it easy on the new Marshal boys, because I like him!"

Edgar groaned and I turned from the bar to behold the room that had suddenly

come to attention at the bar mistresses words. It looked like I'd have my work cut out for me.

Doing my best to make the best of a bad situation I smiled confidently and said, "Who wants to go first?"

Four individuals of the thirty or so in the room stood up and I gestured for them to come forward. I unsnapped my gun belt and handed it to Edgar.

Life in these outer worlds certainly wasn't without trouble, but then I'd never known anything else.

A note from the Author

A little bit about what went into influencing the story.

- As a boy I discovered the western fiction of Louis L'Amour. I don't often re-read a book, but many of his books in my collection have seen the covers peeled back a number of times through the years and yes I own all eighty or so of them. His work helped to inspire me as a boy to become the man I am today.

- The times of the Wild American West of years gone by reflects a time of fierce individuality and adventure. A person had the ability to shape their own future and in the struggle to do so both the good and the bad of humanity met their end in various ways, often brutally. Those days of freedom are all but over, but in the exploration of deep space a new frontier as it were has been opened up, at least

in my imagination, and thus in this series I am combining the best of the past and its possible reemergence in the future, when desperate times will call forth for the actions of the tough men and women that defined the wild days of yesteryear, when Americans truly were free.

- As a Christian author my own bias, as it were, does creep into my writing. Many Christians and non-Christians will no doubt wonder at my explanation of the Genesis account. Allow me to clarify a few things as the views I have put forward in this book are not widely held ones today, although they were more predominantly held in the past by church leaders. What I have addressed in Chapter 7 is known as Gap Theory. Look it up and the Biblical arguments for and against it. To clarify it's not an admission that Evolution is possible as a theory. Far from it actually. It simply is taking the Bible literally as it was originally

written in the Hebrew. I used to be a Young Earth Creationist, but now after presented with the facts and my own prayer and study I've come to the conclusion that the world is far older than just 6,000 years or so. The main thing however is that God created Earth and has been managing it ever since and one day He's going to make a new one.

Reviews and help promoting my books is always appreciated. Thank You, to all who have helped me by doing so!

If you'd like to be informed about new book releases and the availability of free review copies then drop me a note and I'll put you on my fan list and send you updates as they come available. Contact Info:

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Guy S. Stanton, III

A few things about me



I live in the country and I'm glad of it. I have a beautiful wife sent from God, who graciously puts up

with me. God has blessed us with three
awesome children

that I am very proud of. It seems authors always
mention

whether or not they have pets and so I will say
that

we have four, two dogs(Kregridor and Thora)
and two cats (Chester and Herman). As to my
interests, well, writing
and waiting for the Kingdom of Shamayim.

ICE
WIND
Book Two
of
The Wind Drifters

Guy S. Stanton, III

Words of Action

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Ice Wind / Guy S. Stanton, III. – First Edition.

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Book 5: *Drift Wind, Spring 2015*

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*Dedicated to the people
of Israel.*

Chapter One

Land of Fire

I should have shot her. Gritting my teeth I went over in my mind for the hundredth time why I hadn't taken the shot.

I'd had my gun squarely centered on her back and..... and she'd turned and flashed me that playful tease of a smile that she was famous for. I'd froze. Then with a wink she'd jumped from the hovercraft to the ice lands below with stolen jewels in hand.

My only hope was that she had hit the

ground hard. I'd certainly hit hard.

Looking around I acknowledged again, for perhaps the thousandth time, that I could really use some water. I wiped at my brow. My hand should have come away with sweat, but I had been too long without water for that.

Another day like this and I'd be dead. Looking around at the sparse desert environment around me I shook my head at the oddity of the situation. Half of this world was a land of ice, while the other half was a baked leftover portion of hell.

I'd landed in the hell part, while even now she was most likely sipping ice cold water and chilling beside a lava flow. The urge to curse was strong and I felt at the gun by my side in futility.

She'd deliberately set a course for the hovercraft to crash on this arid side of

the planet. She'd known I couldn't work the technology in order to avert the ship's course.

She could've set the craft to explode or crash into the surface, but no, she'd set it to land down remotely. Once it had landed in this parched wasteland the self-destruct countdown had begun.

She'd given me all of five seconds to get clear of the ship. I hadn't had a chance to grab anything. All I had was the shirt on my back and the gun on my hip.

I should've shot her.

Zayri LaRarque was a beautiful woman and she used her beauty to full advantage. I'd fallen under her curse just like everyone else and let my guard slip.

She'd asked for her hands to be free and giving me that winning smile of hers

for some reason I had done as she asked.

Before I knew it some stale chemical smelling piece of cloth had been shoved under my nose. I'd blacked out almost instantly with the last image I remembered being of her smiling down at me before blowing a kiss.

Anger coursed through me at the memory of how I had been duped. To her credit, while I was out she could have killed me easily, but she hadn't. Zayri LaRarque never killed anyone outright, unless they deserved it.

Perhaps her not killing me when she had the chance was why I hadn't pulled the trigger.

Morosely, I looked forward and scanned the arid plain. The sockets of my eyes felt gritty from lack of moisture and upswept sand. The view was the

same as before, nothing but desolation.

Something buzzed and my half-asleep senses seized to life. Glancing to the left I saw a bee hovering in the air. Bees in the desert mean only one thing. Water!

It moved far faster than I could, but I managed to follow it long enough to come within distance of being able to see a few scattered out shade trees that grew up around a nesting of boulders. Trees, like bees, meant water and with the eagerness of desperation I made my way quickly across the rough terrain.

I could already taste the water. Unfortunately, as I got closer I could smell it. The smell was utterly rank!

With a heavy heart I approached the small waterhole. The pool of water wasn't much more than four feet by four feet in size, but squarely in the middle of

it was a Tanic wolf.

From the rate of decomposing tissue I placed the wolf's death at about three days before. To drink the putrefied water was a death sentence all of its own. There was also the highly likely possibility that the water itself was poisoned, hence the dead wolf.

What to do?

To go on without water was death. To drink the water was death with a lot more misery involved. A bullet to the head would be more merciful.

That left me with Option C, but that option had a lot of issues to overcome. It was in me to do whatever it took to survive though.

Lethargically I moved about gathering up dry branches from the three lonely trees situated around the waterhole. I put

a pile of branches together and reaching down I picked two rocks up.

Starting a fire on this side of the planet was a thing of simplicity. Everything was dry and the rocks had unique explosive qualities to them.

It wasn't the process of striking flint together as I had used often on Earth. In truth, very little about being off-world was as it had been on Earth.

I began grinding the two rocks off each other and the brittle stone easily pulverized into dust. It had been three years since Edgar and I had come into the worlds beyond Earth.

I'd left the memories of my life on Earth long behind for the most part. My efforts a year into the cleaning up of the frontier settlement that we had first landed in had been largely successful,

but the work had been unrewarding and the planet of little interest to me.

I'd left and expanded my outreach into traveling among different worlds acting as a solitary voice seeing justice was done. The life of a traveling lawman hadn't been for Edgar. He'd settled down on one of the more civilized worlds that we'd come across. I visited him time to time, but something always drove me on to keep exploring and righting wrongs.

I shook my head disgustedly. I was a dumb fool!

That point of fact had never been made more clear to me then now. With the rocks all but disintegrated into a pile of dust I took one stick and dipped it into the pool of green water.

Removing it I held it over the pile of

dust and shifted the stick about so the dripping water achieved full coverage over the little mound of dust. The dampened pile of rock dust began to smoke and then heat began to emanate from the pile.

Flames burst forth and I moved the pile of sticks over the flaming dust. I shuddered to think what would ever happen if it actually rained in this land of perpetual desert. It really would be a land of fire and ice then.

Watching carefully I kicked out the exploratory flames trying to lead off away from the fire along the top of the ground as rock dust scattered throughout the soil caught flame. My stick pile was well ablaze and I went in search of more wood with which to feed the flames.

The whole time that I gathered sticks I

had to fight against the conscious urge to drink the polluted water. The smell didn't seem to matter, nor did the rotting corpse squarely in the middle of it, because to my body it was simply water and I needed it to survive. My brain seemed to be alone in its fight to keep me from committing suicide.

The waiting was hard, but I did it and then I did my best to prepare for what came next. I'd stripped off a wide piece of bark with my knife from one of the trees and now with the fire's work done I rolled the piece of bark into a funnel.

Crumbling some dry leaves up with my hand I let them spill over into the funnel which I held closed with my other hand. Reaching forward I picked up some charcoal from my fire that I had pulverized into smaller pieces. I let the

charcoal fall on top of the crumbled leaves in a shallow layer. Then I brushed at the sandy dirt beside me in order to remove the volatile surface soil and get at the non-volatile dirt that lay below.

Scooping up some of the non-volatile soil I let it trickle from my hand on top of the charcoal until it formed a layer. I repeated the entire process until I had five repeating layers of charcoal and sandy dirt. Holding the funnel gingerly I got up and moved closer to the pool of stagnant water.

I suspended the bottom end of the funnel, which had about an inch wide circular opening, over top of a piece of twisted metal shaped like a bowl that I had managed to scavenge from the blown apart wreckage of the hovercraft.

With my other hand I then began to carefully dip the putrid green looking water out of the waterhole to then let it fall on the top layer of my funnel.

It took a while, but eventually the water began to seep all the way through the layers to drizzle into the makeshift metal bowl below. Patiently I continued to dip water out of the pool until the bowl was full.

The bowl now full I carefully moved it over to where my fire had been and taking some fresh sticks I built up the fire again from the remaining embers of the first fire. The sticks soon caught on fire and taking three larger sticks I laid them across the fire to make an even plain to set the bowl on.

Now all I could do was wait and watch the precious ingredient for all life

cook away before me. Wispy tendrils of steam rose up out of the bowl.

Groaning I hugged myself with my arms and tried to think of something to distract me from the water that needed time to boil before it would be fully safe to be drunk.

Even after the water had boiled it would be too hot to drink. I'd need to let it cool, but before too much longer I'd have cool running water trickling down my throat and into every part of me. Maybe I could drink a little bit of it now and the rest after it was done boiling.

My hand was reaching for the bowl and I had to literally seize it with my mind to stop the foolish intentions of my body. I forced myself to get up and walk away from the fire. Some temptations were just too great to be resisted it

seemed. Zayri was such a temptation.

In desperation to distract myself I allowed myself to think about her. She'd been hard to catch. She'd led me on a merry chase across the plains of one world and through the forests of another. Finally I had enlisted the help of some traders and with the use of their ship I'd been able to run her down.

While I'd been out from whatever she'd drugged me with she had jettisoned the unconscious crew suited up in the hovercraft's parachutes, until only one parachute had remained, hers. Where the traders were now I did not know, but they weren't here. They probably had plenty of water to drink wherever they were though.

Zayri had stayed on board just long enough for me to revive so she could

gloat over her victory. I'd slipped my hand free of the restraints that she'd had me trussed up in and been able to reclaim my gun from her. She'd streaked for the open portal and I'd lost the opportunity to exact the revenge I should have in order to repay her for this purgatory she'd caused me to land in.

Well, despite what she had intended, I was going to survive this. Turning back to the water I saw that it was boiling enough for me to believe it to be safe.

I had water and thus the source of life that all humans needed. Anything was possible now.

Chapter Two

Hard Run

I sat back watching the spectacular sundown of this world with two suns. The one sun was farther out and smaller, while the other was closer and much brighter. This world orbited both suns, but the twin gravities affected the orbit of the planet in a unique way.

Half of the world was pulled in closer to the brightest of the suns, while the other half saw less of either of the suns and experienced extremely cold temperatures as a result. It was a world

of extremes for sure.

As soon as the twin suns sank below the horizon I would be on the move again. My way forward would be lit by the light of this world's four moons.

In a way it never really got completely dark on the sunny side of this planet. That had its benefits and drawbacks.

Right now it was a benefit because I had light to travel by. Looking back to the waterhole I looked at the lump of falling apart flesh that I had drug-free of the water.

Tanic wolves didn't bother me, but what had killed this one did. The abundant solar power of this side of the world fostered a whole assorted array of the reptilian kingdom that ranged from snakes to lizards. It was said that even

dragons were commonly found in both colder and warmer regions of the planet.

I hated all of them with perhaps the exception being the dragons. They kept to themselves for the most part and didn't bother humans, but to the others I was free pickings.

There were sand vipers big enough to swallow children or short statured people. They would lay in wait buried beneath the sand for months at a time patiently awaiting their next big snack to come along.

Ornig lizards were vicious little monsters that seemed impervious to fire, which amazingly enough they had mastered the effective use of. They didn't breathe it as some of the dragons reportedly did, instead they were aware of the explosive quality of the top layer

of the soil in these deserts.

They would mound it up within traps and wait for a victim to come within range before a whole horde of the little monsters would spit on their piles and ignite them. Whatever victim had wandered into the kill area would be surrounded by a wall of impenetrable flame.

Sometimes the Ornigs would wait for the explosive flames to cook their meal for them, but other times they would just race out into the flames and take bites out of their victims flame and all. Their traps could be avoided, if you knew what to look for, and for the most part they were cowards without the use of their fire to back them up.

On every world I traveled I killed every one of the pesky little saboteurs

that I ran across. I found the depths of their guile in the pursuit of food to be intolerable.

Neither giant sand vipers or swarms of Ornigs were to blame for the wolf's death though. The wolf had been missing a chunk of flesh from one of its rear legs. And on further evaluation I had determined that the wolf had been in the water for far less time than I had initially thought.

It could have stumbled into the water as early as a day and a half before I had arrived. It had been apparent that it had been eaten up from within with infection.

Near death the wolf had hobbled to the waterhole out of severe thirst, because of the fever ravaging its body. It had then collapsed in the water and died from its injuries.

There was only one creature other than a snake that could kill with just a single bite. A Ranzer lizard.

Ranzer lizards were big and yet they could out run a man over short distances. They had no poisoned fangs, but rather it was their saliva. I'd rather be bit by a snake any day then suffer the after effects of a Ranzer's bite.

Nobody survived from the resulting infection of a Ranzer's bite. The dead wolf was clear evidence that there was at least one Ranzer in the area. One was too many.

When I caught up with Zayri.....I could practically feel my fingers around her throat even now. Shaking my head I tried to get a grip on myself. I'd never let any woman get under my skin like I had her. Worst of all was the attraction I

felt for her that called out to me in some elemental way that defied all logic.

I stopped walking as several profound thoughts occurred to me. The urge to hunt Zayri down after I survived this trip through purgatory was overwhelming, but I would probably be best served if I avoided her.

Not making her face the justice that she deserved rankled, but it was probably for the best. She was poison to me and I didn't want to end up like that wolf back there. I was close enough as it was to his condition now!

I started walking again as my mind continued to ponder. What would people say, 'Taran Collins, feared lawman afraid of a woman.' They'd be right too. Whatever had induced me to take the cuffs off of her?

Not knowing the answer to that had me seconding my choice to avoid her from now on. To say that my poor decision making stemmed only from the raw attraction that I had for her just seemed to somehow cheapen the man that I had thought that I was.

She had a way of passing through the usual barriers straight to the core of who I was. Yes, it would be best to avoid her. Let the gossips say whatever they wanted to.

I made good time through the night. The water had rejuvenated me and my will to live was strong. Despite my new positive outlook I wanted no part of facing the heat of the dual suns rising in the sky behind me.

It was time to find shelter from the

heat and wait for night. I could afford to do that now as I had filtered extra water for myself, which now lapped to and fro within my hat that I held before me with both hands.

I found a likely spot, but with anything it was always best to investigate first. Picking up a rock I spit on it and then I threw it forward to land on the most likely spot beneath an overhang of projecting boulders that formed a natural shelter from the two suns.

The sand near the fallen rock shifted and a huge fanged mouth appeared only to clamp down on the rock I had thrown. In the next instant the monstrous snake spewed the rock back out before turning its bright eyes filled with hate toward me standing a safe distance away from it.

I stepped clear of the viper's presence and moved on. Giant sand vipers lacked any speed to apprehend a victim and so the snake watched me go helpless to make up for the months long vigil it had kept beneath the sand lying in wait for a meal. Personally I was very glad to see it disappointed.

About a half mile further I found a large boulder that offered a minimal amount of shade from the heat of the risen suns. It would have to do as all the best spots were taken.

Blinking I opened my eyes. It was very hot and judging from the position of the larger of the two suns I determined that I'd only been asleep for about four hours.

The heat was insufferable and I didn't

give myself a very good chance of being able to fall back asleep. Miserably I looked around, which is when I saw the clouds.

In alarm I shot to my feet. Clouds meant the possibility of rain, which heralded the occurrence of a desert fire. An unlikely occurrence, but so too was the sight of clouds on this side of the planet.

Picking my hat up I drank all the remaining water held within it. Putting it on my head it offered only a momentary relief from the heat as its soaked interior cooled my head. Just as quickly though everything was hot again.

I started walking south and away from the storm front that lay at my back.

Time passed, but with it my suspicions were proved correct. For

such a harsh environment there was more life than one would expect hidden within it and now, like me, animals were heading south for the cover of the ice fields. My best guess was that I was two days out from the swamp land that lay between the desert and the colder water rich lower hemisphere of the planet.

My pace quickened into a run, as the paranoia of the fleeing wildlife inspired the same within me. Looking back I was pretty sure I didn't have two days by which to reach the swamp lands.

By nightfall I was completely exhausted from running, but I kept on. It may be night, but the entire horizon behind me was lit up by fire. By my calculation I'd managed to shave maybe a half days journey off by running, but the ground beneath me remained volatile

sand.

I stumbled on through the night, the need to survive demanding the impossible effort that I was putting forth.

Breathing hard I crashed into a boulder and lay against it for a moment. Dawn wasn't far, but the fire was closer. Close enough to feel the heat of it against my back.

Grimly I looked back to witness the progress of the sizzling flames that raced along the ground feeding on the explosiveness of the top layer of dirt. I had but minutes before the flames reached me.

I could see greenery to the south, but it was still at least a half days journey away and that was only if I ran the whole time. I wasn't going to make it.

“God I need help!” I cried out.

Shaking my head I acknowledged that I had been far too stubborn in asking of help from my Heavenly Father lately. It shouldn't take dire circumstances such as this to provoke conversation with my Maker.

The light was brighter and straightening up from the boulder I pressed on towards the south. Escape from the flames might be hopeless in my present condition, but I had to try.

There were some projecting up-thrusts of rock ahead with one larger mound of rock in the middle of the rocky spires. Maybe I could find a sheltered spot away from the flames. It was my best chance at the moment for survival.

Reaching the first outcrop of rock I realized with a start that it wasn't a

natural outcrop, but rather the fitted stones of a building's corner foundation. Ruins?

To my knowledge there was no human settlement on this world nor ever had been. The structural remnants were very old from the looks of it and the odd pillar standing here and there were inscribed with a language unfamiliar to me in my travels among the outer worlds.

With renewed energy I pieced my way past ancient piles of rubble toward the central construct of stone that still stood for the most part intact. The air rebounded around me of explosions from the fast approaching storm of fire.

Making my way around the still intact stone walls I came across a pillared entrance way that led into the interior of

the structure. I stopped and stared for a moment in profound shock at the emblem that was emblazoned across the top of the entryway.

I'd seen the emblem before. As a boy I had seen my great-grandfather wear such an emblem about his neck on a necklace. I'd even asked him once what it was. He'd smiled and said with a faraway look, "It is but a token memory of a place long since past. Harmony. The symbol signifies harmony."

Then with his face reflecting deep sadness he'd said, "Harmony is no more." That had been all that he'd say and I had let the matter drop.

Walking as if a man blind to all else I made my way down the line of pillars towards the wall at the end that seem to be illuminated in a warm glow apart

from any outside light source. There was a skitter of scales and instinctively I lunged off to the side drawing my gun.

I heard the snap of jaws and a burning pain in my side erupted to life. I fired. The bullet struck the Ranzer in the one hind leg and with a screech it lurched off to the one side.

It turned its baleful eyes away from its leg to me and I filled it full of the lead from my five remaining shells. It jerked repeatedly and keeled over on the ancient stones of the place as the light of life left its reptilian eyes.

I felt on the edge of hysteria. I'd made it so far only now to die. No it couldn't be!

Here I was in a place that must surely tie in to my distant past, but all I could hope to experience now was a death torn

apart by a war from within. Shaken to the core I looked down to the gash in my side that I felt blood pouring out of.

Something dawned on me then and my sluggish senses quickly caught on to the distant hope presented. The ranzer hadn't bit me. It had swiped me with one of its taloned forelegs. There was still the chance of infection, but the flow of blood out of me had likely washed all contamination from the wound.

I was going to live!

Blood was dribbling to the floor and in concern I realized that I might not live after all given the rate at which I was bleeding out. I had to stop the flow of blood somehow, but I didn't have time to make a fire as the thought of cauterizing the wound came to mind.

I had a very bad idea then. Groaning

with the expected pain of what was to come I nonetheless made my way back out to where the pillared entrance way opened up to the sands of the desert.

I tore my shirt off and laying down on the ground I scooped up a handful of the top layer of sand.

“Oh God!” I whispered out, as I held my hand up and let sand funnel out of my hand down the length of the gash in my side.

Breathing hard I watched the sand soak up the blood and then it began to smoke and then my torn flesh burned. I slammed my fist repeatedly into the ground in a hammer like motion as I writhed in agony on the floor of this ancient place.

The smell of my flesh burning had me wanting to throw up, but I had nothing to

throw up already being days without food. The flames were finally out as the sand was spent of its fuel to burn.

Crying I rolled up to my knees. The bleeding was stopped, but I felt like I'd lost several years of my life in the amount of pain I had just suffered through.

Glancing through watery eyes I saw the fires of the desert getting close. The thought of my whole body engulfed in the flaming agony I had just suffered through drove me to my feet and back down the pillared interior of the structure.

What I was hoping for I didn't know. While through some miracle there was little sand accumulated in the interior of the structure the smoke alone from the outside fires would likely kill me. I'd be dead outside by now though anyway.

The atmosphere inside this place was already heated and looking back I saw flames all along the opening of the pillars. I came to the wall at the end of the pillared causeway and coughing repeatedly on the smoke I studied the many carvings and glyphs on the wall before me.

It was just a bunch of gibberish to me. There were stories to be told in the glyphs, but I didn't know how to read them and I didn't have the time even if I did. All I recognized on the wall was the central symbol, which my great-grandfather had said meant harmony.

Harmony of what?

There was nothing in a state of harmony on this world that I could tell of. One glyph caught my attention. It depicted a planet with two suns on

opposite ends of the planet. There were four moons orbiting the planet as well. The glyph was depicting this world as it must've once been!

Somehow the lesser of the two suns had been pulled out of its orbit and closer to the other one. The discordant orbit caused by two suns exerting gravitational pressure in the same direction must be what caused the extremes of this world's downfall from what evidently had been a highly sophisticated culture at one point in time.

This place must've once been a paradise. With two suns on opposite sides of the planet there had likely never been night. Coughing I commented out loud, "Harmony broken." As I realized what my grandfather had meant so many

years ago now.

At the sounding of my words the glyphs on the wall before me, along with the many inscriptions in an unknown language, briefly glowed. Blinking in surprise at the apparent advanced technology of this ancient place I said, "I need to get out of here."

Great, my madness had reached the point of talking to walls.

I put my hand to the wall and it immediately glowed where my fingers touched. I traced my fingers across the surface and the glow followed the path of my fingers.

Very cool and all, but it did little to help me in the moment. The wall had first reacted to a voice command so maybe speaking was the way to go, but what to say?

I thought of my great-grandfather and what little I remembered of him. My cousins, my brother and I had always been in fights with each other and chief of all things I remembered about my great-grandfather was how he would step into the scene of the fight and say over and over again, “Harmony must be restored!”

It’s was worth a shot, “Harmony must be restored.” I spoke aloud.

The wall before me cracked and groaned and what I had taken to be etching made into stone disappeared from view as the wall became smooth as glass. Then indentations formed and the world as it was now formed deeply etched into view in the wall.

I didn’t have any more time for these games of discovery. “I need to leave!”

One of the four moons pulsed brightly and I said, “Yes, take me to the moon!”

All four moons pulsed with color, but reaching up I touched the one that had glowed first.

The indented image on the wall before me changed again and this time the moon in question appeared. It revolved slowly almost as if it was an orb separate from the wall.

Different spots on the moon lit up and flashed. I got the impression I was being asked where on the moon I would like to go. I saw what looked to be a city with a flashing icon beside it and I touched it.

There was a snapping sound and I felt myself pulled backward by a strong wind. Pulled backward was a small word for it, I was flying back down the row of columns and then the columns

were no longer in view.

There was darkness lit up by stars and then I was coming in to land on the surface of a clearing in a patch of forest. Gun in hand I looked around in surprise as the wind left me and I found myself breathing air that was devoid of smoke and fire.

Looking up into the sky past the branches of the trees revealed that I was no longer on the planet that I had just been on. Instead I was looking at it right now in space.

Had my ancestors really once been of this world and had mastery over these moons? The evidence seemed convincing that it was so.

How then had it all come to the ruined state it was in today? Had they not been wise rulers? Had they been judged by

God or had events beyond their control occurred to wipe out almost all traces of civilization on the planet that I had just narrowly escaped from?

I didn't know the answer to any of my questions, but I did know I was no longer choking on smoke or under the threat of being burned alive. Kneeling down I expressed my gratitude, "Thank you God! When my life's journey doesn't make sense You somehow make sense of it all. Help me be about accomplishing Your will and doing what needs done."

Getting up I headed towards the sound of water in the forest. There were the usual forest sounds, but then just as I reached sight of the noisy stream of water all sounds ceased within the forest. I froze in place not moving a

muscle.

I heard crashing in the brush and my hand drifted down to the gun that I had just holstered a few moments before. In sudden realization it occurred to me that I had never taken the time to reload the gun after I had emptied it into the Ranzer!

Internally calling myself every kind of a greenhorn idiot I stood there silently. Not being discovered was my only defense now.

A man burst free of the foliage further upstream from me. There was a panicked look to him that spoke of great terror.

Glancing back he halted his rapid breathing for a moment and seemed to focus on listening over the need to breathe. His heavy breathing came back

then and seeming slightly less alarmed he knelt down and drank water from the stream noisily.

The sound and look of the fast-moving water was on the verge of driving me mad with the urge to drink it, but I dared not move. I remained motionless as I listened to the sounds of the forest in search of anything that might not belong within the natural framework of a forest's repeating melody.

I didn't hear the threat, but I saw it coming in fast over the tree tops and for a moment I almost called out a warning to the man still lapping up water by the stream. Two barbed metal shafts with thin metallic cables attached zipped through the forest foliage from above.

The man screamed in pain as the barbed shafts sank into the back of his

shoulders. He grasped at the stones of the river screaming with the terror, of horror unequaled, but it did no good. He was born aloft into the air to be bumped off tree branches until he cleared the canopy of the forest.

Once clear of the forest canopy the craft hovering in the air overhead turned and headed back the way it had come. The man had still not ceased from screaming as he was flown off from out of my sight.

My need for water forgotten I pushed through the forest until I reached an overhanging precipice that rose above the treetops further down the slope. I walked out to the edge of the cliff and from there I had a good view of all the surrounding land.

My eyes took in the city at the valley's

bottom with interest. Of special note were the pyramid structures that dominated in size over all the other buildings.

I'd heard people talk of the pyramids of ancient Egypt back on Earth and then of course there had been the accounts of the children of Israel and Egypt to be gleaned from Scripture. What I was looking at now though seemed different somehow. A blend of ancient with something more advanced.

Even from this distance there seem to be an oppressive quality to the valley, which after what I had just seen clearly witnessed to it. The man no doubt had been an escaped slave.

I didn't hold with slavery and from the looks of the structures in the valley below it would seem that there would

need to be a lot of slaves in order to have brought such monolithic structures together. Idly I drew my pistol and started thumbing cartridges into it from my belt.

I needed to restock up on ammo by paying a visit to Edgar sometime soon. For now though a new job had opened up in which the possibilities were endless.

The people down in the valley being oppressed to build such structures could very well be the remnants of my people. So could their captors for that matter. Time would tell on both accounts.

I turned and headed back to the water. The water was more abundant on this moon and the chance of fire slight, but I had the distinct impression I had just jumped from the cooking pot into the

flames.

Chapter Three

Mercy Given

My observation that this was likely a slave colony could not have been more close to the truth. It wasn't a slavery of human versus human either. Not for the most part anyway.

There were human looking guards, but the major influencers on the scene where a hybrid combination of human and animal or bird as the case may be. It was like watching a literal scene of ancient Egypt come to life in front of me.

I ducked behind the corner of the

building I was hiding behind as a jackal guard turned its svelte black head with wolf's eyes to glance in my direction. Seeing the oppression of these people and the actual existence of entities only part human brought a whole new meaning to the plight of the Hebrews in Egypt off the pages of the Bible to me.

So far I'd only seen two hybrid creations. The more prevalent of the two being the jackal men and the less prominent number being men with the head of falcons.

The level of unease I felt at even being this close to such evil had me second-guessing as to why I was here. I was only one man after all.

I had exactly twenty seven bullets left and reversibly the jackal guards carried a power staff that I had seen the likes of

before, which had a seemingly endless ability to fire repeatedly. Those staffs could blow quite a hole in an individual.

The more human looking guards were only outfitted with long knives and whips. I withdrew from my position in case the jackal guard should come over to inspect the area. He had seemed to be of the suspicious sort.

I skirted along the edges of the city in the valley. It was really two cities. One grand one and a second city separated apart from the first one, which could only be described as a dump.

As near as I could tell the grander of the two cities was sparsely populated and was host to only the hybrids and some humans, mostly women from the looks of it.

I spent all day scouting it out. As near

as I could tell I placed the count of active bad guys at about five thousand, with only about five hundred of them being clearly of the hybrid persuasion.

Any way you looked at it there weren't good odds to be had. Now if I only had some artillery pieces loaded with grapeshot and about two regiments of cavalry, things would have been different.

I left off scouting the city of vanity personified and drifted down the valley toward the slave city. It was a hunch on my part that they had some of those devices that scanned for body heat. It most likely was how they kept the slaves from escaping at night and then how they tracked those few down that did choose to run, as I'd seen earlier in the day.

The thought of that being me hanging

in the air from barbed shafts impaled in my body just didn't sit well at all. I could only imagine what had happened to the man after I had last seen him.

In complete horror I watched from the edge of the forest the spectacle that was going on at the main gate of the slave city. There on a tall poll, which had a horizontal cross arm high up, hung the man from earlier in the day. He was still alive!

Not only was he alive, but he was still hanging from the barbed shafts stuck fast in the back of his shoulder muscles. Then as I watched one of the barbs tore free of the muscle and the man hung there from one barb only. It wouldn't be long now.

Glancing to the ground I saw directly

below the man an area of upward pointed stakes. The horrific quality of the scene was only added to by the group of people tied to short polls that ringed around the stakes situated beneath the tall poll.

All the slaves that had returned from the other city after a day of hard labor would've had to walk by this gruesome scene, and those slaves held over and chained to the posts were no doubt the man's family. They were being forced to witness the man's demise one muscle ripping moment at a time.

The man in the air was sobbing out and trying to gesture the stakes below him away even as those on the ground sobbed at having to witness the atrocity that they were being forced to. All of those on the ground were looking

upward to the man hanging from the pole.

I saw one little girl look away and she was promptly whipped hard by a guard standing nearby. Still crying she glanced upward again as she even now had new scars to add to her young life.

“The need for deliverance is great Taran.”

I wasn't overly surprised at the sound of the old indian's voice from beside me. He'd appeared off and on over the years that I'd been in space.

“What are you going to do Taran?”

“Not sure, but I do know I'm not going to let this game go on any longer.” I said, not looking away from the man or his crying family on the ground.

The man's actions had become more desperate as he no doubt felt the

remaining barbed point start to tear free. I pulled my gun free and sighting down it I aimed a little above the man's head. It was a long shot to make with a pistol.

“The evening breeze blows from the east.” The old indian commented.

“Yeah.” I said adjusting my aim to the left slightly.

I pulled the trigger. The report of the gun sounded loud, but I had the satisfaction of seeing the man's body go limp. The lifeless body tore free and fell down to be plunged through harmlessly.

“May God have mercy on his soul.” I said meaning every word of it.

“He was a believer. Even so it will be accorded to him in the last day when he inherits eternal life.”

I looked to the old indian and asked, “What am I doing here?”

He smiled, “What you always do Taran.” He said, as he slapped me on the shoulder and started to move on by.

“Which is what?” I asked despondently.

“Good. You do good everywhere you go Taran. Men faithful to the Father’s will are hard to come by and you are one of them.”

Watching him go further into the darkness of the forest I called out, “I can’t do this one alone. God knows I can’t. This isn’t a little town or a little local fight for freedom. There’s a whole city of them!”

“Tell me Taran, all that you’ve done over these past few years, did you do it all yourself?”

“Well no. I wouldn’t have gotten far without God helping me.”

“What makes you think anything has changed Taran? There may be more of the enemy then you have encountered before, but is not God the same as before too? Have faith Taran. Victory is waiting to be claimed even as in all your other conquests for the Kingdom of Heaven. Now go into the city, because yes, they are scanning the perimeters of the city for body heat signatures.”

I glanced back toward the city only to see a great hubbub of activity brewing. He was right I needed to move, now.

“One more thing Taran. You were right about not being able to do this mission on your own, which is why you will need to acquire a partner if you hope to be victorious in setting your people free.”

“Partner? Who?”

He just smiled at me and I knew!

“Oh no you don’t! You surely know what she did to me! Look!” I exclaimed, as I pointed to the angry red scarring of flesh along my whole left side.

“She’s not fit to be a partner to anything but a snake and a cross eyed one to boot!”

The old Indian had the temerity to laugh at me as he faded from view.

“Now look here I’m not having this!” I cried out, but I spoke to empty night air.

Looking into the heavens I made my case directly, “She tried to kill me God!”

No answer.

“She’s nothing but a lying little thief!”

“She yet possesses a soul Taran. Tell me, do you wish Me to consign her to hell?”

Taken aback by the answer I stumbled backwards several steps and stammering I said, “No. No, I don’t wish that on her.”

“I know you don’t. It speaks well of you, especially in light of all that she’s done to you.”

I really needed to be going, but what was being asked was just too much. “I’ll do this on my own. With Your help I can do anything.”

“Yes you can, but you’re not a thief.”

There was no arguing with that. What did I need a thief for?

There was no more time to wait in indecision. I took off at a run and a quarter mile further I slipped into the slave city compound as the hovering drone of craft in the night air sounded

loud over top of the surrounding forests.

All the slave quarter doors were closed to me. I dodged down several side alleys in avoidance of search patrols. Pausing to catch my breath behind a shack I huffed out, “What makes you think she’ll listen to me? She hates anything that represents law and order.”

I ran on and several minutes later I continued my rant, “She’ll stab me in the back. Whatever needs stolen in order to free these people if it has any value she’ll make off with it and leave everyone in the lurch.”

Sighing loudly I pressed my sweaty forehead into a stone pillar and begged softly, “Please don’t make me find her.”

“Why?”

Gritting my teeth I ground my forehead into the stone and said, “You know why!”

I waited for an answer, but none came. Opening my eyes I saw a door open and several arms gestured for me to hurry.

Trustingly I broke away from the pillar and ran to the open door. It was completely dark inside and I was ushered along in the dark by unseen hands.

There was a loud creaking noise and then I was being pressed down into a recession in the floor. I went willingly.

I heard the chink of a jar and the smell of food assaulted my senses. The floor was laid back over top of me and I was closed off in a cocoon of dark silence. It was a good thing I didn't mind tight

spaces. Edgar would have been going nuts by now.

I reached out and claimed the half loaf of bread resting beside me. God bless whatever slave was going hungry tonight in order to feed me!

I ate hungrily until all the food and most of the milk was gone. Then I just lay there. I was tired and now was a good time to rest, but I lay there with my eyes open in the dark. My mind was full of all things Zayri LaRarque.

Somehow I had to get back down to the planet then somehow find the little backstabber. Convince her to come to a heavily enemy occupied moon and get her to steal something I didn't even know about yet.

Presumably I then needed said unknown stolen object in order to do

something yet undisclosed in order to free the people. I closed my eyes. The plan would never work.

I'd chased Zayri to long and learned too much of what made her tick, to think she would ever agree to risking her neck on behalf of someone else. She was as self-centered as she was beautiful. Which begged the question, what did God know that I didn't?

What would cause someone to do differently than they normally would?

Somehow if there was to be a chance of her helping me she would have to somehow come to like me. Not only like me, but be bound to me in some stronger way than an iron manacle.

“God?”

“Yes.”

“You know what I'm thinking.”

“Always.”

“Am I wrong?”

“Yes.”

I sighed loudly, “Then what am I supposed to do? How else do you break a wild mare like her into being willing to accept someone else’s lead?”

“By being the honorable man that you are.”

I twisted in my dark prison uncomfortably. Honorable? Why?

Part of me wanted to strangle the life out of her, while the other part of me wanted to experience all the pleasure her body had to offer me. Images of her drifted through my mind and silently I acknowledged that I had deserved to be dumped in the desert.

When it came to her I was willing to break every law. I was a man structured

by law and order and yet lawless when it came to her.

“God help me be honorable.” I said softly, as I gave in to agreeing to involve Zayri in the plan to free these people. Finally sleep came, but all I saw in the darkness was her smile.

Chapter Four

Forgotten History

The night passed by, at one point the house above me was roughly searched. My finger hovered near the trigger of my pistol as I waited for my hiding spot to be discovered. The moment never came though.

The remaining hours of the night had drifted by, until I heard movement above and the floor was pulled up with a creaking protest. I eased off on the trigger at the sight of faces made thin by little food and too much work.

I holstered the gun and accepted the hands being offered down to me. Stiffly I rose up and looked around at the gathering of mostly older people.

Daylight shone through the mud brick windows brightly. Most of the working age people would already have been at hard labor for several hours by now. I'd slept longer than I thought I had.

Looking around at the gathered faces I felt guilt for the food I had eaten the night before. The sea of faces parted for a younger woman who came straight to me.

She was crying and I guessed that she was some relation to or perhaps even the wife of the man I had shot. She came so close that we were almost touching and then she did a curious thing. She let her head fall forward until her forehead

pressed into my chest as she continued to cry.

It was the act of a sister or a close loved one and yet I was a stranger among these people. Stranger perhaps, but family for sure.

I could see my great-grandfather in these people. I was of their blood and they seemed to sense it. My arms closed around the woman before me protectively as I let her cry even as a group all the older people around drew closer to lay aged hands on me.

The desperation in their eyes was beyond denying and the hope I saw reflected in their eyes as they stared at me seemed unjustified. Unjustified or not I would do my best to free these people. My people.

God help me though I didn't have a

clue as to how to go about it. All I knew was that I needed a partner, presumably in order to steal something.

The crying woman drew back and the group hug seemed to be at an end. Perhaps the oldest looking man I had ever seen stepped close to take my hand in his feeble grasp.

Aged eyes stared at me unflinchingly from a face that was etched with the passage of time and sights best not seen, “Welcome home.”

Hesitatingly I asked, “You know me?”

“Yes, when I look at you I still see my great uncle.”

Swallowing I looked into the eyes of a flesh and blood relation out of the past and asked, “What can I do to help?”

“Come.” The old man said before proceeding to lead me up a flight of

rickety looking stairs.

I followed behind him prepared to catch him, if need be, as he laboriously made his way up the narrow stairwell. The stairway ended in light and gaining the top of the stairs I looked out on a rooftop garden that overlooked the surrounding perimeter of mud brick buildings that constituted the slave quarters.

Moving further out onto the roof I looked up the valley to the upper city. I'd seen it the day before, but now my distaste for it knew no bounds.

“Have you seen those who oppress your people?”

I nodded, “Tell me of them anyway. What are their weaknesses?”

He shrugged and seemed at a loss to name any before stating, “Vanity

perhaps. Militarily they have none that I know of.”

“How did all this happen? I know nothing of the past.”

He nodded, “I thought as much. Much time has passed. I was but a young boy when the world, as we knew it, ended.”

“How old are you?” I asked wonderingly. I knew my great-grandfather had been well over a hundred years of age when he had died, but an exact age had never been given to me.

He shrugged, “I’ve stopped counting the bitter years of my life. Long have I wondered why I have persisted to this day, but now I begin to see. El Elohim is gracious to have allowed me to see the end of my people’s bondage even as I was there for the beginning of it.”

“The war is not over yet old one. I am but what you see, a man of flesh and blood. I possess no army or advancements in technology.”

His age eyes rose to mine and he leaned his hand forward to squeeze my arm, “You possess something better than an army. You yet have the unbroken spirit of our forefathers. I fear it has all but been beaten out of those who survive to this day. With the passage of another hundred years we will all be as cattle trained to the cart, with knowledge of nothing but what our masters tell us.”

Gesturing to the collection of broken down slave quarters around us he said, “Behold your army! We are yet strong, but we have no leader. You will help us?”

“Yes.” I affirmed, but then I said, “I

do not wish to be a leader to my own family's demise though. Tell me why you have not rebelled before. There must be twenty of you to every one of them.”

He nodded and with deep sadness said, “Oh but we have rebelled my son. Once there were a hundred to every one of them. Now they keep our population firmly in check. They slaughter our newborn sons and take our daughters in order to breed more of their kind.”

The muscles of my jaw bunched at the imagery that his words evoked, “How long has this been going on?”

“The last rebellion was over thirty years ago. Since then they allow one in every three boys to live and they take two out of every three girls born to us.”

Bile rising in my throat I asked, “How come there aren't more of them?”

He turned his old eyes to the city of tall stone spires and massive pyramids and said, "Once they were very active in seeding more of their kind through the use of our women, but now they use the women more for sport than for procreation. The few pregnancies that do come to full term give birth to individuals often more similar to their mothers than their beastly fathers. It has been rumored that the strength of their blood has been depleted and the reason why there are few new births is that they do not wish to expose their weakening powers. Perhaps this too is a weakness, but we cannot wait for them to peter out as a reproducible kind. If it were to reach that point they would kill us all out of spite before allowing any full-blooded human to go free. Their hatred

for us is of old.”

“Where did they come from?”

“Earth the same as we all did. A place called Egypt was the place of the great exodus that brought our people here to this world. Not this moon, but the planet you see in the sky destroyed before you.”

I looked up into the sky to behold the massive planet of fire and ice that I had escaped from. The old man went on, “We were slaves then to. There was a revolt by the slaves and most of the beast men were killed. Those few that remained managed to escape to other worlds where they set up new kingdoms. As a people, who shared a common similarity of once being a slave, the former slaves of this world came together and took over control of the planet. Hundreds of years passed and

our numbers spread out across the breadth of the planet. The beast men and others of evil likeness tried to come back many times, but we fought them off. Our world became a beacon of hope in the galaxy for enslaved people everywhere. Revolts were spawned on many slave worlds because of our success. My ancestors even went so far as to go off-world and help the revolts be successful. We were unstoppable. We won every battle we faced, it seemed, whether in the spirit or in the flesh. Their hatred of our humanity has always been great, but so has our hatred for them for having once enslaved us and still yet again to this present day. Some believed the war would soon be over against them as there were fewer and fewer of their kind to face in open battle

or to hunt down. It was the beginning of an era that promised unparalleled peace.”

Tears slipped down the old man's face and wiping at them he said, “Then they did the unexpected. Somehow they changed the mechanics of how our planetary system worked. The harmony of our two suns was broken and the lesser of the suns was pulled into close orbit with the larger one. Massive earthquakes of unparalleled power swept throughout the land. Entire cities were leveled and coastal cities were swept out to sea by great waves and gravitational disruptions caused by the moving together of the two suns. For the first time our people saw night. Always before there had been daylight constantly. The planet's course changed

and it listed off to the one side and now half lays buried in ice, while the other half burns continually under the heat of both suns. Our world was destroyed without even a fight on our part.”

“How many died?”

“Billions.” The old man quivered out emotionally. Looking to me he said, “You have to understand it was not just our own people, but the escaped slaves of countless worlds, as well, that helped make up our population. Those few of us who survived the planetary disturbances were picked off the surface and transported here to once again serve as slaves. Daily we have to bear witness to the former greatness of our people and its current destruction as we slowly orbit around our old home. Our world was destroyed by hatred. Our beast

masters are ever vindictive in their treatment of us. To know and constantly be reminded of the freedom that once was ours, but now lies in ruin is a daily torment that has driven many of us to madness, such as the man you helped escape a painful death yesterday. The stakes are bathed with a certain kind of acid that cauterizes human flesh in order to prevent an individual from bleeding out and so often a person will survive for days impaled and in unimaginable agony as their loved ones are forced to watch. Now you are here and despite the knowledge of what will happen to us should we fail, we are yet a people who yearn to be free. You offer us hope. Hope that the unexpected can yet be achieved. Thank you for what you did. Your presence here is an inspiration.

There were rumors of small bands of our people escaping the planet's destruction, but never have we seen living proof before you came to us."

"I've been away from Earth for a few years now. Why have I never heard of any of this?"

"It's said that the surrounding worlds were purged of any record of our former greatness and more than one generation has passed by since the downfall of our world. Much is lost with the passage of time. Indeed we have become a forgotten people, until today. El Elohim has remembered us. Tell me your name."

"Taran Collins"

"The last name must have been an assumed name taken once back on Earth, but Taran is familiar to me. You are not the first to be named so. Taran you strike

me as a man of experience in matters of war. What do you think of our situation?”

I sighed, “Not good. They have technology on their side and you at best have clubs and spears. There can be no advantage of a surprise attack, because they monitor all of your bodily movements within the valley.”

“How so?”

I waved my hand dismissively, “Not important. Just believe me that they are. The only thing I see going for us is numbers.”

“You’re wrong there. We now have you.”

“They’re probably not far from figuring that out. I can’t stay here.”

He nodded, “I thought as much, but how will you escape? You saw what

happened yesterday.”

“I did, but just the same I have to try. What do you know of the planet’s surface? What’s your name by the way?”

“Royan.”

“Royan what do you know?”

“Well nothing other than that it’s destroyed.”

“Not quite. Hazardous yes, but not destroyed. I just came from there yesterday. I tracked a thief to the planet through a gateway portal and she seemed to be purposeful in coming there. Do you know of any hidden colonies or camps on the planet’s surface?”

“No, I don’t! We’ve only been told that the planet was dead of all life.”

“Oh no, it’s got life all right!” I said touching my side that still hurt terribly. More than anything it itched, but I dared

not scratch at the new skin forming beneath the scabbed over surface.

It was a miracle that I hadn't come down with so much as even a fever from the whole ordeal. The volatile sand must have burnt things good.

“Tell me, how did they get the one sun to leave its orbit?”

“No one knows. I once overheard a conversation by two of the lesser hybrid beast men in which both professed a lack of knowing as well, but the one said he'd heard there was a device channeling the power of the sun into a different dimension whatever that means.”

“Fascinating. Tell me where might such a device be kept?”

“I would say the grand palace and more directly probably the grand temple.

The grand palace is slightly separated from the larger pyramidal works in the valley bottom. It's further up on the hill that looks out over the valley. It is the most heavily guarded of all the building complexes in the valley. The remaining beast men of the old order reside there. Very rarely do they leave.”

“Why is that?”

“We don't know. The people who are taken to serve them have to stay there and they never return to us. All we know about the oldest of their kind is that there are five of them. There was a sixth, but he died several years ago. That pyramid farther to the left is his.”

In total I saw six pyramids arrayed about the upper city. Four were built and two were a work in the process of being completed.

“What’s going to happen when those two remaining pyramids are completed?”

“Some say that is the day we will all be put to death, because once the last pyramid is completed that there will be no further use for us. I fear indeed that is what will happen if something is not done.”

“Not going to happen Royan. I need some clothes in order to fit in better and then I will make my escape from the city.”

Royan gestured back the way we had come and I made my way off the roof garden.

Some things were a bit clearer now for me. The path to victory however was not.

I at least had an inkling now as to

what might need stolen. Now how to convince my escaped thief to join in and fight for a noble cause?

I had my doubts, but God had never led me astray yet and I would be faithful to do what I had been given to do.

Moving about within the slave city I soon realized that my presence was common knowledge. Although they made an effort to not show it they gave evidence of their excitement in partly hidden smiles and whispered words. God help me not disappoint them!

Ornan, the man assisting me, led the work ox out of the corral to me. Doubtfully he said, "I do not understand how you plan to escape. Hundreds have tried and all have been caught and killed!"

I took a tight grip on the lead rope of the old ox and smiled as I said, “An old indian trick from the world I was born on. I’m hoping it will work in the present as it has in the past.”

I brushed my side up against the ox as close as I could get and then I let it have a little leeway to move forward. The animals of the slaves roamed the valley freely with there being no stipulations raised against them.

Keeping the ox beside me I matched it step for step, as I bent down, in order to not be spotted by hybrid guardsmen. Few guards came to the slave village and those that did weren’t unused to the oxen moving about on the plain of the valley bottom.

With each step forward I used the ox’s heat signature to mask my own as I made

my way forward across the open pasture towards the forest edge. Before I'd done this stunt I'd looked around for about an hour and finally spied the device that I felt sure was the heat scanner. I'd made sure before I had begun this walk to keep the ox between me and the scanner.

Once we reach the forest the ox seemed hesitant to go further, but with urging it lumbered onto a game trail and ambled along at a pace that was gratefully hard to bear because of its slowness.

Finally I felt I was far enough away and I ditched the ox, which promptly headed back toward the valley. I brushed at something on my arm and came away with a tick. With disgust I threw it into the brush and then busily I shook and brushed at my borrowed wardrobe to

dislodge any more of the unwelcome guests.

The ticket to freedom had still come at the cost of some of my blood, I noted grimly, as I dislodged a tick from my calf with the blade of my knife. That done I hurried on and within an hour I was back at where I had appeared on the moon the day before.

Staring at the planet in the sky before me the question of how I was to get back there hit me hard. I had no idea how to engineer such a feat.

Unlike the pillared enclosure on the planet's surface there was nothing in this clearing to suggest of technology or even of civilization.

“I need some help God.”

I waited listening, but all I heard was the breeze whistling through the trees

around me. On inspiration I went with the breeze and to my surprise just past the clearing the forest abruptly broke off along a sheer cliff that plummeted down several hundred feet.

The breeze from the forest blew strongly at my back now, even as another breeze blew up the face of the cliff to ruffle my hair about. I felt an urge from within telling me that this was the way to travel off-world.

Looking down into the gorge littered with rocks I said, "You can't be serious?"

The breeze strengthened, as if in answer, and I had a hard choice to make. I had to trust God if I was going to take one more step to free the remnants of my people. I had to free them and just as inexplicably I had to trust God in order

to do so.

I jumped.

Air rushed by me and then I was rushing by rocks and trees and into darkness and light. It was too much to keep my eyes open and so I shut them, but the vision they had afforded me while open had been mesmerizing.

The air turned cold and I opened them to see ground coming in closer to my field of vision. Icy ground.

I landed and slid several feet forward on the ice as the wind dissipated at my back. Looking up I watched the air current that had brought me here swirl away with almost an iridescent color to it that was steadily fading, until all I saw was the darkness of the night.

The moon I had just come from glowed brightly in the distance of space.

The mysteries of travel by wind and flame were just that. I doubted if I would ever learn the secrets of such long distance travel through seemingly ordinary elements of nature.

Chapter Five

Lava Water

My eyes slitted against the cold wind of the southern end of the planet I looked about at what had once been my people's home for hundreds of years. All that I saw was ice and it was so cold that the only true way to describe this barren landscape was to say it was the essence of cold itself. Cold in temperature and cold in bleak formation.

I stepped forward my boots crunching on the icy ground, as snow pellets stung at my cheek. Fire and ice. I wasn't sure

which side of the planet I preferred over the other. Either way you looked at it there was little to welcome home a long-lost son of the land.

Brightness in the dark drove me to head off towards my right and before long I came across a flow of molten rock. The blast of heat was welcome, but the chill at my back didn't abate any in intensity. I needed to find shelter and quick.

I moved along the hissing stream of lava, as close as I dared to, in order to feel its warmth. As I made my way along I couldn't help but wonder why of all places Zayri had chosen to jump out over these ice fields.

There was more water than the desert side for sure, but I found the freezing cold no more hospitable than the lizards

of the dry side of the planet. To have jumped out into such a desolate landscape as this bespoke of confidence and perhaps some knowledge of the land. How would she have had such knowledge?

Could she be a former slave descendent? If she was of my people then I had perhaps stumbled upon my first solid means of convincing her to help me.

She was a thief and rumored to be a loner so any allegiance she might have would be thin at best. Still it was something.

The lava flow made a gushing noise up ahead and glancing forward I watched as steam rose up from what appeared to be a precipice of some kind. Carefully I made my way to the edge and

looked down over what indeed was a cliff.

It seemed that I was at the border of an ancient sea or perhaps a lake. A flat plane of ice stretched out for as far as I could see in the semidarkness.

At the base of the cliff was the only place I saw water actual moving. In fact it was boiling. The lava flow kept an open hole punched through the ice, as it cascaded down over the cliff and into the body of water at the base of the cliff.

I noticed something peculiar then. A large pipe led up out of the open hole in the ice and led off along the surface of the ice toward the opposing shoreline of what appeared to have once been a natural harbor before the ice had taken over.

That pipe meant one thing. People.

Hurriedly I looked for a way down off the cliff top to the ice sheet below. Seeing a way I started down.

Distances were deceptive. It took me upwards of an hour to get down off the fifty foot rise above the frozen water. The ice plastered to everything made the simplest of movements hazardous.

I stepped out over the ice towards the pipe and about did a split. Cowboy boots were not my friend here. A pair moccasins would've been better, but the thought of nothing but a piece of leather between the ice and my foot sent a shiver up my spine.

Reaching the pipe I saw that the end of it elbowed down into the boiling water. Touching the metallic pipe my hand felt warmth. They were apparently pumping the water out of the hole and

using it for something.

I shook my head as the ingenuity of what they were doing occurred to me. They were using the warm water as an unlimited heat source.

Beneath the cloak I wore I slipped the trigger guard off my gun and began flexing my frozen fingers in order to get them to work for me if needed. I followed along the pipe hoping it would lead me someplace warm and sheltered away from the wind.

I stopped a hundred feet or so offshore from the opposing cliff of what I felt sure had once been a harbor in better days. There appeared to be a series of old sea caves in the cliff face before me now.

Airships of a medley of differing designs were parked within them. Taking

a close look at the airships I came to a very unwelcome conclusion. This was a pirate cove.

They were using the inhospitableness of this world to hide their base of operations from forces of the law. I had not just one thief to contend with, but perhaps a hundred or more.

I stood there in the cold wracked by indecision as to what to do. I really had no choice, when it came down to it.

I stepped out toward the one cave that had been fronted over with metal siding and that had a door in it. It was where the pipe disappeared to as well.

Stepping up to the door I tried it and found it unlocked. I stepped in briskly and slammed it shut behind me.

Warm air welcomed me, but that was where the relief stopped. I was in a

cavern like room that bore an uncanny resemblance to a typical Western-style bar back on Earth. Some things didn't change.

Hard eyed stares greeted my arrival from both men and women alike. It was a hard looking lot for sure. I could only applaud this group of brigands for their cunning in flying so cleverly under the radar.

Experience had taught me that there was only one way to play out such a deck of cards as I had just been dealt. One had to be upfront, because if for even an instant one projected a spirit of fear before such a cut throated mob as this, you could expect to be dead just as quickly.

I made my way through the crowded place and up to the bar. Digging a gold

piece out of my pocket I slammed it down on the bar and said, "I'll take some of your lava water. Warm preferably."

The bartender, a balding man, with an eye patch over his left eye to go along with the atmosphere of the place picked my gold piece up and bit into it.

Studying his tooth impression in the coin he nodded approvingly and put a glass of murky looking water on the bar top before me. I seized a hold of it and drank the whole glass down.

It wasn't water per se. Firewater would've been a better name for it. I hadn't had a drink of alcohol in years, but for now I was somewhat grateful for the bite of the drink as suddenly I wasn't cold anymore.

"I know this man! I seen him off-

world twenty or thirty light years from here. He's a law man!"

The pointed anonymity of everyone within the place rose a notch and in the silence that followed the man's ascertainment of who I was I turned and faced the room. Boldly I said, "That's right, I'm a law man and I've come to arrest you all. Put your weapons on the bar and line up to be cuffed."

There was a moment of silence then, which was shattered by the sound of laughter by almost everyone in the room. I wasn't deceived though. I knew what was coming.

A man close to me with a curled mustache of epic proportions swung a bottle at my head. I ducked and grabbing one end of the handlebar mustache I pulled and the man followed along

screaming.

His face met my uplifting knee and the crunch of his nose was a sickeningly audible sound within the room. There was a moment of shock then before all hell broke loose.

They came at me from all corners and I did my best not to give them a still target to focus on. It was to my advantage that half of them were drunk, but there were far too many of them to be able to realistically overcome.

The odds didn't matter. It was in my nature to fight. In fact I enjoyed it.

I'd taken several hits to the head that had jarred a few less grounded thoughts loose to bat around within the recesses of my mind. The smoky hint of pain faded to be replaced by an analytical

appreciation on my part for the joy of a no holds barred fight.

I slammed a kick into a downed man's rib cage. Dodged a woman's out thrusting claws and made sure to push her forward into a man's punch that had been intended for me.

I really frowned on hitting women, but there were those times when a man had to do what he had to do. I gripped a brunette by the hair that had just smashed a chair across my back and swinging her up I threw her bodily at three onrushing men. All four of them went down.

I was grabbed from behind by a choking hold of an arm about my neck. I sent both my elbows backward to smash into the man's ribs and with a wheeze his hold on me slackened and I stepped out of his arm lock only to be knocked

upside the head by an unseen right fisted punch that had power to it.

The fight went badly for me then and it became increasingly hard to give out as much as I was receiving. In fact, I was wincing at the expected impact of a drawn back fist, as I was held for the moment immobile by two others.

A women's voice, I knew only too well, rang out, "Tarken stop!"

The muscled pirate before me gave a befuddled blink before dropping his fist to stare at the woman issuing the order. In general the fight against me had stopped.

It would seem that Zayri had garnered quite a bit of respect among her thieving brethren, which was of no surprise to me as she was the best thief that I had ever run across. The two men holding me let

go and I stood unsteadily on my feet, as I weaved about slightly in my effort to remain standing.

Everything hurt. I hadn't been in a fight like this since the Civil War, only I'd been a lot younger then. I spit out a mouthful of blood and felt about my teeth with my tongue, only to gratefully find that they were still all there. Call me vain, but I had no desire to join in with the ranks of those who featured the toothless look.

My hands were bleeding badly from where I'd worn the skin off the knuckles and from deflecting the punches of others. Wiping at my face I dryly noted that I'd put more blood on it than I had wiped off.

My one eye was swelled shut, but the other was able to focus enough to see

Zayri now standing close by. I felt her slip my pistol free of its holster with a light touch and her words soon followed, “Why didn’t you use your gun Marshal?”

I hurt all over and I wasn’t entirely sure I was fully conscious, but strangest of all was that I couldn’t get over how good she smelled. Shrugging I about fell and one of her hands was on my arm constraining me from completing my trip to the floor.

From busted lips I muttered, “Didn’t see much point in killing anybody. Not what I came for.”

“You didn’t answer my question Marshal.” I heard her say softly.

Blinking I stared at her confused out of my one good eye. My thinking admittedly was slow, but her statement

made no sense. Then, I realized, looking into her eyes that she was referring to me not shooting her when I'd had the chance to back on the hovercraft.

I didn't have an answer, other than there was something about her I found undeniable and never wanted to see harmed.

Her eyes on me were too intense to keep meeting in direct contact. My eyes drifted down to the warm looking upper exposed contours of her breasts and I darted my gaze back up to hers hoping my attraction to her wasn't as much of an open book as I feared it was.

Too late. I saw the realization in her eyes and immediately I wondered how she would use it against me. Incredibly though, I saw her step closer to my blindside and then I felt her loop my arm

about her shoulders, even as her hand came around my back to press against my far side for added support.

I tried to resist, but there was little left in me to protest against anything, least of all the soft feel of her skin and form pressed up against my side.

“I’m bleeding on you.” I said huskily, as she directed me toward a doorway, as her arm around my back urged me forward.

“It will wash.”

I let her lead me on and taking a moment I looked about the bar only to see that the place had been quite demolished in the fight. Pulling my remaining money free from my pocket in an action that hurt my chaffed knuckles I tossed the remaining gold pieces on the counter before the bartender, “Sorry

about the mess.”

“Don’t be! Haven’t seen so much excitement in years! Would you like some more lava water?”

I knew the alcohol would burn, but right now the thought of something to help numb the pain was a temptation I couldn’t resist, but before my lips could speak Zayri spoke out instead, “The Marshal doesn’t drink.”

The bartender blinked and in a puzzled tone I asked, “How do you know?”

“I make it my business to study all the habits of my adversaries. When you came in here you really didn’t want alcohol, but you made the mistake of asking for it because we call Barney’s concoction of rotgut, lava water. However I don’t recommend drinking

seawater in its place.”

“No, I imagine not.” I said, a bit befuddled by everything going on.

Had Zayri really stepped in and broken up the fight and was she even now helping me? She certainly looked and smelled real. As my Aunt Ruth would’ve said, “The good Lord surely does work in mysterious ways.”

“Can I have my gun back?”

“No.” She said coolly.

“Am I a prisoner here?”

“It depends.”

“Depends on what?”

“Why did you come? And what are you going to do with the knowledge of this place?”

I squeezed her shoulder lightly, “Relax. I’m out of the law business.”

“Oh really. How come?”

“I found something better to do.”

“You intrigue me Marshal, but you still haven’t answered my question of why you are here.”

I really didn’t feel that now was the best time to go into my reason for being here. I wasn’t in my right mind so to speak and I felt the grave need to pass out and be dead to the world for a day or so.

She stopped her progress down the long hallway, which forced me to a halt. Groaning I realized I had no choice.

“I need your help.”

She was silent, but she started walking again.

We entered a room with a decidedly feminine touch to it despite the rocky walls. I saw a chair and headed for it. It hurt to stand let alone walk. Someone

had smashed something across my one knee and my one hip hurt abominably from where someone had kicked me.

Zayri shifted me in a different direction and I saw a narrow bed along the one wall. I shook my head puzzled, “Why are you helping me?”

“Someone needs to. Goodness knows you don’t have the good sense El Elohim gave to a gnat to come walking in here like you did.”

Far from being insulted at being referred to as of less social status than a gnat I chuckled instead. Oh my ribs hurt!

Cringing I lowered myself down onto the bed. I lay there for a moment blessedly free of a lot of the discomfort of being upright.

Looking up at her standing there I tried to remember what we had been

talking about, but so help me I couldn't. Instead honesty came from my uncontrolled fogginess of mind, "You're beautiful."

I saw a slight flush highlight her features and some part of my willful consciousness cringed. I shouldn't have said that.

She turned away and was gone. Darn it! I'd offended her.

Suddenly she was back and sitting down on the bed beside me. I looked at her in surprise, but it was hard to keep my one eye open.

"Don't fight it Marshal. I promise to not take advantage of you while you sleep."

Strange my normal self would be affronted at the thought of being at this woman's mercy, but right now I really

didn't mind the idea at all of being at her mercy. That was alarming, but all I felt was peace.

She had a warm wet rag and she was wiping at my face with it. It hurt and felt good at the same time.

"I'm sorry." She said softly.

"Sorry for what?" I asked dreamily, as I felt unconsciousness begin to close around me.

"For not stopping the fight sooner."

She was sorry about that? How odd.

My shirt was being pulled away from me and I heard her gasp so loudly that I came to full awareness and half started to rise to see what the threat in the room was, but she pushed me back down.

"What's the matter?" I asked thickly, as my one good eye had already fallen closed again. I was so tired.

“What happened to your side?”

“A Ranzer took a swipe at me. I was bleeding out so I packed volatile sand in the wound.”

She swore loudly and my hand rose blindly to feel at her face, “Don’t swear.”

My hand fell from her face and slid down to lay conformed around the warm contour of one breast. She always dressed so provocatively and I’d hated her for it, because of the temptation she offered, but right now I couldn’t care less.

I should take my hand away, but it remained as if it had a will of its own. The comforting feel of her was the last thing I remembered.

Zayri looked down at the Marshal’s

intimately possessive hold on her. She should move his hand away, but he seemed to be drawing comfort from the touch of her so she remained not moving within his grasp.

Her eyes left his hand to look down upon his bruised, but impressively muscled physique. He'd called her beautiful, but as a man he was beautiful to her.

That beauty was now in part marred by the angry swath of burned flesh along his one side. Quite unbidden she felt tears slip down her face.

She'd been attracted to the straightlaced marshal for years and what was more was that she respected him as she did few men. She hadn't wanted him to die, but he'd gotten to close to capturing her and she'd had to

do something to throw him off her trail.

Stranding him in the desert had been the best compromise she could make. An act that wouldn't outright kill him, but most likely would have led to his demise in time.

He'd survived though, as she thought he might and now he was here in her room. What was she going to do?

She heard noise and looking up she saw Marcy step into the room. Marcy was a tall robust blonde that now featured a black eye, but otherwise seemed none the worse for wear.

Coming closer she observed the sleeping Marshal's grasp of her and smiled before saying, "It looks like the long arm of the law has finally caught up with you Zayri."

Zayri looked from her to the Marshal

as a flush once again warmed her features. Marcy's hand settled warmly on her shoulder and squeezed before she leaned down to whisper in Zayri's ear, "I wouldn't let this opportunity slip by you. The life of a thief, howbeit, a necessary one for some of us, doesn't have to be the only avenue for all of us to ever venture into in life."

Marcy left closing the door and Zayri was left with a choice to make. She shook her head as a soft smile played about her lips.

This was so unlike anything she'd ever heard about this man. She was witnessing his true emotions right now. It would likely be a different story when he woke up.

Looking about the room she took in the bare sparseness of the room's

furnishings. The life of a thief, while it had its moments of glamour and excitement, in the end it was an often empty and bare experience.

The warmest thing in the room was the Marshal's hand on her. He needed her help. That alone was exciting.

And as for glamour she'd had her fill of it. Whatever it was that he wanted she'd do it, but she wanted something in return.

She wanted more of what he was giving her right now, a loving touch. She'd only felt the harshness of others expressed towards her in life in terms of touch. His touch was the first that actually seemed to give back more than it took.

Looking at him she acknowledged that she had deep feelings for this

latest stranger to come from Earth into the outer worlds. He'd hunted her and now he'd caught her.

His hand started to slip and she caught it. Pressing a kiss to the scabbed over knuckles she debated about what to do.

He'd be a different man when he woke up, but now she knew the truth of what she'd glimpsed on the transport craft before she'd jumped. He couldn't resist her.

That fact most likely made him angry she mused to herself. So what to do?

It would no doubt make him happy that she would willingly cooperate with him. But with the mystery job done he'd probably go back to drifting again. Like her he was always moving on, but she didn't want that life anymore.

She wanted to be in the sun running from nothing and experiencing love and devotion from a real man. How then to make him settle and stop his drifting pursuit of bringing justice to the stars?

He'd said he wasn't in the law business anymore. That was curious.

She laid his hand down on the bed as a plan emerged. It was simple really. She'd seduce him.

She'd have to be careful though. The Marshal was a very straightlaced individual. Being too overt in her seduction would be no good. She'd have to make him think being with her was his idea, which meant she needed to provide the proper amount of playful resistance, while at the same time putting herself out as a prize not to be denied.

Right now however in his unconscious state he was fair game. Going to the door she locked it.

She could only imagine what the others must be thinking of her actions. Marcy had probably already blabbed everything she'd seen to one and all.

It didn't matter. Her crew was loyal to her and would accept any decision she made. She'd set this hiding place up and she'd been the one to put forward a plan of action that had seen them all profit greatly in the past few years. Her exodus now from the scene, while missed, wouldn't be crippling.

She came back to stand beside the bed. Despite the excitement of the moment she was tired. The Marshal however took up most of her bed with his large frame.

Smiling, she slipped her dress off. She liked pretty things and her undergarments were perhaps among the prettiest in the galaxy. It helped her to feel feminine to know how she looked beneath the clothes she wore, when constantly surrounded by the roughest elements of the criminal world.

Another thing she liked was to smell nice. Going to a little table she pulled free a small bottle from a drawer that had a blend of essential oils held within it.

The blend of oils was extremely rare. She'd traded an entire collection of diamonds and rubies just for this one bottle. It had been worth it.

Still smiling, she took one drop and dabbed it onto her chest, which she then rubbed into the skin. It was a

temptation to take everything off, but that would be too much.

Going to the bed she pulled his boots off and set them on the floor and then climbing over him she fit herself into the narrow space between him and the wall. Pulling the blankets up over both of them she lay on her side staring at him.

Smiling she listened to him snoring. She'd never cared about the sound of men snoring, but with anything that was him she was completely captivated by it. Acknowledgely, she was growing completely infatuated with him and in the here and now she was reveling in the experience of being so close to him and not having to fear that he intended to haul her away in chains to some dank abusive prison world to serve out

her many crimes.

Staring at his lips she could barely refrain from kissing them. She wouldn't have refrained at all except for the fact that they were both split and that if she kissed him like she wanted to she might cause him pain and maybe cause his lips to start bleeding again.

Leaning forward she contented herself with kissing the goose egged knot over his one eye. Pulling back she watched him sleep in a mixture of fascination and sensual tension.

She wanted him, but she'd have to wait. Idly she flexed her ring finger. Would a man like him ever marry a woman like her?

She hoped so. He began to stir slightly and in alarm she watched him move beside her. If he woke up right

now it wouldn't be good!

His eyes didn't open though. He'd turned on his side and with an instinctive motion he pulled her to him.

Eyes wide open she now lay still within his arms. His breath ruffled her hair, as her cheek was pressed to his chest. Tentatively she hugged him to her with her upper arm, while being careful not to let her arm lay on the burned flesh of his side.

She breathed in the heady aroma this man had, while laying still in the bed, yearning all the while for more. She'd never experienced anything like this before.

She only had a vague memory of a mother holding her as a child and then it had been a rough-and-tumble life of managing to just survive. The muscles

against her cheek and the arms about her were security itself and his smell was reassuring as much as it was intoxicating.

“I think I’m falling in love with you Marshal.” She breathed out closing her eyes, as she relished the closeness of him finally being near to her.

Chapter Six

Deception Forsaken

Blinking I opened my eyes. The bed was warm, but empty somehow.

Slowly I sat up and swung my feet to the floor. I felt like a new man and yet the ache of my injuries remained.

She wasn't here, but I smelled her all about me. The door opened and a blonde walked in with a platter of food along with an engaging smile.

Cringing, I asked, as I pointed toward her eye, "Did I do that?"

"Not directly, but you sort of helped it

happen.”

“I’m sorry!” I said.

“Now there’s no needing to be apologizing Marshal. You were only defending yourself and my can you do that well! You laid out over half the crew all by your lonesome. Here, I thought you might like a bite to eat.” She finished with, as she set the tray of food down beside me on the bed.

She laughed and I looked up surprised. She gestured to my face and said, “You look like you’ve never seen food before.”

“It’s been scarce lately.” I admitted.

“Well be a big boy and eat it all gone Marshal.” She said, as she then turned to leave through the door just as Zayri entered the room. The two women shared a smile and then the blonde

disappeared.

It hurt to look at Zayri and so I turned to the food beside me and occupied myself by filling myself full of it.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Zayri pick a chair up and place it rather closely in front of me. She straddled it and folding her arms over the back of the chair she rested her chin on them as she watched me eat.

She was way too close!

Trying my best I sought to come up with some conversation to break the silence of the room.

“Why do you all keep calling me the Marshal? It’s an Earth term. I’ve never asked to be called by it while I’ve been away from Earth, but it seems like a hard title to escape.”

“So is being a thief. Tell me Marshal

do you think people can change?”

I looked up to her and gazed into her eyes. All I saw was trouble dancing in the blue depths of her eyes as she stared in rapt focus at me.

“The name is Taran and yes I believe people can change.”

“Okay then, Taran,” she affirmed dramatically with a smile before adding, “What can I do for you?”

I looked back down to the food feeling the need to very much escape from her. I tried to think, but all that seemed to register was how beautiful she was.

Something was wrong.

I was supposed to be having a hard time to convince her to do something noble, but instead it sounded and looked as if she wanted to do anything I asked

of her.

“Do you have anything else you could wear?” I asked huskily.

“Of course I do. I’m a woman aren’t I?”

Nodding my head still staring at the half eaten food beside me I said, “Yes you very much are. Zayri I find you very desirable and I can’t think with you right there.” I said gesturing to her very exposed chest before me and with a soft laugh she stood up and turned away.

My eyes swung to her and I watched her move away. The tight leather pants she wore hugged every curve of her rear. What was wrong with me?

I was in lust, that was what was wrong with me. Incredibly then I saw her take her top off and in shock I looked at her bare back.

“What are you doing?” I asked thickly. She glanced over one bare shoulder, “Giving you a less tempting view Taran.”

She pulled something white from a drawer and put it on and then slipped on a silky looking blouse. She bent forward slightly to fluff at her hair as she looked in the mirror and then she turned grandly back to me, “How’s this?” She asked dramatically.

The view of open cleavage was gone, but the effect of her was unabated in terms of raw appeal.

“It’s better.” I said.

She came back and turning the chair around she sat down rather primly upon it. I still couldn’t think and it did no good to see how she was laughing at me with her eyes.

I was supposed to be noble and asking for help from on high I came to a thought that revolved about something else other than her, “How long have I been out?”

“About a day.”

Nodding then I suddenly remembered everything.

“Do you know the history of this planet?”

“You mean about it once being a slave world that fought and gained its freedom from its overlord masters, then yes I do.”

I looked at her again then and saw more seriousness, as well as curiosity, to be found within the depths of her eyes.

“When the planet was torn apart by the one sun being moved out of its place, some people managed to escape to Earth. I come from that bloodline of people. Some of my people that didn’t

die on the planet's surface are now being held as slaves on one of the four orbiting moons as a sort of everlasting punishment by their former masters of a millennia ago. I want to free them, but not only that. I want to restore the balance, harmony if you will, of this world. I want my people to once again be free to roam the surface of this planet. A planet no longer held locked in either ice or fire.”

Then switching tactics I said, “You seem to know a lot about me?”

She nodded and I went on, “Then you must know that I am a believer in the Creator.”

She nodded again, the curious light to her eyes growing only brighter. I looked away, “While in prayer I received instruction that the task I want to

accomplish is too big for me. I need a partner and that partner is you.”

Turning her head to the side she said, “Explain.”

For fear she was taking my meaning of partner in the wrong way I hurriedly said, “Not a partner in any physical way! I meant I need your help professionally. I believe the beast men holding my people captive possess the ability or more likely a device that is causing the one sun to remain out of its proper orbit. I want you to help me steal it or perhaps damage it. I’m sorry I don’t know much more than that. It’s very vague sounding I know.”

She stood up and walked away a few paces. After a moment she turned to regard me speculatively, “I want a full pardon. Not only for me, but my whole

crew here.”

I hesitated as to what to say, “I don’t have the authority to grant you a pardon.”

She started to turn away, but I held up a hand forestalling her, “But I can give you a local pardon as it were.”

“Local pardon?” She asked, turning to face me fully.

“Yes, if you and your crew help me defeat the rule of these beast men and this world is returned to harmony you and your crew are free to stay here and live in peace and freedom. But only if you stop from being thieves. You can’t continue to use this world as a base for crime. You have to leave that life behind you.”

Regarding me coolly she said, “You don’t offer us much in return for us

helping you. As you can see this base is extremely hard to find and it benefits us for the planet's climate to remain as it is.”

“I found it. So could others.” I countered with.

“Perhaps, but unlikely. We could just kill you and make it all go away.”

“Yes, you could. That's certainly an option before you and a sensible one I might add.”

She looked at me in surprise before asking, “You think it's sensible of us to kill you?”

“From your position, yes.” I answered honestly.

She pick something up off a table beside her. It was my gun.

“Why do you continue using this outdated Earth device instead of a

rechargeable power stick?”

“It’s what I’m used to and it still works just fine in getting the job done.”

She nodded and looked at me as she held my gun poised in her hands. I wasn’t quite sure what she was going to do.

After a long moment she looked down to the gun in her hands and said, “I like you Marshal. You handle yourself well as a man. I’ve never been chased by a better hunter than you, neither have I received more mercy at the hands of another individual than you.”

She fell silent for a moment before adding, “You’re asking a lot.”

“I know.” I admitted not sure what else I could say to make the deal a better one for her.

“Zayri the life you’re leading right

now doesn't end well. Back on Earth I had my own wild fling with the law and it about killed me. In a way it did inside. If God hadn't stepped back into my life I wouldn't be here right now.”

“Is it your God that makes you the man you are?”

“Yes.” I said firmly.

“If we do what you want and this planet is restored than what of us? We know nothing else than what we're doing now by which to feed ourselves.”

“You asked me when you came in here if I believe a person could change and I said yes. There is more to life than stealing.”

“Yes there is.” She said softly before turning her back to me.

I steadily gazed at her back. The tension emanating off of her was tangible

to be felt within the atmosphere of the room.

“You are a very honest and thoroughly honorable man aren’t you?”

“I try to be.” I answered, as I wondered at the oddity of her question.

“All my life if I wanted something I had to steal it. First it was food and then jewels and gold. I’ve never been able to steal affection though.”

I waited with bated breath for her to continue.

“Do you remember how you touched me before you fell asleep?”

“Yes.” I said thickly, as my intimate grasp of her came fully to mind.

She ducked her head down and I stared at the back of her neck wanting her to turn and face me so I could see the emotions at play on her face.

“Well Marshal I liked it. You probably think I’m a loose woman given how I dress and act, but I’m not.”

The tension seemed to double within her tensed back muscles and I did not doubt that I was hearing the complete and honest truth from her. “Go ahead Zayri. I want to hear what you have to say.”

A moment passed before she spoke in a strangled sounding tone, “The truth is that I’ve liked you for a long time. You’ve always seemed to stand for everything that I’m not and I the hunted have respected you the hunter for that. What’s more is that out of that respect I’ve also become quite infatuated with you.”

She gave off a half choked scream as angrily she said, “I shouldn’t be telling

you this! I never reveal my true intentions to anyone!”

She started to walk toward the door angrily and I stood up and called out to her, “Zayri!”

She stopped.

“Go on.” I urged.

In a small voice she said then, “I’m sorry I stranded you in the desert! I didn’t want for you to die and yet I was scared and I acted rashly. I’m glad you survived the desert! I’m glad you’re here. It was my intention to agree to do whatever you asked of me so I could continue to be near you. I intended to seduce you in order to make you my lover. Like everything I’ve done in life all I would be doing is taking what’s not mine! You are a good man and you deserve better than to have been dumped

in a desert that kills most that it sees. What's more you deserve better in a woman than someone who's very first plans for you while you slept to passed out to awaken was to seduce you into doing my bidding.”

Her voice was rich with tears now. “I'm a thief! I'll always be a thief. It's just what I do. I steal, whether it's jewels or affection it doesn't matter!”

I stepped out towards her then and she wheeled around holding my gun leveled off at my head with her finger on the trigger. She blinked her eyes free of tears as anger colored her tone, “Get out Marshal! You have my permission to leave. Tell whoever you want about this base. We'll find a new base and leave this world for you to give to your people. You can go on being an honest

upright man of faith without fear of being dragged under by a scheming woman out for her own benefit!”

Not in all my days had I imagined this confrontation with Zayri going like this. Her emotional outburst of honesty, as to her intentions towards me, far from repelling me inspired peace about the future instead.

I stepped closer and she cocked the trigger back, but I didn't stop walking. She was showing me a very deep layer of herself and it was good.

My hand closed about the gun barrel and meeting her gaze I said, “Thank you for being honest about your intentions. Give me the gun, Zayri.”

She let go and I reclaimed it and safely un-cocked it as she stood there uncertainly.

She turned to leave the room, but my hands closed about her waist anchoring her to the spot. Stepping up behind her I said, “The funny thing about confessions is that once one has the courage to admit the truth the thing desired is often granted.”

“What?” She asked startled.

“Go sit on the bed.”

She looked at me uncertainly over one shoulder and then did as I asked. She sat there watching me curiously as to what I would do next.

Going to her dresser I idly began opening drawers and poking through their contents.

“What are you doing?” She asked uncertainly.

Looking to her I smiled, “Learning more about you. My knowledge of you is

decidedly lacking.”

“Why do you want to know more about me?”

“Because I do.” I replied simply.

Opening a small wooden box I pulled a small bottle up into view and exclaimed, “Now this should be outlawed.”

“Please don’t break it!” She called out worriedly from the bed.

Turning to her bottle in hand I said, “I wouldn’t dream of it. I love the smell of this stuff on you!”

I went to her and swung the chair near the bed around as she had at first done to me and sat down straddling it. She watched me curiously not sure what to think. I doubted that it was a look ever commonly seen on her face.

Leaning my chest against the back rest

of the chair I opened the little bottle between us. The smell wafted up out of the bottle aromatically and raising my eyes to hers I said, "This smells really good, but although you were to put this on it doesn't mean that you smell really good."

Her head tilted to the side, as a slight smile played about her full lips, "You think I stink?"

Smiling I said, "No, but lies do and although you can cover them up with something nice smelling it doesn't change the fact that there between you being genuine versus being something artificial in appearance. Thank you for telling me the truth and not going on to seduce me to doing your will."

She nodded and looked down at her hands clasped together in her lap. I put

the lid back on the bottle and set it down carefully onto the food platter beside her.

“Now however the fact remains that you smell really good.”

She looked up and smiling into her eyes I said, “Feel free to continue seducing me Zayri.”

“I don’t understand?”

Smiling, I stood up only to sit down on the bed beside her. Reaching for my boots I pulled them on. Glancing to her I said, “I’m not going anywhere Zayri. Once my people are saved and the planet is on the road to recovery I have no intentions of leaving. I need a partner though to make all that happen and then I need someone special to enjoy it all with. Sound good to you?”

“Yes!” She said quickly, as her face

reflected profound shock.

It was a real struggle not to kiss her, but I forced myself to stand and walk away. I stopped beside her dresser and pulled another article of clothing free. Tossing it to her I said, “Wear this one.”

In surprise she looked up from the cloth she held to me and said, “Won’t you find this too tempting?”

Smiling I said, “It doesn’t matter now Zayri, because there’s nothing left unseen between us. I know what you want and I want the same. I don’t have to resist you now because I know I can trust you. I’ll see you out in the bar.”

I opened the door to go and she stood up with a look of incomprehension about her as she called out, “You’re alright with me being a thief?”

“Heck no!” I said.

“Then what game are we playing?” She asked in frustration.

“You’ve given me the respect I need by being honest, now in return I’m giving you the opportunity to win me over as your future life companion.”

“But I already know you want me!”

“It appears then that it’s a stacked deck against me. Relax Zayri, this is called dating and my actions are those of an honorable man. I know that if I stayed within this room that there’s nothing that you wouldn’t hold back from me, but I respect you too much to simply use you for my own pleasure. You’re not a thief anymore to me Zayri. You’re someone to be respected and from now on that’s exactly what I’m going to do.” I closed the door and walked away.

Zayri held her hands to her eyes. What had just happened?

Never had she expected herself to be so honest with someone. She'd given up everything, but lost nothing. No, in fact, she was richer for being honest!

She looked at the shirt he had tossed at her. She had his permission to stoke his desire for her. She didn't have to steal anything, because it was all being freely given to her.

Instead of working for affection she could now enjoy the process as it came to her freely. She looked to the door as she solemnly pledged to never tell or live out a lie again. It simply wasn't worth it. Honesty by far was more rewarding.

Chapter Seven

Seduced

I stepped up to the bar and met the bartender's gaze. He wore a smile that I found hard to read.

“How about something with a little less kick this time.” I said.

Grinning broadly he poured a glass of what appeared to be milk. What on Earth were they milking on this planet?

He set it down with a clunk before me and tentatively I sipped from it. Yeah it was milk alright. However from what it had come from I could only guess at.

Continuing to sip at the milk I felt that I was very much on edge as I expected a repeat of the day before to occur at any moment. To my surprise though everyone within the bar seemed to be of a jovial demeanor and were acting as if I was just one of the boys.

A man beside me, which I distinctly remembered taking a punch from raised his tankard, when he noticed my perusal and said, "To a good fight."

"The old one or a new one?" I asked.

"My lands yuh are crazy! You want to be going about it again?" The man exclaimed and laughing I shook my head no and took a drink of my milk.

The general conversation of the place came to a halt and questioningly those at the bar turned to see why. I already knew though. Zayri had arrived and with gusto

she addressed the room at large, “Ladies and gents the Marshal’s brought us a job. What do you say to a bit of excitement or are you all too busy still being lazy?” She asked one and all in a saucy taunt to the room at large.

All eyes in the room swung to me. Marcy looked me up and down before glancing to Zayri, “What be the job?”

“A way to go the straight and narrow and leave this life behind and live like kings and queens with nobody chasing after us. How’s that sound to ya?”

My need for Zayri’s help was becoming slightly embellished and I started to speak when she turned piercing eyes to me and asked, “How does all the wealth to be found in three or four pyramids of the beast men sound to you as a suitable payment for our

services?”

Exclamations of excitement broke out around the room and as one they left their stations to crowd in around Zayri.

Marcy looked to me, “Is this be true about the plunder to be had?”

Deciding to go along with the extortion that Zayri had begun I made the deal sweeter, “I believe six pyramids worth of plunder would be more accurate of a tally.”

Joyous excitement broke out around the room upon the faces of Zayri’s crew of henchmen and women.

The bartender managed to break through the many questions being put forward by roaring out loudly, “Plunder aside, what’s the part about living in peace and living the straight and narrow got to do with it?”

Zayri nodded and hopped up to sit on the edge of one of the playing tables as she brought one leather clad leg up to rest on a nearby chair seat. She leaned forward conspiratorially and the whole room seemed to lean into her to hear what she would say.

“Well it’s like this. The good Marshal that we’ve all come to respect is by blood a Melungeon and quite naturally he wants to see this world once held mightily by his people restored to its former glory.”

She held a hand up, “Who here thinks he’s man enough for the job?”

She was immediately seconded boisterously by the room at large and I had to admit to a certain amount of ego enlargement at the easy votes of confidence in me.

“And well you should, as who of you has ever saw a man take on as tough a lot as us and almost come out on top. Now the plan is simple. On the biggest of the four moons are the rest of his people held over in slavery by the weakening brood of vipers who, thanks to them and their heavy handedness, have poisoned this galaxy into such a state of poverty that there’s hardly anything left worth stealing!”

Shouted exclamations of, “Aye!!!” Rang out around the room in agreement with her.

“Aye it’s so! And now comes the time for us to steal back the wealth they’ve stolen from us and while we’re doing it we’ll set the good Marshal’s people free.”

Everyone in the room was so psyched

out by the easy picture of success that she had so artfully painted that they were ready to march out the door. Zayri rose up dramatically off the table and motioned down with her hands as if to curb down their excitement, “Now, there’s more to be heard. About the living in peace part, who of you likes being held up in this boring ice bucket of a place?”

No one raised their hand.

“It’s the same for me. Before us lies an opportunity to escape this life of always being on the run. If we help the Marshal free his people then in return not only do we secure for ourselves the richest haul ever, but we also receive a pardon for our past crimes as long as we stay on this world. Let me make that clear. Beyond this world you’ll be

hunted as usual, but here you'll be safe, but you have to give up the life we've lead so far and live peaceably. What do you say?"

"We get to keep the treasure and we're free to stay?" One man asked.

"That's the way of it." Zayri affirmed.

"Well then what have we got to lose! When do we go?" The man burst out with in question.

In answer to his first question I couldn't help but think, his life, as I recalled the heavy defenses and sophisticated weaponry of the enemy.

"Start packing up and get the ships ready and loaded for war. As to when we leave that's up to the Marshal to decide. He's in charge of the whole venture."

The room emptied out busily until

only I and Zayri remained. She came to the bar beside me and poured herself a drink.

Regarding her I said, “A bit of an embellishment on our agreement don’t you think? I mentioned nothing about the wealth of the beast men.”

She shrugged with a playful smile, “You’re happy to have the extra help aren’t you?”

“I am. Thank you.”

She took a drink and I asked, “Do you suppose any of them know what they’re up against? I make the count of the enemy forces at around five thousand and I’d hazard to bet that their ships are better than yours.”

She raised her glass to me in a mock salute, “Which is why Marshal I suggest we infiltrate and steal their ships first of

all. If we have power and control over the skies it won't matter how many of them are on the ground.”

What she said had a lot of truth to it. “You think stealing their ships is doable? Surely they protect those assets more than anything else?”

“Protect from what?” She asked with a sardonic lift of an eyebrow.

I didn't follow her reasoning. Sighing she said, “The slaves they lord over are so far removed from being technologically able to operate advanced technology that I bet they focus very few resources on protecting their ships from them. Time is a great equalizer. No successful attempt has ever been made against them yet and with the will of the slaves only weakened with time why would they

believe them any threat to their technology? Besides all that, no one to my knowledge, has ever been foolish enough, other than your people of the past, to engage the beast men in outright warfare on their own turf. They won't be expecting us."

She had made valid points and nodding I said, "I hope you're right."

She turned back to the bar and took another drink. Glancing at her reflection in the bar mirror I saw a look of concern pass across her face before she boisterously said, "I know I'm right."

Setting the glass down she glanced at me and then back to the glass sitting on the bar, "I suppose you don't like that I drink?"

I nodded.

"Well there are some things that don't

change.” She said with a fiery light to her eyes.

“I have it on good record from a close friend of mine that happens to be a doctor that hard alcohol consumption has disastrous consequences on unborn children.”

Her look of hard defiance fell apart and with a shocked expression she stuttered out softly, “What?”

I reached out and pulled her to me abruptly with a hand on the small of her back even as my other hand speared into her hair and pulled her head towards mine. She had no choice but to be pressed up against me and quite shaken looking she gazed up into my eyes as I dominantly said, “If you wish to be my wife and the bearer of my children then you’ll do as I say. I wear the pants Zayri.

Not you. Got it?”

Her head moved almost imperceptibly in acquiescence and I did then what I'd been dying to do ever since I'd first seen her. I kissed her long and passionately.

Her hands came up to frame around my face as she returned the kiss with equal measure. As the kiss went on I pressed her up against the bar hard as I stole all of her breath.

I pulled back and she gasped deeply for air looking at me with both desire and a little fear. Shakily she felt at her swollen lips all the while looking at me. I stood still waiting for her to decide on something very important.

I let my eyes run down her and I believe it was very clear to her just how passionately I wanted her. My eyes came back up to her eyes and I watched her

shiver even as her breathing picked up.

Rawly I said, “Decide now. Either run away or come here. If you come here be warned that I’ll never let you go. You may be able to cajole a rough band of cutthroats such as the likes of your crew to do your bidding, but I expect more and I won’t stand for deception. You see what I am. I won’t hold anything back from you. I loved once and was rejected and I don’t think I can stand to suffer through that again, but I don’t know how to be any other way in a relationship than but to have all my chips cashed into the game. I’m all in how about you? “

Her breathing quick, as her eyes scanned over the tight vibrating knot of tension that I was, I watched her swallow trepidatiously and straighten away from the bar she had collapsed

back against. Looking into her eyes I read both a spirit that was unsure and yet excited.

I wasn't going to do anything to make her choice for her. Flowery words were in the past and what she saw was the raw side of a man whose affections had once been trampled upon, but were now being given flight once more.

Taking a shivery breath she stepped close to me her eyes level with my chest. Something relaxed in me and at the same time broke free.

I captured both of her hands and put them in the grasp of one of mine behind her back, as I tipped her chin up with my other hand. "You're sure you want me? The real me."

"Yes." She breathed out looking more excited now than afraid.

My grip tightened on her hands and I cupped the back of her neck with my other hand as I kissed her again. I kissed her sweetly though instead of overbearingly hard as I had done before.

Her eyes opened to stare into mine and I let go of her hands. Her hands rose to my shoulders as we watched each other.

Breaking contact with my lips she whispered breathlessly, "I want you!"

Smiling, I stepped away and said, "And you will have me once my people are free."

She looked almost angry then before her face shifted to a self-deprecating smile as she felt at her flushed cheeks and said, "I thought I was the one supposed to be seducing you?"

"Oh you have Zayri. Trust me." I said,

as I led her from the room towards the outside entrance of this den of thievery.

Chapter Eight

Iced

“So do you have a way of getting around those heat scanner devices?” I whispered out.

Zayri nodded and motioned her head to two of her men. As far as we could tell there were only two of the scanners that picked up on people’s body heat in and around the slave city.

Time passed and in the fading rays of afternoon sunlight I saw a very strange sight. Two men with hands interlocked, as they bent over at the waist facing each

other, were closing in on the farthest heat scanner. I looked at the scanner nearer to us and saw the same thing occurring.

“To the device they don’t classify as human, but rather as a four legged animal of some kind so no alarm is raised.” Zayri whispered.

“What’s that he just put over the front of the device?” I exclaimed in question.

Zayri had been rather cryptic in laying out her means of accomplishing the unified task we both faced. Instead she’d insisted it wasn’t wise to be too dialed into any one plan, because on a big job like this things would constantly be changing and any plan could prove faulty. I’d gone along trusting her, but right now I felt like I was a bit in the dark as to what was going on.

“Bags of ice.” She said.

My brow furrowed before straightening in surprise. Looking to her I said, “you were pretty good at the thief business.”

She gave me an affronted look and said, “You know I am! I’m the best!”

“I’m inclined to agree with you on all points, when it comes to you being the best.”

She smiled, but then quickly sobered as she said, “You need to start the evacuation of your people quickly. At best you have four hours until the ice melts and the heat scanners are back online.”

I nodded and started to leave. I stopped and looking back I noticed her already looking at me. Staring deeply into her eyes I said, “You take care of yourself now!”

“Aye aye Marshal.”

“Taran.”

“Yes, Taran.” She said patiently and I hurried on to my task not liking the fact that I couldn’t be of help to her with hers.

I needed to get my people out. As uneducated slaves they stood very little chance in the coming technological struggle other than for being cannon fodder. Zayri and I had both agreed it was best to get them out of the equation as soon as possible.

Reaching the city I was ushered into a packed house full of waiting people. I recognized some of the older ones, but the younger faces were new to me.

Royan stepped forward, “You have a plan?”

“I do. Everyone is leaving. Now!” I

emphasized heavily.

They stared at me aghast, “How?” Royan asked doubtfully.

“Why you’re going to walk right out of here. The devices that keep track of you are currently blind, but they’ll only be so for about three more hours. We’ve got to be out of here and have you all back on the planet before then. Alright now, I’m sorry there’s not more time to explain, but we need to move!”

The room came unglued and dispersed as the room of people spread out to inform nearly forty thousand people that the time to leave was now.

“Tell everyone to dress warmly!” I called out after the departing people.

Royan caught my hand, “If we get past these devices and to the planet beyond, how will we survive?”

“Where you’re going will only be temporary. There’s a series of caves where some friends of mine have been living. There should be enough room to hold us all until.....” My voice trailed off as I listened for a moment to what had sounded like a cry of alarm, but had really only been a baby crying out instead.

“Until what?” Royan asked impatiently.

“Until the planet is set back into harmony.”

“You really think that’s possible?”

“I do, but it does no good for your people to be slaughtered here if the fighting should spill over from the upper city.”

“If we are leaving then who is to help you overcome the enemy?”

“I found some friends who are willing to help us. Even now a plan is being enacted to cause the beast men to greatly doubt their abilities. My hope is that most of them will flee instead of putting up a fight. Hey you two over there! I’m going to need you to carry him.”

Royan protested, but eventually gave up and allowed himself to be carried along in the flow of humanity exiting the city. Forty thousand of the quietest people I’d ever heard shifted out of the city virtually noiselessly as shadows drew dark upon the land.

Pushing them hard I led them to the cliff and there I had to cajole them to jump. Once a few jumped and the others saw the wind portal in action the others boldly stepped forward and jumped.

It had taken me almost three hours to

get the people the short journey from the city to the cliff portal. We were here now though and people were disappearing quickly.

Once the beast men were aware of an incursion being made they most likely would have terminated the slave city fearing that the only incursion that could occur would be from them and not from some outside source. As if to echo that sentiment the sound of loud explosions and the resulting trembling of the surface of the moon beneath my feet had people jumping over the cliff in double-time.

I ran back through the woods until I had an overview of the valley below. The slave city was gone as if detonated in place!

They must've had the location of the city ready to blow at a moment's notice

as I saw none of their ships in the air by which such total destruction could have occurred so quickly. Concern for Zayri lit up brightly in my mind, but I forced myself to run back and check up on the status of my people's exodus.

The last few hundred of them were jumping unimpeded over the cliff and confident that Zayri's minions that we'd left behind back on the surface of the planet, in order to direct the people to the cave systems, would do their job I in turn raced off through the forest for the upper city.

What I would do I was not sure. Most likely get in the way, but I had to be involved. Quite a few people were risking their lives for a cause not their own and it was high time that I did too.

Chapter Nine

Faith Established

Zayri carefully slid the small mirror into place as she scarcely dared to even breathe. The little red beam of light hit the mirror and adjusting it she aimed the refracted beam of light at the beam on the wall opposite her.

The red lights lined up and the far beam of light sizzled briefly before going out. She removed the mirror carefully and the beam before her went back to its corridor of protection, even as ten of her crew slid down the wall

she'd just cleared of the opposing proximity sensor.

Going on she made her way to the entryway of the compound and waited. Two jackal guards stood in opposition of her and she felt a shiver of apprehension course through her.

As a woman she knew only too well what her fate would be if she was caught by such merciless creatures. They took no pity on human women, but rather they took great delight in causing them pain and humiliation.

Boldly she stood up and approached the open entryway of the palace compound as she let her hips roll in as erotic of a sway of movement as she could muster. The fake smile of invitation she had plastered to her face was the hardest of all to maintain.

The jackal guards had noticed her immediately and leveled off the staffs in their hands at her in preparation of blasting her into particles of matter, but now they stood slack canine jawed as they watched her approach.

The jackal guards never saw the figures that approached from behind that sliced their throats wide-open before ramming home the blades into their sides repeatedly. With hybrids such as these it was wise to inflict maximum damage as they were known for their recuperative powers of regeneration. Inflict enough damage though and they couldn't survive for long enough in order to recover.

Zayri slipped past the pair of fallen jackals as her two accomplices fell into line behind her. Here and there the body of a dead guard whether full blood

jackal man or hybridized human lay in a puddle of their own blood. For the moment the primary palace compound appeared to be within her control.

Judging from the buildings in the gloomy darkness it was hard to say what lay within them. Over the course of the next hour a discovery process ensued.

Most of the buildings were unoccupied and useless to them. A lot of them were labs that had screens full of live data that were even beyond Zayri's comprehension. She made sure to set explosive devices at all of the main consoles in all such rooms they came across.

Moving on into one building both she and Marcy lost control of their stomachs at one glance as to what the room

contained. If the sight hadn't been enough the smell would have been.

Piles of stillborn babies many of which seemed to be monstrous in appearance lay piled in carts along with their sightless human mothers from which the abominable creations had been surgically hacked out of.

Holding hands Marcy and Zayri helped each other step free of the building and together both of them quickly closed the double doors. Tears falling they turned back to the task at hand their minds however still living in the horror of what they'd seen.

A jackal guard stumbled from a building in apparent drunkenness and he let out a yip of pain before falling down under the flashing knives of the two women, who savagely attacked him,

until all breath was gone from him. Leaving the corpse they both slid up to the still open doorway and peered within.

An assortment of jackal men and hybridized more human looking men were having a good old time drinking and playing what appeared to be a virtual reality game of some kind. Slowly Marcy closed the door and Zayri dug a lock from her pack and affixed it to the closed door.

Both women then chucked a half-dozen small explosive devices onto the roof of the gaming hall. For both of them the job had become an entirely personal one and not one founded out of any acquirement of loot.

Meeting up with several of the others one gestured to a large building at his

rear and shrugged as if he didn't know what to do. Zayri followed along after him toward the building in question.

Stepping past the fallen jackal guard she witnessed a panoramic view of prison cells filled with females of all ages up to about the age of thirty years. They stared at her despondently as if all hope had long since been washed from the recesses of their minds by the cruelty of their overlord masters.

Turning to the others Zayri said, "Get them out of here!"

"But how?" The man asked helplessly.

"I don't care! Just get them out and away from this compound! If you have to make several trips to the planet in one of the airships then do it!"

"Alright Zayri, but you know this

could endanger the whole operation?”

Zayri stared the man down and he turned away without a further word of protest as he began opening up cells.

Zayri followed along by Marcy went back out into the night and approached the grandest of the buildings within the palace compound. Loud noise emanated from it, but no guards were apparent on its gabled porches of which they were many.

Slipping up the marble stairs Zayri and Marcy stole along the walls and then slipped in and through an entryway that was lined with pillars. Moving from pillar to pillar to either side of the main walkway both women came to the end of the pillars. The walkway at the end of the pillars began descending in a flight of stairs to a sunken amphitheater styled

temple.

In horror both women watched as hundreds of the fallen creatures within the sunken temple before them engaged themselves in what appeared to be the opening stages of a ritual sacrifice of five young girls tied off to five central pillars that rose all the way from the pit of the temple's lowest point and up past their elevation to the high vaulted roof overhead. Off to the one side of the five central pillars were five upraised dais that had five thrones on them. Each of the thrones had one of the falcon men sitting upon it.

They seemed far older in appearance than the jackal men and far more cunning whereas the jackals put off only the barest evidence of an advanced intellect. Both women looked to each other at a

loss as to what to do.

Zayri looked about the place in search of anything that could be a match in terms of a device that could alter the order of the orbiting suns. Beyond the five pillars and opposite of the five thrones lay an entrance way to a subterranean destination.

Squinting Zayri was able to see a glyph depicted over the entrance way that showed in bright colors a planet half on fire with one sun and a dark object that surely must be the second sun, only it was still in the position of antiquity directly opposed to the larger sun on the other side of the planet. That was curious, Zayri mused to herself.

She gestured to the entryway and Marcy pointed with emphasis to the hall filled with the ranks of the enemy as if to

say, “Don’t you see them? How do you think we could ever get over there unnoticed?”

Zayri looked back out at the sunken temple and her eyes fell on the serving women that moved with downcast eyes and chained together hands about the scene serving cups of alcoholic beverages to the chanting crowds of beast men calling out for the blood of the innocent girls chained to the five pillars. Her eyes left the serving women to meet Marcy’s and Marcy reacted vehemently by shaking her head no and gesturing with her arms that she wanted no part in such a plan.

“Please.” Zayri mouthed out to Marcy.

“Why?” Marcy mouthed out in return and then added, “He’s not my man! Why should I risk my life anymore for him in

order to find some silly device that'll set the planet right again and wipe out our hiding spot?"

Zayri read all the words from her friends lips clearly and by way of an answer she pointed to the petrified five young girls standing bound off to the pillars at the temple's center.

Marcy looked away from them and back to her resignedly and Zayri mouthed out, "If we don't crush the power these monsters have there will be more girls chained to those pillars! Is that what you want?"

Marcy looked at her sourly before nodding her assent to take part in the plan. Both women withdrew back the way they had come in and skirted around the outside of the beast man's temple, until they found an entrance way that

appeared to be a slave entrance because of its lack of adornment.

Slipping down the stairs they startled two women standing there. Holding fingers to their lips they whispered for them to be quiet.

Nervously both women nodded and Zayri quietly explained that a rescue was being performed. The two women looked to her in quiet disbelief as if they couldn't believe their ears.

“When serving women come back in for refills you need to tell them and have them start slipping out this way and head for the north gate of the palace compound. The other women are already there and waiting to be removed from the moon.”

In growing excitement both women nodded vigorously and said that they

would do as asked.

Zayri and Marcy both reluctantly approached a pile of rags that left one mostly bare and open to the lecherous groping of beings not even fully human. Men were bad enough, but to do what they planned was a fate similar to rolling about in a snake pit.

“If this goes wrong I shall never forgive you Zayri.”

Zayri nodded, as she started to slip free of her clothes and said, “I’m with you on that one sister.”

Fully dawned with the apparel of a slave they finished by smearing dirt onto exposed flesh and messing their hair up to fit in with the picture of the other women, who had long since forgone any attempt to look appealing to the creatures that abused them on a daily

basis.

Zayri picked up a pair of rusty iron manacles and the short length of chain that divided them and then affixed them around Marcy's wrists. Marcy did the same to her and both women raised their eyes from their bound hands to each other.

In a small voice Marcy asked, "Do you believe there's a God?"

Zayri's eyes ducked away, "I think there is. I'm pretty sure my man serves Him. Why do you ask?"

A tear slipped down Marcy's cheek, "Because I have the awful fear that I'm going to die!"

Zayri tried to hug her, but realized that she couldn't with her hands now bound together. Instead she grasped Marcy's hands tightly and said, "When we get out

of here and we are! We're going to find out for ourselves whether God exists or not. Got it?"

Marcy nodded and let go of Zayri's hands to wipe at her tears. Both women turned and accepted a serving tray from the two women who had been watching.

The two women, who had been silent till now, both now spoke in unison, "There is a God and surely you both are His angels to do this for us!"

Zayri and Marcy looked at each other and despite the circumstances chuckled at the absurdity of that.

"We do not jest, but we speak the truth! Now go and see for yourselves that our God is a God that saves!" The one slave woman said proudly.

Zayri stared at the woman intently before asking, "How can you say that?"

Where has your God been while you've been raped and abused all these years?"

The woman shook her head, "I do not fault my God for the actions of others and as to where He has been well I'm looking even now at the proof of His mercy for us. Go with the grace of Elohim. The device to restore our world as it was before lays down the corridor behind the pillars, but you'll need a jackal guard to open the door for you."

Zayri nodded wondering at how the woman had known to tell her that. Both she and Marcy turned to enter out upon the temple floor, whose denizens were crying out for blood.

Marcy leaned in to whisper into Zayri's ear, "How did she know what we came here for?"

"Perhaps God told her." Zayri

responded with as it was her best guess, which more and more seemed like a highly plausible answer.

Marcy nodded and both women stepped forward into the throng as they sought to ignore the incarnate evil of the beings they brushed past and were groped by. Looking through the shadowing veil of their hair both women while remaining apart angled toward the entrance way that lay at the back of the temple.

The tempo of the place had picked up a notch and the jackal men had begun to howl. Zayri felt her spirit quake inside of her and whispering too softly to be heard by any around her she said, “God if you truly exist then help me now!”

A jackal guard ahead of her was ignoring the festive focus of the rest of

the pack and instead he was sizing her up lustfully. He made a step forward toward her and Zayri was about to drop the tray and run, when another serving girl stumbled into the jackal spilling her tray of drinks all over him.

With a snarled yip of fury the jackal guard struck the woman to the ground. Zayri meanwhile ducked out of view and hurried on through the crowded throng.

The jackal guard looked back only to see that the beautiful slave was gone and in consternation at having been denied a tryst with the woman he'd been focused on he now turned to inflict damage upon the woman at his feet, but there was no woman! He looked about in consternation and then figuring it had all been a mirage brought on by his drunkenness he once

again joined in with the chanting of the others.

Zayri pressed ahead whispering under her breath, “I believe! I believe! I.....” Over and over again. She’d looked back only to see as the jackal man had that there had been no serving woman. God was real and He was helping her!

Her eyes found Marcy not too far from her and Marcy nodded with the clear light of comprehension in her eyes as if to testify that she’d seen it all and now believed too. Both women joined up at the entrance way and slowly backed down it all the while keeping wary eyes on the back of the enemy host within the temple, until they thought it safe to turn and run down the long hallway unseen.

Reaching the last bend in the

subterranean hallway Marcy and Zayri saw a pair of double doors guarded over by two more jackal men. They were more serious looking than was typical for jackal men.

“What’s the meaning of this?” One growled angrily, while growling was all the other one did.

Holding up the trays each sporting a solitary cup both women said what they’d practiced back down the hall in unison, “Refreshments your lords before you take your pleasure of us.”

The two jackal guards looked to each other before breaking out in a happy pant. They seized the cups off the trays and slugged the contents down voraciously.

Throwing the cups aside they knocked the trays from the women’s hands and

ordered with eagerness, “Turn around slave meat!”

Both women did as ordered and were promptly shoved to their knees. That’s as far as the beast men got in the process of taking their pleasure of the women.

Both women rose up off the floor and turned to view the choking jackal men with contempt and utter disdain. Both guards had fallen to the ground and now they helplessly watched as the two women approached with small knives they’d pulled from somewhere. The poison in the drink raced through their systems paralyzing them to the point of not being able to take a breath let alone defend themselves.

Savagely both women cut their once boastful assailants throats and the inhuman eyes faded of life as their

tongues lolled out of their canine mouths to the dusty floor of the passageway. Stepping past the bodies Zayri wiped the blood off her hands and studied the locking mechanism of the double doors.

Turning to the one jackal guard Zayri said hurriedly, "Help me get his hand over here before his body heat starts falling. Together the two women drug the beast until Zayri was able to plaster the things hand to the central panel lock receiver.

The door clicked as some inner mechanism was released and together the doors swung inward. A fortune in gold and gems unlike any other stretched out before them, but both women were past the desire for jewels.

All they wanted was the destruction of this place and its unholy host. Zayri was

pretty sure as to how to go about doing it too.

Pointing to the left she said, “Think you can program that power consul to overload and explode?”

Marcie grinned and pulled a small explosive device out that had been pressed hidden between her breasts by the tight slave halter top she wore, “If not there’s always this.”

Zayri grinned and continued on up the stairs that lay before her that ended in a central pedestal that light radiated out from. She skipped unmindfully over piles of loot no doubt taken from a thousand slain generations of mankind just in order to rot within the confines of this madhouse.

Reaching the end of the stairs she moved carefully out onto a rune

engraved surface that bespoke of dark rituals probably too numerous to count. Before her in the air spun an image of the planet, only it showed none of the damage of ice and desert fire that the present world did.

Something else that was off was that the suns were still in opposite orbiting paths. There was no indication of the one sun having been pulled in by the orbit of the larger sun.

Zayri liked to think of herself as an educated person even though she'd never had a day of class in her life. Life had been her classroom, but in addition to the treasures she'd stolen she'd also stolen knowledge and during her long waits between jobs she'd taught herself much of math, science and history.

It had always seemed an impossibility

to her that the two suns could be so close together and not be pulled in the final separating distance and explode into each other thus wiping out the planet and all four moons and indeed probably this entire galaxy. Now those doubts were confirmed. The positions of the suns had not moved.

What then caused the appearance of the second sun to be in appearance where it wasn't?

Furthermore what was stealing the heat of the smaller sun and holding it back from the surface of the planet?

Going to the center of the rune inscribed floor she picked up a small intricately made device. A device partly responsible for the death of billions of people.

She knew what the device was, only

she'd never fathomed that it could be stretched to accomplish such a purpose as it had been. The device was a holographic Volon generator.

The projected image above her was the reverse image of what the cube in her hands was actively projecting in the universe beyond the four walls of this vault. The language inscribed on the box was unfamiliar to her, but having a little familiarity with such devices she knew that to see what the device was covering up cosmically the view lens had to be inverted.

She slid a small lever over and the projected image above her changed instantly. The planet she knew that was half ice and scorched sand was back, but the smaller sun, although where it had always been, was a black mass, while

the projected fake sun was in close orbit with the larger sun.

There was a good reason for the blackened sun that gave off no light or heat. Directly behind it a gigantic rift in space had been opened up. All the projected heat energy and light cast off by the sun was being sucked by the vacuum of space somewhere else in the galaxy!

How the beast men had pulled off such a stunt was unfathomable. Almost as unfathomable as that was the question of how to stop it.

Staring at the blackened sun she had to admit she had absolutely no idea about how to restore it and close the rift in space. There was no way that she knew of unless.....unless there was a big enough explosion.

She'd seen on a mining planet where an unquenchable fire had been put out with an explosion. The principle worked because the air the fire needed to live and thrive was suddenly gone in the aftermath of an explosion. Could such a thing work in reverse?

The rift, an unquenchable fire, stealing the air it needed from one galaxy and jettisoning it into another. What if the vacuum induced pull on this side of the rift was interrupted and the gravitational forces of the sun were allowed to once again take over? The rift would likely be torn apart and possibly overwhelmed, in theory anyway.

Sudden noise drew her attention and she dropped flat as several jackal guards stormed into the treasure vault. Several of them started for the stairs and Zayri

numbly considered what few options she had, which really boiled down to just two. Stand and fight or surrender and be tortured.

“Hey, you butt faced dogs! Over here chumps!” Zayri heard Marcy call out boldly from somewhere below.

Zayri peered over the edge of the platform in time to see the jackal guards on the verge of discovering her wheel around to look at Marcy who now stood in the doorway to the vault waving bye-bye at them.

“Catch me if you can flea bags! That is unless you’re too busy sniffing each other’s rears!”

Marcy took off running and the beast men tore back down the stairs after her with enraged howls of demented fury.

“Marcy what are you doing!” Zayri

exclaimed under her breath, as she snatched up the holographic cube and ran down the stairs after the others.

Marcy was caught as Zayri knew she would be and as she cleared the mouth of the entrance to the vault where it opened up to the temple floor she heard Marcy cursing her captors with every cuss word she had in her considerable vocabulary of them.

Marcy was being dragged to the center of the five pillars where she was thrown to the ground before the five thrones of the watchful falcon men. The unholy congregation as a whole was packed in close to see what was transpiring.

The central falcon man of the five raised one arm and said with a voice that carried, "Tear her apart until she

reveals what she was up to in the vault of secrets!”

Before the ravening horde could descend on Marcy, Zayri screamed out, “Touch one hair of her head and I blow your precious little device here to pieces!”

Heads swiveled to her from all those at the back of the room and the falcon men on their thrones at the other end of the room craned to see around the five central pillars, arranged as the points of a five pointed star, in order to get a glimpse at her.

The jackal men nearest to her closed in and holding up a similar explosive device such as the one Marcy had pulled free earlier she pushed a button on the tube and the small cylinder flashed red repeatedly. The jackal men drew back

from her all the while snarling their menace at her.

“That’s right pups! I take my thumb off this and this device is history!” Zayri said, as she continued walking through the crowd that made way before her.

She stepped past the forgotten children, who had become silent spectators to what was going on, until she was by Marcy’s side. Marcy had some scratches and some bruising going on, but otherwise she was fine. The two women stepped back to back and faced the hall of snarling demons.

The central falcon man spoke, “It appears an insurrection has at last begun. Detonate the slave city!”

Almost on the heel of his words the ground shook and trembled violently.

Facing the lead falcon man Zayri

called up to him, “You’re too late birdbrain! There already gone and any chance you had for victory went with them!”

“Explain!”

“We don’t have to explain anything to you poop feathers!” Marcy called out and the legion of dog men stepped closer, but halted as Zayri waived the flashing red cylinder about in the air in front of them.

“Trust me I’ll take my thumb off this button long before I allow one of you abominations to lay ahold of me!” Zayri called out threateningly.

The falcon men sitting on their thrones laughed and the admittedly dumber minded jackal men looked between the two women and their five leaders as if confused about what was going on.

“Go ahead and press the button you foolish girl!” One of the falcon men to the left called out.

“Yes, go ahead!” Another of them called out.

“Do it!” Cried out another, as all five of them continued to laugh insanely.

Zayri looked at all five of them and uncertainly she asked, “You all have a death wish or something?”

“That device you hold can’t reach but a few feet in terms of effective blast distance. And as for the box, we built it and if need be we can build another. In fact why build another one anyway, as who is there left to fool?” The lead falcon man called out to her as he regarded her contemptuously.

Zayri shook her head, “No, you’re lying! I know what materials it takes to

build such a device and more than that I know that they no longer exist, because the world it came from doesn't exist anymore. If I blow this device there's no way you're going to be able to build another one and I very much doubt that you want your little trick of years gone by to be revealed to the whole galaxy, because if it is, you will become the target of every free world that does not wish for their planet to end up the way this one has!"

All she received for her sound reasoning were chuckles from the beak shaped faces, who seemed more amused than alarmed with the situation.

The central one spoke, "I like your spirit! You're an outsider I can tell. These slaves of ours are too tame by half. I think I'll try you out for myself

before I feast upon your flesh.”

“No dice beak face.” Zayri said resigned to her fate.

She lifted her thumb, as she closed her eyes reflexively not wanting to see her own death. Together both she and Marcy cringed from the expected blast as the ranks of surrounding jackal men scrambled to move back from the range of the device’s blast radius.

Nothing happened!

Zayri opened her eyes to behold the device before her glowing solid red. It should have exploded!

All her ears heard was the derision of the falcon leaders as they thumped at their thrones with their fists. Their laughter was soon picked up by all those within the temple.

The sound was deafening and in

horror Zayri turned to meet Marcy's eyes which reflected her own horror at the situation. Zayri threw the worthless explosive from her and held hands tightly with Marcy. There was nothing they could do now, but wait for the inevitable.

The falcon leader held one hand up and gestured with his other to a small cube that lay on the palm of his upheld hand. The laughter within the temple subsided and he called out as the other four falcon men stood up, "This device renders all energy weapons and bombs inert while in this temple. It's sort of a safeguard against any wishing to stage a revolt. No weapon of yours will operate and no explosive that you have planted about the place will go off."

"That's good to know." An out of

breath voice called out.

Zayri wheeled about to see me standing at the top of one of the stairways that led down into the lower temple area where everyone was congregated. I motioned for her to duck and turning she pulled Marcy down to the ground with her.

I was grateful beyond words to see her yet alive and just as mad to have heard the threats said against her. Coolly I drew my pistol and my breathing abruptly evened out past any ability of mind to do so.

I'm good with a gun, but in this moment I don't think I could've missed even if I'd wanted to. The first shot shattered the cube in the pompous bird dude's hand.

Two explosions immediately rang out. One near Zayri and Marcy and one deeper in the complex somewhere. I registered all that duly in the background as I continued to fan the trigger of my gun making each shot count.

The gun clicked on empty and the smoke clearing from my face revealed five keeled over bird carcasses on the thrones built by their vanity. Even as I counted my kills a greater series of explosions rumbled throughout the building and stonework from the ceiling started falling.

Like newborn puppies caught in a lightning storm the leaderless pack of jackal men broke apart and began scrambling for any exit they could find. Calmly I made my way down the steps before me thumbing shells into my gun

from my belt.

Jackal men peeled away from me as their eyes lingered on the weapon in my hands that had defied their greatest technology and slain all their leaders in the pace of but a few seconds. If they only knew that I had but a six shot capacity.

Reaching the center of the temple area I holstered my gun and worked hard at freeing the girl tied off to the pillar, the base of which was stained red from the blood of countless past victims. Marcy and Zayri had the other four girls free and together they all rushed over to me, as I caught up the girl I had freed into my arms.

Marcy gripped a hold of my arm and said, "Thank you! You're my hero!"

I gripped her arm in return and said,

“No, thank you for risking your life like you have!”

She shrugged and moved on with the two girls she'd freed and calling back over one shoulder she said, “I'd do it again!”

Zayri was pressing into me and I saw the hint of tears in her eyes. “Come honey! Let's get out of here!”

She nodded and together we took to the stairs with the two remaining girls and the one I held. The place was falling apart as more and more explosions rolled on and on in a continuous reverberation of destruction.

Reaching the night air the entire place fell down behind us. What had held it up so long was hard to fathom, that is, if you weren't a person of faith. As it was I saw faith written all over the doings of

this night.

Zayri's crew had gained control of most of the enemy's airships and as we ran through the palace compound with exploding buildings all around us we were caught up by one of the airships.

We appeared on the bridge and of all people I saw the bartender at the controls. He grinned big and said, "Best time I've had in years! You're good luck Marshal!"

His grin disappeared though as Zayri pulled him out of the driver's seat and sat in his place. She cut his protesting short with, "Sorry Ross, but the day's not over yet. Do any of the other ships have enough room for you and the girls?"

Ross glanced at the girls all grouped around Marcy, "Yeah sure!"

“Then set up an exchange and be quick about it!”

Ross went to a panel and started conversing with what I presumed were other airships. I in turn walked to the matching console seat that was beside Zayri's at the head of the vessel and sat down tiredly.

The buttons and gadgets all around me were a confusing blur of technological pizzazz. I'd never sought to understand the advancements of these outer worlds from Earth and I had no desire to start now.

I pulled my gun free and checked it over before holstering it again. I felt eyes watching me and glancing over the separating counter I caught Zayri's approving stare upon me.

“What?” I asked defensively.

“You’re completely soaked with sweat.”

“Yeah well something told me I’d better hurry to get by your side.”

“Thank you.” She said with a smile.

Looking down to my hands I emotionally said, “No, thank you! You and your people have really stuck out your neck on this one and I can’t express how grateful I am for what you’ve done. I could never have done this on my own, that’s for sure!” I grudgingly admitted at the last.

“Everyone needs a helping hand time to time Marshal. There’s no shame in having a little help now and again.”

I nodded and glanced over to her smiling, “I know, but an old lone wolf like me finds it hard to handle change.”

“Please no canine references. I’ve had

my fill of dogs for a long time to come!”

Laughing, I nodded and looked out the window before us at the carnage that was being wrecked upon the remnants of the beast men and their once grand scaled city that was being reduced to rubble by their own ships plus a few extras.

It was ironic really. Being destroyed at the hands of one's own technology.

“What did you find in the temple?” I asked in sudden trepidation, as I remembered that I had a multitude of people to provide for that were now homeless and held up on a world that was no less deadly than before.

“The second sun never moved. The image you saw in close orbit to the large sun is a mirage. It's not there now, because I destroyed the box that

projected the second sun's image.”

“If the sun never moved then why don't we see it?”

“It's hard to explain. Did you ever see a candle become extinguished when a door near it has been opened abruptly?”

I nodded and she said, “Well the beast men opened a door. A big door that leads to another place in space. The back draft is so strong it's sucking all the heat and light put off by the sun into an area of space beyond our immediate area.”

What she spoke of was hard for me to wrap my mind around and a little desperately I asked, “What can we do?”

“Well I think we should start by closing the door. Ross are you gone yet?”

“Beaming off now. Hey why do you

two want to be alone anyway?” He called out jovially.

Smiling Zayri lifted a hand and waved farewell without turning around. The girls, Marcy, and Ross were suddenly all gone.

Chapter Ten

Alone under the Sun

Shaking my head, at the disappearance of Ross and the others, I turned back in my seat as Zayri pulled free of the city and headed towards the empty part of space where a sun should be. There was a noise behind me and looking back I witnessed the cargo hold suddenly fully loaded with explosives.

I glanced to Zayri and she shrugged,

“Sometimes you need to blow the candle up in order to get some light.”

She grinned cheekily at me and I stared at her mesmerized.

“What?” She asked self-consciously after a moment.

“You’re beautiful.”

“Only you would say that right now. I look atrocious!” She said laughing.

“What’s not to love about you.” I said entirely serious and she glanced back to me quickly with a look that said I’d touched her deeply.

“Zayri I don’t know what you’re up to, but on the off chance we don’t survive I want you to know that I like you and that every moment I’m with you I find something new to love about you.”

She smiled at the screens before her, but I didn’t miss the tears tracking down

her face. Looking over at me she passionately said, “We’re not going to die! This ship is going to crash into your hidden sun and you’re going to get your world back and I come along with it. It’s a package deal. Take it or leave it!”

“I’m all in.” I said smiling.

She did some last minute programming with her fast-moving fingers, as I continued to admire her. The manacles about her wrists made her task somewhat cumbersome and I was just about to offer to remove them when she pushed back from the consul before her and said, “All set!”

She rose and I followed. The rags she wore concealed little and yet tormented all the same. It was a war not to rip what little remained off. What was really hard at the moment was to remember that we

were about to crash into a hidden sun.

She glanced over her shoulder and gave me a knowing smirk as my eyes lifted from her rear to meet her gaze. She pressed a button and a panel door slid open. She stepped inside and reaching the open panel I saw her standing in a very confined space.

She crooked a finger beckoningly at me and said, "This way Marshal."

I stepped inside and the panel door shut behind me. We were pressed firmly up against each other to the point it was hard to even take a full breath.

"You know these escape pods are designed to transport just one. We're going to need to conserve oxygen with our breathing." She said teasingly.

I kissed her deeply and she chuckled richly. Drawing back I whispered, "You

mean like this?”

“Exactly so.” She said reclaiming my lips passionately with hers.

We were suddenly launched into a freefall motion that normally would have pulled at my stomach strings, but passion held me in a grip that wouldn't let go. Coming up for air as we shot through space I felt led to apologize, “I'm sorry. I really stink.”

Laughing she pressed closer in order to reclaim my lips, “Like I care!”

The pod shook violently and neither of us witnessed the airship loaded with explosives crash into the hidden sun. Neither did we see the immediate corresponding coronal mass ejection of plasma that lit up the galaxy as an epic solar flare burst out of the darkness of a seemingly void area of space.

The galaxy crackled in the wake of the solar eruption of plasma and then a light pierced through the darkness that hadn't been seen in almost two hundred years. All this occurred, but the couple in the escape pod remained oblivious as they conserved oxygen by breathing as one, sharing the breath of life with each other unselfishly.

The landing was beyond rough. The pod literally fell apart and I felt myself flung free of it to land with a hard smack into a body of water.

Sputtering for air I rose to my feet and gasped in fresh air. It should have been night on the planet, but harmony had been restored.

I glanced upward and then quickly away from the bright light in the sky that

had brought its warmth back to a formally frozen land. The water was cold, but the air on my face was warm.

The re-emergent sun was the least of my priorities at the moment though.

“Zayri!” I called out in panic.

“Over here.”

I turned to see her about twenty feet away in the shallow water. Slogging over to her I grabbed at her and her chain was what I caught a hold of first. I pulled her shivering body towards what appeared to be the shoreline that the flash thawed water lapped up against.

Pulling free of the water I tore my wet shirt off grateful for the warmth of the sun on my skin. Turning to Zayri, who still looked chilled I said, “Now it’s your turn.”

She arched an eyebrow and held her

arms out and shook her chain demandingly, "Remove these first Marshal."

Reaching out I grasped her chain and pulled her closer until our faces nearly touched, "No. By the way Mrs. Collins the name's Taran."

"Mr. Collins I do believe you are a man who likes to have things your own way."

"Only when it comes to you Mrs. Collins."

A note from the Author

A little bit about what went into influencing the story.

- In Fire Wind I started the premise behind this new series (adventure and more adventure after that), which opens the imaginative realms up for the subsequent books of the series. It wasn't my intention, but it just came to be that Book 1 was rather noticeably absent of any romance plotline. I actually had one, but it got pitched and God inspired a whole new storyline, which totally reads over from Book 1 into Book 2 of the series. These will be the only two books of the series to be focused from Taran's perspective. Book 3 will be from his brother Logan's perspective. Book 4 will be from the perspective of their niece, Tara. Book 5 is yet undecided. All the books will have a certain overlap of previous characters and I've

limited the series to five books at the present, but who knows maybe there will be more.

- As a Christian I think many of us (at least me), who have read the Bible repetitively can fall into not fully relating to the stories on the pages. What do I mean? Most Bible readers know about how the children of Israel were in bondage in Egypt for 400 hundred years. It's easy to just keep reading on, but truly let's try to comprehend what 400 years of slavery would be like. That's over twice the history of America! It's twice the length of the Pax Romana (Two hundred years of peace during the Roman Empire). In short it's a very long time and I hope my book has helped you to reevaluate just how awful human slavery can be, has been and currently is. Perhaps one of the worst stats of our modern era other than the number of abortions there have been world wide is that there are more slaves now in this present day then there have ever been at any

point in recorded history. There are people all over this world who have no control over the use of their bodies or what will become of them. Please pray for them if you have a moment.

- The beastmen aren't imaginary figures. In my book, *The Kingdom*, I exposed how the Bible references men who had the head of lions. In ancient Egypt we have the false gods Anubis (jackal headed man) and Horace (falcon headed man). Some may think such combinations are fanciful and impossible to achieve, but I believe otherwise and one day those of us who believe in Jesus may find ourselves in a war for freedom against such forces just as the children of Israel had to. *"But as the days of Noah were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be."* Matthew 24:37

Reviews and help promoting my books is always appreciated. Thank You, to all who have

helped me by doing so!

Guy S. Stanton, III

A few things about me



I live in the country and I'm glad of it. I have a beautiful wife sent from God, who graciously puts up with me. God has blessed us with three awesome children that I am very proud of. It seems authors always mention whether or not they have pets and so I will say that we have four, two dogs(Kregridor and Thora) and two cats (Chester and Herman). As to my interests, well, writing and waiting for the Kingdom of Shamayim.

HARD
WIND
Book Three
of
The Wind Drifters

Guy S. Stanton, III

Words of Action

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Guy's books can be found in a variety of formats, both digital and print, at the following locations: Words of Action, Amazon, Barnes&Noble, Smashwords, Apple iBookstore, Kobo, Goodreads, and CreateSpace.

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Book 5: *Rift Wind, Spring 2015*

Non-series Books

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given*

*right to make your own
choices.*

May you choose wisely.

Chapter One

Freedom Song

I spit. The corresponding splat had my eyebrows raising slightly. A new record.

Hurray, I thought absently as I fell back onto the flea bitten cot within the dank cell I was imprisoned within.

Letting my arm fall across my face I debated my sanity for only the fourth time today. At least I think it was the fourth time.

My temper exploded and I rose up off the bunk to slam my fists into the wall. It hurt, but savagely I didn't care.

I stared at the wall for a moment before glancing to the side to view the splotch of moisture on the floor. Spitting contests, cockroach races, and befriending mice could only go so far into filling the emptiness of being left in this pigsty of a cell morning, day, and night.

Closing my eyes I rested against the wall as I admitted that a part of me had already gone insane in the three months that I had been cooped up in this Mexican hellhole of a penitentiary. That is if I'd ever had a sane bone in my body to start out with.

I laughed out loud hollowly and in the still atmosphere of the cell my laugh sounded so far gone of sanity that I abruptly stopped. Tapping my forehead against the wall I gripped down hard and

repeated the mantra that kept me going, “Stay alive, be ready, and get out!”

Pushing away from the wall I forced myself to start the daily exercises that I had enacted to both help with the boredom and the need to be physically ready to make a go at an escape if the opportunity ever presented itself. The opportunity was never presented though.

I was never permitted to leave the cell, unlike some of the other prisoners and in fact they never even opened the door. The only reason they fed me, was because they knew the torture of being cooped up in this cell indefinitely was to me far worse than being starved to death. The diabolical fiends!

I swore then viciously over and over again as I pulled myself up in endless chin-ups. The swearing didn't help

though because every time my feet touched down it was only confirmation that I was still in this accursed cell.

I'd be here till I died. "No! You're going to get out Logan!" I addressed my errant thought harshly.

It didn't help my effort to remain sane to now acknowledge that I was addressing myself as if there were multiple warring factions held up within me. This further sign of my persistent descent into madness only drove me to exercise harder.

I ran in place. I jumped up and down. Did push-ups on the floor. Shadow boxed, as I relived every fight I'd ever fought, until I stumbled about the floor of my cell in exhaustion.

I tripped on a rough stone and fell out flat on the grungy floor of my cell.

Hopelessly I stared upwards at the brief light given through my cell window that offered me a view of the wide-open plains beyond the penitentiary.

I never dared to look out the window. To do so would be to truly go mad, at least that's what I feared would happen.

I heard Mark's chirp and then the feel of little feet scampering up my side. My gaze shifted down to the field mouse sitting on my chest.

"How's the outside world today Mark? Still there and waiting for me?"

Market chirped and I nodded.

"Good to know. I just need another day and I'll be out, you'll see."

Mark arched his little head to the side and I stated for his benefit, "What? You don't believe me? What would you know about it anyway? Maybe they'll be

an earthquake.”

Mark didn't seem to think much of that plan and truly neither did I. I continued to lay in the dirt idly stroking Mark's svelte furred back with a finger. He seemed to vibrate with each stroke and I contented myself in knowing that at least one of us was happy.

Boots sounded on the corridor outside and my ears picked up on the anomaly of sound instantly. It was the wrong time of the day for any activity as it was the siesta hour.

I stared at the door as the steps drew closer. The steps drew even with my cell door and then they moved past.

My head fell back to the floor as utter defeat swept through me. In the background of my private sorrow I heard a jingle of keys and then the protesting

creak of a door being opened.

There was swearing then and in surprise I recognized it as being done in English instead of Spanish. A door was slammed shut and I straightened up till I was sitting.

I scooped Mark up and offered him a shirt pocket to take shelter in. He scampered in and in gathering astonishment I heard the jingle of keys at my door.

My door was pulled open to the tune of pointed gun barrels leveled off at my head. Blinking against the blinding light streaming through the doorway I got to my feet.

I made no attempt to escape as the number of guns leveled against me wasn't something I wished to test.

“You Logan Collins?” Came a rough

voice from beyond the doorway.

“Sure thing. Who wants to know?”

Hired beef rushed into the cell and jerked me back against the wall roughly. It would've been a thing of ease to steal their guns, but I wanted to let this wild bet ride for a while.

Completely clueless as to why this intervention was being instigated, I allowed myself to be cuffed and then pulled down the stank halls of this south of the border cesspool.

Reaching the outside perimeter of the jail I was shoved towards a horse. Willingly I mounted up.

My hands were once again secured. My second pair of cuffs looped around my existing ones and were snapped around the saddle horn anchoring me to the saddle.

Without a word the party of five hard cases that were rescuing me from hell road out the open gate of the place tugging me along behind them. At the moment I couldn't make up my mind if they were ministering angels of deliverance or if there was something worse to be feared than the fires of the hell of the place that had tried my sanity to the breaking point.

I said nothing, but instead left the situation to develop. We were riding northward toward Texas and idly I wondered if my escape was but to the gallows of some Texas border town.

The thought didn't sit well with me. I didn't care for hanging, but I'd admittedly done enough to deserve it. Deserve it or not I wasn't going up those thirteen stairs to the top of the scaffold

willingly.

It was a silent bunch I rode with. They regarded me with watchful caution and I them in return.

The more time that went on the more it occurred to me that something wasn't right about this setup. Who would want me enough to send a bunch of hard cases like this, south of the border to pull me out of a deserved residency in hell on Earth?

I'd thought about it for hours and still I came up with nothing. What friends I did have didn't have the money to pay a bunch like this and though I called them friends they weren't the type to go out of their way and do something like this

even if they did have the money.

I had plenty of those who wanted me dead, but why go to this great length to rescue me?

No doubt there were some bankers and a few ranchers who'd pay good money to see me suffer, but this extreme of an action seemed even too much for them. I leaned forward against the tree I was chained off to for the night and contemplated what to do.

The shackles were tight and I still hadn't managed to find anything with which to pick the locking mechanism. It looked like I was stuck here, for the night anyway.

Mark scampered up and out of my pocket to disappear into the undergrowth of the copse of trees that we had camped in for the night.

“Happy journeys little friend.” I muttered, as I looked off into the surrounding countryside longingly.

I was free of my cell, but still a prisoner. I didn't like it. I didn't like it at all.

The next day dawned and surprisingly Mark was back in my pocket. I rode stiffly perched in the saddle still sore from having to sit up all night.

I was beyond hungry as my captors hadn't seen fit to feed me any of their breakfast and I wasn't asking anything of them. Right now all I wanted to do as I felt them pull me steadily closer to some form of overdue justice was to kill them.

They had it coming anyway. Anyone

who stood in my way of being free deserved what they got.

We crossed the border a little before noon and I saw my chance when we stopped off in a small border town.

One of them pulled me from the saddle and shoved me over against a nearby hitching post and shackled me off to an iron loop stuck fast in the timber post. With a contemptuous sneer the one who'd done it turned his back on me and followed the others into the saloon.

I waited till he was gone before I commenced using bits of the chain linking my manacles together to pry at a rusty nail half stuck into the hitching post. Sweat beaded my brow with the effort I exerted to be free. With a protesting creak that sounded far too loud the nail came free after several

minutes of prying it from the tough wood.

Nail in hand I leaned forward onto the post as if asleep. I heard boot heels come to the batwing doors and then after a moment move away into the interior of the saloon again.

My eyes opened and I turned the nail in my palm around to start to work at the lock. It was a crudely simplistic lock and with only a few twists the manacle sprang free from my wrist. I worked on my other wrist and had the same results.

Straightening up I looked around the sleepy border town. A dump like this likely didn't even have a Marshal or any form of law enforcement when it came to that. Rubbing at my wrists I acknowledged what a good thing that was.

I turned towards the saloon doors. Most men in their right minds would mount up right now and light a shuck for it, but not me.

I went to one of my former captor's saddle bags and pulled out a spare handgun I'd seen him keep there. I spun the cylinder of the weapon and sizing it up I determined that it was good enough for what I needed.

I stuck the barrel into the front of my waistband and then mounting up the stairs I boldly pushed through the doors of the saloon letting them clap loudly as they closed behind me. The five men at the bar turned their heads to look and immediately all motion on their part was arrested to the stillness of surprise that marred their faces with astonishment at the sight of me armed behind them.

I said nothing, as I continued on a few more steps only to stop. They all slowly turned from the bar and glanced surreptitiously at one another and then one started the ball rolling and went for his gun.

I drew and fired and I didn't stop, as I watched each of the five go for it and try to gun me down. Hot lead burned past my cheek and glass shattered behind me, but I'd made my shots count.

Five shots later the last of the five slid down to the floor as his grip on the bar gave way. The bartender kept glancing at something beneath the bartop and in a hard voice I said, as I casually waved the gun in my hand, "I wouldn't if I were you. I still got a shell here with your name on it if need be."

The bartender backed away with a

grey look to his face and I stepped closer to the bar and one of the men who still lay alive on the floor. He was gut shot.

He looked up at me with hate as he said, “Why’d you have to go be ah shooten me in the gut jailbait?”

“You shouldn’t have jumped like a scared rabbit, bounty man. Now I need you to answer a question. Who sent you to fetch me?”

The man stared mutinously up at me in silence. Reaching to the bar top I picked up a glass of whiskey and dumped it on his bloody fingers clutching at his stomach.

He screamed and jerked at the contact of the fiery alcohol upon his wound. Picking up a bottle I held it threateningly above him and said, “There’s more

where that came from. Now start talking or I start pouring.”

In a broken whine the man pleaded, “Please Mister what did I do to you to deserve this?”

“You treated me like an animal and I’m not in the business of being forgiving. Start talking!” I finished with as I tilted the bottle threateningly.

“Okay okay! We were hired on to go down and bribe the Commandant to let you go. We was promised \$1000 apiece if we brought you back alive!”

I stared down at the man incredulously. “\$1000 apiece! Who pays with that amount of blood money in these parts?” I exclaimed, while tilting the bottle even more threateningly.

“It was a government man by the name of Lawrence! We was to deliver you to

the railhead at a town two days ride north of here where they'd take custody of yah. After that I don't know nothing I swear!"

"Who'd take custody of me?" I pressed.

"That Lawrence fella and a detachment of Yankee Calvary is what I heard."

I set the bottle down hard on the bar as I came to grips with the knowledge of what the man had just said. What had I done to bring the government down on me that they'd be willing enough to pay \$5000 to the likes of this crew to bring my hide to them alive? I didn't know, but I wasn't wasting any time in finding out.

I left the bar and rifled through the other men's pockets and came up with a sizable amount of cash and gold. Stuffing

it all away I turned to the bartender and as if reading my mind he set the bar money on the counter and I tipped a hat that I'd claimed off of one of the dead men to him and said, "Much obliged."

I'd claimed a gun belt off of one of the men and I took two guns that I fancied from two of the others. I holstered one and stuffed the other gun into my pants behind my back.

Looking to the man that lay twisted up in pain on the floor I un-cocked and tossed the pistol I had used to gain my freedom, which ironically had come from his saddlebag. The gun clattered to the floor beside him easily within his reach.

He looked at it incredulously for a moment before snatching it up and cocking the trigger back and pointing it

at me. I stared down the barrel of the shaking gun and held up one finger.

I turned my back on the man and left the saloon. A shot rang out, but it hadn't been one directed at me.

Mounting up on the horse I fancied the most, I captured the reins of a second horse that I'd use as a spare if need be and then I took out of town as if the devil himself was behind me.

Chapter Two

Denied

I was free! I rode long and hard for three days switching off and on from between the two horses. Any pursuit of me including the mysterious government man was long gone.

I began to relax and with that came the need to once again experience the finer pleasure of a game of cards, with as much whiskey as I wanted, along with the willing body of a woman to keep me warm all night. Yes, it was time to go to town.

Just ahead lay Winthrop. It was a large town. Heck, it was almost a city.

It had a pretty strict law presence, but I always behaved myself here and did my shady dealings elsewhere. Winthrop was a fallback for me. Sort of a vacation spot from my life of crime.

I came here as often as I could and when the money ran out, well then it was time to hit the trail and scare some more of it up with which to feed my addictions.

I rode boldly down the street. The Marshal of Winthrop and I had a long-standing agreement. I didn't start any trouble and he chose to ignore the poorly rendered billboard of my face that lay in

a pile at his office.

It also helped out to lose judiciously at cards with him from time to time as well. Rounding a corner I saw him on the boardwalk and I waved.

He lifted an arm as well and then glancing around he then gestured me closer. Pulling up near the boardwalk I heard him say, "I heard you bought it down Mexico way."

I shrugged and gestured widely to myself, "I'm here."

Glancing around again he said, "There's been a lot about who've been asking of you. What have you been up to other than the usual?"

"Who's been asking?" I said, as I went cold inside.

"Don't know them. I only know there the serious type and that I wouldn't be

wanting to wake up on their bad side. How about you skipping out of town and bedding down somewhere else for a while?”

The last comment really hadn't been a request so much as it had been a thinly veiled order. The only problem was that I didn't take orders anymore, “I ain't going nowhere Marshal! Now if you have a problem with that you let me know. In the meantime I'm getting cleaned up and outfitted and then I'll be at Mary's place. You come by later if you want to try your luck.”

The Marshal decidedly grey-looking beneath the tan of his face stepped back, as I spurred my horse forward and away from him. In anger I rode on down the street as the knowledge that my safe haven may not be so safe anymore

became a reality to me.

Whoever was hunting me had a lot to answer for and I wasn't in a charitable mood about it either.

The town just wasn't the same for me. Word seemed to have spread that I was a marked man and there were few who wanted anything to do with me as a result and I felt more alone than usual because of it. I was hoping that some time at Mary's would help ease away the knot of tension I felt rising up in me like a figurative noose about my neck. I shivered at the thought and quickly dispelled the feeling by stepping into Mary's.

Mary looked up from the front desk

and I thought her eyes tightened for a brief moment at the sight of me before she seemed to be as always, “Well well if it ain’t the hardest of the rowdy bunch come to pay my girls a visit. How have ya been Logan? You look well, if a bit thin.”

“Oh I’m man enough Mary, as to how I’ve been I have to say I’ve been without a woman for far too long.”

Mary laughed raucously and grinning I gripped a hold of a pretty brunette’s arm standing nearby and started for the stairs.

“Now you take it easy on that one Logan. She’s new from back East and she ain’t quite used to how lusty you Western men can be.”

“I make no promises Mary.” I call out behind me.

Reaching the upper level of the

brothel I began walking down the row of doors knocking as I went and listening for noise in general. Finally I found a door with no answering inquiry or animated noise from within.

I turned the knob and slung the brunette into the room. She spun away to come up against one of the bedposts hard.

She was breathing hard, but instead of excitement or even fear in her eyes I detected a barely leashed hostility. Strange.

Women usually welcomed the opportunity of being with me. Then again I had to remind myself that she was from back East. Maybe she was just frightened. Yeah that was it probably.

I closed and locked the door and going to a chair I pulled my boots off

and let them fall loudly to the floor. Standing up I pulled my one gun free and laid it aside and then I undid my belt gun and tossed my hat aside.

“All right honey, time to lose that lace your wearing. I’m not known for being rough, but right now I am a mite impatient to get things started.”

I stepped toward her, when she remained still and to my surprise she brought up a funny looking little gun from behind her back and in horror I watched her pull the trigger. Instead of a muzzle blast though it shot off wires at me.

It all happened so fast that I had only begun to think to dodge out of the way, when the wires penetrated my chest. I jolted in complete agony as what felt like a direct strike of lightning streaked

through my whole body with mindnumbing completeness.

I fell to the floor and tried to crawl away from the witch, but the ability to think or move was gone from me. All I could do was take the pain as it came in ever abundant supply.

The lightning jolts stopped and I felt able to breathe once more. I'd rather be horsewhipped any day then suffer this!

Looking up I had no time to react as sluggish as I was from the just caused pain as the woman began to rain down heavy hitting blows upon me from some wand like device in her hand. The pain of the hits quickly helped to jar my body's paralyzed senses to life and kicking out I caught the woman with a foot and sent her careening away into a dresser.

Sitting up stiffly I managed to pull one wire free of my chest, but then in horror I saw her stoop to pick up the gun-like device and press the trigger again. The jolting pain hit me again, but I was angry!

I yanked and the other wire came free. I wasn't fast enough then though to avoid what came next. She'd stepped close and she now kicked me right between the legs where it hurt most.

Gasping I fell over onto my side and curled into a fetal position as she began to rain down savage blow after savage blow on my head and upper back with her stick thingy. This woman had a serious problem!

“That’s enough Claire. I think you’ve avenged your injured pride enough.”

The hits just kept coming though and I

felt consciousness start to slip away from me.

“That’s enough!!! I need him alive you fool!”

“I hate men like him! They should all be castrated!”

“Claire your opinions on men are well documented and your preference for women duly excepted within the ranks of our society, but you are failing to perform your job in the occupational quality that I expect of an agent of your rank! He nearly got the drop on you!”

“It won’t happen again Sir!”

“It had better not or you’re through for good and you know what happens then don’t you?”

“Yes sir.” Came the shaken reply.

The second voice spoke again, “All right you, you, and you pick him up and

take him to my railcar. Get dressed Claire, unless that is, if you want to stay and entertain more male guests.”

I heard laughter dimly then from other sources in the room, as I felt myself picked up and carried from the room. It would appear that I was once again a prisoner.

What on Earth had she shot me with? And just who were they and why were they interested in me of all people?

I didn't know, but I hated them. That I did know.

As if apart from reality I saw Mary's heavily painted face blanched in horror along with some of the other girls as I was carted past them and out the door. Everyone within the town had betrayed me somehow.

I didn't know much more about my

current predicament other than the fact that I was alone and without help, while being at the mercy of people who seemed to have none.

Chapter Three

Disclosure

I was moving. Then I heard the hoot of a train whistle and my eyes shot open.

Befuddled by what I saw I looked about the ornately decorated railcar, until my eyes came to rest on the mustached form of a man of pure calculating coldness that sat behind a desk, which dominated the room with its mahogany grandeur.

“Claire is not known for her light treatment of men, but you my friend appear to have gotten under her skin. She

did quite the number on you.”

Sitting up I looked around and rubbing at the back of my neck I felt something odd about my wrist. Looking at it I saw a metallic looking bracelet snapped about my wrist snugly. I had one just like it on the other wrist too.

“What’s this?” I exclaimed angrily in gesture to the bracelets.

“Oh those. Allow me to demonstrate the use of them for your benefit.”

He slipped a hand into one of his silk dinner vest pockets, but otherwise appeared to do nothing, while I was suddenly overcome by blinding pain the likes of which had me seeing stars through the ceiling of the railcar.

The pain stopped and I gazed over at the coolly smiling individual behind the desk. His voice sounding smug he said,

“Those little trinkets do wonders at keeping brutes like you in check.”

“Why you.....” I swore, as I lunged for him. The blinding pain was back and I collapsed to the floor helpless to do anything else other than take it.

The pain blessedly stopped after what felt like the length of an entire day had passed by.

“Did I forget to mention that if you get within five feet of me that this device will automatically light you up like a lone tree in a thunderstorm?”

Crawling back to the couch I pulled myself up onto it and lay exhausted with my head fallen over the back of it. I did not feel well at all.

“What do you want with me?” I asked softly, as a massive headache sprang

free in my head.

“Yes, getting to that. I must say that it is regrettable that I should have need of anything from the likes of someone like you. You’re nothing but a common criminal of the worst sort.”

I brought my head up to look at the man directly before saying, “It takes one to know one pops. I’ve seen your kind before. Men like me do the dirty work for jobs masterminded by people like you, who like to remain hidden behind the scenes so you can continue living the pompous double life you often exhibit as a pillar of the community.”

I expected to receive another jolt of agony for my impudence, but it didn’t come. My captor regarding me shrewdly, steepled his soft hands together beneath his chin and said, “The difference

between us lies in that there is nothing common in the crimes that I commit. Otherwise you are quite correct on all accounts in your assessment of me. Tell me Logan Collins are you a man who would turn away from a golden opportunity, the likes of which lies far beyond even the wildest of imaginative abilities to conjure up?”

Treading carefully I said, “It depends. Does it pay well?”

He chuckled and said, “Oh yes, quite richly, in fact.”

“Do I get to take these off?” I asked, as I held up my wrists sporting the silver bracelets.

He shook his head no and said, “I don’t trust you. But.....” He held up one finger during a drama filled moment before saying, “I need not trust all whom

I do business with. It is enough that I trust your love of money and the idle pursuits of a man with the ways of the world to bring you into line with what I propose. The promise of wealth brings along with it its own brand of loyalty so to speak.”

Strangely the proposition of wealth rang off deaf ears, as I was more consumed with the pathetic realization that this man thought I could be bought. Could I?

“My name is Lawrence Rothelson the IV and I am a man in need of your particular personal abilities, in particular your blood is of special value to me.”

I stared at the man in disbelief, as a chill swept throughout me, “My blood?” I asked uncertainly.

“Yes. You have quite a storied background that I imagine you know sadly nothing of. Those in the past were ever adept at hiding their secrets from those of us in the present.”

Waving his words aside I said, “What do you want with my blood?”

Instead of answering my question he asked instead, “What can you tell me of your older brother Taran?”

Blinking with surprise, I tried to cover up my startlement at the question by saying, “That traitor! Not much. I haven’t seen him in years. In fact, not since the war when he went to go fight as a damned Yankee.”

Lawrence nodded and brought up a sheaf of papers laying on the massive desk before him and said, “Fortunately for you I believe you. I’m told the

departure of your brother to fight for the North caused quite a rife between the two of you.”

A little shaken I asked, “How do you know that?”

Lawrence smiled at me in a not very nice way and said deprecatingly, “I make it my business to be well-informed of all matters that pertain to my interests. Now let’s see here. You had quite the military record fighting on behalf of the Confederacy. You were promoted and demoted from the rank of Sgt. seven times. Almost executed for insubordination on two separate occasions and yet you were awarded more medals and commendations for bravery than any other soldier in your entire division. It says here that you showed a complete disregard for danger

and that you volunteered for every dangerous job that came along. In short these reports tell me that you are a born killer that takes issue with authority figures. Am I right?"

I shrugged, "Mostly. I like to think that there's more to me than that, but on second thought I am pretty well as much of a lost cause as the war I fought in."

Lawrence regarded me closely for a moment before saying, "I can use men like you, but get this straight I'm the boss!"

"You're the boss." I affirmed.

He nodded, as if believing me and perhaps he did. Poor fool.

I didn't take orders and I never had, but I wasn't stupid either. I knew when to fly low and this was such a time. At least until I got a grasp on whatever the

heck was going on.

“Now on to business. Your brother quite simply is no longer on the planet and I represent a group of interested individuals that would very much like to know how he went about doing it. Tell me is this your brother’s handwriting?”

A paper was shoved toward me and in a daze I stood up and stepped closer to the desk to pick up the weathered piece of paper. My brother’s handwriting in his typical bold style leapt off the page at me.

“Yeah it’s his handwriting, sure enough. What’s this about leaving the planet?”

“It might surprise you to learn Mr. Logan that there are other worlds in the galaxy other than just Earth. Other worlds and alien beings that could quite

easily wipe us all out. I represent an organization that finds its roots in the highest levels of our government. Our mission is to protect this nation, indeed the entire world.”

I looked from the paper in my hand to him and I think it dawned on him to some degree of just how little I believed him.

He smiled narcissistically before shrugging his shoulders and admitting, “During the course of our work it behooves us to take certain liberties with the freedoms of others and to engineer as it were what the political and technological face of tomorrow will be. Our core agenda though is one based in a doctrine of peace. A peace wherein we rule, uncontested, that is.”

“Good luck with that. I already fought in one civil war and I want no part of a

second.”

He smiled in the cunning way that he manifested, as if it was a beloved personality and said, “Another war at present won’t be necessary. The work we do of unification is best done in stages over a long period of time. That as it may be it is nonetheless important that we position ourselves strategically against all possible threats and the ability to come and leave this planet via unknown means and perhaps via higher end technology constitutes such a threat. I have prepared some reading material for you, which will help you get reacquainted with the storied past of your forebears. Decidedly not much is known, but I think you will find what we have been able to compile of great interest. Claire will show you to your

cabin. Number nine I believe.”

I looked to the right as a door opened at one end of the railcar and the brunette who had kicked me in the goods made an unwelcome appearance. I looked back to Lawrence and took the proffered bundle of papers before heading toward the door and the woman I sincerely disliked on the deepest of levels.

I didn't break eye contact with Claire as I approached, but together we stared at each other in mutual dislike for everything the other stood for. I watched surprise dawn in her eyes as my fist shot out toward her.

In an effort to evade the hit she backed up and fell over a chair to crash onto the floor unceremoniously. I'd never intended on hitting her and if she hadn't been so intimidated by me she would've

realized that I was too far away from her to have even connected.

I'd made my point rather clearly I thought. I tipped my hat to the beet red enforcer on the floor, who featured herself as some kind of a higher form than man and glancing from her to Lawrence, who was watching the drama unfold in silence, I said by way of confirmation, "Cabin nine?"

He nodded before adding, "Dinner is at six."

I nodded closing the door of the railcar behind me as I chose to escort myself alone down the series of train cars until I reached cabin nine.

Claire picked herself up off the floor

and fingered the concealed stun gun on her side.

“I wouldn’t if I were you.”

Claire looked to her boss and said, “I have a limit as to how much I’ll take from the likes of him!”

Lawrence laughed outright in her face and looking her over contemptuously he said, “Yes, I saw your limit. Now get out of here!”

Chapter Four

The Locked Door

I looked up from the steak cooked to perfection before me to Lawrence sitting across the aisle at his own table. The food was great and I ate hungrily, not missing the looks of disdain directed my way by the other members of the dining car, which I took to be underlings of Lawrence's. In fact the whole train seemed to be bought out by him.

My onlookers had an ingrained back East big city look to them and I did nothing to disappoint them in terms of

poor Western table manners. Rather I found myself over exaggerating my uncouthness. They thought me unrefined and I did nothing to disappoint them.

Taking a piece of bread I swabbed up the spilled gravy from the mashed potatoes that I had just finished devouring. Of them all Lawrence was the only one that seemed to think me capable of greater things. That was good.

If they thought I was stupid then they would be sloppy in their handling of me. On the other hand it was good my new boss had some measure of respect for my abilities, which in turn ensured I wouldn't be done away with too early in the game.

Once I had served out my usefulness though I was under no delusions as to

what would happen to me. What usefulness I was to Lawrence was still a mystery to me in large degree.

I'd read the papers that he'd given me. The story told on page had been eye-opening in its claims as to the early history of my family, especially in regards to having been preexistent here before the first European colonists had arrived in America.

I still found it all rather hard to accept though. Outer worlds. Other life forms. The possibility of travel to those places and the knowledge that ancestors of mine had already been there and come back. Yes, it was a lot to swallow.

"Do you eat like this all the time?" A redhead, who wasn't all that hard to look at asked.

Looking up I nodded my head and

said, "Yes ma'am."

"Why? You eat like food is fast going out of style."

"Well ma'am I don't know of what this style is you speak of, but in my experience good food like this isn't guaranteed nor does it come by very often. I'm guessing you wouldn't know that coming from the big city like you do, but out here in the West food can be hard to come by so it's best to eat when it's available."

"Well spoken Mr. Collins." Lawrence said patronizingly.

Gesturing with my fork to the twelve or so other people in the dining car I asked, "Just what purpose do these trussed up turkeys serve?"

Disgruntled exclamations of affront resounded loudly at my words and

chuckling Lawrence said, “Behave Logan. Everyone out.”

Obediently everyone slowly filed out of the dining car giving me the evil eye as they went. When they were all gone the smile dropped from Lawrence’s face and his voice was somewhat harsh as he said, “Drop the dumb hillboy act Logan! I know what you’re about. Your one thought is of how you can escape and if you do your job well then escape is what I will let you do, but until then I don’t need you laying the groundwork for a planned exodus from my plans!”

I regarded the man across the aisle from me with new caution. Lawrence was nobody’s fool that much was clear. Sitting back in my chair I honestly said, “It’s not in my nature to sit back and take orders, but for the present you have the

upper hand and I'm willing to do the task or whatever it is you've got planned if it will get these bracelets off and some money in my pocket."

Lawrence regarded me closely for a moment before asking, "You read the file?"

"I did, but I don't see of what use I am to your plans of finding a way off-world."

Lawrence looked away and gazing out the window at the passing scenery he said, "Over the years we've made discoveries. Mind-numbing discoveries. Even now we have entire teams of people analyzing and working on deciphering exactly what makes the advanced technology we've acquired work. We lead the world behind the scenes in terms of discovering the

ancient secrets and technologies of the past. An America that is fully backed by the powers of the ancients is an America that has the ability to write ourselves into whatever position in the world stage we deem desirable in the future to come. We've left the anemic times of the subservient thirteen colonies far behind. Would it shock you to know that in our secret labs we have mastered the ability to fly?"

I tried to look suitably impressed in order to lead him on, but my real thought was, 'So what?' It must've worked as he went on passionately and in a way he revealed his religion to me, "We are far far advanced beyond anything you see in the common arena around. Why take for instance this travel by train, slow and unreliable. I could be in this nation's

capital in under two hours with some of the advancements we've acquired and mastered the use of!"

"I still don't understand what this all has to do with me. I'm as un-advanced as they come."

"Yes, you very much are a throwback in terms of advancement, but your ancestors were not. So far we have been able to determine that there are two methods of leaving the planet. By way of ships that fly and by way of a portal that sends over the information of an individual to an off-world place in a way that is dazzling even as it is impossible yet for us to understand and reliably replicate. Your brother left in such a way by all accounts. How he configured the jump between worlds I am not sure as he scarcely has any more

training in even the most rudimentary of sciences such as you possess. That said we have found a way as to ascertain for ourselves what lies beyond this world. Going on a lead we found in a journal entry from an ancestor of yours. We deciphered the name of a place along with its location that doesn't exist today. It was where your ancestors first arrived back on Earth. We know they founded a city, but the city was destroyed. The details are sketchy but it would seem that they were followed from wherever they came from by forces hostile to them. Survivors of the attack made their way eastward and settled in the mountains of the Alleghenies. It would seem that they left all trace of their advancements in technology behind in their new agrarian existence in the mountains. The

discovery of your ancestor's city occurred five years ago. We've had teams at work sifting through the rubble of the city, which is now mostly buried in sand or wiped away entirely from the face of the Earth. Last year we unearthed a corridor that led us to an underground vault. The vault was devoid of contents save for one thing. A flying ship. Beautifully preserved I might add. We've had our finest scientist at work on it ever since. We've managed to activate the technology, but it's locked from our use for any intensive purpose because of the matter of blood. Apparently only certain people can operate the technology. Your family being one of the few. Actually the direct lineage of your family in particular seems to be the only one that can cause the technology to

work as it should at full capacity.”

“How do you know that?”

“We’ve tried other Melungeon bloodlined individuals, but all they can do is to activate minor functions of the ship. You, your brother, and sister are all that remains of the immediate line of your family. Your brother is confirmation enough for us that your family in particular has the ability to operate the technology of your forefathers at full capacity and thus so should you. We can’t find your sister, which has been a source of wonder as you can see in your own case we are quite good at tracking down people of interest.”

I looked away from Lawrence and out one of the windows off to the side of me. I did my best to shield my thoughts from view, but my fists were white knuckled

beneath the table cloth.

Something wasn't right. I had a large family with multiple aunts and uncles and no doubt hundreds of cousins. Lawrence had said that my two siblings were all that was left of my immediate family. That simply couldn't be unless..... unless the government had thought my family a threat and hunted them all down.

My brother had been off-world for going on five years and somehow they had known of that event occurring when it did. Lawrence had said they hadn't found the ship and the need of my family's blood to operate it until a year ago, which meant their first reaction to my brothers leaving could've been one of blind panic fostered by the need to mitigate the ability to keep people

outside of their fold of veiled interests from discovering more about the past and possibly becoming a challenge to their bid to gain political control over the country and perhaps even the world.

The more I thought about it the more logic it made. What to do now? As it was I was literally in the presence of one of my family's executioners.

“What are you thinking Logan?” Lawrence asked.

Turning from the window I said, “It's just hard to take the reality of all you've said in.”

Lawrence nodded, “Yes it is. The mystery of what we don't know will soon be behind us though. With your help we will unlock the final secrets of the ship and an exploratory mission off-world has already been planned.”

I blinked, “Off-world mission?”

“Yes Logan. You’re going off-world, but only until we find some means of recalibrating the ship’s mechanisms to accept anybody’s direct input.”

That’s when they’ll kill me like they already have the rest of my family, I silently acknowledged to myself.

Forcing a smile I said, “Well I’m game for the adventure.”

Lawrence smiled, “Good to hear. We’ll reach our last train stop in the morning and from there we’ll travel overland one day’s ride until we reach the site of the old city where the ship yet remains.”

Nodding I got up, “Well then I’d better get my rest hadn’t I.”

I moved past his table as every nerved up urge within my body commanded me

to reach out and strangle the man with my bare hands, but I wouldn't get far in the attempt because of the bracelets. That knowledge and only that knowledge held me back from obeying the urges of my inner desires to kill the man.

I had to find a way to be free of these cursed contraptions of torture!

When I did find a way to be free of them though I would enact a revenge for my family the likes of which would become legend. On that promise to myself I eased out of the dining car and on down the train towards my cabin.

I paused outside my cabin. Carefully peeking out my cracked open door earlier had shown me that Lawrence was in cabin one and that the other cabins up to nine were all likewise occupied. That left just one cabin unaccounted for,

number ten.

I'd seen no one enter it, but I felt sure that I'd heard noise coming from it. Going to cabin ten I tried the handle, but found it locked.

The lock was a simple kind and slipping the table knife that I had pocketed unseen in the dining car I jammed it between the frame of the door and the door lock and the lock popped open with a click. Glancing either way and seeing the coast was clear I ducked into the cabin quickly shutting the door behind me.

Rather stunned I stood there with my back against the door as I stared into the bluest pair of eyes that I'd ever seen. In a word she was glorious.

Curly tendrils of blonde hair fell about her face and dusted down to her

shoulders in a delightful manner. Her face was a mixture of cute combined with innocent sensual appeal that was utterly undeniable. In short she had lady written all over her.

I stood there like an idiot and her look of surprise at my sudden appearance turned to one of playfulness and with a smile to match she asked, “Do you often break into others’ quarters?”

“Not lately.” I said by way of response.

Her one eyebrow arched, “Not lately? Whatever do you mean by that?”

Swallowing I tried to get my mind unglued from her, but it was hard, because my eyes wouldn’t listen.

“I should be going. Sorry for the intrusion.” I said, as I quite unlike myself sought for a way to make an

exodus from a beautiful woman's chamber.

Her playful smile fled as she held up a hand and exclaimed, "No wait! You don't need to leave just yet. Why don't you stay a while and talk."

My attention wasn't so much on her words as it had been grabbed by the sight of her upraised arm. She had a silver bracelet snapped about her wrist just like I did. This woman, lady, was a prisoner?

I looked at my own wrists and I heard her gasp. Looking up I asked the question most prevalent on my mind, "What on Earth does Lawrence have someone like you here as a prisoner on this train?"

"What do you mean someone like me?"

Verbally stumbling I gestured vaguely to all of her and lamely said, “You know, something fine, a lady.”

“Something fine.” She said repeating my words softly.

She smiled then and the blue of her eyes seemed to double in brilliance as she flashed pretty white teeth at me and said, “Come and sit down as it would appear that we have something in common.” She said, as she gestured to the bench seat across from her.

Swallowing against my urge to stay and bask in the presence of this woman I shook my head no and said, “It wouldn’t be good for me to be found here with you. I need to leave before someone comes.”

She nodded and sighed heavily before saying, “You’re probably right, but

you're the first real person unlike them that I've seen since I was kidnapped over a week ago."

"Why were you kidnapped?"

She looked out the window to the side of her as all the playful quality of her smile was now gone, replaced instead with a forlorn expression that did not suit her well at all. "My grandfather is a brilliant scientist. He was hired on by a government agency to do some work in the West. He wasn't supposed to be gone long, but time stretched out until I hadn't heard from him for over three months. Then Lawrence's goons showed up and took me from our home in Philadelphia. They haven't said much, but I get the picture that I'm being used as leverage in order to get my grandfather to do something for them. It can't be good."

She said, as her voice trailed off into silence.

Meanwhile I felt myself gripped with the urge to strangle Lawrence all over again. She looked from the window to me and smiled as she said, “You probably should leave fellow prisoner that you are. It’s been nice talking with you. I hope it works out well for you and that you get away. I’ll pray to God that it happens even so.”

I don’t know what made me do it, but the look of aloneness that had already closed in about her was too much to bear the sight of. Stepping closer to her I said, “I need to leave, but if you’d like I could leave Mark here to keep you company.”

I reached up and unbuttoned my shirt pocket and Mark scampered out of the pocket and into my hand. She gasped in

surprise and held a hand to her mouth as she said almost on the verge of laughing, “You keep a mouse in your pocket?”

“Not typically, just lately. He won’t bite I promise.”

I held my hand out and timidly she opened her palm and Mark scooted right into it looking just as mesmerized by this creation of woman as I was. Digging in my pocket I brought out a napkin that I’d taken from the dining car and opening it I pulled some cheese and a piece of bread out to lay on the windowsill beside her.

Mark scampered up her arm and across her lap to the windowsill and started packing his mouth full with food. Her face full of intrigued curiosity and the simple pleasure of watching of all things a mouse eating was utterly breathtaking.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

She glanced from Mark to me and smiling she said, “Christina Applegate, but you can call me Christy. Whom do I have the pleasure of speaking with?”

“Logan Collins.”

She held out her gracefully molded hand to me and I took it in my own somewhat gingerly.

“Well Logan it’s been very nice to meet you and Mark.”

I nodded and let go of her hand and forced myself to step away to the door. She watched me go as with one finger she petted Mark’s back. In that moment I felt extreme jealousy rise up in me against the rodent.

Turning I opened the door and quickly stepped out having to pull hard so the lock would slip back into place. It made

a noise, but no one appeared.

I stepped into my cabin and leaned back against the door after I shut it. My mind thought over the encounter that had just occurred.

She'd said that she would pray for my chance to escape. That she was a woman of strong faith I didn't doubt.

I'd said that she was something fine and truly she was. One thing was for sure. If I did get the opportunity to break free she was coming with me. There was no way come hell or high water that I was going to leave someone like her in the clutches of someone like Lawrence and his band of murderous city slickers.

Chapter Five

Hot Coffee

I didn't get a chance to see Christy again until we left the train the next day. Idly I asked who she was to one of Lawrence's clan in order to play along and I was promptly told to mine my own business.

They kept Christy away from prying eyes and brought the horse for her to where she was being kept behind the train station. Anger at someone like her being kidnapped and threatened and probably even made to feel pain made

my stomach churn even as I fantasized about sinking my fist all the way through Lawrence's slightly aristocratic paunch.

Mounting up we headed out of town and immediately the elements of a hot day in the West assaulted me. The heat didn't bother me, but the thought of what the sun would do to her unprotected head and face had me pulling my horse around to the tune of excited exclamations from custodians charged with keeping watch over me.

One of them even drew a gun, but I ignored him and pulled my horse in alongside of Christy, who squinted curiously at me against the bright glare of the sun raining down on her face. I took my hat off and put it on her head and had the satisfaction of seeing her fair white skin cast into shadow.

She didn't say anything, but her eyes were profound in their message of 'Thank You'.

"Would you look at that? Hey mates it appears chivalry ain't dead after all." One of the city slickers said with a guffaw of laughter.

I turned my eyes to him and he abruptly stopped laughing at the sight of the naked animosity I unleashed on him with just my gaze. Swallowing away his laughter he looked away hurriedly.

I felt a hand touch my arm and glancing to Christy I heard her say so softly only I could've heard her, "Where did you ever learn to look at someone out of so deep a well of hatred?"

Glancing away I said, "It's easy once you've had enough disappointments at the hands of others."

We said no more, but continued to ride on companionably. She had no luggage and although the dress she wore was very fine it looked as if she'd spent the week in it.

I fought against the urge to swear. I doubted she'd like hearing me swear anyway.

Glancing over to her I had a startling thought occur to me. Where was Mark?

Her dress didn't have any pockets that I could see and her hands were in plain view. Something akin to panic seized a hold of me.

I had very little I held of value in this world and Mark was one of them. He'd helped me get through a difficult time and retain some measure of my sanity and for that I was forever indebted to him for.

Christy cleared her throat and looking surreptitiously at her face she caught my eye and rose one hand to trace her fingers down her cheek as if she was brushing something away, only her fingers continued on downward to the modest high v cut neckline of her dress before she let her hand fall back to the saddle horn.

In startlement I stared at the hidden realm of her full chest that lay beneath the concealing layers of the fabric and lace that I gazed at. No, she couldn't have!

Pulling my eyes up it was only to see her nod imperceptibly as merriment glowed out of her eyes at me in a silent dance of unexpressed laughter. Swallowing I looked away from her.

I was never going to speak to Mark

again. What a lucky little rat he was!

Somehow my mind refused to leave the subject of Christy's full chest, which made riding an unpleasant experience. My attraction to her must have been apparent to her, because glancing her way time to time revealed that I was under as much study by her as she was a source of focus for me.

Each time our eyes met I saw a not so innocent look in her eyes that was hard to define. I hated myself, because against all my more nobler aspects, what few that had survived since childhood to the present, came the realization that I was falling for her big time.

That was bad, because I was bad.

Something fine like her should be paired with the same and not devalued as would be the case with any interaction with me.

I urged my mount faster and moved ahead in the column of riders in order to escape the allure that it was to look at her or even just be near her. Moving ahead did no good though as now I was constantly fighting against the urge to look back at her.

That night after darkness had fallen I saw something occur that sickened me. Claire was actively trying to cajole Christy to leave the fires light and go with her out into the darkness.

Looking about at the faces of those

along on this misbegotten journey revealed only amusement or disinterest in the taboo that was unfolding. As for myself I was unsure of how I could help Christy.

If I directly intervened I'd spark a larger conflict. I might even get myself shot. Oh wait, that's right they couldn't afford to kill me right now! Armed with that knowledge I was preparing to rise when Christy did the unexpected in defense of herself.

Claire was seated right beside her giggling as she whispered something into Christy's ear. How Christy had managed to put up with the woman and whatever she was insinuating that the two of them should do together was beyond me. Apparently a line was crossed though and with eyes widened I watched

Christy with one hand pull down Claire's low neckline shirt and with the other lift her coffee cup which she splashed the entire contents of all over Claire's exposed chest.

Clare shrieked and leaped back from the fire as she tore at her clothing. I couldn't help from bursting out laughing at the sight of it.

My laughter died the moment I saw one of Claire's cronies pull one of the little devices from a pocket and press a switch. With a cry of pain Christy fell to the ground in convulsions.

The distance between me and the man enacting such cruelty on Christy was gone within a blink and he only had a moment of shocked realization to comprehend his fate before I snapped his neck with my bare hands. I grabbed up

the device from the now slack hand of the man and drawing my arm back I then pitched outward into the desert as hard as I could throw.

Oh I knew what was coming next, but I wasn't done yet. I shoved off from the ground as mind-numbing pain shot throughout me. My lunge carried me on over top of the campfire and with a screech Claire tried to duck out of the way, but in the end she was only partly successful.

I landed and my hand managed to catch hers before she could escape. She jolted violently as the same current of pain I was feeling was transferred over to her.

“Shut that thing off!” Someone cried out in alarm.

One man stupidly grabbed a hold of

Claire and was caught up in the same prison of pain Claire and I were caught up in. The pain stopped, but then it was replaced with several kicks to my ribs and head.

I tensed against the blows all the meanwhile watching as a nearly unconscious Claire was drug away. The kicks stopped and I focused on just getting in enough air to breathe.

Someone was kneeling over me and I knew it was Christy even though my eyes were shut. There was just something about her presence that brought peace to my soul like no one else ever had.

“You shouldn’t have done that!” She whispered emotionally.

Cracking my eyes open I saw her face wet with tears and before any of those gathered around Claire could see I lifted

my hand up between us and pressed the control device I'd pretended to throw away down the front of her dress.

"Hope there's enough room." I muttered out dazedly, as I felt myself begin to pass out.

Christy only half listened to the angry voices of the others. She hated them!

No, that wasn't right of her. To hate someone was the same as to kill according to what Jesus had said in the Bible. She really didn't understand that, because the word 'dislike' seemed too little of a word to describe her emotions in concern to Claire.

The things that woman had said to

her! In all her sheltered life up till now she'd never thought once that someone like Claire could exist, but she was finding out with a lot of things that the reality of life was far different than the protective shell that she had been raised in apart from the world.

The man, whose head lay in her lap had witnessed much of that reality and it had made him hard. While she judged him as being a hard man that knowledge was offset by the small things that she had gleaned of his character in just the short time that she had known him.

He was still tender enough to form a friendship with a mouse of all things, which in its own way was very sad. More importantly he had shared that friendship with her, when she'd really

needed some form of companionship.

Thankfully she'd let Mark out of his lacy living arrangement earlier or no doubt he would be dead now. Each time she had suffered from the blinding pain of the electric shock caused by the bracelets she had marveled at her own survival of it. She doubted mice would be as hardy to such ill treatment.

She could see Mark's beady little eyes off a little ways in the darkness away from the fire as she tended to his master. Looking down into the man's face she came to grips with the reality of her own actions and what had resulted from them.

She'd never reacted so in anger in all her life before to do as she had done to Claire by dumping her hot coffee down her shirt. She'd wanted to do far

worse to the woman and throwing the coffee had seemed the lesser side of the actions the situation had called for.

Her outburst though had gotten a man killed. Looking at the corpse of the man, who had caused her pain, she searched within herself for remorse, but she couldn't find any. The only remorse she felt was for the pain the man laying within her arms had felt.

From the start this wild man had seemed taken with her and now she knew to what depths he would go for her. She wasn't quite sure how to take that kind of extreme emotion on the part of another.

He'd killed for her and her budding infatuation for him had only deepened. Surely there was something unhealthy about such feelings?

Out here though he really was the only source of protection she had encountered, but back East a man like him would have been perceived as the greatest of dangers. Which was it?

She thought about it. The fact was that she wasn't back East anymore. She was here in this land of sun and hot desert wind and he was the only saving grace she had encountered. Surely that must be a sign from God?

She didn't know, but she knew she was glad to have this man in her life, even though she knew he wasn't a good man. People could change, but the question was, would he?

She heard steps and looking up she saw Claire standing there backlit by the campfire. Claire looked fully revived and suitably enraged as she puffed

herself up to spew forth with who knew what kind of foul verbiage, but Christy wanted none of it and preempting whatever Claire had been about to say she spoke first, “Have you ever had a man come in defense of you and even be willing to kill as well as suffer the resulting agony for the action of doing so?”

Claire’s face was a picture of both puzzlement and wordlessness in reply to the question Christy had posed to her.

“Well I do have such a man and you would do well to remember it if you know what’s good for you! Now I suggest you choke down whatever you were about to say and go vomit it out where I can’t hear you. Your attentions are entirely not wanted as you can see

there is no way you're pitiful condition of abominable lifestyle can compare with the man you see lying before you. When given the option I will choose the path of God's ordained coupling of one man with one woman every time and you had better respect that or you can risk getting your neck snapped! The choice is yours."

Claire looking somewhat shaken by the outburst from the usually mild tempered woman they had kidnapped a week before and now she drew backward away from Christy as if she'd grown fangs and the means by which to use them effectively.

Christy watched her go and inwardly relaxed. She'd said most of what she had by way of bluffing superior strength in a situation where she did

not have any. Somehow it had worked though. This man, indeed these very Western lands, were having quite the transforming effect on her.

Chapter Six

In the Blood

We reached the spot where they said an ancient city had once been, only I didn't see anything but dry desert and stone. My ancestors had supposedly been here at some point, but I felt no call of affinity to the place.

It wasn't my home. Truthfully I didn't have a home anymore.

I'd been raised back East in the mountains, and although the mountains were beautiful I hadn't fit in there enough to want to stay. I fit in better out

here in the West, but even here I felt reined in by different interests, namely the law.

Truly though it wasn't that I was against there being law and order. I wasn't against it as I was well aware for the need for it. It was simply just that I wanted to be singularly apart from it, but that was never going to happen. If it wasn't the law then it was long arm of the government that operated on a level beneath the law on the pretext that it was for the greater good of the people.

Thinking about the government and how I was in the grips of it even now I thought of my extended family now all likely slaughtered by said government. I had to get these bracelets off!

It was akin to being locked away back in that Mexican hellhole of a prison in

terms of having to act natural around the likes of Lawrence.

An upthrusting jut of rock was ahead and it was this that we stopped in front of. For the first time I saw hints of civilization.

Cut into the rock were stone stairs leading upward. My curiosity piqued I eagerly dismounted and moved forward with the others, who were now careful to give me a wide birth.

I held back from the stairs at the last and let Christy go up the stairs before me. With a smile she moved past me and began climbing.

Watching her I abstractly realized that something in me had changed. I liked women. Most of all I liked the physical passion there was to be had with them, but right now when my mind should have

been caught up with what it would be like to slide my hands down and over the contours of this woman before me my mind was completely elsewhere.

Christy was more than just a body and she was different than any woman I had ever known. She was a lady in every sense of the word and I desired her more than I had any woman before her. That said, if I didn't come up with something fast the object of my every fascination as of late could end up dead soon and most likely brutalized before that moment of death came. Avoiding that fate for Christy was all I could think of right now.

My expiration date was certain. Once I was past being of use they'd turn the pain on and leave it on.

Christy's existence might stretch out

longer as they would likely need the services of her grandfather for some time to come, but there was no way they would leave any civilian held against their will that had been privy to the goings on out here in the desert alive and able to speak of what they had seen. Lawrence wasn't the type to leave loose strings, hence his aggravation over not being able to locate my sister.

I'd thought a lot about my sister, as well as her daughter, Tara. I'd even prayed for them, but I doubted such a prayer from one like me would do any good.

“Alright those of you who haven't been here before stay to your left and keep hold of the rope.”

I came out of my thoughts at the sound of Claire's voice. She gave me an evil

eye, but stayed back as I moved into the hole that opened up mysteriously on top of this jut of rock in the middle of nowhere.

Darkness closed in around me and idly I thought on whether or not this was my opportunity to get myself and Christy free. My hand stayed on the lead rope though that ran along the one side of the tunnel. There were just too many unknowns to start a bid for freedom right now.

The stone stairs were slippery and rounded off beneath us as if testament to the long passage of time that had transpired since their creation and subsequent exposure to the effects of wind and rain water.

Wind breathed past us down into the depths and I marveled at where it could

be that we were going to. I was pretty sure that we were now beneath the level of the outside plain.

Time stretched on and I heard the heavy breathing of the Easterners caused by more exertion than they were used to and the fear that any dark, seemingly endless, corridor would evoke.

I had problems of my own. The darkness wasn't so bad, but the confined quarters of the narrow tunnel were proving a bit much to handle.

My face was beaded with sweat and it was only pride that kept me sternly modulating my breathing from being as heavy sounding as those around me. This place was like a prison all over again, but there at least I'd had a window.

A soft hand felt at my front before wondering to the side and claiming my

free hand in a consoling grip. I knew shame in that moment that this woman knew my weakness.

I tugged on my hand, but she wouldn't let go. She kept leading me on through the darkness and obediently I followed feeling the internal pressure I was under abate some in terms of severity.

One of the Easterners cried out in semi-hysteria, "Does this tunnel never end? We've been walking for hours!"

"Pipe down you gutless coward, Weston. The first of the rooms is just ahead and we've only been walking for a little over an hour." Came Lawrence's perturbed voice in reply to the other party member.

Up ahead I saw light and I had to fight to avoid hastening toward it. One of the Easterners though did not and slipping

he fell headlong down several steps. The sounds of his fall were painful to hear and his resulting hysterical cries seemed partly justified, even if he did sound like a little girl.

The column came to a halt as we waited for those in the front to pick up the moaning form of the tunnel's first victim. I felt Christy turn and then she was wiping at my face with a cloth.

As the built-up evidence of my tension was wiped away I wondered at her actions and then it dawned on me what she was up to. She was trying to help me save face by removing the physical evidence of my fear for small spaces.

Tingles shot throughout me as she finished up and not being able to resist the temptation my hands settled about her waist possessively and brought her the

last little distance to me until she was pressed fully up against me in the darkness. I felt her breathing pick up in rhythm, but that was all.

Her hands settled on my shoulders and it seemed as though she waited in expectation for me to do more. I felt more sweat pop free on my brow, but it wasn't from the smallness of the space.

I couldn't do it! I couldn't take the innocence that I wanted so desperately from off her lips.

I let go of her and silently urged her to move away. I would've stepped back from her, but I had no room to do so.

She didn't move away and once again the cloth lifted and wiped the fresh sweat away. She stepped back and I breathed in a shaky breath, only to have my breath halt as she stepped forward

and landed a blind peck to the side of my face.

She turned away then and the column started out again. My free hand rose to feel at my cheek that seemed to burn at where her lips had contacted it.

Her innocent passion for me was beyond enticing. How was I going to keep her at arm's length, when it was clear she wanted to be within the reach of them?

Christy felt like her face was ten shades of red and it was with gratefulness for the darkness of the tunnel that she moved on down its cool interior. Why had she done that?

He'd been going to kiss her and then

he hadn't and it.....it had simply been too much. One of her chief self-confessed faults in life was her tendency to be impulsive, but right now her greatest peeve with herself was that she had missed his lips and kissed him on the cheek like some doting aunt to a nephew!

Her flushed face only grew more intense, as what it would have been like to have been kissed with the passion the man behind her manifested for her would have been like to experience. With dread she viewed the approaching end of the tunnel that would reveal her flushed countenance.

The column moved on and with reluctance she stepped into the lighted room beyond the tunnel. With a stunned gasp she forgot her embarrassment as

she gazed on the room and the view beyond it.

Before her was a wall of windows of which many were broken and cracked. It was through these cracked and missing panes of glass that the wind at their backs while in the downward stepping tunnel now disappeared out through.

It took a moment and a few steps closer to the wall of light to realize the view she was afforded was out over the side of a canyon. This room was built as an overlook of a vast canyon system that lay off in the distance lower than the elevation of this high sided canyon wall. Instantly she wanted a house someday that had a secretive overlook like this.

She glanced to the side and

speculatively regarded the man, who was the object of all her burgeoning emotions of desire.

Blinking away my astonishment of the hidden location of this room's expansive view I turned my head to Christy in response to her staring at me. She had an impish smile that gave her a mysterious edge I wasn't too sure about.

“What?” I asked uncertainly.

“From what I've gathered from overhearing the others is that the builders of this place are some of your ancestors. Is that right?”

“Apparently.” I conceded not sure where her questioning was headed.

Her smile only turned more

mysterious as it took on a calculating aspect, “Well then, it shouldn’t be too hard for you to construct such a place seeing as it is in your blood to know about how to go about it.”

“What?” I asked completely puzzled now.

Smiling she turned away choosing to leave me in the dark.

“Grand Papa!” She exclaimed out as the smile left her face.

I watched, as she ran to encircle an elderly man with her arms, who looked worn down both within and without. His time wrinkled hands clasped tightly around his granddaughter’s back as he held her close to him fiercely.

I saw a tear pass down his cheek and I knew my expanding role of sudden nobility of character would have to grow

some more. How was I going to get an old man and his granddaughter to safety though?

That indeed was the question. The old man's piercing blue eyes opened to regard me and for a moment I felt my soul searched by him.

His searing glance fell from my face to the metallic bracelets about my wrists. His gaze swung up to me and to my surprise I saw him mouth out, "I can get you free of those."

He imperceptibly hugged his granddaughter tighter and the message was clear. I dipped my head in acknowledgment of granting his request of saving the life of what was obviously his most treasured possession in the world.

"Well now that we've got all the

niceties of long-lost greeting behind us, Cornelius, it's time to get back to work.” Lawrence said with smugness that had me wanting to smash his teeth through the back of his skull.

Cornelius turned around somewhat arthritically to face Lawrence and the others who were at his back, “You cursed overgrown parasite of a man sized flea! How dare you bring my granddaughter here like this!”

Tightlipped Lawrence responded, “Well she is here and Cornelius, you'd better realize what is at stake. Your calculations had better be right, because her life depends on it.”

“Why? What you mean by that?” Cornelius huffed out.

“She's going on the expedition so it's to your designated advantage to ensure

the vessel flies as is intended.”

“Why you lily livered piece.....”

Lawrence drew out the small device that rendered only pain and said, “Or I can engage this now and you can watch her brain fry. What’s it going to be?”

Cornelius tightly responded with, “The vessel is as ready as I can make it. All we need yet is him to take it wherever it is you want the darn thing to go.”

“Just what is it I’m supposed to do?” I asked cutting into the drama of the moment.

With a sardonic laugh the old man turned to me and said, “Why you’re going to fly the cursed contraption. How are your reflexes boy?”

I stared at Cornelius dry mouthed. Fly the vessel. Looking to Lawrence I said,

“I thought you said all I had to do was activate something.”

Lawrence was studying Cornelius closely as he answered me with, “Yes, that was my understanding as well. What has changed Cornelius?”

Cornelius was shaking his head, “It won’t work without an active presence at the controls. No, he’s going to have to fly it or the cursed thing is not going anywhere.”

I started to protest, but Cornelius gestured to me and said, “Come here boy.”

He shuffled off to where moisture dripped from the ceiling to puddle on the floor of the room.

Lawrence spoke in what sounded like rising hysteria, “Cornelius, I brought with me the most qualified people in the

country to fly this vessel and you're telling me that this two bit gunslinger is better qualified?"

"Gunslinger you say! That's good! It's all about reflexes and I bet his are better than any of these other namby-pamby's I see that you brought with you."

I stopped walking as Cornelius turned to me and then pointed to the fast drip of water falling from the ceiling to repetitively splat into a puddle on the floor.

"All right now, hold your hand like this and try to dodge it in and out between the drops without getting wet."

I looked away from him to the fast drips of water falling from the ceiling. I held my hand the way he had instructed and getting a feel for the rhythm I dodged my hand forward and back.

“Now the other hand.” Cornelius ordered gruffly.

I did as requested and my left hand came away as devoid of moisture as my right hand had been.

“Well Lawrence have you seen enough?” Cornelius challenged.

Lawrence nodded slowly and Cornelius burst out with, “Good! Now let’s get this mission done and over with so my granddaughter can be back within the safety of civilization and away from the likes of you and your ilk!”

“It will be as you say Cornelius once this mission proves successful.” Lawrence affirmed.

Cornelius was facing away from the others and both I and Christy saw him roll his eyes at the obvious lie on Lawrence’s part.

I rather liked the old man's spirit and I fell in along behind him as he trundled down another passageway.

The passageway soon ended in a cavernous room dominated by a sleek looking object of metallic design. The room was highlighted by skylights overhead and in awe I studied the gleaming craft before me.

“Pretty isn't it my boy?”

I nodded.

“Well come along. We haven't much time to familiarize you with it before you're going to have to fly it to who knows where for who knows what.”

Feeling nervous anxiety threaten to overwhelm all thought I immediately followed Cornelius up the gang way that led into the vessel. Lights and gadgets beyond comprehension were lit up all

around in a dizzying display of advancements far beyond me.

“Now you’ll sit up here.” Cornelius said indicating one of two chairs that lay towards the front of the vessel’s forward windows.

Feeling like my heartbeat was off rhythm I sat down and looked helplessly about as to what to do. Strangely none of the buttons and levers that dominated the rest of the ship were around me. All I saw were two grips before me.

“Yes, take a hold of them and let’s see what happens.” Cornelius affirmed, as if reading my mind.

I leaned forward and my hands closed around the supple material of the two rods that projected out from the front dash. Lights came to life all over the windows before me and even the dash.

“Fascinating! Truly fascinating the way your ancestors designed their technology. Now I’ve come to believe in my research that for the pilot the act of flying the ship is almost entirely a mental exercise. A mental exercise that however borrows over what abilities you have in the physical. Now I want you to concentrate on floating the vessel a foot up off the floor.”

I did and there was a loud clang followed by an abrupt jolt as the ship resettled back onto the ground roughly. Looking back I saw that it had been the gangway falling away from the ship that had startled me.

Looking to Lawrence I saw a man extremely happy in a way that seemed distasteful somehow. Beaming from ear to ear he rubbed his hands together and

said, “We leave in the morning! See that these three are locked away and that they are well fed. We want them to be ready for the trials of the journey ahead.”

I was hustled along with Christy and her grandfather down and out of the ship to be enclosed in a small room with a sturdy looking door.

Chapter Seven

Honor Bound

The plate of food that had been shoved into the room for me remained uneaten. Vaguely I heard Christy and her grandfather talking in the background. Both of their lives depended on what I could do tomorrow.

The only thing about that though was that it was highly likely my best efforts would get us all killed. I contented myself in the knowledge that at least our enemies would die as well.

How could they realistically expect

me to be able to fly a ship beyond the realms of any body of water and not only that, but take it to another world? They were crazy!

I was a risk taker from way back when, but even I wouldn't do this if given the choice. The deck was stacked against me though.

Again and again the alarming realization occurred to me that the best opportunity to escape and to be free of types like Lawrence was off-world. This ship represented his only access to the worlds he thought lay beyond.

If the ship didn't return then any possible bounty hunters or government men sent out on a blood vendetta would be left with little else to do other than to stare at the stars. The only problem was that I had to successfully get the ship off-

world.

The headache that had plagued me for an hour now threatened to overwhelm and I forced myself to stop overthinking the situation, but it was hard. I heard someone sit down and I mentally girded myself against the onslaught of Christy's sweet presence.

Glancing to her I saw her regarding me curiously and I quickly looked away. I don't know whatever she thought she saw good in me, but she was badly mistaken.

I was scum and she really shouldn't be over here. It was like dangling a succulent looking steak in front of a half starved mongrel dog.

She picked up my plate and took a noisy bite out of a potato chunk. In surprise my eyes opened more fully and

in something close to shock I regarded the mischievous blonde that sat beside me.

“You’re stealing my food!” I exclaimed softly, as if I couldn’t believe what my eyes were telling me.

She shrugged, “I’m hungry and there wasn’t much on my plate.” Was all she said as the adorable quality she possessed only intensified.

“And you think that entitles you to steal what’s mine?” I exclaimed further.

“Look who’s talking Mr. Notorious bank robber, cattle rustler, and various other crimes of grand larceny.” She countered with before biting into another potato.

Blinking from the rightness of her words I looked away. When reality bit, it bit hard!

“Want a bite? I’ll share.”

I looked at the skewered potato held beneath my nose on a fork, “No thanks. Enjoy your spoils. If I ate right now with the headache I have I’d be hurling it everywhere.”

She set the plate down as she said, “Why didn’t you say so? Come here.”

Before I knew it her hands pulled me over and only halfheartedly resisting her my head landed up in her lap. Blinking in surprise I watched as she sat my hat aside, which she’d returned to me when we had entered the tunnel.

Her hands rose to my face and her fingertips began to massage at my temples in a circular motion that was amazing even as it was alarming. She could slit my throat right now and so help me I wouldn’t have noticed.

“I’m not sure what I can do tomorrow.....”

“Shhh. Relax. Tomorrow is in God’s hands and I’m sure you’ll do just fine.” Came her consoling words in a cutoff to mine.

My eyes opened and I looked up into her eyes that had far too many nakedly visible dreams of the future easily to be seen within them as she looked at me.

Swallowing I said, “You shouldn’t be thinking about whatever it is you see of happening between me and you. I’m not the man for you.”

The dreams didn’t die off in her eyes, instead she smiled as she asked, “Why?”

“I’m a sinner.”

She turned her head to the side with a soft laugh as she said, “So am I! Many times over in fact.”

I snorted derisively and surprisingly she smacked me on the cheek and with a serious look she said, "I'm not joking!"

I believed her and all I found myself able to respond with was in repeat of her question, "Why?"

"I like what I see and I like what I think you could become, that is if you wanted to."

"I don't change. I'm who I am." I said flatly.

Her eyes holding the promise of untold wealth backed up her gently spoken words, "Not even for me?"

I stared at her speechless. Finally I closed my eyes and just let myself be lulled into peace by the actions of her hands.

I didn't have an answer to her question. At least I didn't think I did.

Cornelius stood over his granddaughter, who continued to stroke the brow of the snoring man, whose head lay in her lap. He shook his head as he witnessed the loving actions of his favorite person in all the world.

Love, it just didn't make any sense or have any rhyme or reason to it. There was no fighting it though so he said nothing resolving instead to hold back any opinions he had on the moral character of the man his granddaughter had picked out for herself.

The man though, tarnished and with quite the reputation, by all accounts did have a decency about him in

regards to how he treated Christy. That was important, as was the fact that this man more so than any dandified city fellow had the ability to keep his granddaughter safe.

Safe? What truly was safe anymore?

He'd done his best to provide a safe haven for Christy after both her parents had been stabbed in a mugging in broad daylight when she had been only four. He'd done all he could to ensure her safety in life and look where all his best efforts had ended up!

Her very life and well-being were in great peril, because of him of all people! Curse his exemplary grasp of knowledge beyond the means of his day and age that had landed him in this pit in the middle of nowhere serving to the likes of an arrogant little mouse of a

man such as Lawrence!

The Lawrence's of the world were destroying society and now they were threatening all he held dear. They had to be stopped, but his feeble old hands weren't up to the task anymore, but perhaps this stranger was.

Had God sent a savior in the form of a lobo wolf or was the man really nothing more than a bottom feeder on society that would trash his granddaughter's heart? Only time would tell, but for now he busied himself by praying that it would not be so.

I rose up out of a dead sleep and in the dim light of the room, I took in

Christy, who lay back against the wall fast asleep sitting up. Cornelius was sawing logs in one of the two cots in the room.

Gently I scooped Christy up off the floor and her head fell trustingly against my shoulder. Swallowing I carried her to the other cot and laid her down trying not to awaken her, but her eyes opened dreamily as she said, "Thank you. My bottom was killing me."

I could well imagine that with her sitting on the stone floor with the weight of my head in her lap for hours. "You should have woke me up."

"No, I couldn't do that. You needed your rest."

I went to move away, but her hand held onto my shirt, "I want you to kiss me."

I looked at her and she added, "I've stared at your lips for hours."

"Christy I don't....."

"Please."

"I..... I...."

"Oh come on. I know you want to."

She cajoled.

I looked at her askance, "Are you trying to seduce me?"

"Maybe. So what if I am? Now please kiss me!"

"Only if you promise to stop trying to seduce me." I countered with.

Pouting her lips she gave me a look of disappointment that hurt somehow to see before moving to roll on her side facing away from me and saying, "Now that, I can't promise you."

I stared at the side of her face in contemplation. What was wrong with

this woman?

Nothing as far as I could see. Absolutely nothing at all. So then why did she want me?

Reaching a finger forward I threaded the curly blonde tresses of her hair back over her ear and away from her face. I moved back from her as the temptation became just too great.

I was a man worthy of hell, but if I messed up this girl's life I'd be fit for something far worse than hell.

I went to the half boarded over window that moonlight poured through. "God I'm not sure you're hearing this, but if You could tomorrow I'd really appreciate it if You could help me fly that ship thing and find a way to get this girl and her grandfather to safety. I..... I'd be very beholden to You if You'd do

that.” I stopped myself from speaking further and going over to where I had been earlier I sat down.

Hunger beckoned, but one look at the plate full of crumbs and the overstuffed form of Mark laying blissfully unconscious to the world beside it changed my mind. I’d suffered far worse things in life than making it through a night with a bellyful of hunger, but the hunger I felt for Christy truly was torture.

Closing my eyes I whispered, “God help me not be me when it comes to her!”

I willed myself to sleep then, but all I could dream of was what it would’ve been like to kiss her.

They would be coming for us at any moment and Cornelius still hadn't answered my question!

“Out with it! How do I get out of these shock bracelets?”

Cornelius continued to look me in the face stubbornly and I felt myself truly begin to lose it. In frustration I turned away.

Christy tugged on her grandfather's hand, “Please tell him Grand Papa!” She urged.

“And what if I do! Then he'll go off and leave you here in this murderous den of vipers! He isn't to be any more trusted than they are!”

“Grand Papa!”

“What! You don't know this man's reputation? His face is on every

billboard in the Southwest! The man's practically a legend for pulling off stunts of robbery and mischiefery!"

Gritting my teeth I moved away to the room's solitary window. Staring out it I grimly acknowledged that he had a very well reasoned point. I was not a man of honor so why should I be trusted as such?

I found for the very first time since I could remember the desire within me to be respected and trusted by others. Sadly it was too late for that.

How was I going to get Christy out of here? More than anything in the world I wanted to see to it that she had the ability to keep on being nice and in a setting surrounded by equally nice people.

I could hear the two of them arguing,

but not the gist of what they were saying. Cornelius was suddenly beside me and once again regarding me with those piercing eyes of his.

Christy remained by the door and I tried once more to convince the old man, “Look, I honestly just want to get your granddaughter out of here. I perhaps better than you know full well what will happen once either you or she outlive your usefulness to Lawrence. I don’t want that for her! I’m really telling you the truth on that Sir!”

Cornelius nodded and said softly, “I believe you young man. Forgiven an old man his doubts. Christy is very precious to me.”

I nodded full well understanding how that could be. I wouldn’t trust her with someone like me either and yet he’d just

said he believed me.

“You no doubt must have come to the conclusion that the best opportunity to escape Lawrence is when we’re off-world?” Cornelius inquired.

Nodding I said, “Providing I get us off-world successfully to start with.”

“Oh I have no fear of that. You’ll do fine today. It’s in your blood after all.” He hesitated for a moment, but then said, “You must also realize that there is no safe way my granddaughter could ever come to live on Earth in peace again thanks to men like Lawrence who rule and reign in extreme positions of power behind the scenes of our very own government?”

“The idea has crossed my mind Sir.”

“Well what are you prepared to do about it?” Cornelius pressed.

I took my hat off and twisted it in my hands before acknowledging my own lack of an answer to the problem at hand, “I don’t know Sir. She’s at risk no matter how I see it.”

Cornelius nodded before pointing at me, “But gentle soul that she is she’s safest when with you of all people.”

I shook my head, “That’s not safe at all. I don’t know anything about women like her. I’m somebody who really has.....well just plain made a mess of it and she keeps looking at me as if she thinks I’m something special. I’m not and I know it!”

Cornelius was looking at me in an intense fashion that said he was seeing something that he hadn’t before. Finally he spoke, “If you want to know how to be free and to save not only your own

life, but hers as well then you have to do two things.”

Looking at him out of the same depth of intensity that he was looking at me I said, “What are they?”

“You have to keep my granddaughter off-world and not let her ever return to Earth. That’s one condition.”

I nodded, “I’ll agree to that. What’s the other?”

“You have to marry her right here and now.”

“What?” I squeaked out in a voice that sounded more like the mouse in my pocket had spoken.

“You heard me! Now what about it?”

I glanced to Christy, who had come close, only to see her equally shocked at her grandfather’s change of heart.

“You were just arguing against him

and now you're for having me marry him?" Christy asked in a small voice.

Cornelius waved his hand through the air, "I changed my mind! I'm entitled to do that and anyway things are different, because I can see he loves you."

"I don't....." I started to protest, but Cornelius overrode me, "Oh yes you do! In fact you love her so much that you're willing to give up your precious free roaming lifestyle because you know it's what she deserves and that her being with you gives her the best chance of survival! Am I right or not?"

I remained silent as I couldn't say otherwise, but what he wanted wasn't right. Before I knew it he was explaining how among other things than being just a scientist and a mathematician he was also an ordained minister and then he

started spouting out the vows of marriage that I'd never expected to be heard said over me.

Equally mystifying to me was the sound of my voice in reply to the same vows. In a trance I heard Christy's voice repeat the same and then Cornelius wrapped it all up by saying, "You may kiss the bride later. Right now I think I hear them coming."

Gesturing to my bracelets he said, "It's really rather simple. They made a colossal error in putting two bracelets on you. Men like Lawrence always think overkill is better, but it often proves their undoing. All you need to do is get one of them mad enough at you to give you a zap. You then touch both bracelets together and they will short each other out and fall harmlessly off your wrists."

Blinking I asked in a whisper as I heard the door being opened, “All I have to do is touch them together?”

He nodded and I turned to the door as I relied on my best poker face to hide how shaken up inside I was at the recent turn of events. I was a married man. Literally everything had just changed about my life.

Lawrence came into view, “Alright let’s get the process of making history underway. You two come with me. The girl stays behind.”

Cornelius was about to erupt into an angered outburst, but I preempted him by saying, “Fine by me boss, but you do realize it’s your first mistake.”

Cornelius took a quick breath and looked at me as if I’d gone nuts. Lawrence was speculative in his study

of me, “How so?”

I shrugged, “She’s a loose end no matter how you look at her. Leaving her here opens the possibility of her escaping and talking about all she knows. I’d just shoot her and be done with it.”

With a gasp Christy pulled back from me as I kept my face a mirror image of the cool calculation that Lawrence manifested.

Cornelius cut in, “You harm one hair of her head and I’m through! I’ll sabotage your little get up here until the wires won’t spark off each other! I’ll.....”

Lawrence waved his hand dismissively at Cornelius, “Alright she can come, but she had better behave!”

Lawrence left the room and I felt

Cornelius softly pat me on the back. As for myself I felt myself breathe again.

That had been close. Married one moment and almost a widower the next. Not the start I'd envisioned to my marriage, not that I'd ever envisioned any such thing in the first place.

I moved to leave the room and Christy impulsively grabbed at my hand to hold it, but I shook my hand free of hers and catching on she dutifully separated away from me as it would appear only natural for her to do from someone who'd just said she'd be better off dead. I couldn't resist taking one glance at her though and she gave me a quick wink in return.

It was a struggle not to smile at her impulsiveness but her life depended on it. Strangely being yoked to her didn't seem like the prison sentence I'd always

viewed marriage as. She certainly deserved better than me and I would do my best to be better. God help me!

I sat once more in the seat I had the day before and the windows and dash before me came alive with symbols and all kinds of rifferaff.

“Now what?” I asked dumbly.

Cornelius was at a panel off to the side behind me and at my question he said, “Now we open the doors and then you very carefully are going to move us outside.”

“And how do I do that?”

“Think about going forward. Think about moving forward very slowly that is!”

The wall before me separated and moved off to either side and I was greeted by an unencumbered view over the canyon system beyond. I did as he said and the craft moved forward with only a little turbulence as I bounced it off the floor of the vault once.

“Easy with it Logan!” Lawrence said testily.

“Shut it!” I responded tightlipped, as a concentrated all my willpower on what I was doing.

“I won’t have the likes of you talking to me in such a way!” Lawrence hotly responded.

“Then shock me or shoot me in the back!” I offered, as the craft edged out over the rim of the canyon that fell off steeply below us. Lawrence was silent, but I could feel him fuming with the urge

to push the button.

Like it or not he needed me and right now his survival depended on my ability to fly the ship, which so far was going surprisingly well. I thought upward and the craft lifted above the canyon until we were overlooking the plain of the desert that lay stretched all around us.

“Now what?” I asked.

Lawrence stepped up to Cornelius and handed him a paper, “Here are the coordinates of the world we wish to visit.”

Cornelius took the paper and studied it with interest before he began to hit a series of buttons on a wall panel. “The course is set. Logan do you feel an urging to let go of control of the ship?”

“Yes.”

“Then do so.”

I let go of the double handles and the ship floated upward with speed on a targeted direction of which I assumed had been put in place by Cornelius just now. The complexity of everything around me was overwhelming.

I glanced back to where Christy was sitting towards the rear. Her face wore the same look of incredibility that my own must reflect.

Seeing her sitting back there brought me to ground so to speak. The incredibility of all that was around us, while awe-inspiring, wasn't suitable to mask the dire situation we were faced with.

Even now I had one of Lawrence's people hovering over me looking at what the screens and lighted buttons were all about. Three more were hovering about

Cornelius studying and asking questions of everything that he did. It was clear that the process of learning to replace us had already begun in earnest.

Soberly I did my best to study the instruments before me. A lot of the controls and features on the screens were in the form of irregular shapes. Shapes I recognized!

As a boy both my brother and I had inherited a set of wooden building block toys. We'd played and created new shapes and structures with them endlessly for hours. Not one toy block was exactly the same as another.

The toy blocks had names carved into them and certain ones allowed you to build certain structures. Some of the structures had been quite grand and Taran and I had always been competing

to see if we could create something uniquely original.

In most aspects Taran had excelled more than I in both aptitude and fighting, but with block wars I'd held my own and even won some of the time. Now I began to see that the blocks had really just been the rough form of representation of the lines that made up the outlines of the blocks. Did the shapes still go together in this virtual world?

Reaching forward I touched the lighted outlines on the dash and they moved with the pull of my fingers across the surface. Cool!

Smiling softly I started to create interweaved shapes.

“What..... what are you doing?”
Asked my apprentice in a hushed voice as if blown away by what was being

manifested by the twisting of my fingers on the dash and even the lighted panes of the window before me.

I ignored him, but he became insistent, “What are you doing?”

“Playing.”

“What?” He exclaimed.

He began to speak again, but Cornelius who had come up unawares behind us spoke, “Shut up and leave him be!”

The man made to speak, but Lawrence also in attendance waved his hand no. I forgot the gathering of the others around me as I focused on what was before me.

The exotic names of the blocks had come back to me along with configurations I had thought long since lost since I had moved beyond the realm of childhood. More and more the truth

that my people had come from the stars became unquestionably real to me.

There was no denying it now and somehow my forefathers had equipped me for this day without directly telling me. I'd have lived life with the greater aspect of my existence unknown and so it would have continued if the greed of a clan of individuals bent on power and the acquirements of more of it hadn't meddled in the natural course of events.

Words to shapes and shapes realigning into forms of geometric complexity steadily evolved before me. The shapes were a language and the more I built and modified them the greater my understanding of the language grew. The pictures on the screens before me were opening up some hereto for hidden memory in my mind that I didn't

remember ever having been taught.

I knew how this ship worked. I knew the way the engines combined with particles of light to realign them up within an internal array which focused and re-magnified their power into a greater output than was first received in the initial input.

I knew all this about this ship and how it worked and yet I still didn't know how it was that I could know, but the more I played the more I learned or as it seemed to be to me, remembered.

“Just what are you doing Logan?”
Cornelius breathed out.

“I wish I knew.”

“Don't give me that Logan!”
Lawrence cut in angrily. He went on, “You will teach my man what it is you're doing and I mean now!”

Not looking from the dash and the glass screens before me as I became more adept by the moment in the creation process I had begun I said, “No dice Lawrence.”

“What!!!”

“You heard me. I ain’t training anyone to take over for me so you can just kill me.”

Lawrence lost his temper then and began screaming all kinds of dire threats, but I pushed him to the back of my attention. Finally though he said something that attracted my attention back to him, “Bring the girl over here!”

Glancing away from the game of shapes I turned to watch Christy be drug forward roughly. Lawrence pulled a knife out and held it to her throat, “Tell us now or I’m going to start carving her

up like a turkey and don't bother trying to lie to us about how you don't care for her! I know different and in fact that's why I decided to bring her along in order to properly motivate you to do my will if need be."

I swung around in the chair that swiveled smoothly to the accomplishment of the task. Christy had a brave face on, but the knife was hard to ignore.

Looking Lawrence directly in the eye I said, "Touch her and you die. Don't believe me then go ahead and keep holding her like that and you'll find out."

Silence strung out for a long moment as I let all the apathy of spirit I felt for this man come into vivid focus within my eyes. I'm known for being intense at times, mostly I shield that aspect as to be

too intense made more of an impression on people and helped them to pick your face out of a crowd as that of a notorious bank robber.

Lawrence wasn't liking what he saw and grudgingly he released her.

Nodding I said, "Wise decision. Now I'll toss you a bone. Did you know that the world you have us headed for is still inhabited despite having taken heavy damage in a slave revolt of some years back?"

Lawrence's eyes widened and he breathed out in question barely loud enough to be heard, "How do you know that?"

"Couldn't tell you if I tried. Suffice it to say though the more I play the more I learn. Now drift away and take him with you and I'll get you to where you want to

go.”

Obediently Lawrence did so and it appeared that things were well in hand. One of his goons started to drag Christy away but I said, “She stays and sits right here beside me.” I said in indication of the seat across from mine.

Lawrence nodded in ascent and Christy quickly shook her arm free and headed to the chair and sat down beside me.

Calling out after Lawrence I said, “In addition to being still inhabited the world also has some surviving structures of its earlier cultural societal makeup.”

Lawrence suddenly looked as if besides himself with glee. He moved off toward the back of the ship armed with those tidbits.

Everything I had said while true had

in point been a deception. A deception I intended for him to find out for himself in vivid detail.

In a gruff whisper Cornelius said, “I recognized some of those symbols from Greek classical literature. We’re not headed to Atlantis are we?”

It was weird. Everything he’d just said should’ve been Greek to me, but for whatever reason I now seemed to be linked with a vast depository of knowledge and I in turn knew exactly what he meant.

“Not Atlantis itself. A one time galactic outpost of it however yes.” I whispered in reply to his query.

“It’s still occupied?” Cornelius breathed out with concern.

“Yes, but there is nothing to fear Cornelius. We’re going to take Lawrence

there and if all goes according to plan that is where we'll leave him and his crew.”

“I don't understand.”

Truly neither did I fully, but in part I did and that was enough for me to take faith in. Cornelius moved off and it was just me and Christy.

Glancing over at her it was to the welcome look of her ever inviting smile. I shook my head, “How can you smile like that in this stressful environment? You just had a knife held to your throat.”

She shrugged and said, “Because I'm happy.”

I glanced from her to the screen full of interconnected shapes before me. She was happy to be with me?

I wasn't sure I comprehended how that could be, but I wasn't wishful of

what she'd said changing in any way.

"I can't wait for you to kiss me."

My jaw gripped hard. I glanced at her feeling every bit the big bad wolf and said, "There's a lot more about being together than just kissing Christy."

"I know." She said softly looking more excited than scared.

It hurt to look at her and yet it was impossible not to. She was beauty and innocence personified. Troubled I looked away from her.

"What's wrong Logan?" She asked concerned.

"You should have a better man than the likes of me."

"I could ask for no better a man than you. God has greatly blessed me with you Logan."

"How so?" I asked doubtfully, as I

stared outward past the shapes into the darkness of space beyond the window.

“Well I know you care for me even as you have cared for me. You love me enough to risk your own life for me as you have already on several occasions and no doubt yet are going to do so again in the future. You’re handsome and although I know you have a past I yet have confidence that you’ll be faithful to only me from now on. Am I right?”

I nodded dutifully.

“What’s not to love about you Logan?”

“A great deal. I’ve stolen and killed more than you can imagine. The guilt I bear is more than can be forgiven.”

“That’s not so and you know it!”

I looked to her and she went on. Raising a finger she admonished, “I

know someone taught you God's word as a child. I'm not sure how I know that, but I do. All you have to do Logan is ask for forgiveness and you will be forgiven. You know what I say is the truth so stop pretending otherwise. You think you're so tough, but how many men care for the welfare of a mouse? In truth you're as special in God's eyes as I am!" She finished with passionately and nodding I turned away.

She was right and she was wrong. I would never be as special as she was.

Chapter Eight

Gnashing of Teeth

It took us two days to reach the Atlantean outpost. Two days in which I nearly lost the will to refrain from strangling Lawrence and his crew of cutthroats many times over.

They were insufferable in their questions and threats and I did my best to inform them of truth as little as possible and to mislead them as much as possible. All the while that was going on was the constant war to keep from going crazy in the need I had to touch Christy.

She was mine to have and hold and yet I had to act as if she was just some woman that I'd rather not see dead for the benefit of Lawrence's fickleness of heart. In combination it was all driving me crazy.

That was all behind now and increasingly I was looking forward more and more to what lay ahead. The planet was in view below us and we began to descend rapidly toward it.

"I thought you said this world was inhabited! All I see is jungle." Claire said in doubtful question of me as she glanced away from one screen.

"Oh it's inhabited." I responded with before adding, "With monsters."

"What!!!" Claire exclaimed.

"Yes it would seem the beings that you came to inquire knowledge of quite

some time ago created for their amusement a bevy of flesh eating monsters by which they threatened their slaves with in order to get more work out of them. The slaves receiving outside help from my people rebelled centuries ago and were removed from this world, while their former masters were in tune treated to remain with the creations of their own evil imaginations. A few of them have managed to survive. Perhaps you can ask of them the answers by which to gain great power for yourselves. In general the world is used as a prison colony of sorts, but for only the worst of offenders mind you. I'd say you'll fit right in Lawrence."

Lawrence had drawn out his little control button remote and now shaking with fury he said, "You've double-

crossed me for the last time!” And with that said he pressed the button.

I'd been holding my arms overlapped and shifting them I brought my wristbands to touch. The shock coursed into me, but departed just as quickly as sparks and smoke shot off the metallic wristbands.

Both bands fell off my wrists and I stood up flexing my hands. Lawrence backed up and in vindictive fear cried out, “Fry the girl!”

Claire felt at her pocket but then in realization said, “I can't! Don't you remember we couldn't find the remote!”

“Shoot him, someone!” Lawrence cried out as I stepped forward to grasp a hold of a handlebar on the one side of the ship. One of Lawrence's willing accomplices pulled a gun free and held

it up his hand visibly shaking.

I shook my head and said, “I wouldn’t if I were you. You’re going to need all the bullets you have to ward off bigger predators than me.”

“What?” The man quivered out.

Leaning forward I said, “If you hadn’t noticed we’re descending quite rapidly to the planet’s surface. In fact I think we’re about to crash.”

“What!!!” Lawrence screamed out, as he wheeled to the forward window, which did indeed reveal the surface of the planet fast approaching.

Christy and Cornelius were both strapped in, but nobody else was and in the terror of the moment they were beyond accomplishing such a task.

Lawrence was practically foaming at the mouth as he wheeled from the

window to face me once more, “You’re going to destroy my beautiful ship! You fool! Do you not realize what you’re doing? You’re setting the course of human advancement back several thousand years, if not more! We could’ve journeyed to the stars within another generation and had the ability to use this ship to procure ancient technologies in the meantime!”

“First of all it’s not your ship and second of all I like the Earth in its current primitive form without the likes of pompous little power-hungry jerks like you in complete control of it. The next generation on Earth can thank me for keeping them from the imposed butchery that your kind would enact upon the populace.”

“Why you insolent cur! Your kind

need wiped out and believe me I'll see to it! I" The ship hit the ground and people went flying.

My feet left the deck, but I held on to the bar for dear life as the ship bounced and careened about on its rough landing onto the planet's surface. Finally it came to a stop.

The gangway hatch opened up as lights flashed all over even as a threatening alarm sounded out as steamy vapor filled the cabin of the ship. In the hysteria of the moment I called out loudly, "The ship's going to blow! Everyone out now!"

Like a herd of cattle anxious to avoid a winter windstorm Lawrence and his bunch either ran or crawled for the opened hatchway as quickly as they could. I even helped one or two of them

complete the journey to the open hatch.

That done I hung against the side of the gangway watching them disperse into the vegetation of the planet's jungle environment as fast as their feet could take them. Chuckling softly I shook my head and pressed the button for the hatch to close. What a gullible lot they were.

“Look out Logan!”

I wheeled around to see Christy take down Claire, who had somehow escaped my notice in the mass exodus from the ship by the other crew members.

Both women fell to the floor and a shot rang out loudly. Of the two tussling women on the floor Christy fell off to the one side.

“No!!!” I screamed out as I ran toward the pair.

Claire screamed in fright as she saw her death reflected in my eyes and dropping the gun she scrambled off to the side. I let her go for the moment as I fell to my knees beside Christy.

Claire completed her mad scramble to safety and slipped through the closing hatchway just before it closed.

Christy's eyes were closed, but her hands were clenched down low on her side.

“Christy?”

Her eyes opened and they reflected the pain she was in and I cried out brokenly, “I’m so sorry! This is all my fault! I should’ve had a better plan of getting them off board! I.....oh God please don’t die!”

Something flashed in her eyes and coughing piteously she asked in a choked

voice, “Will you promise to do something Logan?”

“Anything!” I said brokenly, as I watched her eyes flutter and her breathing come roughly to her as if she had to gasp for continued life.

“I want you to get right with God.”

I nodded my head as I grasped her hand.

“I want to hear you do it now.” She said gasping for breath.

Tears streaking down my face I honored her last request by closing my eyes and saying, “Jesus, please forgive me for my many sins. I don’t deserve Your grace, but I ask for it anyway. Please don’t let her die!” I cried out with at the last as I opened my eyes.

She was smiling at me through the pain and in a whisper she said, “Kiss

me.”

Leaning forward I did so. The loss of her and these last few moments by which to fill an entire life full of all I'd wish to experience over the course of a lifetime with her was too much. I broke the kiss off and pressing the side of my face against her chest I cried out, “Please don't die!”

Her heart still beat firmly beneath my cheek and through the cloudy veil of my tears I saw Cornelius leaning back against a console shaking his head side to side with a wry expression on his face that was hard to read. Where was his sorrow over the loss of his granddaughter?

Raising my head I looked down at Christy's face now remarkably free of the pain it had just been etched deeply

with a moment before. Smiling sheepishly, as she held up a pocket-sized Bible she took from a hidden dress pocket she said, “I have a confession to make. I’m not dying.”

I pushed back from her and up to my knees as I stared at her in a mixture of joy and apoplectic anger.

“Utterly shameful.” Cornelius mused aloud.

I looked to him and looking pained he shrugged his shoulders, “I tried to teach her better, but she’s forever been the practical joker no matter how many times she was disciplined as a girl. This is by far though her greatest fall into deceit. Shameful!”

Looking concerned now Christy said, “I’m sorry! I promise not to do this again! I promise!”

Looking from her to Cornelius I asked, “Are you sure you spanked her hard enough as a girl?”

Looking reflective Cornelius shook his head no and said, “Apparently no. Would you do me the favor and see that it’s done right?”

“With pleasure!” I said savagely and with a gasp Christy tried to scuttle away, but I caught her and hauled her up to her feet alongside of me.

Cornelius had taken his belt off and with a gesture of offering it to me said, “Use mine. It’s thicker than yours and it should leave a good sting.”

“Grand Papa!” Christy exclaimed in outrage.

Leaning forward I took the belt, “Thanks!” I then proceeded to drag Christy toward the pilot chair at the head

of the craft.

“You wouldn’t hurt me Logan! Would you?” She finished with uncertainty.

I didn’t answer and in panic she begged, “Please don’t! I’m sorry okay! I shouldn’t have done it! Can’t you forgive me?”

Sitting down in the chair I looked up to her face that was on the verge of tears and smiled broadly.

“Why you rat!” She burst out with.

Chuckling I tossed Cornelius’s belt to him. Cornelius sat down in the chair across from mine with a sigh of regret and said, “She truly deserved a spanking you know.”

“Where’s your spirit of forgiveness Cornelius?”

“She already has you wrapped around her finger boy.”

Chuckling, I nodded, as I pulled Christy down to sit on my one leg. Humor vanishing I removed the pocket-sized Bible that had caught the bullet and laid it down on the dash before me as living proof that there was a God of mercy directly involved in my life.

“Now we had better get out of here before any more attempts are made on your life.” I said, as I relished the feel of Christy being alive and well beside me.

Christy looked forward and asked, “But I thought we crashed?”

“More of a rough landing so to speak. The ship has a protective shield that spared the vessel from any major damage. I programmed all those alarms to go off and for the hatch to open.”

Christy looked from the screens to me with a look of marvelment written

across her face as she said, “You really do know how all this technology works don’t you?”

“Yes, as unbelievable as it sounds. It must be in my blood.”

Smiling she looked forward again and abruptly shrieked as loudly as she could. I felt like shrieking as well, but I held it in.

“Upon my word!” Cornelius exclaimed, while I busied myself with pulling the ship up and away from the beast that seemed all teeth that was even now trying to bite through the forward windows.

Escape from the surface achieved I set the ship upon a new set of coordinates.

“What was that thing?” Christy breathed out as her face still bore a look of terror.

I shook my head and said, “Not sure, but I find myself almost pitying Lawrence right now. Well almost.”

Claire felt as if her heart was coming out of her chest. The horrors of this world were unimaginable.

Why ever had Lawrence wanted to come here of all places? Logan had said it was a penal colony and well she could imagine it being an effective one.

Off in the distance she heard pistol rounds going off and the roars of the creatures that called this place home. Then there was screaming, which was abruptly cut off and well could she imagine the monster even now as it chewed up its victim.

Just as she had cleared away from the ship and the murderous wrath that she'd seen in the eyes of Logan she had seen one of the monsters dart past her in route for the ship. Now however, faced with the awfulness of this world, she wished she was back on the ship lying dead in a pool of her own blood, at least then there would have been a quick death as opposed to the every waking moment of horror that this place evoked.

There was more screaming in the distance. It was all too much. She put her hands over her ears and ran blindly through the vegetation in the opposite direction from the screams of mortal agony that continued to ring out behind her in the distance.

She didn't even know why she ran as

she had no hope of reaching someplace safe, but surely anything ahead of her was better than being eaten alive like those behind her. She half fell her way down a steep bank and crawling forward toward a stream of water she drank hungrily.

Something made her look up and in startle meant she pulled back from the water at the sight of three bearded men dressed in little more than rags. They looked at her with eyes that didn't reflect true sanity.

Swallowing down her anxiety she rose up off the ground, but with a freakish bound they were suddenly on all sides of her. Managing to find her voice she said, "What do you want?"

As one they laughed manically, before one sobered enough to say,

“Why you honey. We want woman!”

“Ain’t seen one in years!” Said one of the others as he licked his lips before adding, “They be few women dropped off here and them that do don’t last long.”

Panic mounting as all the civilized structure that she’d fought against all her life became suddenly absent from her she said, “But I don’t do men. I’m only interested in women. Now back off and leave me alone!”

Laughing all three of the men pointed to her as if she was the crazy one. Claire tried to run, but they caught a hold of her and the hell of this prison planet truly began in essence for her.

She began cursing everything and everyone that had in her eyes conspired to get her landed in this place of

*torment, but most of all she cursed
God.*

Chapter Nine

Autopilot

“Well that should about do it Cornelius. Think you can handle it?”

Cornelius nodded absently, as he gazed fixatedly at the game of block outline shapes before him, which even now he was learning to manipulate with his fingers. “How utterly intriguing this is! Language through the manipulation of geometric shapes with corresponding mathematically derived principles used throughout to create a chemistry of infinite possibilities.” Cornelius mused

as gleefully, as a young child, as his old mind grappled with the challenge of learning an entire new set of skills that utilized in part the concepts that he had already mastered in life.

Christy and I gazed fondly at the old man absorbed in the pursuit of a new avenue of interest. As grand as the discovery of all the simple game had unlocked for me my mind however was elsewhere.

My gaze turned to Christy who still sat on my one leg. Her eyes met mine and her innocent smile was betrayed by the look of passion in her eyes for me.

This time our kiss however was not one of goodbye, but rather of a new beginning. Her hands closed about my face as we tasted each other's lips passionately.

The loud clearing of someone's throat had us both looking at Cornelius startled. Looking over the rim of his glasses at us he said, "Perhaps you two love birds had best get yourself a room somewhere."

Christy gazed forlornly past me towards the rear hatch and said, "But there are no rooms!"

That's what she thought!

Motioning to the heads-up display I said to Cornelius, "Everything is on autopilot. I expect we'll get where we're going in about a week. I might or might not see you before then."

Christy's face turned ten shades of red and I marveled at the beauty of a simple blush. I'd never had the joy of being with a woman who could and now I had the honor of causing this woman no end

of blushing for the rest of my days.

Sounding as if her tongue was tied Christy said in deep mortification, “There are no rooms Logan!”

Smiling I reached my hand up and dipped it beneath the neckline of her dress. She gasped and looked even more mortified, as I pulled my hand free and set Mark down on the dash of the ship.

Cornelius stared at the appearance of Mark in consternation. Gesturing between the two I said, “Cornelius meet Mark. Mark meet Cornelius. You two can keep each other company while I get accustomed to the joys of matrimony.”

I stood up and transferred Christy from sitting on my thigh to laying draped across my arms. She stared at me out of a mixture of desire and embarrassment as I walked toward the back hatch.

A little past halfway across the length of the ship I set her down on her feet and she stood there awkwardly glancing from me to her gaping grandfather still seated at the forward end of the ship. I waved my hand across a panel of lights on the wall and a panel of steel seemed to virtually materialize behind me cutting off all sight of Cornelius.

Gaspings Christy held her hand to her mouth as she fought to stifle a nervous giggle. Wrapping my knuckles on the steel partition I said, "See proof, soundproof, and only able to be opened from this side. Are you satisfied?"

Turning from the wall of steel to me she came closer with a smile only to say, "Not till I'm all yours Mr. Collins."

"That can be arranged Mrs. Collins." I said, as my lips lowered to hers, even

as my hands seized onto the priceless gift that she was.

Cornelius glanced away from the steel partitioned blast door to Mark and shook his head and said, "I don't know about this younger generation. I surely don't, but then who can argue with divinely appointed passion. If ever there was a rose it's my Christy and if there ever was a thorn it would be Logan. Together they make the complete rose don't you think?"

Mark's little head bobbed, as if in agreement and thus an amicable relationship of sorts began between the aging professor and the little field mouse from a prison south of the

border.

Chapter Ten

Blue vs. Grey

One week later

Taran looked up as a ship passed by overhead. His alarm was only momentary as he recognized the form of one of the cruisers of his ancestors, which he had found the blueprints for in an abandoned lab that had been found when the ice on the southern hemisphere of the planet had melted.

Where on Earth had this ancient craft been raised from the dead from?

People from all over that could trace

their lineage to his people had been arriving back on the planet in the last year ever since the word had gotten out about its return to life. It would appear that yet one more of his kin had arrived home bringing a valuable piece of their former technological greatness with them as well.

Taran straightened up to full height and tried to get the kinks out of his back caused from seemingly endless post hole digging. With the end of the forced weather modification on his world of Soluranami the endless stretches of volatile sand had turned into a vast prairie of thick green grass where here and there a long dormant seed of a tree grew and sprouted to show its leaves to the endless day.

The soil, indeed almost everything

had changed in this world that never knew darkness thanks to its twin suns. In this brave new world of opportunities he intended to raise horses.

Perhaps it was a simplistic endeavor for the leader of a world to embark on, but life is about the simple pleasures. Several months from now he was expecting his first batch of horses to arrive from a world nearly overrun with the creatures.

It was a primitive world of bitter rivalries and violence, but their horses were beyond compare. The world was inaccessible by any means other than a spacecraft so one of Zayri's old cronies was shipping in a cargo hold of them for him so he could start to build his herd.

The imminent due date of the arrival of the horses demanded a means of keeping them. Hence the endless fence building project he had embarked on a month back.

As he watched the craft set down on the prairie not too far away he felt the loving touch of his wife, as she massaged the ache in his back with one hand. Glancing to the side he caught her smiling at him. She knew how it irked him with the ability she had of sneaking up on him without him hearing her.

She brought her other hand up, which his gun belt hung off of, "Thought you might need this dear."

Smiling Taran took the gun belt and hung it from the top of the post beside him. He doubted he'd need the gun, but

it had been wise of her to bring it nonetheless.

The holstered gun hung within easy access should he need it. Looping his arm around his wife's shoulders he rubbed over the growing mound of her belly with his other hand and asked, "And how is the mama-to-be today?"

"Worried as usual that you're going to work yourself into an early grave."

Chuckling Taran said, "I told you dear. Work now means restful enjoyment later."

The sound of a fast approaching horse had both of them glancing back to see Edgar pull up behind them. With excitement he dismounted and rushed forward all the while pointing, "Did you see that ship? It's a carbon copy of the one in the archives!"

“So it is and it would appear its occupants are coming to greet us.”

Taran studied the lone walking form of the man that was approaching. There was something very familiar about the man’s walk. In astonishment he whispered, “It can’t be him!”

“Can’t be who?” Zayri asked with concern.

“My brother!” Taran said even as he confirmed it now as his brother’s face came better into view.

Zayri glance with excitement toward the approaching man and then with puzzlement towards her husband who didn’t seem overjoyed at the appearance of his brother. “Why aren’t you happy about your brother being here Taran?”

He glanced at her and said, “I want

to be, but the last time we met he said the next time we saw each other he'd kill me."

Zayri gasped and looked at the approaching man in a new light.

"Maybe you should put your gun on." She said softly.

Taran shook his head no and then started out to meet his brother. Zayri wanted to object, but she bit her lip instead as she and Edgar looked on nervously.

He was the same old Taran for sure, I acknowledged, as I noted his brazen approach toward me without the gun that the woman had brought him. The last time I'd seen my brother he'd been

wearing Yankee blue and I'd been in Confederate gray.

We'd stood in a field wrecked with the carnage of two armies at merciless war with each other. The dead from both sides of the conflict had been littered about our feet so thickly that it had been hard to find a spot to step.

He'd held a cavalry saber in one hand and an empty pistol in the other. I'd had a rifle still loaded and pointed at his chest. The moment of horror at being opposite your brother on the field of battle and yet driven to kill him because of the spilt blood of my mates on the ground had been a strong compulsion urging me to pull the trigger.

He was my brother though and so I'd let him go. I'd always wondered if that had been a mistake. A betrayal if you

will, of the men that I'd fought alongside of, but at the time loyalty to family first had still come out on top.

It still did.

I came to a stop and so did he. He'd aged well and had the look of a satisfied life about him. I was only recently coming to such an expressive acceptance of what joy life could be when you had the right person beside you to share it with.

Softly I spoke, "You still don't have a loaded gun brother, but neither do I. I'd like to forget the past and start over on this world if it's all right with you big brother."

There was no hesitation in him as he stepped forward and wrapped me up in a hug the cracked my back. I returned the hug with equal measure.

Taran spoke against my shoulder, “Welcome home little brother!”

“I’m glad to be here Taran!”

Drawing back after a moment I stepped to the side to take Christy’s hand, who had come up behind me, and facing Taran I said, “I don’t come alone brother. This is my wife Christy and her grandfather Cornelius.”

Mark scampered up out of Cornelius’s vest pocket to his shoulder and I added, “And friend.”

The beautiful woman standing off to the side of Taran stepped forward to take my hand, “And I’m Zayri, Taran’s wife.”

Leaving me Zayri went to Christy and taking both of her hands she warmly said, “I am very glad to meet you Christy! Come! There’s more than enough room in our house for you and

your grandfather, until we can get a house of your own built. We even have running water. Would you like a bath?"

"Oh yes please!" Christy said with excitement. And so on and so on the two women conversed as they headed off towards the house in the distance.

Taran and I fondly watched them go happy in the knowledge that not only were both of us happy because of the women that we now had as our wives, but also because our wives had a friendship of their own apart from us by which they could enjoy.

Edgar was edging off toward the landed ship with the pure light of curiosity alight in his eyes. Cornelius intercepting him said, "You seem to have the look of a learned profession about you Sir?"

Edgar puffed up slightly and responded with, “Why yes I do. I’m a doctor and an amateur scientist as it were.”

“You don’t say my good young man!” Cornelius burst out with enthusiasm before adding, “Come with me Doctor. What a blessing it is to have a man of professional conduct to share this rediscovery of what surely must be one of the most rudimentary foundations of all mathematical theorems.”

The two men walked on towards the ship as they excitedly lived off each other’s enthusiasm over the thrill of discovery of something new and yet old at the same time.

Smiling I glanced from them to my surroundings of endless grass.

“It wasn’t always like this, but people

came together and God intervened and now you see the results.” Taran said.

Nodding I looked back to Taran. Eyeing him up speculatively I said, “You’ll have a fight to keep such a paradise like this brother.”

Taran smiled sagely and said, “Has it ever been any different anywhere else and at any other point in time?”

I nodded my agreement and said, “I’ll help you keep the peace brother, as I am tired of endlessly drifting.” Pausing for a moment I grudgingly said, “As a family we’re all wiped out back on Earth, Taran. From the sounds of it our whole family got hunted down and put to the gun barrel, except for perhaps our sister.”

Taran nodded grimly at the news. Looking toward the horizon he said,

“Our situation here is also precarious. It’s a big world and there are few people as of yet to populate it. We have many ancient enemies and sooner or later an attack will come. Be that as it may this is where I’ve put my roots down. In several months a new Collins will be born and our family will go on. Come hell or high water I won’t go out without a fight to keep what’s mine!”

Stepping up to Taran I slapped him on the back effectively jarring him from his depressive outlook of the possible future events facing us and said, “Fortunately for you brother I’m a man that likes to fight.” Smiling together we headed for the house in the distance.

We hadn’t gotten very far when Taran asked, “Have you ever built fence?”

“No, why do you ask?”

“Because I’ve got several hundred yards of it with your name on it.”

“Yeah right!” I said only half jokingly.

“You want to eat don’t you?” Taran said with a mischievous glint to his eyes.

“I’m still on my honeymoon brother.” I said begging off.

“You have all night for that. What you need is outdoor exercise.”

I looked at him darkly and chuckling he said, “Well at least give me half a day’s work.”

“Alright it’s a deal. When does it get dark around here?”

Laughing uproariously Taran said, “It never does brother!”

Not seeing the cause of his humor I asked, “So how do you measure time?”

“We don’t for the most part so you see your half a day of labor can be stretched

out however long I want to.”

“Is that a horse trough?”

“Yes, why? Hey put me down!”

As it was we both ended up in the cold water.

It was good to have my big brother back in my life, even if he did have the tendency of always trying to boss me around. Can't blame a man for trying I guess.

A note from the Author

A little bit about what went into influencing the story.

- I think too often in the Christian world there is this stigma attached to people who are sinners as being untouchable and people to be avoided at all costs. That's just wrong according to my understanding of the Gospel Message. We're all sinners saved by Grace and as the Bible says God is no respecter of persons. Whatever you've done in the past can be forgiven, except for one thing only. That one thing is if you commit blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. You can curse God and Jesus both and it can be forgiven, but not so against the Holy Spirit. My advice, don't do it! In terms of this book, Logan, got his second chance at a renewed walk with God through the intervention of a godly woman. That happens a

lot in life and women by far go to unnoticed in the vital role they play in shaping the men around them by the way they manage their own spiritual relationship with God. My mother was definitely an inspiration for me to be a godly man. Faith can move mountains so whether you're male or female let your light show shine and be willing to rise to the task of doing the Lord's work in the lives of those He has placed around you. We all have our own mission fields to which we are uniquely suited for, with none being grander than the other, because we're all working towards the common goal assigned to us by Jesus to share the Gospel Message with others until He returns and ladies and gentlemen I think that day is getting very close indeed. Let's be ready and able to show our Lord and Master how we have been accountable for the time and gifts that have been given to us.

Reviews and help promoting my books is

always appreciated. Thank You, to all who have helped me by doing so!

If you'd like to be informed about new book releases and the availability of free review copies then drop me a note and I'll put you on my fan list and send you updates as they come available. Contact Info:

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Guy S. Stanton, III

A few things about me



I live in the country and I'm glad of it. I have a beautiful wife sent from God, who graciously puts up with me. God has blessed us with three awesome children that I am very proud of. It seems authors always mention whether or not they have pets and so I will say

that

we have four, two dogs(Kregridor and Thora)
and two cats (Chester and Herman). As to my
interests, well, writing
and waiting for the Kingdom of Shamayim.

DRIIFT
WIND
Book Four
of
The Wind Drifters

Guy S. Stanton, III

Words of Action

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*Dedicated to an author and friend
of mine who has both helped
and inspired me along my own path.*

Chapter One

Hard Times

My feet were killing me. Well they would be if I could feel them.

Shivering uncontrollably I remained where I was as I listened for the sound of riders. Finally the thunder of hooves sounded and I waited for them to pass by, but to my horror I heard them slow to a halt so close to the bridge I was hiding under that I could hear them talking.

“Did you see her?” A man called out.

I about jumped out of my skin as a voice directly overhead on the bridge

spoke out in reply, “No, I didn’t. I’ve been waiting here figuring she’d drift downstream, but nothing so far.”

“Well if she ain’t come by now she’s not coming as she didn’t get by us! She must’ve went upstream.”

“Maybe she went over the mountain.” Came another voice into the two-way conversation.

“Are you daft man! She ain’t no fool! She be one of us hill folk. Ain’t nobody but a city slicker stupid enough to cross over Rattlesnake Ridge!”

There were several grunts of agreement and as a party the group took off back the way they’d come. I stayed a little longer in the water, but then crying from the unbearable pain of the cold water I stumbled free of it.

Falling against the river bank I

crawled up it until I was free of the water and there I lay shivering. The sun had chosen not to give its warmth today and instead it lay hid behind a field of clouds.

How I could have used its warmth right now!

Crying now more from the pain of loss than the icy tingling of my bare feet and calves I forced myself to get up. Making it up to the elevation of the road I stopped and looked about. No riders were visible.

I stood there debating about what to do. There would be no cover for me, if I continued on downstream and no friends either. I'd stick out in the bigger towns and I didn't have much money for such places, which left my options being but few.

I would do better to stay in the mountains, but that was no easy feat either. Back a year ago when the killing of the Collins had begun my Ma had packed me up and we'd come and settled in this backwood area of the mountains a good many miles from the place of my upbringing.

Here we'd outlived most of our other kin by all accounts, but it had done us no good in the end for they had found us. Gold money paid up front with more to follow had a way of finding what it wanted.

Again my mind relived the events of the morning in a brutalizing fashion that never seemed to dim in the intensity of the emotion it evoked. Ma had pulled me out of my bed while it was still dark and thrusting my dress on she'd told me to

light a shuck for the creek.

She'd told me to wait for her there, and that she'd be along soon after she gathered some things. She hadn't had the time though.

She'd been about halfway out the door when I'd seen two neighbor men and a city man I'd never seen before slip up out of nowhere and push her back inside the cabin. I'd heard some scuffling and then had come the gun shot and right then and there I knew she was dead.

I'd stayed in hiding, to horror stricken to move, all the while I'd had to listen to them tear our little cabin apart as they looked for something. I knew what it was as I had that something in my pocket.

The something that they wanted was a letter from my Uncle Taran that was over

two years old. It was the one thing my Ma had thought to give me when she'd dragged me from my bed.

Before she'd pushed me out the door she'd said, "If anything happens to me you use the gold coins I sewed into your dress and you get yourself West and find your Uncle Taran. He'll help you and finish the raising of you."

I'd started to protest then, but she'd pushed me on down the path and out of respect I'd gone on to the hiding place that we had set up. Now, however, she was dead and I had literally nobody to turn to as our friends and kin were either dead or turned traitor to us. Us Collins had once been mighty numerous, but now it seemed we were an endangered kind.

I started out walking and the movement helped bring my feet back to

life.

I was going to do what no sane person would be about. I was going to cross Rattlesnake Ridge.

It was a cold late spring day and the sun wasn't making it through the clouds and so just maybe I'd be lucky. I didn't really have a choice anyway.

Without a horse I stood no chance down in the valleys and the other routes into the surrounding hills were all watched. Beyond Rattlesnake Ridge was wild country all the way to the Kentucky border. I'd find me a way West then and hopefully free of this blood wrath on anyone that went by the name of Collins.

The day wore on and so did my

hunger. Since we'd moved away from home last year in the midst of the killings times had been rough. Ma had guarded our money sparingly and there hadn't been much in the way of extra.

That said we'd eaten well enough most days, but right now I was missing breakfast and the lunch that should've followed. It was still too early for berries although I saw many of them on the bushes I passed by. They were still too green to be eaten and I had no wish of adding stomach upset to my already long list of agonies.

My feet although well calloused were not used to this rough of a terrain. The ground beneath me was turning into nothing but rocks. Rocks with sharp irregular edges.

Sitting down on a boulder I tore at the

hem of my dress. The worn fabric ripped and I pulled off several strips of it. I'd sat down next to a birch tree and pulling with all my might I managed to pull off two decent sized strips of bark.

I fashioned the bark pieces as best as I could into the general outline of my foot. That done I laid the bark pieces on the ground near my feet. Reaching into my pocket I pulled free several handfuls of puffy milkweed seeds that I'd picked earlier.

I laid the white plumed seeds that were as soft as chicken feathers onto the two pieces of bark. Next I put my feet on top of the seeds and bark and individually began to wrap each foot up with strips of cotton I had torn off my dress.

The padded bark now secured to my

feet from parts of my dress, I sat back and did what I'd been dreading. I reached into my other pocket and pulled free the clumpy piece of root that it held.

It was a swamp cattail root. I'd pulled it this morning from the stream, but only now could I force myself to eat it.

Opening my mouth I bit down on the starchy tuber and chewed. It tasted like pond water and dirt. The urge to throw up was very present, but the urge to survive was greater.

Mouthful after mouthful I forced myself to chew on the starchy roots until it was all gone. There were many times throughout the long ordeal of eating the root that I'd prayed to be wealthy. I never wanted to eat this again, but after the meal was done I forced myself to bow my head and say, "Thank you God

for my meal. I hope and pray it does my body good.”

Looking up from the ground I had to fight against sudden tears as all I had lost came to full realization through the daze I felt locked up in, “God help me!” I whispered out brokenly.

“Please keep the snakes away! Both the slithering kind and the kind with two legs that have murdered my whole family. I ask this in your name Jesus, Amen.”

Standing up I forced myself to start climbing upward over the rocky terrain again. The makeshift shoes helped, but they made walking awkward and quite a few times I fell to land hard on the rocks.

By midafternoon I'd cleared the lower reaches of the ridge and I was now coming up on the crest of it. This was the danger area. This ridge faced the warm southern horizon and all along its crest was a stony outcrop that was full of cracks that led deeply into the ground.

The area was literally chock-full of rattlesnakes. Some of the dens had hundreds of snakes to them and the dens themselves weren't but a few feet from each other in some places.

On a hot day if something were to startle the sunning rattlers into giving their warning tale shake the combined sound of so many snakes rattling could be heard down in the valley. The man had been right. It was insane to contemplate crossing such an obstacle,

but I had no choice.

If I fell victim to the snakes then so be it. The bravado of my mind however couldn't replace the shaking consciousness of my physical reaction to the thought of how that death would be.

I saw them even now all laid out in jumbled piles in the rocks ahead.

“Oh God what do I do?” I moaned out.

If I'd had fire I could've made two torches and burned a way through, but all I had was a piece of paper in my pocket. What else could I do?

On sudden inspiration I picked up a rock and threw it. The startled snakes scattered off to the sides to the tune of a mass hissing.

Picking up more rocks I continued to throw them at the sleeping reptiles in

order to form sort of a safe corridor between their abundant numbers.

Arming myself with a stick I moved forward toward the pathway of thrown rocks. Giant rattlers to little itzy-bitsy ones reared up into coils at my approach. It was the little ones that you had to watch out for the most though. They packed more venom than the adults did.

Before I could think about it any longer I sprinted forward. Snakes to either side of the cleared pathway of thrown rocks lashed out at me, but I was running and I'm a fast runner.

Thankfully I didn't trip and clearing the outcropping of stones I ran a short distance further before stopping even as the afternoon continued to hum to the sound of rattles behind me. Breathing

hard I noticed one rattlesnake on the small side was giving chase.

What was bothering him so much as to pursue after me I didn't know, but his lone approach toward me gave me an idea. I shimmied the shoulders of my dress off my shoulders so I could pull the strings that held my nighty in place.

The strings pulled I slid the shoulders of my torn dress back on and pulling the hem of it up I tugged on the nighty, which slid free to pool around my ankles. Stepping out of it I quickly tied the upper end of it off in a knot effectively making an open bag out of the lower portion of the night dress.

The ticked off reptile was nearly upon me and reclaiming my snake stick I pinned him to the ground just behind his head. Leaning forward I arranged the

open bottom end of the night dress before the snake which writhed to be free of the pressure of my stick.

I let go with the pressure of the stick on the snake only to then scoot it towards the improvised bag opening. Angrily it retreated from the stick into the night dress and dropping the stick I snatched up the loose ends of the nighty and brought them up into the air.

The snake fell down to the knotted end of the nighty as with satisfaction I viewed by capture of the angrily rattling snake. I was without a gun or a knife, but now at least I had a weapon of distraction to hurl at someone if need be.

Careful to hold the improvised snake bag away from me I started on over and down off the north side of the ridge. Thankfully there was no massing of

snakes on this end.

I walked on feeling odd being without an undergarment beneath my dress. My chest with the advent of me turning ten, six years ago, had underwent major changes. Changes I wished would soon stop!

Now the ebullient evidence of my emerging woman's body swayed to and fro freely as I walked all the while painfully chaffing off the inside of the dress I wore. Holding my free arm up I halted the movement, but it was hard to keep my arm up for prolonged periods of time.

Sighing I came to a stop. In frustration I looked down at the unwanted evidence of my raw appeal to many men both young and old. It wasn't just my breasts they ogled and paid attention to. I

couldn't count how many times I had been smacked on the rear or pinched by the men of this area at every church social I had attended in the last year.

It hadn't been like that back home, as I'd had an army of cousins to do war on my behalf, but here in this neck of the woods I had essentially been a foreigner and thus free game for every lecherous fellow that came along. Oh why couldn't I be one of those girls of my age with a flat chest and no hips to speak of?

My mother's admonishing words came back to me, "Now Tara don't be talking down the beauty you've been given! You can't help the way men are in this place and for sure they give men a bad name, but one day my love there will be a man who will come along who will make you glad to have the curves

you do so don't be wishing to be otherwise than you are. You're just fine the way God made you and that's that."

Sighing in the moment though I couldn't relate with her words as my breasts literally ached. Looking around to see if I was alone in the forest, which I was as near as I could tell, I sat down on a rock and ripped more cloth off the bottom of my dress.

Pulling the bodice of my dress down I then began to wrap the cloth in a binding clasp around my chest and upper back. I tied the cloth pieces off and pulled my dress back up. Standing up I shimmied slightly and was awarded with no corresponding ache of sensitized motion.

That problem was solved, but if I kept ripping cloth off my dress for varied purposes I'd have a problem of a

different kind soon enough. My face flushed red at the notion of appearing within any town looking as I did now.

Be that as it may that day would come and I'd meet it with all the dignity that I could. I started out once more being careful in how I lifted up my captured weapon bound within the confines of my night dress.

It was getting on toward dark when I saw a campfire in the forest below me. Instinct warned me to avoid it, but hunger drove me to go nearer to it.

In the end I stayed where I was in indecision. Miserably I acknowledged that I couldn't afford to go near the fire, hungry or not, and I was simply too tired to go on much farther today and whoever had made that fire might hear me in my passing by of it in the still dark of the

forest. The best thing for me to do was to stay right where I was.

On the verge of tears I sat down in the sheltering enclave of two fallen over trees. The air was getting colder and shivering I pulled my shortened dress as far over my drawn up knees as possible. Shivering I pressed my face against my knees and cried silently until at some point I must've fallen asleep.

“Hey lookee what I found!”

In startlement from the voice out of nowhere I woke to the image of an older man standing not over five feet in front of me. He had a disreputable look to him and his next words confirmed it, “I thought I saw a patch of white up here

before dark settled in last night. I'm affixing your that Collins girl that the whole counties on the hunt for. \$200 in gold pays for a heap of trouble young miss! I've gonna have that money for myself now though! Yes Sirrreeee!"

I stood up stiffly and tried to back away, but the fallen tree trunks of the two massive trees I'd taken shelter from prevented any easy flight for me now.

"Whoo whee! Look at the jugs on you girl! I'm gonna have me a bonus before I turn you over in a day or so!" The man lecherously said with his eyes fully rooted on my chest.

I'd had it! Were there truly no more decent men in these mountains? It sure seemed so!

He was reaching out toward my chest and I launched forward and bit his

offending fingers as hard as I could. He yelped and jumped back and I used the opportunity to slip by him.

He kicked out and caught me in the shin and I went flying into the leaf matter of the forest floor. Spitting out dirt I turned and started to surge up to my feet when his voice stopped me, “You stay put now! I got this here throwing knife and I don’t miss, especially when no \$200 be in jeopardy!”

My eyes tracked over to him and the knife he held in his hand. I scooted backward until I was but a short distance from where I had spent the night.

“Hey what you got in the bag?” He inquired suspiciously.

I glanced down to the white of my night dress beside me and not quite sure why I did it I picked it up and held it

perilously close to my chest as if it was a treasured possession. At any moment I expected to feel fangs sink into my chest, but surprisingly there wasn't even a rattle from the bag.

“Hey I get it! You got something they want don't yah? What's that in the bag there? I bet it be more than just \$200 worth in gold that they be wanten to pay for ya! Give it here!”

Clutching the bag closer I defiantly said, “No!”

I felt movement within the bag.

Stepping closer the man reached down and yanked the night dress free from my clasp and pulled it roughly to him as he stepped back triumphantly. Undoing the twisted off end of the bag he boldly stuck his hand in, “I got it! Now fortune come to Papa!”

He pulled his prize free and screamed in horror. He made to drop the fully awakened snake, but it was too late. The snake lashed out and bit him on the cheek and then again on the neck.

In hysteria the man hacked with the knife on the snake still latched onto his throat and the snake fell in two pieces to the forest floor. The man meanwhile stumbled about screaming insanely and then all sound seemed to come to a wheezing halt.

He fell to his knees as his face turned purple from lack of air and then he pitched over dead before me. Breathing hard I waited for my breath to come back to me.

Cursed man or not, it had been hard to watch what had happened. I felt guilty somehow.

Shaking my head violently I reminded whatever part of me that had come up with that emotion that if I hadn't played along even now I'd be held pinned to the ground and raped by the man who then would've turned me over for \$200 in blood money and shed nary a tear over me. No, as hard as it had been to watch the man's death my actions were justified. His greed had brought his own doom down upon himself.

Standing up I made to move past the man when my still shocked mind slowly came aware to the fact of my good fortune other than the fact of not being this man's prisoner. All of his stuff was available now for my use.

I picked up the bloody knife carefully and then moving off down the slope I came to his campfire. The smell of food

was overwhelming and I ate like the starving person I was.

Guilt tried to set in once more, but my need was too great to fully listen to it. I ate till I was full and then I began scavenging through the man's pack for whatever else might be of use to me, which unfortunately wasn't very much.

The man's coat was too big and it smelled, but at least I was warm. I had food for two more days unless I was able to augment my food supply in some way.

My real problem however though was that I was lost. The best I could come up to do was to keep heading west.

At times within the deep forest even that was hard to manage, because most of the time the sun's light was lost to me because of the deep shade given off by

the forest canopy.

Chapter Two

Not by Sight

For all the world it seemed as if I were alone, but I wasn't really. Forest creatures and talkative birds were all about me. They at least intended me no harm, even the two bears I had come across hadn't sought to bother me. In the world of men though I was nothing but raw meat to be used and then traded for gold.

My thoughts drifted to my Uncle Taran. I'd been quite young the last time he'd come to visit. He'd been on his

way to the West after the great war had ended and while I hadn't been told much it was clear that he had been running from something at the time. What it had been he hadn't said, at least not to me.

The look about him had greatly concerned my mother and I'd heard her pray for her brother many a time over the years since then. She prayed just as much for my Uncle Logan, who I'd never seen. By all accounts he had been a wild one and seldom seen by the family once he was of an age to leave.

I felt at my pocket and pulled out my Uncle's letter and in a sunny spot in the forest I stopped to read it, *"Dear Susanna, I hope this letter finds you and Tara well. Maybe you've even found yourself a man and are starting a new life again. Whatever the case may*

be I pray the best for you and Tara. That's right Sis, I'm praying again. I've felt the weight of your prayers for years and finally I let God get a hold of me again and my how things have changed! Thank you Susanna for all you've done for me by praying for me and in helping to raise me after Ma died. I know Tara couldn't wish for a better mother than you. Now on to something else. This is actually the second letter that I've written. I wasn't going to write another, but something has driven me to take pen to paper again and I believe it to be the Spirit of the Lord so here goes....."

I read on over the course of several pages as Uncle Taran detailed his encounters in the small town of Orlaca in the Arizona Territory. I'd read this

account over and over and never had I ceased to feel the thrill at hearing the story that came to life off the pages of the letter. It was the kind of story that was hard to believe, but Uncle Taran wasn't the lying kind so both Ma and I took everything written as to being the gospel truth no matter how unbelievable it sounded.

I skipped over a bit of the story of events and down to the last paragraph that was of the most import to me in my current situation, *“Enclosed I have sent along some gold coins I have managed to trade gold dust for. I hope they are of help to you even as I pray that your situation is such that you have no need of them. I don't fully realize I think the enormity of what I'm about to do, but I feel driven to this task and I pray I do*

only what pleases God as that is my desire. It's occurred to me that perhaps you or offspring of yours might wish to follow in this adventure I have begun. To that end please find the map I have drawn up of the place I had a dream about where fire and wind came together. It is to this place that I plan to head out in the morning toward. If my venture is successful this is likely the last time you'll ever hear from me and for that I am truly saddened by. All my love, your brother, Taran."

I folded the letter back up and stuck it in my pocket. I really hadn't needed to read the letter again or look at the map as both were indelligibly etched within my mind. Reading it again had been more of an encouraging experience because it reaffirmed that there was

hope for me that life could get better. At least it might get better if I managed to get off-world.

Somehow the idea of leaving this planet behind and experiencing something new was hope in and of itself. I had to get to the West and find this fire-wind portal towards the great beyond! I just had to!

Feeling strengthened of spirit I continued to trudge through the forest on my makeshift shoes. I'd had to replace the bark several times and cloth strips once. My dress now came knee-high and I shuddered at the sight I would be to decent folk.

It couldn't be helped. I had the will to survive and there was no room for embarrassment.

It began to rain and sourly I noted its

occurrence by pulling the collar of the coat I wore tighter about my neck. I should've taken the coat owner's hat, but it hadn't occurred to me at the time.

The rain picked up and the sodden tresses of my cinnamon red hair began to drip icy water down the back of my neck to saturate my dress beneath the coat. I didn't need to be getting myself drenched right now and coming down sick, but the drive to be West and free kept me walking.

Eventually though better sense prevailed and I stepped beneath an overhang and watched the late spring storm rage through the forest. Shivering I clutched at myself ineffectively. I'd

waited too long to get out of the rain. My dress was soaked beneath the coat.

Miserably I watched the rain fall. It was as if the whole world and even God was against me.

“Not so Tara.” Came a voice off to my right.

Shrieking in alarm I jumped away from the overhang and back out into the rain. My eyes took in the form of an old indian and in shock I watched him gesture to me and say, “Please come back in out of the rain Tara.”

Feeling oddly comforted by the concern on the man’s face for me I stepped back in under the overhang.

“Who are you?” I quivered out in fear, as there was no explanation for this man’s sudden appearance out of nowhere let alone knowing my thoughts

and my name.

“I’m a messenger from the Most High, whom you have served faithfully all your young life.”

I started shaking so badly that I fell to my knees and I would’ve pitched over to my face, but the man’s hands caught me and gently pulled me back up to my feet.

In mortal fear I drew back as far as his hands would allow as things began to add up quickly, “You’re the angel my Uncle Taran talked about in his letter aren’t you?”

“I am. Your Uncle is alive and well by the way.”

“Can you take me to him?”

“No.”

“No?” I said forlornly, as I felt my heart begin to break apart in despair. This one hope of re-unite ment with my

Uncle, someone of my kin who actually cared about me was all I had been hanging on for.

Sobbing emotionally I turned to push my face into the rock of the overhang, “Why does God hate me so? What have I done to deserve the hell that my life has become?”

“Tara look at me.”

Not wanting to, but feeling compelled to, I looked at the messenger and he spoke, “The tragedies that have befallen you are not of God’s making and neither were they willed upon you by Him. I do not hinder you from going to your Uncle, but rather I have come to warn you of danger. Danger that lies on the road ahead. The Lord loves you Tara and He knows you love Him too and that is why He sent me to you.”

Straightening I wiped at my tears, “What does God want me to do?”

“He wants your trust Tara and also your patience. When your Uncle left this world it was in his heart to do good for the Kingdom of God and he has. Now the task has fallen to you Tara. What will you choose to do with the life that’s been given to you?”

Stuttering I said, “I’m just a 16 going on 17 year old girl! What can God possibly use me for?”

“More than you know Tara, if you will only trust Him.”

I looked away into the rain and felt my heart squeeze painfully. Looking down I said, “You keep talking about trust as if in the pursuit of trusting God I’m going to experience even more pain than I already have.”

I looked up and the messenger nodded. Looking him in the eye I screamed out passionately, “I don’t want any more pain!”

“God knows that Tara, hence you have a choice. Three choices in fact and none of them are wrong.”

“What are they?” I asked not sure I really wanted to know.

“You can continue your journey west. The way will be fraught with peril and it is my understanding that you will not survive if you choose to do this. Another option is that a day’s journey from here toward the south you will come across a cabin in a clearing. The family there is of your name Collins and they will gladly take you in as they too are hiding from the evil forces that have been unleashed against your family. You’ll be

safe and perhaps have a future filled with both a husband and children, if that's what you want. Both of these options lie before you and God does not hinder you from choosing either as it is your right as a being created with the gift of self-will to choose for yourself what you will do in this life. Even if you were to die your soul is cared for Tara so do not fear death in either of these two options as the grave has no hold over you since as a young child you welcomed in your Redeemers Spirit to live within you and forgive you of all your sins.”

Managing to breathe a little better and with my tears in check for the moment I asked, “But what does God want me to do?”

“To become a slave.”

“What?” I squeaked out in disbelief of what I’d just heard.

“If you come with me now we will leave this place of Earth and travel outward to other places of my Master’s creation and journey to a world torn by war and violence. It is a world without a witness of the one true God. If you choose this path Tara know that you will suffer hurt and even seemingly the loss of self, but you will in turn gain the favor of the Most High and be given a dispensation by which you will perform miracles such as you have only read about written within the pages of your Bible. Your quest cannot fail as your Lord will not fail to deliver you from all calamities. Nor despite the grimmest of circumstances will He ever forsake you. Your reward will be great Tara, but you

will have to live trusting in the mercy of the Lord and for some believers that can be very hard to do.”

I stared at the messenger in a mixture of angst and excitement. He made option three sound like I would step into hell yet be victorious over it in the end somehow.

I didn't want to step into hell. Neither did I want to die by going west to pursue my dream of being free of this world on my own terms.

If these mountains in the East crawled with hunters anxious that every drop of Collins blood be spilled I could well imagine that places such as Orlaca were traps set in the making. God hadn't needed to warn me, but He had. That said a lot about my Creator. I must be important to Him.

If I went to the cabin in the woods I would have it easy so to speak, but such was not the life I'd ever wanted to live or be defined by. The angel had said God would use me to do miracles! And yet to do that I first must become a slave.

“Oh God!” I cried out turning away from the messenger.

My crying now only helped define the path before me, because I knew what I wanted out of life most. I wanted to please my Maker above all else.

Turning I gathered in enough breath to whisper out, “The last one. I choose the last option.”

He held out his hand to me and I gathered I was to take it with my own. Putting my hand out part way I hesitated to complete the journey.

Not able to meet the messenger's eyes

I asked, “Will I always be a slave on this world that you’re taking me to?”

“Does it matter?” He asked.

On an indrawn hitch of breath I realized in that moment just how much I was giving up. Nothing would be guaranteed to me other than God’s promise to go through my trials with me.

Inwardly I prayed for help and the strength came from somewhere beyond me to move my hand the rest of the distance to grasp the messengers hand. I felt unimaginable power sweep throughout me as if it came from some deep well within me and flowed outward to baptize every last part of me. In shock I met the messenger smiling eyes as he said, “As it is written, *‘To who much is given much is required’*. And yet Tara the reward for faithfulness

will be very great indeed.”

The messenger's visage had changed and he became as if the image of living fire and yet I was unafraid even as flames coursed around me and a wind blew so fierce that I saw the Earth disappear beneath my feet as if but a second had passed by.

The bright void of the sky gave way to the darkness of space so vast as to be inconceivable in terms of outer reach. Worlds and stars passed by without number until finally time seemed to slow down and I found myself being lowered to a world of grass and warm breezes.

Looking about I saw a vast prairie and yet it was different from any grassland I'd ever seen. The flowers, the scents in the air, even the sounds of the birds all seemed to give off an aura of wildness.

My eyes tracked back to the one who had brought me here. His face serious he let go of my hand and pointing off towards the sun setting over the distant horizon he said, “Your journey leads that way. Do not fear Tara as your life is kept and you are in no danger of not accomplishing all that my Lord has appointed for you to do. Hold fast to your faith and do not walk by sight, but rather by every word out of the mouth of God and it will go well for you.”

The messenger was gone then just like he had never existed and I was left staring at the direction of my fate sinking over the horizon. I believed God was who He said He was and even so I knew that He would uphold His promises to me, but I did not want to be a slave.

“Not my will but Thy will be done.” I

whispered brokenly, as I cast the last of self to the wayside and headed toward the disappearing sun and whatever calamity was sure to befall me. My vanishing self cried loudly in my mind that I should of gone with option two, but the infilling of grace I had experienced back on Earth strongly encouraged otherwise.

My flesh truly was indeed weak, even as my spirit was willing to accomplish whatever God inspired tasks lay ahead. Just what could a slave do though that could be so momentous?

I didn't know, but time would surely tell the truth of it.

Chapter Three

Freedom Lost

Sleepily I opened my eyes. The sun was even now rising in the sky and although it was early the temperature was warm. I felt no sign of sickness from my drenching the day before on Earth and for that I was grateful.

Sitting up in the grass I blinked repetitively as I came to the swift conclusion of how un-alone I was. Horses were everywhere!

I was laying in the midst of a herd that had to be literally thousands strong in

number!

How was this possible? The horses nearest me flicked their ears at me, but continued grazing as they kept a wide berth around me. Their actions seemed almost tame, but I had the distinct feeling that they were not.

Why did they not trample me to death? Perhaps they recognized that I was no threat to them.

Just then I heard an excited breakout of horses neighing warningly and then there was a deep chesty roar. I sat frozen still, my eyes wide open at the hearing of the roar that continued to echo out across the prairie.

Horses took off into a full run all around me in an awesome flexing of muscle and sinew put to the test. Despite the panic to escape they sheeted around

where I lay in the grass as if there was an invisible wall around me.

The horses that had been near me were gone as the herd split and went in what seemed like a hundred different directions. That's when I saw the predator.

It was a bear, but a bear unlike any I had ever seen or heard tell of before. Its legs were taller than a horse and while truly massive in size it looked like it could run very fast.

There were three of them. Two were in full chase after the horses, who's kicked up heels made the ground beneath me vibrate with heavy intensity. The third bear however looked like it had no stomach for chasing horses today.

It looked about scanning its environment, which is when it saw me. It

gave an excited huff and began to lope unbelievably fast toward me.

I tore the makeshift sandals off my feet and letting the coat fly off my shoulders I took off barefoot across the prairie as fast as I could run. Looking back I saw the bear looming fast. Its speed was uncanny given its great bulk.

I ran harder and then on a whim I began dodging to the left and then to the right. The bear was upon me, but it was as I had hoped. It was fast in a straight line, but unwieldy in shifting direction.

It roared bad naturedly as it swiped at me with a paw that would've taken my head off. I screamed and turned direction again and ran with all my might. Ducking my way beneath a second swipe at my head I took off back in the direction that we had just come from.

The bear pulled up as tons of weight came to a skidding halt and with a snarl it turned to follow after me. I had no more in me though. I could barely breathe and my ribs hurt to the point of extreme pain.

Pulling up I watched it come toward me as I sucked in air that didn't seem to satisfy my lungs need for life. In desperation I cried out, "God you promised me!"

"I know and soon you will know that I keep all My promises. Drop to the ground Tara and behold how tenderly I watch over you."

Instantly at the passage of those words spoken to me within my spirit I fell on my face even as a squeal of heavy blood wrath erupted over top of me. My cheek bounced off the ground as four hooves

hit hard on the ground just ahead of me.

I looked up to behold the most massive and utterly resplendent stallion I had ever seen in my life. In color it was one of the rarest being a blue roan, but in equal it surely had none.

The massive bear came to a halt as the stallion reared up pawing at the air with massive hooves as its voice shook the air with an age old battle cry. The bear then in turn reared up to an unimaginable height on two legs and roared its own challenge back at the stallion.

The stallion while valiant had an uphill battle at best against such an opponent. The stallion however clearly didn't care what his chances might be. It launched forward teeth bared and in awe I watched an epic conflict begin.

The bear swiped out and with the

reflexes of a cat the blue roan stallion dipped down under the swipe and dived forward off to the bear's one side. It then delivered a crushing sideways kick to the bears forward support leg and I heard the audible snap of bones.

The bear cried out rawly and fell forward over its injured leg, the stallion, however was relentless in its attack. He had circled and come up behind the beast and in continued awe I watched the stallion leap up high into the air.

The bear seemed to sense its impending doom and it started to look up, but it was too late. The stallion landed with crushing force and the bear was knocked flat to the ground. The stallion skipped forward off the bear's back and as the snarling bear lifted its head with an angered roar both rear

hooves shot out and pulverized its face.

The bear's roar had been cut off by the double kick as if it had never started. Its great head crashed to the ground, but for good measure the stallion wheeled around and slammed one foreleg hoof into the bear's head, but the bear didn't move.

The stallion then let loose with a squeal that rocked the air as it proclaimed loud and clear to all that it was king of this prairie world. His front hooves crashed back to the ground and for a moment it was utterly still and devoid of all its former wrath as it turned its head to look at me and I knew then and there that God's promise of protection was real and something I could put my trust in.

The stallion took off towards its

departed herd and for a moment I sat there in silence. Standing up I heard a sound and glancing to the side I saw a group of riders sitting still in their saddles not too far away from me.

They came toward me then. Their features were surprisingly familiar to me in that they appeared to be of Cherokee Indian origin. They gestured back and forth from me to the bear speaking excitedly.

I knew something of their language, but they spoke so fast it was hard to comprehend all they said. "The great spirit watches this one! We no touch!" "She rare. Bring good price." "No! Leave her be!" "We need what her price will bring us, but we not touch her lest we be cursed."

The three of them seemed to come to a

consensus and one jumped down and approached me hesitantly. I held out my wrists together and said in Cherokee, “It is not right for a brother to sell another of his kind.”

He glanced at me startled before then stepping forward quickly and binding my wrists together. I continued staring him down and at the last he said, “It is our way.”

“And yet there is a better way.”

Muttering under his breath he hurried away and mounted his horse. The three riders started out then and the rope binding me to the one’s saddle tugged and I started walking. My life as a slave had just begun.

Chapter Four

Passed Over

A day went by followed by another and another. They fed me surprisingly well and none of them so much as laid a hand on me.

The environment around me had changed. There were more trees and for the first time I actually saw some rocks. The next day I smelled salt in the air and that evening my captors made camp on a bluff overlooking a stone walled fortress of a small city that lay along a windswept expanse of the coastline

below us.

As usual they left me off in the darkness alone as they gathered about their small campfire. I watched the lights come on in the city below and imagined of all the things that tomorrow could bring.

Horrible visions assailed my mind and I found myself unable to put them to rest. The messenger had said that I would suffer and well could I imagine how that could come to be.

Lots of girls in the hills would run off with the boys and do whatever it took to gain attention, but I never had. I was a virgin, but I doubted I would be so by the end of tomorrow.

Pulling my knees up I pressed my face into them and cried. One of the men over by the fire came close and I felt a

blanket settle about my shoulders.

Looking up I saw him point to the city and then me before shrugging and saying, "It is our way for a long time now."

"Well it shouldn't be!" I said with deeply felt hurt for the things of tomorrow that hadn't even happened yet, but that already felt like daggers being pushed into my side.

He started to move off and I forced myself to say, "Thank you for the blanket."

He paused a moment before nodding and going back to the others by the fire.

It was colder here on the coast than it had been in the prairie heartland and I cuddled within the blanket hoping against hope it could shield me from what lay ahead of me. Somberly I watched the lights of the city, until it

grew so late in the night that one by one they were all put out.

It was hot, but I couldn't be sure that it was all due to the heat of the day or partly from the embarrassment that I felt. I stood in a lineup of other women, who seemed to feel the same as I about the proceedings.

I'd had my mouth opened and my teeth looked at so many times my jaw fell bruised. I was of a leaner build than the other women and strangely somewhat different from them in other respects as well. I couldn't put my finger on it, but they didn't seem quite as human as me.

They looked human enough, as did the men of the city around me, but there was

something that said they were not of my kind the way for instance the Cherokee men who had brought me here were.

There were other surprises as well. These people or whatever they were seemed to have different motivations than the normal humans I had encountered in life before. Buyers would squeeze my shoulders look at my hands and get a distasteful look on their faces, before then moving to the next woman and smiling at the sight of callused palms and shoulders with more muscle than mine had.

It was all rather quite surprising. The slave auction seemed to operate on a completely different set of rules than how I would have imagined. It seemed to me that if all of us women in the lineup were horses then I in the eyes of

the buyers, was the scrawny one of the lot.

Instead of having my dress torn from off me or being groped as the men of Earth had been always want to do these foreign men looked at me as if I was something beneath their interest as well as a waste of their money. In comparison with the other women, who possessed physiques more similar to that of a man's, I was the odd woman out.

The sale went on and eventually I alone was left on the selling block. One of the few remaining buyers through a single coin at the auctioneer. I had been sold, cheaply at that.

All these foreign men wore black mustaches and their skin colors ranged from white to olive Brown. The most notably different thing that I could pick

out about them from that of other men was that there was something wrong with their eyes. They were bigger than they should be and seemingly darker of aspect of anything that could be called good.

My buyer pulled me hurriedly along through the city and again to my surprise I didn't attract much attention at all. Did I look that bad or was God just keeping me in some way from being noticed?

I tended to side with the latter.

A large construction of stone lay ahead of me. Reaching it I was pulled down through narrow corridors that stunk. Eventually we reached a gallery of sorts and I was led into a large

kitchen like area.

The kitchen was full of other women at work all of which stopped to watch the proceedings of my entrance into the space. My hands were unchained and the rope about my neck was removed.

I was shoved toward a table littered with cabbage heads. There was one woman there already tearing the cabbage into chunks and I got the impression that I was to help her.

I picked up a cabbage head and started repeating the other woman's task of tearing it into chunks. The man who had brought me here gave a grunt and left the kitchen.

The other women looked up from their tasks about the room towards the closed-door the man had just disappeared through. Unlike the women I'd been sold

with today all these women appeared to be full blood Cherokee and thankfully fully human.

Tearing chunks off the cabbage I had to fight against the urge to eat. The woman beside me picked up a chunk and held it out to me.

Nervously I brushed my hair back from my face, was this permitted? I looked to the other women and several nodded as if reading my mind.

I took the chunk of cabbage from the woman beside me and in Cherokee said, "Thank you."

Instantly there were exclamations from around the room and smiles from all the women at large. In surprise I watched them converge on me as one mass group.

Several of the women began running

hands through my hair commenting over the redness of its color. One woman took my face in her hands and felt along my cheek bones as if determining if I was Cherokee or not.

“My great-grandmother.” I said.

The women reacted with more smiles and soft pats to my person here and there. One by one they drifted back to their workstations and resumed their tasks.

I munched on the cabbage as I tore more of it loose. Within the kitchen a softly murmured conversation took place between me and the others and I answered all their questions as best as I could.

When it came to the part about men of their own blood having been the ones who had delivered me to the city the women around me to a one hung their heads down in shame.

One shrugged and said, "Our men do not respect us for they do not respect themselves." "Their spirit is broken." Said another.

I didn't see how any of that could condone the selling off of these women to a city of strange men who, to me, seemed to be as outsiders to this world of endless prairies. Obviously there was more going on here than just a matter of respect.

The food being prepared by all the women was thrown into bowls, which were then set on trays. One woman pulled me down a hall and pulled a

homespun tunic of drab brown color such as she wore from a pile and indicated that I should wear it.

She left and dutifully I took the stained shreds of my dress off and put on the garment of a slave. It was a loose fit and for that I was grateful as all the men on this planet couldn't be blind to the fact that I was a girl with curves.

Chapter Five

Descent into Hell

Holding the tray of food level I walked along with growing trepidation. Just what was this place and who was the food for?

We'd passed through several iron barred portals under heavy guard and with each edition of security my wonderment of the place only grew. I was a slave and yet there had been no guards in the kitchens located toward the outside of this complex. What then were they guarding towards the interior of this

colossal structure of stone?

Finally up ahead I saw a patch of sunlight and with anxious fervor I waited to see what it would reveal. Gaining the expanse of sunlight I found myself looking past a balcony filled with seats that overlooked and oval-shaped arena filled with sand.

I'd never seen the like of it, but my mind seized on what it was from the classical literature that we'd had to read growing up. This place was a gladiatorial arena much like the ones no doubt that the Christians had been fed to the lions in ancient Roman in. The thought of that fate made my stomach go queasy.

The sunlit view of the arena was gone and the long line of women bearing trays ahead of me had begun descending

stairs. It was no longer within my mind a question as to who the food was for.

Gladiators. A queasiness stronger than the fear of being fed to lions seized a hold of me. Lions could only tear at the flesh unlike the way a human animal could tear both soul and body apart.

I heard them then. Screaming and yelling with the loud sound of clanging. It was almost as if the sounds of caged lions had been duplicated over into that of the roars of men.

Exclamations of impatience rang out at the sight of the women bearing food.

“Alright shut up you mongrel dogs and stand back from the bars!” Rang out the stentorian voice of a guard who looked part mongrel himself.

I felt utterly exposed in my walk past the cells of men, who didn't quite seem

human to me in an even different way than the men of the city had. Oh they appeared to be fully human, for sure, but their eyes.....

Their eyes seemed empty of anything nobler than that of a hungry half maddened beast. I could feel the weight of their stares and it was as I had feared. These men full well noticed me and their voices rang out with things I prayed my ears would go deaf to.

“Oh God!” I whispered under my breath as words of crude meaning all seemingly directed at me sailed out of the mouths of men unchecked by any sense of morality or decency. I really was a Christian being fed to a pack of lions!

The order was given to halt and the two rows of women turned to face the

cell bays on either side of the central walkway. I faced the way my side of the column turned and I stood there doing my best to hold it together, but it wasn't going well.

The bowls on my tray rattled against each other repeatedly and I could barely refrain from peeing on the spot. Everything within me urged me to run back down the way I had come into this place of hellish torment.

I wanted to leave this planet! But above all I wanted option 2!

I'd made a choice though and like it or not I was going to have to go through with it. Quivering from within I raised my eyes to the cell in front of me.

The man who stood at the back of the cell was a beast. His eyes took in my form in a way that a month of Sunday

baths couldn't wash away. Surely God wasn't going to allow this to happen to me?

“Back from the bars you ingrates! Back!” The guards screamed out all over the cell bay.

Reluctantly the rest of the men moved back from the bars to the back wall of their cells. The order was given and the women approached the cells.

I watched and did as the others did by bending down and scooting the tray across the filthy floor through an opening in the iron bars just wide enough to fit the tray. With the tray pushed into the cell the women drew back from the cells.

Fledgling hope began within my heart that this was the extent of my exposure to the teeth of hell. That hope died in the

next instance as a guard called out, “Alright you know the drill, point winners only get to have women. Now who is going to beg the loudest for the first go around with the newest bit of flesh?”

Immediately about a half-dozen men I took to be the winners sang out raucously, each of them trying to outdo the others. The guards laughed among themselves and then one stepped forward to grasp me by the hair and pull me down the row of cells.

“See what you losers are missing? To the winners go the spoils and you Tigan have had the most points this month so enjoy!”

A cell door was clanged open before me and I was shoved inside. Other doors were opened and clanged shut and I

heard the sounds that came from those cells as if apart from the loud cries of rage and disappointment from the men who hadn't received any women.

Even as I heard what took place in the background and the sounds of the guards leaving the cell bay all my attention was directed to the back wall of the cell where a mass of shifting muscle in human form vibrated with the intensity to have me.

Why he'd waited this long to devour me was a mystery to even me. He lunged with a roar and in desperation I kicked the food tray beside me to skitter across the floor toward him. As I'd hoped he stepped on the tray and went flying off balance toward me when his leg slipped out from underneath him.

I dodged to the side as he rolled head

over heels to clang up against the bars of the cell. His face wore a dazed expression and with what little depleted courage I still had I jumped forward and seizing his massive head I brought it forward and then back as hard as I could against the bars of the door.

He grunted sharply, but his arms were rising toward me so I did the action of clanging his head off the bars again and again as fast as I could manage to. I'm not sure how many times it was I did this before his massively corded arms fell down to lay limply beside him.

Breathing hard I stepped back from him. I kept going back until the cell wall would allow me to go no further.

Had I killed him?

His chest moved, which answered that question. The next question however

was, should I kill him?

If I did kill him the guards would most likely kill me in revenge for the destruction of what no doubt to them was a valuable commodity, while in their eyes I was next to being worthless. What to do?

I became aware of something then. Silence.

Looking past the tresses of my hair that had fallen forward over my eyes I looked out at the surrounding holding pens. The men, even the ones with women, were all grouped at the bars watching me.

As a group they were seemingly made up of all kinds of different ethnicities and combinations thereof and I could only assume that they had been taken as slaves from other worlds than this one.

Now however as a group they stared at me in unified surprise and perhaps even more surprising, anger.

If I read their looks right it almost seemed that they were affronted that I had managed to avoid my rape by besting one of their own. Swallowing I brushed at my hair with a shaking hand as I continued to struggle at a lack for what to do.

I may very well have escaped rape this time, but the next cell I was dropped off into would be a completely different story. I wouldn't stand a chance.

Minutes of silence passed by and in that time I occupied myself with staring at the floor to then darting my gaze to the big black man laying unconscious on the floor. At the first sign of him coming to I was prepared to jug his thoughts as

forcibly as I could once again.

The men as a whole still stared at me and the women less fortunate than me had pulled themselves together and now sat on the cots looking at me with worried expressions. Why were they worried about me? They'd been the ones savagely raped, not I.

A jingle of keys was my first warning that the guards were headed back into the cell bay. The other women were released from the cells of the winners that they had been given to.

The women quickly left the cell bay all the while casting worried glances back at me. In stupefaction several guards congregated in front of the cell I was in. They looked from the black giant lying comatose on the floor to me repetitively as if they couldn't believe

their eyes.

“Can I go with the others please?” I pleaded softly.

They looked among themselves and laughed before shaking their heads no. One leaned forward against the bars and pointing to the fallen man he said, “If he dies or doesn’t have his pleasure of you by morning then I’ll see to it that before the morning drill begins that you’ll be taken by the whole lot of them!” He said pointing to the crowded bay of gladiators, who began once more to issue cat calls and other perversities all directed at me. Laughing the guards walked away.

Slowly I sank to the floor as a hundred men did their best to shatter the framework of my mind.

I stared at the man on the floor

opposite of me within the cell. To let him awaken and have at me was to die, as his wrath would likely be without equal. To keep clunking his head would likely impair if not kill him, which left me in the position of being raped by all these chanting demons around me as a whole in the morning.

I would never survive such a thing as that and I was pretty sure it was intended that I didn't survive either of the two options the guards had given me. Did I have an option three?

I looked about the room of men who chanted terrible things and I lost it, "Be quiet! Have you no shame for pity's sake!"

Some of them quieted for only a moment, but my scream had seemed to only egg on the majority of them to new

heights of obsceneness. My eyes drifted over them individually as I felt hatred bloom brightly in my heart toward each and every last one of them.

My eyes fell on one cell that had no leering face at the bars and yet the cell was occupied, by one of the winners no less, as I'd seen a woman leave that cell earlier. With curiosity I peered closer and saw the dim form at the back of the cell steadily watching me from the shadows. Here at last was at least someone with enough decency to not be screaming filth at me as if he were no older than an uncouth youth.

My eyes drifted from him back to my cell and the situation that faced me. I stood up to my feet as a plan emerged. My option three.

Time was against me. The man at my

feet wasn't an option and neither was the foul mouthed horde clamoring to have a go at me. That left but one thing to do. Escape!

I didn't like the life of a slave anyway. 'You'll never make it Tara' I cautioned myself.

I knew that, but it was in me to fight to survive so why not at least die in the effort of trying to be free than wait for it to come to me. I got up and approached the cell door.

The bars were set close to each other, but my arms were slim and I was able to pass my arm through them quite easily. Doing so I blindly felt at the lock on the other side of the door.

It was of a simple design and I felt reasonably sure that I could crack it. As a girl of ten all one summer I had

clandestinely practiced on unlocking a wardrobe my mother always kept locked. In the end I'd gotten into big trouble, but I'd succeeded in opening the lock.

I pulled my arm back through the bars and then I busied myself looking about the pigsty of a cell I was locked in. I found only one usable splinter of wood that was hard enough and yet thin enough to work with. The problem though was that I needed two such lock pick devices.

I searched as much as I could for the missing piece, but I could find nothing usable. No matter how hard I looked it just wasn't here!

I didn't know if picking the lock with just one pick would work or not. I had to try.

I went back to the lock and kneeling down I stuck my arm back through and blindly began trying the intricacies of the lock. The men all around me had become largely silent now and hearing movement I glanced through the bars towards the cells on the other side.

The silent one had left the dark shadows of his cell and now stood as the others were at the bars of his door. His eyes stared into mine piercingly. He was a very intense individual to behold.

It was easy to see how he was one of the winners in this gladiatorial world of brutality and death. Intense or not though he had shown a difference of character from all those gathered around.

Something else different about him was that of all the men he was the only one who was of Cherokee origin. The

women in the kitchen had said that their men had no spirit to them, well that was certainly not the case with this one.

In some ways he reminded me of the untamed stallion that had saved me from the bear. As if unbidden to my thoughts my gaze drifted to the man unconscious upon the cell floor. Behold the bear. Glancing back over to the Cherokee, behold the stallion.

Taking a deep breath I pulled the useless piece of wood free of the lock and held it up in one hand as I made direct eye contact with the silent man. I held one finger up and I watched his nostrils flare widely and again I was reminded of the stallion analogy.

His eyes seemed to have reached a peaked intensity and without a word he turned from the bars and went to his cot.

He was back a moment later with something.

His hands were too big to fit through the bars and I wondered how he would throw a small piece of wood so far. He threw an object and with a metallic clang it landed nearby.

Straining I managed to pull in the small metal rod that had fallen slightly short of the cell. My outstretched fingers brought it to hand and I eagerly began to manipulate the lock with the slim piece of metal.

This was what I had needed all along. The door clicked and sprang open with a squeak. I'd done it!

There were startled comments throughout the room and as one man began trying to pick their own locks, but their hands and arms were too big to fit

through the bars. Gaining my feet I stepped through and down the walkway to the tune of exclamations and shocked expressions of amazement.

Staring steadily at the steps that lead out of this hell hole I forced myself to come to a stop. I'd gotten this far, but I was in a foreign land and truly I didn't know what I would be up against. Beyond even that how was I even going to get past the guard stations that I had passed earlier to get here to this sunken cell bay?

Taking in a shivery indrawn breath of air I turned my head to stare into the eyes of the man who had helped me and now regarded me in rapt focus of concentration. I had no chance on my own of escaping, but with him.....

I just didn't know. The way he looked

at me now spelled trouble, but I was in for a world of it in the morning if I didn't manage to escape. Surely being at one man's mercy was better than being at the mercy of the horde, who were even now begging for me to free them.

Retrospectively I wondered to myself that if being at one man's mercy was acceptable then why hadn't I just stayed in the cell and allowed the wrongful use of myself by the animal that I'd been thrown in with?

I didn't really have an answer other than the fact that there seemed to be a distinction of some kind that said this man was different. That indefinable quality aside all my eyes took in now was a brutal savage that stared at me with an intensity that could turn rock to molten lava if given enough time.

Somehow he knew what I was contemplating, but unlike most of the men in the room he wasn't begging to have himself freed as they were. He hadn't sung out about all the detestable things he'd want to do to me either.

Turning to face his cell I approached cautiously. The intensity of his eyes seemed to double and in Cherokee I asked, "If I let you out will you get me out of this city?"

His head nodded firmly. It was the first sign of communicableness he had exhibited so far.

Pressing on hopefully I added, "Then you will let me go free?"

His head didn't move in agreement and his eyes told me quite the opposite was the case. If I let this man free I'd still be a slave. His slave.

Shaking my head in denial I walked away toward the stairs. I couldn't believe it! I'd offered him freedom and he'd turned it down!

With my foot on the first stair I came unwillingly to the acknowledgment that he was at least honest. Honest to the point that he'd remain a slave warrior rather than lie just in order to be free. I closed my eyes.

God had asked me to be a slave here on this world. He hadn't told me to try to escape from it.

Opening my eyes I stared bitterly up the stairs, "God you're pushing me too far!"

There was no answer and desperately I tried to hang on to my faith by summoning up memories of how God had always provided a way. There had

been the instance when I'd stayed in the water long past I had thought the need for, which had saved me from the unseen rider above. The snake I had gotten a crazy notion to capture, which hadn't bit me when it should have right before the man had ripped it from me. Then the stallion that had slayed the bear bent on devouring me.

What had kept the stallion from drumming me into the dirt?

Looking back at the man I wondered the same. God had said He'd keep me, but He'd asked me to be a slave. I'd made a fateful choice back on Earth and now feeling broken all over again inside I turned and walked back to the man's cell.

I didn't look at him as I worked at the mechanisms of the lock on his door. The

lock clicked and the door sprang ajar. I got up to my feet and forced myself to look at the man now free of his cage.

He pushed the door of his cell open and held out his hand. Meekly I put my lock pick pieces into his outstretched hand. What he wanted them for I had no idea.

He tossed the pieces at a cell which had perhaps the thinnest of all the men held up within it. The man scrambled to pick up the pieces that had fallen to the floor of his cell.

His thinner arms were able to barely squeeze through the bars as mine had. In alarm I looked at the man I had released. What was he doing?

I had no time to ask the question though before an iron grip closed about my wrist and tugged me forward at great

speed. He bounded up the steps like a mountain goat and stumbling already out of breath I did my best to keep pace with him for risk of being bodily drug up the stone stairs.

Reaching the upper hallway he hurried down it just as I heard further exclamations break out from the cellblock below. Something clicked then within my mind. The man was going to use the others as a diversion in order to take the heat off of our own escape attempt.

Reaching the area of sunlight that overlooked the arena he let go of my wrist and jumped up onto the windowsill and then without any hesitation he jumped off of it. With a gasp I went to the windowsill and looked over in time to see the man land

on his feet roughly twenty feet below.

He stumbled forward a bit, but he didn't fall. Glancing upward he gestured to me to do the same. He was crazy!

I heard more outcries of excitement from the cellblock and the sounds of multiple doors opening. That was enough for me to do something completely irrational.

I fell more than jumped over the windowsill. With an 'umph!!!' I landed onto a giving structure of support.

With startlement I opened my eyes to gaze into the eyes of the man who had caught me. He'd actually caught me!

I wasn't a light girl for my age and yet the strength of his arms beneath me only testified to the fact that it wouldn't have mattered even if I had weighed more. I truly felt helpless as I felt his strength

about me.

He set me on my feet and then he was off running again dragging me behind him. We ran through bleachers and then along the upper railing of the arena itself.

At the far end of the arena he turned to me and lifting me up bodily swung me over the railing and without warning dropped me. I fell with a scream that was abruptly cut off as I landed with an ‘umph!!!’ onto the bloodstained sand of the arena.

Only a moment later he landed in the sand beside me. Gamely I struggled up to my feet prepared to run again.

Breathing hard I looked to him only to see him regarding me with an appreciative gleam to his eyes. He nodded slightly and took off for a door

in the arena wall.

I ran after him through the stained sand of the arena grateful for not having to be drug along behind him as before. One thing was very clear and that was that I would never stand a chance in trying to out run this man. Back where I had grown up I could out run any boy for miles around, but this man made me look slow.

He was already at the door and knocking roughly. The door opened after a moment and with a gasp I watched the Cherokee pull the surprised guard out of the doorway and snap the man's neck as easily as that of a chicken.

The guard fell lifelessly to the sand as my man dodged into the darkness beyond. I heard the sounds of continued mayhem take place then.

Cautiously I peered through the doorway. More dead bodies lay on the ground of a dimly lit room that appeared to be a stable. I stepped past fallen bloody corpses until I came into view of the Cherokee leading two fine looking horses free of a stall.

He had the blood of a half-dozen men sprayed across him and yet his hands on the skittish horses was gentleness itself to behold. The horses stood still as if in a trance and he threw a saddle on the one and a lead halter on the other.

I hoped the saddled one was for me. I'd never really gotten the opportunity to ride much and riding bareback I felt was a bit beyond my limited abilities.

The Cherokee mounted up and sat down into the saddle. That answered that question.

I stepped forward toward the other horse and was about to attempt to climb aboard when there was a sharp tug at my hair. Painfully still under the man's pulling grip on my hair I turned and stepped closer to his mount. Why didn't the man ever talk to say what he wanted?

I gasped, as I was abruptly hauled upward to land astraddle of the horse behind the Cherokee. He shook the lead rope of the other horse impatiently and I took it from him. Then without being ready for it he urged the horse below us forward and my one hand had to grip sharply at the man's shoulder to keep from falling over the horse backward.

Where on Earth was he going to ride to? Instead of riding out into the arena he was riding into the inner workings of the structure. With a squeal of fright I

ducked my head down at the last moment to avoid it being taken off by a low-lying doorway beam.

A series of steep stairways were directly before us. He wasn't serious!

Oh but he was though. Ducking my head to press my face into the shifting muscles of his back I slid my one arm as far across his rigid stomach as I could in order to hold on as my other arm was pulled out behind me by the horse following us.

The horse we rode bucked up the stairs and just when I thought I couldn't hold on any longer we were free of the stairs and racing down a long hallway. Screams rang out and I watched the slave women that I had served with dodge off to the sides of the horse's passage.

The man not only had bypassed all the security checkpoints between the kitchens and the cells, but we also had horses! Never would I have managed this on my own. There was one more guard outpost though. What was he going to do?

I tapped his shoulder and glancing to me I explained as much. I wasn't sure he heard me, but he gave a terse nod before looking forward again.

He abruptly swung the horse beneath us left and we crashed through a narrow doorway, which he almost managed to take my head off with again. It was the kitchen I'd worked in earlier and with a cry of alarm I felt him urge the horse straight for the window overlooking the city below us.

“No!!!” I screamed, but it was too

late.

Glass shattered and I ducked my head down as I felt the horse lunge through space and then begin to fall. The landing was beyond rough and my hold on the man was shaken free.

I felt myself tugged free of the horse altogether as the rope knotted in my one hand came to an abrupt halt. I hit the ground and all my air left me.

In desperation to breathe I got to my knees trying to suck in air, but none came. I was dying!

A hand slammed into my back with enough force to set every bone in my body loose. I pitched forward onto my face in the dust, but I could breathe.

Coughing and hacking on dust I felt myself jerked to my feet again by the man's cruel grip on my hair. It hurt and

I'd had enough of his manhandling!

I half turned and sent one fist as hard as I could throw it into the man's chest. It felt like my hand broke with the impact to what seemed like a solid stone wall. An answering fist came out from nowhere and hit me up alongside of the head.

I would've fallen if it weren't for the grip on my hair. However, I no longer cared about the pain of my hair being pulled. I was beyond that.

Colors were fading as everything became dark. I was bodily lifted and sat on something and then the world started to move very fast.

Chapter Six

Please.....

Oh my head hurt! It didn't help that it felt like I was caught in the midst of an earthquake either.

I opened my eyes painfully only to see starlit darkness all around. Blurry objects were passing by at great speed. Just as dimly I realized that we were riding hard through the night, which meant we had escaped the city.

One escape had been achieved, but I hadn't escaped him. Despite my pounding headache and induced

fogginess of mind I became painfully aware of two things back to back.

One was the presence of the man's arm clamped across my front, which my breasts lay fully upon. The second thing was how tight my rear was pressed up against the man behind me. I could feel every bit of his arousal for me!

Suddenly I didn't care that I'd escape the city or of even being gang raped to death. All that I knew was the certainty of what would happen with this man if I didn't manage to escape.

I crashed my head back against the man and had the satisfaction of feeling it smash into the man's jaw. The man grunted and his hold on me slackened.

I lunged forward and managed to fall off the horse. As it was I was nearly trampled under by the second horse.

Reaching my feet I started to run out into the dark. I was tackled hard from behind and driven to the ground.

Roughly flipped over I found my hands imprisoned to either side of my head. Screaming I said, "Let me go! I let you free! Surely you know what it's like to be a slave without any choice of your own by now? How can you deny me the same freedom as you now have in return?"

No answer to my question came and staring up into the hard face above mine was to see that my words had seemed to fall on deaf ears. The man's face reflected nothing but passion. The passion to have me.

There would be no escape this night. Starting to cry I stopped struggling to be free and whispering brokenly in

Cherokee I said, "I'm a virgin. Please I.....

My voice trailed off as I watched some emotion hard to define sweep across his face. Maybe just a little did his hands let off on the pressure he was exerting. I wasn't sure, I was just grasping at straws.

"Oh God if this is Your will then so be it, but give me a sign or something!"

I couldn't bring myself to look into the man's eyes anymore. His one hand left my wrist to begin hiking my tunic up, which when I showed no sign of resistance my other wrist was freed, but in the next moment my tunic was pulled up and over me and I was left to lay bare in the grass.

I pressed the side of my face to the ground and bit my lip hard. I wanted to

fight, but something said not to. I closed my eyes wishing for the whole ordeal to be over with already. It wasn't to be though.

To my everlasting shock instead of being brutally savaged he instead did pleasurable things that I had not ever been informed of. I hated him for it, but my body responded to everything that he did and when he completed his taking of me after what felt like hours of torment I experienced no pain at all.

The stars were bright overhead. I looked at them and wondered which might be the sun of Earth. Everything I had been put through came up to press hard against me. The loss of my mother

most of all.

Tears streaked down my cheek and my view of the stars became blurry. The hand that laid claim to my bare chest lifted to gently wipe at the tears on my face.

I'd thought he was asleep. Cursing myself I realized that my emotional outburst had probably awakened him.

The man seemed limitless in his passion to have me over and over again and biting my lip I accepted him once more into my body. I didn't put up a fight. In truth what was there to fight against as he made what he did to me feel good. The positiveness of our physical union though only made me feel guilty in some way.

His physical possession of me was short-lived and once again I heard him

drift off to sleep. Even in his sleep though he didn't let go of me. There was something akin to cherishment in the way that he held onto me.

The enormity of what had transpired this night between me and this man wasn't lost to me. I was full of this man's seed and even now I could be pregnant. It wasn't something I wanted to think about, but like it or not I could even now be becoming linked to this man in more ways than just by his manhood.

God hadn't intervened and indeed their seemingly had been no reason for intervention as strangely I felt no danger from the man who held me. Despite his passion at times my captor hadn't been all that rough and far more considerate than I could've hoped for given the

circumstances.

I closed my eyes and willed myself to get some sleep. The night was cool and although I was bare to it I was far from cold with him pressed up against me from behind.

Chapter Seven

Choices

The close shrilling notes of a songbird startled me. Blinking my eyes open I tried to gather my thoughts.

My face blushed hotly as all that had transpired last night came vividly to memory. Well and truly did I feel like a woman this morning.

My slave tunic had been draped over me and cautiously I turned my head, only to confirm what I had thought. My captor was gone.

Sitting up I looked down at what was

perhaps the oddest sight that I would ever have expected to have seen. There on the pressed down grass where he had lain lay a bouquet of flowers.

I looked around, but he was nowhere to be seen. I looked back to the flowers in consternation.

I didn't know what to think. The flowers didn't go at all with the man, who'd wordlessly had me repeatedly all night long. Well.....maybe they did.

I shook my head as if to clear it of the confusion I was under. I felt strange and more than anything I wanted a bath. No, make that food. I was starving!

I slipped the dress on and stood up.

I looked down to the flattened grass and thought it a poor indication to relay all that had happened here last night. Feeling flushed again I picked up the

bouquet of flowers.

I should crush them was my first thought and yet they were beautiful. A similarity came to mind. It had been in his power to crush me, only he hadn't. Was this what the symbolism of the flowers was?

Why had a man who I'd never even heard say a word left me flowers?

I heard grass moving and looking up I watched him come toward me. With interest I took him in and where I should've felt hate I..... I didn't. I wasn't sure why that was.

He motioned me to come over to where a rock thrust up out of the ground. Obediently I did so and watched with interest as he unloaded an arm full of green balls which seemed reminiscent of garden melons.

Taking a short sword out from his belt he halved the melon into pieces. I looked to the blade of the sword expecting to see dried blood still on it, but it was clean.

He'd noticed my look at the sword and shaking his head I actually saw him smile briefly. The smile was there one moment and gone the next, but it was good to know that he could at least smile.

He offered a piece of the juicy looking fruit that was yellow inside and I took it from him. It was really good!

I consumed the edible part and tentatively I reached out for another piece of the fruit. He said nothing, as usual, as he continued to chop up the garden melon like things so I continued to eat them.

I made sure to at least leave a half share of the fruit for him to eat though. I watched him bite into a piece and chew then he did a curious thing by lifting his head and jerking it backward slightly.

I watched the swallowed food pass down his throat. Odd.

Then he did the whole process over again with his next bite of fruit. What he was doing not only looked odd but awkward as well and I felt myself staring at him.

He noticed my stare and his hand moved then quickly in what I was shocked to see was sign language. Different indian tribes used sign language to communicate and yet I knew he understood Cherokee.

“Could you repeat that?” I asked, as I brushed some of my hair back over one

ear.

His hand flashed again and in astonishment I looked to his face and said, “You don’t have a tongue!”

He nodded and kept on eating.

“Why?”

His hand moved, “They cut it out. Say Cherokee have nothing worth saying to be heard anyway.”

I put my hand over my mouth as I suddenly felt a little nauseous at the thought of what it would be like to have my tongue removed. Looking at him I said, “I’m sorry.”

His head cocked to the side as his hand moved, “Why?”

“I..... I just am. It must be terrible to be without a tongue.”

He shrugged and looked back down to the fruit he was still chopping up. I

wasn't hungry anymore and turning away I faced the prairie that stretched out as far as the eye could see.

I felt him then standing behind me. The man had taken me against my will and I..... he just didn't seem like someone I should hate.

He stepped off to the side of me and glancing to him I asked, "Are we being followed?"

He shook his head no. I turned back to the fruit, but his hand caught my arm halting the action.

His hand signed again, but he really didn't have to because what he wanted was plain to see in his face. I looked down to his hand as what he'd said reverberated throughout me, "I want you again before we go."

Looking up I met his gaze not sure

how he would react as I quite honestly said, "I'm sore. Could we please not right now?"

His eyes stared into mine and I was beginning to think I'd made a mistake when he nodded his head. His hand flashed and there was no questioning the message of it, "Tonight."

"Yes." I whispered out in acceptance as I felt myself about to catch on flame and burn alive.

I needed to get away. I pulled to be free and he let go.

I hurried off toward some bushes, but stopped when I heard him snap his fingers. Looking back he signed, "Thank you for letting me go. My spirit die if I be there much longer."

What did a person say to that?

I could well sympathize with what he

meant. The thing though is that I felt his admission of gratitude deserved an answering one, “Thank you for waiting till tonight.”

I hurried on then feeling very strange inside. Where had the man who had yanked on my hair and knocked me out with his fist gone to? Thinking about it I realized he'd had little choice but to subdue me while in the city in order for us to escape, but that didn't excuse him for pulling my hair the way he had or for what he'd done last night.

Shaken I walked on as I quite numbly contemplated on what an afterthought, ‘last night’ had been in my previous thought. What was wrong with me?

The hours of the day fell by one by one. Endlessly riding across the shifting field of grass that lay ever before us.

Thankfully I made the journey on my own horse and wasn't pressed up against him as I had been last night. He'd let me have the saddle while he rode the other horse bareback.

He really was the finest horsemen I'd ever seen. You could see it in just the way he moved with the animal. It was almost as if he was one with it somehow.

About midafternoon he dropped back to ride beside me. There then commenced a period of time that he indepthly studied me.

I kept waiting to be pulled off the horse and pressed into the grass again. The passion to do that was there in his

eyes, but the look about him was more contemplative than passionate.

Finally his hand moved, “Why you not run? I ride ahead all day and give you plenty of chances.”

In shock I gazed at him before switching my gaze to the horizon before us. Why hadn't I made a break for it?

It was true what he said, I'd had plenty of chances throughout the day to run for it. However the thought of running from him hadn't even occurred in my mind!

I put my hand to my head that had suddenly begun to hurt. Maybe I was getting too much sunlight. My many freckles were no doubt loving it.

I glanced to him only to see him still watching me so I asked, “What would you have done if I had run?”

“Catch you.” Came the swift response and that was that. We rode the rest of the day side-by-side.

Towards evening we cleared a rise and below us was a pond of water in a low point in the land. The water called out to me. Not so much because I was thirsty, but because I wanted a bath.

My captor however remained still for a long time on the ridge studying the water hole and the land around it quite thoroughly. I felt very safe from other dangers when with him.

Finally he eased forward and we made the short journey down to the water. We all drank deeply and then surprisingly he went about making a fire.

I wouldn't have thought that safe to do, but I trusted his instincts on the matter far more than my own. While he was busy with that I stood by staring at the cool water longingly.

Snapping out of my daze I went about gathering dry brush with which to feed the fire. To my surprise he came up and stopped me. He pointed to the water before then taking what brush I had gathered and going back to where he was working on making the fire.

"Thank you." I said to softly for him to have heard.

Never would I have expected him to be this nice to me. In the cell bay he had seemed only slightly less animal than the others. In truth he was a good deal different from the others.

I turned away to the water and without

hesitation I dove into it. I took my tunic off and I did my best to wash the sorry garment. My efforts did little to visibly improve it, but at least perhaps it would smell better.

I looked up to see him standing there along the shore and self-consciously I ducked lower in the water. He motioned to the tunic and in surprise at his generosity I tossed it to him.

He took it toward the fire and hung it over a nearby bush. I smacked myself in the head then for what I had just done. Oh well it really didn't matter as I wouldn't have had a covering much longer anyway.

Something smacked into the water near me and I have screamed in startlement to the tune of his chuckle from the shoreline. I caught a hold of his

pants before they sank below the surface of the water.

The implication was obvious. He wanted me to wash his pants.

I looked at the worn material in my hands. Then not quite believing it I started to do my best to clean them, but like with my tunic there was little to be done to salvage what hadn't been great to start out with.

Looking up from my task after a while I saw him waiting patiently. I tossed the pants to him and he walked away stark naked. Modesty wasn't his strong suit. Admittedly what did it matter in this setting.

With a gasp I watched him dive into the water and become gone from view. It wasn't overly a surprise when he resurfaced right before me. His hand

found mine and he began to lead me toward the shore and I went along willingly.

Chapter Eight

My Woman

I stared the water of the pool reflectively. It was odd to relate to how I felt inside versus how I thought I should feel.

The sun was warm. The flowers were beautiful and slave or not I actually felt rather at peace with the day.

I had little to complain of seemingly. The only problem was that I should be discontent with the situation surely.

I was being held and actively used by a man without my own consent and

already within the span of two days it was clear that he had no intentions of ever letting me go. In his mind I was his and that was that.

I objected to my lack of say in the matter, but strangely his inability to talk out right and converse with me was of more angst to my soul than his frequent passionate use of me. I shook my head at the oddity of my own emotions.

Glancing up from the water at a sudden sound I stood up abruptly in alarm. There across the body of water was a large doglike creature. It looked sick and vicious all in the same moment.

The movement of me standing had its glazed eyes focusing on me. That was strange, why hadn't it sensed me from the start? I wasn't downwind of it. It should've smelled me long before now.

With a snarl the creature charged around the pool of water toward me. In alarm I looked about for my captor, as I prepared to run the other way from the beast.

My captor was coming fast as ground melons went flying from his arms. He was gesturing to something beyond me madly?

My head swung the other way in consternation. The water?

Didn't he know dogs could swim? I started to run along the shore, but glancing back I saw that I didn't have a chance. The slobbering dog thing was making good time on me, because of my indecision.

My man suddenly appeared off to the side of us waving his arms madly as if to attract the things attention. Why didn't he

have his sword out?

The beast took out for him and I pulled up. The look on my man's face was extreme as he pointed at the water in a gesture that had, "Now!!!" written all over it.

Oh how I wished he could talk! I didn't second-guess him again though. I dove into the water and then I quickly waded backwards toward deeper water as I watched the tableau taking place out of the water along the shoreline.

My man in a feat of extreme ability turned to face the pursuing dog thing and gave a double fake that looked like it would have torn the knee ligaments of a normal man. The beast launched forward and landed where my man had been, but now wasn't. Meanwhile with a speed far greater than my own on my best day my

man made a direct beeline for the water and me.

The dog thing stumbled back up to its feet and gave chase, but it was too late. With surging strides my man waded into the water to join me.

Incredibly I watched the beast pull up at the waters disturbed surface as if afraid of it. With a snarl it pranced along the edge of the water its face wreathed with vicious avarice for us.

Then for the first time the thing seemed to notice the horses that had shied away as far as their tied off lead ropes would allow. It took off with a bound for them and my man grunted loudly.

His hands dove under the water and came up with rocks in both hands. He threw one and in shock I watched it take

out the front leg of the beast that was in full stride. The thing went down and rock number two bounced off of its head.

The beast shook its head and lurched on an upward back towards the horses as if crazed against any diversion of any kind. My man threw rock after rock and I did my best to help by stabbing my own hands down into the water in search of projectiles which I then held up for him to take and throw.

Some rocks landed and some didn't. The thing was obviously injured, but still it doggedly headed for the horses. The one horse without a saddle tore free of its bushy tie off and with eyes wide in terror it took off for the far horizon.

The other horse was not so lucky. Its tie off kept it stationary and it shied about as best as it could as the dog thing

closed with it. The horse lashed out with a hoof and sent the thing rolling.

With a whine of pain the beast got back up and skirting around the back of the horse. It launched forward and latched onto one of the horse's rear haunches. My man smote the water between us hard while issuing a harsh grunt that I think would have been a curse if it had been audible but from the look of emotion on his face I was sure of it.

I looked back in time to see the horse kick backwards with both hind legs. The beast was catapulted away from the horse as the noise of the sickening crunch of the horse's hooves connected with its chest cavity. The thing landed several feet away and did not move again.

Once more there was silence to be found in the formerly tranquil morning that I had been enjoying. My man took my hand and led me to the far side of the water away from the horse and the nearby corpse.

Reaching dry ground he grasped my arms and held me still, before signing to me, "Stay!"

I nodded and then watched as he carefully made his way around the body of water. He gave the corpse a wide berth and came up on the horse from the front.

The horse was still panicked, but soon quieted at his touch upon it. I felt my face flush as I well knew how the man's touch had a power all of its own.

Then with shock I watched him strike out with two fingers to the side of the

horses head. The horse immediately groaned and plopped down upon the ground.

Holding a hand to my mouth I watched teary-eyed as with an abrupt and decisive movement he broke the horse's neck. Perhaps more overwhelming than the death of the animal was the raw emotion to be seen on my man's face.

He stood up and moved back around the water to where I stood. I thought I knew now what it had all been about, but I found myself asking, "Why?"

His hands signed, "The animal was sick. The sickness infects all who are bitten. In the end you die, but you go mad first and try to bite others. I had to kill the horse as it would have sickened and then tried to spread the disease."

"And you wanted me in the water

because those with the disease avoid bodies of water. We have the disease back where I come from too.”

He nodded and turned to face the horizon, which we would now have to travel towards on foot. Reaching out my hand I grasped his muscular one.

His eyes came to mine and haltingly I said, “You saved my life by what you did.”

He actually smiled and then glancing to his other hand I saw his words that seemed to speak volumes even though they were simple, “You are my woman.”

I smiled and then brushing at my hair I asked, “What’s your name?”

He gestured to the horizon and made the sign for, ‘far’.

“Far Horizon?” I inquired softly and he nodded.

Pointing to myself I said, "Tara."

A look of bitterness passed across his face and I realized with a sharp pang of sympathy that he would never be able say my name aloud and I knew no way of signing it to him. He looked away from me and for once his face wasn't so hard to read.

I saw a lot in that moment. He looked back to me and indicating the horizon questioningly I nodded in return and we started walking.

Biting my lip I warred with myself for a moment before reaching out and folding my hand into his again. He glanced down startled and then to me. I kept looking ahead though. He glanced ahead as well as his fingers grasped mine firmly.

My gaze swung to him and silently I

mouthed out, "I forgive you."

He glanced at me with a look that said he had missed something and in return I smiled mysteriously at him in order to deepen the mystery. Truly it was a mystery how I'd come to this point of being able to forgive, but I'd rather take joy in the moment than continue to live in the past.

I had a man who put my own life above his. Such men were rare. My uncle was such a man and thank God so was mine!

Far Horizon's other hand came across his body to trace the outline of the smile on my face. Turning my head to him I watched him hesitantly point to himself. I nodded and had the pleasure of watching him look a little unsteady.

I kept walking on as I reveled in the

joy that I had the ability to affect this man. I wasn't so helpless after all. It was good to know and it was good to be me.

Chapter Nine

Faith and Passion

Two days later

Together we lay on our bellies in the grass staring out at the horse herd that stretched out across the prairie before us. With a smile I watched a young colt race about on the grass around its mother.

Looking to the side I saw Far Horizon looking as if it was something else beyond the horses before us that he saw.

“What are you thinking about?” I asked with interest.

He blinked before rolling onto his back with a sigh. His hand moved, "I wish I could talk."

"I do too." I whispered.

He glanced at me before looking skyward. I sat up a little to better see his hand sign, "I am worried of how my people will receive me. I am a chief or at least I was. I was betrayed by one who wanted the leadership of the tribe. It was known to the strange beards of the city that I planned to start a war to rid the land of them. They got to my rival and promised him things if he would arrange for me to be caught. That was two years ago."

"What happened to him?"

"They doublecrossed him. He was the first one they put in a death match with me. At heart he was a coward, but even

as a coward it would have been better for him to lead the people than die at my hand. My people are leaderless and now that I return they have one that cannot talk!”

“You talk just fine.”

“It is not the same!” He insisted vehemently.

I shrugged, “Is it your voice that makes you the man you are or is it something else?”

He looked to me speculatively and then away.

Glancing down to my hands I said, “You know I could help you.”

“How?”

“I can pray to my God that you receive your ability to speak again.”

He stared at me as if I was crazy. I went on, “My God can do anything.

What can yours do?”

“I have none.”

“Well then how about taking a step of faith and believing in mine?”

He looked profoundly puzzled before finally saying, “First I would need to know He exists in order to have faith in something I can’t see.”

Nodding I stood up. Looking down at him I said, “Wait here and watch.”

He was silent, but he made no move to stop me as I stood up and walked down the slope toward the herd of horses stretched out over the prairie before us.

Looking up I whispered, “You know what I need to convince him You’re real. Please help me! I’m scared and I’m not really anybody to be asking, but I know what Your messenger said was the truth

and so I'm asking for a miracle.”

My lips fell silent then as I continued to walk toward the horses. The heads of the horses were all directed toward me and sure enough there he was.

Big and as powerful as I had remembered he raced out toward me with a thundering grace unmatched by any other. Holding my hand out I kept walking as I tried not to let the beat of my heart overwhelm me.

The stallion came barreling on toward me and I despaired of the miracle I'd been hoping for, but then it happened. Just as he reached me and it looked like I'd be run over he came to an abrupt stop that sent dirt clods flying all around as prairie sod was ripped up.

With sudden boldness I stepped out over the prairie as I gently coaxed him to

let me near. Massively ridged muscles that I'd seen all too well in motion before remained at ease as I reached up and felt the snuffling breath of a horse surely first among all horses.

My hands felt along his muzzle and he dipped his head to me. I stared into his eye as I rubbed at his chest and patted his massive front shoulder.

“I need your help. I do not ask you to give up your freedom lightly. I myself have had to make such a choice. It was the right thing to do and even now it is so for you. Come.”

I turned and began walking back to the knoll and the man that stood there. I kept one hand on the stallion's shoulder that even now walked in step with me.

As I drew near to Far Horizon the expression on his face was one of awed

amazement. He glanced from me to the horse and back repeatedly as if his eyes could not believe what he saw.

Reaching the base of the knoll I said, "Go to your new master, even as he is my master."

The stallion surged up the slope toward Far Horizon who stood still in the face of the charge. The stallion when reaching Far Horizon dipped one knee down in an action that echoed of some past relationship with humans and I watched as Far Horizon stepped forward and swung aboard the massive stallion.

The stallion wheeled around and my breath caught at the sight of a man and horse who in a way already seemed bonded of spirit. Charging down then toward me I saw Far Horizon dip over

the side with his hand outreached.

I reached up and felt myself caught and swung through the air to land astraddle of the broad back behind Far Horizon. Far Horizon directed the stallion seemingly with nothing but his knees as with one hand he held onto the stallion's overflowing mane.

My arms clasped tightly around Far Horizon and I felt the comforting weight of his hand settle over my crossed arms. There was no way to describe the ride upon this stallion other than to say it was, unequalled.

Horses peeled from all corners to trail out behind us in a consorted charge as they willingly followed the lead stallion of the pack to wherever his rider should lead him. The sight of the many colors of the other horses and the beauty

of their spread out movement was dazzling.

Never had I felt a part of anything so special in life than what I was right now. Pressing my cheek to the muscled contours of Far Horizon's back I closed my eyes in the bliss of the moment. I was so glad that I had chosen this option.

True, I didn't know what tomorrow would bring, but I wasn't overly concerned about it. God's presence was in my life this day and He'd be my chaperone through tomorrow as well.

We rode into one of the camps of Far Horizon's people the next day and first off I saw one of the three men who had sold me to the people of the city. He

wore a look of astonishment as did all the people of the camp.

They stared in wonder at both the stallion and at the man that I held onto. In most of their eyes I was but secondary in interest, which was fine by me.

I felt a pricking from within as if the Spirit of God was reminding me that there was nothing secondary about me. That was true. I held my head up a little more proudly.

Far Horizon slid off the high back of the stallion and turning he lifted me down. His eyes studied mine and I smiled letting him know I was there for him.

Yesterday he had confided in me how nervous he was about having to face his people without the use of his voice. People pressed around, but Far Horizon

did not let go of my hand and I stood with him as questions rained down from seemingly everywhere.

Finally an older man quieted the mob of eager faces. Turning to Far Horizon he asked, “How is it you have returned to us and on such a stallion with such a woman?”

I felt my face flush as the old man gestured to me in a way that said I was quite the catch. I forgot my embarrassment though as I took in the carefully hidden angst to be seen in Far Horizon’s face at having to answer the old man and reveal his weakness.

In truth there was very little weak about the man. Over the past several days I had come to see more and more of the layered and truly complex individual that he was. Among the surprises of

finding myself increasingly drawn to this man was also the realization that I respected him.

Far Horizon's hand started to leave mine and I knew it was so that he could have the free use of it to sign by. Instinctively I held his hand back and stepping forward I spoke in Cherokee, "Your leader has indeed returned to you, but the price of freedom can be high. Far Horizon was treated as less than the man he is by men without honor. They cut out his tongue, as a sign of their hatred for not only Far Horizon, but for all of you. Even having the gift of speech taken from him, when many men would have gladly sought death, Far Horizon instead clung to life. The only reason I am alive today after being sold by men of this people, to the men of the settlement, is

because your leader not only endeavored to escape when he had the opportunity to, but he also brought me along as well. I am here now, only by the grace of my God and you would do well to heed the words of Far Horizon for I tell you that I know of no other man, who can compare to him.”

I looked around at the gathered men piercingly and none of them uttered a word to the contrary. The sight of the stallion aggressively pawing at the ground behind me was evidence enough of what a man Far Horizon was in their eyes to have such a horse that stood in obedience to him.

“Who are you to speak so boldly being but a woman in the presence of warriors?” The old man before me groused out cantankerously.

Before I could speak to my defense I saw the passionate movement of Far Horizon's hand off to the side and the force of his hand moving more than conveyed how forceful his words would've been, "She is my wife and in greater possession of honor than you Falling Leaf! The Creator moves through her for I've seen it with my own eyes and I tell you now if she wished you dead then you would be for I do not doubt that the Creator would do so, if she but asked!"

I started to step away a little to give room to Far Horizon, who with just the passion of his hands had cowed the whole crowd. A passion that had risen in defense of me.

Far Horizon's hand slid around my waist to my opposing hip and he

effectively anchored me back beside him. Obediently I stayed and with interest watched again as he signed savagely in opposition to the old man before us, “It was Hawk Man that betrayed me, but it was you who whispered the betrayal into his mind! I know for I have had a long time to think on the matter. Your time is over as you have led my people into disorder and chaos of mind! Cast him from the people now!”

Warriors around the old man laid a hold of him and drug him roughly away. Far Horizon looked around at the faces of those that still bore shock at the sight of their leader of the past two years being disposed of so concisely. Far Horizon began to sign and all eyes were glued instantly to the shifting of his

hands.

“The time of our subservience to these invaders of our world is at an end! No longer will we sell our own to them! No longer will we trade with them or give them food in peace! From now on there will be war! We are the people of these lands! It is our right to possession that they have challenged in which we have squandered away through poor leadership and a lust for their inventions! We do not need their devices and from this day forward we are at war with them as they have nothing to offer us accept the pain and misery that they have imposed upon us!”

I watched Far Horizon with pride as I witnessed the tired and defeated glaze depart from the eyes of the people he commanded the emotions of with but the

movement of his hands.

“It will not be easy. Indeed we will not win on our own. We have been godless for far too long, but I have seen that truly a God does exist! The same Creator of old we once served, but have long since ceased paying homage to. I believe this is why we a strong people have been brought into subjection by those who are both fewer in number than us and who have far less honor. We must change our lack of faith or else we will not win! If we change then whether we win in battle or not it will not matter as we will once again be a free people who are not bound by the ills of unbelief, but rather a people walking in the ways of the Creator who formed us!”

Cries of adulation rang out continually from all those present and yet the silence

of Far Horizon's moving hands continued to dominate the atmosphere.

“Send riders to all the camps. Tell them my words and if they wish to be free then let them come here. However if they wish to remain without honor, as our people have been since our grandfathers failed to drive out the invasion of those who view us as something less, then so be it! We do not need them as I only want honest warriors of faith with me in this war to come. We are not a defeated people as truly we have not yet begun to fight until now!”

People were jumping up and down and things got wild for a while. I lost sight of Far Horizon and idly drifting back from the frenzy I turned and began to walk among the tents of the camp.

My walk wasn't aimless though. I

prayed over all that was to come. I prayed for the people to find their way back to the Creator. I prayed for success in war against the otherworldly inhabitants of the settlement.

In a way I was now one of these people. Far Horizon had surprised me as confirming me as his wife before everyone. I wasn't a slave anymore.

I smiled softly. Truly I hadn't been a slave for very long although at the time it had seemed to be an eternity.

Glancing up I saw Far Horizon and an older woman coming toward me. His face wore a relieved expression and teasingly I asked, "Were you are afraid I ran off or something?"

He shrugged and I saw it for the answer it was.

Tilting my head to the side I regarded

him speculatively, “Why would that bother you Far Horizon? You are famous among your people. You could have any woman you wanted.”

He shook his head abruptly and signed, “There is only one of you. I want no other in life.”

I felt myself blushing at his words and I glanced down at a lack for what to say. I heard him clear his throat and glancing up I saw a very vulnerable look pass across his eyes as he signed, “You do want to stay among the people? With me?”

“Yes Far Horizon.” I said softly.

I had the pleasure of watching him exhale his pent-up breath even as I reveled in the fact that if I had wanted it Far Horizon had just given me the indication that I could’ve left if I had so

chosen to. Leave for what though?

Passion, respect, commitment, excitement for sure, were all to be found here in spades. No, I had nowhere I wanted to be more than where I was right now.

Far Horizon was staring at me hard as if he was reading my every thought. Maybe he was and that was fine as he was free to do so, as I didn't plan on ever holding anything back from my husband. I let the full awareness of all my thoughts shine out of my eyes at him.

Dazed looking Far Horizon shook his head and with a start he took in the forgotten woman who'd been standing off to the side of him, who was smiling broadly as she looked between the two of us. Far Horizon gestured to me and the woman stepped forward quickly with

what looked to be a measuring string. She made several quick measurements and then she quickly left without ever saying a word.

“Am I getting a new dress?” I asked eagerly.

He nodded. His eyes however weren't on mine. The woman's last measurement had been around my bust and that was where his eyes remained.

Feeling daring I leaned forward and softly inquired teasingly, “Far Horizon?”

His eyes sprang up to mine blinking rapidly and I asked, “How long does it take to make a dress?”

He didn't seem to comprehend the question and not being able to help myself I laughed. Taking his hands I stepped closer and to his surprise I leaned up on my toes to kiss him

passionately. It was the first time I had initiated a kiss other than to respond to his.

Drawing back I asked, “How was that?”

He nodded enthusiastically and then I saw sharp regret pass across his face.

“What?” I asked in concern to the look.

He looked at my lips and I guessed in that moment that he felt keenly the lack of being able to kiss me as fully as I had just kissed him. Pressing closer to him I whispered, “I don’t care about that Far Horizon!”

Seizing his face I brought it down closer to mine and I kissed him forcefully letting him know I wasn’t put off by the feel of his butchered tongue, which I pressed my own against with

abandon. He seized me in an embrace that promised to never let go and for a while I forgot the world beneath my feet even existed.

Dazed I gasped for air, only to feel it leaving me as I was picked up and slung over a broad shoulder. Smiling from some strange mixture of euphoria mixed with anticipated passion I kissed the small of his back. How things could truly change overnight, when God was in control.

I lay with my cheek pressed against his arm beneath my head as I stared lazily into the flames of the fire at the center of the tent. Idly I let my gaze wander to the beautifully dyed leather

dress laid out on the other side of the fire.

It hadn't taken the women of the camp long to put together perhaps what was the finest piece of workmanship that I'd ever seen. It was a good thing too as my old tunic was little more than a pile of torn rags now.

Smiling again I affirmed to myself how nice it was to have a man who was so passionate for me as Far Horizon was. It was fun too. I pressed a kiss against the bicep muscle my head lay on and Far Horizon's fingers came off my hip to play with a strand of my curly hair.

I sensed he was disturbed about something. Turning I gazed into his eyes and asked, "What's the matter?"

He sighed loudly and I grinned

broadly as I said, “You have no secrets from me.”

He smiled, but then quickly sobered. He rolled to his back and began to sign, “They have stick weapons that shoot energy like lightning bolts. My people have no such weapons. That was why my grandfathers before me allowed the strangers to build their city as they felt we would lose any battle that was fought against them. The same is now true as it was before. I do not wish to lead my people to their death.”

“And who says you are? You’ve got a weapon they don’t know about.”

“What’s that?”

Grinning I slid on top of him and said, “Me!”

He smiled, but his heart wasn’t in it. I decided to give him a moral boost, “Do

you know what sulfur is?”

He shook his head no.

“Well I do and I saw a ton of it over by that bluff on the edge of the camp. Mix that with some nitrate and some other ingredients and you’ve got the genuine makings of an answer to their energy weapons. They’ll never know what hit them.”

His eyes continued to echo his question of the general cluelessness he had for what I spoke of, but I could see that he wanted to believe that I truly did have an answer that would fix his problem and yet the worry of a leader responsible for his people kept his brow furrowed with tension.

“You’ll see my love. Don’t worry about it anymore.”

Trustingly the look of worry left his

face to be replaced with the desire for me that was really never that far away.

Chapter Ten

Respect Given

“Keep them back!” I said testily.

Far Horizon shewed the gawkers back from the fire for what must've been the tenth time. By nature I wasn't an overly crabby person, but the current stress of the situation was having an adverse effect on me.

I'd never made gunpowder by myself before and in general it had been a long time since I'd seen my grandfather do it. I only hoped that I was getting the mixture of ingredients right.

My grandfather had always used to say 'there's gunpowder and then there's good gunpowder', which is why he'd always insisted on making his own. The ingredients I had to work with were a little make do, but they seemed of good enough quality.

One thing for sure was that I didn't want to find out right now whether or not my concoction was volatile or not. One of the hazards of gunpowder making is that it starts out as a liquid, a liquid slowly cooked and reduced over a fire until most of the moisture is gone from it.

Sweat beaded along my brow as I spread more of the sandy paste out on the sheet of leather that was held in suspension several feet above the flames of the fire below. One time my grandfather while making powder had

fallen asleep and one of the drying boards had dipped to the side and some powder had spilled. It had all gone up then and the powder shack had exploded.

Grandfather, other than being a bit singed, had come out of it unscathed, but that had been the last time he'd made his own powder. I was hoping to not have a similar experience.

Far Horizon cleared his throat and I spared him a glance. He signed, "This black dirt is going to help us against the enemy?"

Glancing back to the powder that was now crumbling into gritty specs I smiled grimly as I said, "O ye of little faith."

A few minutes more and it was done. With Far Horizon's help I brought the stretched out piece of hide covered in

black dust away from the flames. Together we laid it on the ground a safe distance from the fire.

Scooping the gunpowder together with my bare hands for fear of using anything that could cause a spark I amassed quite a sizable pile of it. Reaching off to the side I picked up a small gourd. The gourd was hollowed out inside and I commenced to pour the gourd full of the gunpowder one handful at a time.

When the gourd was packed full I took some cloth and tightly wadded it up to seal off the small hole in the top of the gourd where I had poured the gunpowder through. Now it was time for the moment of truth.

Far Horizon had watched me curiously throughout the process and hopping up to his feet now he helped me

up. Smiling I thanked him and he made a gesture I'd never seen before.

“What does that mean?” He looked away and shrugged and I thought his face had a bit of a blush to it.

I was going to find out what that hand sign had meant, but for now I had a bomb to let off. Oh how I hoped it wasn't a dud!

If all my efforts had resulted in a dud then Far Horizon stood to lose a lot of respect in the eyes of the tribe. I did not want that even as I did not want to disappoint my husband by failing to provide a means with which to fight the superior technology of the enemy with.

“Did you make that fire I asked you too?”

Far Horizon nodded quickly and I moved past him. At the edge of a small

bluff I saw the large fire that had been made in a wallow lower down and away from the camp. The fire was well within throwing distance.

Warriors were everywhere along the bluff's edge and calling out loudly I gestured for them to move back a little. They did so, but not very far. Taking orders from a woman was new for them.

So be it, if any of them got burned or blasted with gourd fragments it was on their head as I'd done my part to warn them. Looking at the heavy gourd in my hand I prayed out loud in my native tongue, "Oh God please let this work!"

Drawling back my arm I launched the gourd. My aim was good. The gourd hit glancingly off the ground before the fire to then roll forward directly into the flames. I instantly winced in expectation,

but nothing happened.

Nothing continued to happen and I began to feel the weight of stairs on my back. Looking heavenward I pleaded softly, “God..... - KABOOM!!! -

My feet left the ground and I was flung backward along with all the others that had been standing closer than I had advised. A fire ball of flame consumed the wallow in the prairie and sent firewood pieces and clumps of dirt flying everywhere, even as a thick column of black smoke hung heavy in the air.

Staring up at the dissipating smoke I commented abstractly in my mind that perhaps I'd put too much nitrate into the mixture. As it was I was pretty sure the combination that I had come up with

would blow a gun barrel apart, but then the current potency of the blend was well-suited for destruction employed in the form of bombs.

Glancing around I saw laughing warriors helping each other up off the grass. Somehow laughing didn't seem to be appropriate right now. Didn't they understand how close I'd come to sending us all to Kingdom come?

Far Horizon was laughing along with the rest of them. He pulled me up and looked repeatedly from me to the crater in the prairie below us. He seemed at a lack for what to express, but his general excitement was communication enough. Finally he calmed enough to sign and when he did I instantly wished he hadn't.

“The explosion..... it reminds me of you when we.....” He left the rest

unsaid, but he'd already said too much, which had been seen by far too many. I don't think I'd ever been more mortified in my life.

Warriors were laughing everywhere. My face felt like it was engulfed in the flames of the explosion of a few moments ago. I turned to leave and escape, but Far Horizon spun me back and before I could protest he was kissing me openly in front of everyone. I would never forgive him for this.

The kiss broke off and in surprise I found myself lifted up to be seated on Far Horizon's shoulder. He began to then run down the slope and parade through the camp.

I clutched at his other shoulder and head for support, if he could of he would have been screaming, but as it was the

other warriors more than made up for his lack of a voice. Women everywhere were being lifted up to be seated on the shoulders of warriors.

The profoundness of what was happening in the moment wasn't lost on me. This universal respect being directed at all the women was something new among these people of the prairie.

I gazed at the faces of the surprised women that had been borne aloft as I was. There was joy and a dawning surprise as if something precious was being given to them that they'd never had before.

It was beautiful and I wiped at my tears. Laughing I realized I must look a sight as I had just wiped black powder residue all across my face. It didn't matter.

Looking down to Far Horizon I caught him looking up at me. He signed, "Thank you. You have made my people whole."

The sincerity of his face matched the emotions I saw in his eyes. Okay maybe I could forgive him.

I scooted forward and turned and he let me slide down him. I wrapped my legs around his waist and holding his face I whispered with a smile, "Like gunpowder going off huh?"

He made a whistling noise followed by an explosion that had him flinging his hands wide from where they had been supporting me. Laughing I clung on to him and kissed him passionately completely unmindful if anyone else saw how besotted I was with this man. It was a good day.

Peeking an eye open I witnessed a

great many other women being kissed in like manner as I was. I closed my eyes commenting dryly to myself on the strong likelihood of there being a lot of babies in the not so distant future.

That was fine by me as it meant that my child would have lots of playmates growing up. A good day indeed.

Chapter Eleven

Liberation Interrupted

Three weeks later

I watched anxiously from the cover of some shrubby trees. Far Horizon would not hear of me accompanying the others on the mission to plant bombs within the settlement so I was stuck here to be nothing more than an observer to what took place this day.

Anxiously I watched and waited. As

was customary the different camps of the prairie people had brought the tribute items required of each of them monthly by the off-worlders. Noticeably absent in this year's trade was that of slaves, usually women, that had been a common custom in times past.

What the settlement dwellers by the sea didn't know was that for the past three weeks the people of the prairie had been involved in little else, but the creation of more gunpowder. There had been a few mishaps and some close calls, but thankfully no one had been hurt seriously.

Even now several tons by my calculations of black powder was being placed throughout the city. Timing all the charges to go off together would be difficult, but not impossible thanks to an

ingenious idea one of the prairie women had come up with in the form of a slow burning fuse made of twisted hemp fiber saturated with a reduced potency of black powder. The slow burning fuse burned at a predictable rate, which made timing an overall consorted explosion possible by varying the lengths and times when fuses were lit.

The woman's addition to the war effort for liberation had only strengthened the resolve by the men of seeing their women in a new light. Slow burning fuses or not it was going to be difficult just the same to avoid detection.

For the thousandth time I wished that Far Horizon had let me tag along. I'd slowly found out as our relationship deepened that I could usually get my way if I tried hard enough, but in this matter

he'd been unshakable and respectfully I was obeying him by doing as he had commanded.

Most of all I did not care for the part of the plan were it involved him. He had the other warriors acting out a charade of delivering him up to the settlement dwellers as a sign of their good faith, but in return they were bartering for more settlement goods than usual. Such a bargaining process promised to take a while and while all eyes were on the deal in process warriors were slipping into the settlement from all corners to drop off payloads of black powder.

The sign for everything to go up would be when the sun reached mid sky. I felt a tap on my shoulder.

Glancing back I saw all three of the warriors who had delivered me up to the

settlement a month ago standing there.

“Falling Water, Storm Tree, Golden Horse how can I be of help?” I gently inquired of the three men, who looked almost guilty to be alive.

Finally Golden Horse burst out with, “How have you not told Far Horizon who it was that did the dishonor of delivering you up to the outsiders?”

“Why should I?” I asked inquiringly.

“Because we deserve punishment!” Golden Horse exclaimed loudly, as if driven from some internal angst. The other two nodded affirmatively.

Turning fully from the city to them I approached and put my hands on the shoulder of each warrior and verbally forgave them for what they had done. When I got to Golden Horse it was to see tears in his eyes.

He shook his head, “It is not right what you do!”

“Yes it is Golden Horse. Even as the Creator has forgiven me of my trespasses even now do I so forgive you, but promise me something and that goes for all three of you. Never treat your women as something of lesser value than yourselves.”

All three men nodded and I started to turn away, but I heard Golden Horse mumble, “It is still not right for us to be left off so lightly. We delivered you up and look now how you are even freeing us this day from the tyranny of these outsiders who have oppressed us for going on three generations!”

“Golden Horse if you had not delivered me up then I would never have met Far Horizon. He and I would not

have escaped and even now your people would still be caught within the grip of tyranny with no hope of a better life. Sometimes it is better to just accept forgiveness whether deserved or not even as you realize that the Creator has been at work the whole time despite your wrong actions toward me. I can forgive and now it's time for you to forgive yourself and stop living under the curses of yesterday and accept what your Creator has in store for you today, which I pray will soon be freedom. Now it is almost midday, hurry and take your positions with the others.”

The three men turned to go as I'd ordered, but Golden Horse turned back at the last and said, “Thank you! You are very wise.”

“You're welcome and my wisdom is

only because I've listened to the Creator. You should do the same in your own life. He's earnestly waiting to hear from you.”

He nodded and hurried off to join the other warriors massed around their horses that were hidden from view of the city. I only hoped the bombs would prove successful in terms of paving the way before them.

The sun reached mid sky and with a discordant theme explosions erupted throughout the city. It was hard to judge the overall success of them as dense black smoke overwhelmed the settlement at large.

Warriors screaming at the top of their lungs plunged toward the blasted apart settlement on horseback, until it seemed that I alone was left. The dense smoke

covered everything and in a way it seemed like it had devoured the city and all that it held within it. Had anyone survived?

The wind blew and columns of smoke drifted in toward me. I coughed on the acrid smoke, even as I'd tried to peer through it. "Oh dear God keep him safe!" I whispered, but it was as loud as a scream in my heart.

I was beginning to see more of the city thanks to the wind. The settlement in its entirety was in flames and riders were pouring out of it as fast as they could ride. They were giving up the fight so soon?

I'd expected the confrontation to last for a while. Rising quickly I went back toward the holding area and the big stallion trotted forward. He was too tall

for me to mount and so I climbed onto a lower branch of a tree and shimmied on to him from there.

He took off for the rise overlooking the settlement and there he safely stopped as I didn't know how I could compel the animal to do even anything except through prayer to God. Warriors were in a strung out column fast approaching my position. It was not a look of victory that lay upon them.

The city appeared destroyed so why the angst as if they had suffered defeat of some kind?

Warriors raced by me on horseback and then in relief I saw Far Horizon. He looked roughed up, but seemed able enough despite the visible injuries. He drew up and slid from his horse onto the stallion behind me.

“What’s going on? Why are we running?”

He shook his head negatively and pointed.

I looked to the city and I saw it now. A huge object was rising up into the air from the flames of the settlement.

Far Horizon wheeled the stallion with his knees and we took off in hot pursuit after the other warriors, who were already gone from view. Looking back over his shoulder I saw the large vessel hovering over the settlement start to coast towards us. What had I done?

I’d only done what I felt led to do. Things weren’t supposed to end out like this!

We didn’t stand a chance against the technology that thing back there hovering in the air was in representation of!

Didn't God know that?

He had to and knowing that gave me a measure of peace to help quell the panic that had begun to grow within me.

The stallion ate up the distance faster than the wind it seemed. We gained the top of a rise and with a startled grunt Far Horizon brought the stallion to a raging halt.

There in the low lands before us was the entire body of prairie warriors likewise drawn up as if paralyzed to do anything else because of what lay before them. Another vessel, one only half the size of the one overtop the settlement, hovered above the ground before the startled horsemen.

With a droning whine a dark shadow fell over both Far Horizon and I and looking up I screamed at the sight of the

vessel from the settlement directly over top of us. We were trapped!

I watched as mechanical apertures moved on the vessels underbody and I screamed, “We need to move now!”

Far Horizon must’ve reached the same conclusion as he had already begun to urge the great stallion forward. With one great lunge we were several horse lengths from where we had just been and good thing too, because the ground erupted with explosive force as beams of lightning slammed into it.

Far Horizon didn’t look back and neither did he ride in a straight line or else we would have been doomed. The vessel behind us seemed to have it out for us in particular as they seemed to ignore the thousands of other riders on the prairie in order to concentrate on us.

I don't know how we weren't hit as the ground all around us was being blown to bits. The stallion leapt over craters or swerved past them, how much longer such an effort could be maintained was anybody's guess. My guess though was that it wouldn't be long.

Despite the violence of the moment and the need for concentration I felt myself on the verge of crying hysterically. I didn't want the new life I felt sure that lay nestled within me even now to die anymore than I wanted to die right now.

The riders of the prairie scattered before our approach as the surface of the planet was torn apart all around us by the vessel's guns that seemed eager to blast us into utter annihilation. Strangely

the other vessel had yet to fire upon us and as it was we were headed for the moment right at them.

“Oh God help us!” I cried out.

Logan shook his head in extreme disbelief, “Taran are you seeing this?”

“Doesn’t seem fair does it. I never liked the way these alien half breeds treated the indigenous population of this world and right now never more so. How does a simple fly in to trade for some horses turn into a complicated affair such as this?” Taran asked to no one in specific.

“I don’t know brother. Hey, does that girl on the stallion have red hair?” Logan exclaimed pointing toward the

lone horse's occupants that seemed to be somehow dodging certain death a thousand times over with the passage of each second.

"Red hair?" Taran breathed out before shouting out, "Zoom up on her!"

Logan did so and both men gasped at the sight of the familiar resemblance as large as life portrayed on the screens before them.

"Is that Tara?" Logan exclaimed, as he saw a living vision of his older sister only in younger form.

"Take that ship out now!" Taran responded with in answer and Logan did so while calling out in reply, "How on Earth did she get here?"

"We can ask her ourselves, when she's safe! Now push your buttons and get that thing destroyed!"

“Their geometric algorithms, not buttons.” Logan gritted out even as the ship of their ancestor’s design rocked about roughly as all of its considerable ordinance fired off at the same moment.

Explosions appeared all over the enemy vessel in a terrific scene of mass effect, but it itself didn’t go up in flames. The attack however on the double ridden horse on the prairie stopped, as the opposing vessel brought everything to bear on Taran and Logan.

Logan peeled the ship to the left and then dramatically upward in an action that damaged Taran’s ability to keep his breakfast down. He didn’t complain though as his brother masterfully eluded the enemies power bolts even while maintaining the heavy barrage of destruction upon the other vessel.

Something changed within the amphitheater of war and the other vessel now trailing smoke heavily broke away from the fight to limp toward the horizon all the while fighting to gain altitude.

“They’re going to jump!” Logan called out with deep dissatisfaction, as he did his best to pump the enemy vessel with enough damage so that it would explode before it could escape.

“Let them go and land this thing before I throw up everywhere!” Taran ordered demandingly.

Logan reluctantly broke off pursuit of the enemy vessel and dryly commented, “You’re rather bossy you know.”

“Sorry, it’s a habit I picked up somewhere.”

“Yeah, like from birth!” Logan exclaimed sarcastically.

“So what’s wrong with it? I get the job done.”

Logan shook his head, “I don’t know how Zayri puts up with you. I certainly couldn’t!”

“Just get us landed will ya!”

“As you wish master.”

Taran gave Logan a dirty look to which Logan chuckled in response to. The Thanglarin VX4 craft touched down softly, but Taran was already out of his seat and moving aft towards the rear hatch.

Impatiently he waited for all systems to clear and then he hit the button that made the door open. He jumped free of the craft too impatient to wait for the stairs to unfold and hurried on through

the kneelength grass toward the woman streaking across the ground toward him.

With a squeal of delight I launched up and wrapped my arms around my uncle's neck. His strong arms came around me just as I had remembered as a young girl.

I lost it in a mixture of joy over being still alive and the joy of seeing him mixed with hysterical tears as I hung on relishing the moment for all it was worth. I still had family. Family that cared for me. I wasn't alone of all my kin in the world anymore.

“Thank God you came to be here Taran! You're an absolute answer to prayer! I thought we were going to die! I

thought you were just more of the enemy, but you're not and now you're here and everything's great and I don't have to worry.....”

Laughing Taran exclaimed, “Come up for air Tara, you'll pass out!”

“I don't care! I'm just so happy!”

Wiping at his eyes Taran let go of her and looked his niece over that was already the spitting image of his sister. Tara being off-world and with what Logan had learned before coming off-world all echoed strongly to the fact that his beloved sister was no longer among the living. It was a bittersweet moment for him.

Looking past Tara he noticed the tall muscular form of a man that had warrior written all over him. “And who is this?” He asked already knowing in

part what kind of relationship was between this warrior and his niece.

I turned and pulled Far Horizon up beside me and gesturing to Taran and Logan, who'd come up alongside of his brother, I said in Cherokee, "These are my two uncles Taran and Logan!"

Turning back to Taran I said proudly, "This is Far Horizon and I'm his wife."

The two brothers glanced at each other and then sized the big Cherokee up. It seemed to be an unspoken consensus between the two of them that they wanted no part of any trouble with the man, who looked able to take them both on at the same time.

Taran made the hand gesture for peace and then in the Cherokee language that he'd learned as a kid in the mountains he said, "Peace to the man who holds the

heart of my beloved niece.”

Far horizon signed back, “Who can hold the brightness of the Creator’s love for that is what she symbolizes to me and not only me, but to all my people. Welcome men of my wife’s family. My land is open to you. Thank you for helping to restore it to us.”

As I wiped at my eyes emotionally I glanced from Far Horizon back to Taran and said, “He can’t talk because his tongue was cut out, but somehow he says an awful lot anyway.”

I stepped closer to Far Horizon as I watched Taran and Logan share a curious look between the two of them. Logan stated for the two of them it seemed, “Can’t talk huh? We might know someone who would be able to help with that.”

“What?” I breathed out with.

Taran said, “I’ll explain later. What are you going to do now that his people are free? Our world, the world of our ancestors that I wrote to you about is real and it’s becoming more beautiful with each passing year. You’re welcome to come Tara.”

Smiling I shook my head no, “My place is here.....” Glancing up to Far Horizon I added in Cherokee, “With my people.”

Glancing back to Taran I said, “But I’d love to come visit.”

Taran smiled broadly, “That can be arranged.”

Looking past me he admiringly gazed at the stallion, which stood in regal profile beyond Far Horizon and said, “I actually came to buy some horses. I

don't suppose there might be a colt or filly sired by that grand old boy behind you running around that your people would be willing to part with, would there?"

I laughed and interpreted his words to Far Horizon who smiled and turned to the stallion that he had seemed to bond with on some deeper level. No words were spoken, and yet the stallion suddenly reared up on its hind legs majestically and screamed out as only a stallion could.

His hooves crashed down to shake the ground beneath all of our feet, but the ground continued to shake. With a gasp of astonishment both Taran and Logan watched the horizon light up from the dazzling array of colors of the horse herd without equal that even now

streamed down into the valley like a river of flowing purity.

Far Horizon signed, "Take as many as you wish."

Taran looking truly humbled glanced to the tall Cherokee and said in Cherokee, "Thank you for your gift, but I wish to return a gift to you. I will return and when I do I hope to give you something precious, even as you have in part fulfilled my need to once again see my world populated with the beauty to be had in the Creator's creation of these animals."

Far Horizon held his hand out and the two men shook.

Chapter Twelve

Words of the Heart

I gazed anxiously at Far Horizon. He'd been asleep for a long time now. Almost a day actually. I had wanted to awaken him many times, but the doctor named Edgar had said to let him rest before he left this morning to go back with Taran and Logan to their world.

In addition to my angst over Far Horizon's well-being I was also struggling with a good deal of curiosity. To this moment I was still not sure what or how the Doctor had pulled off what

he had.

In the fighting for the destruction of the settlement several warriors had been badly injured and one of them a few days later had died. With that family's permission the doctor had taken the man's tongue and somehow grafted it onto the remaining stump of Far Horizon's tongue.

The transformation hadn't stopped there either though. The doctor had injected some sort of healing solution into Far Horizon's remaining tongue tissue, which had somehow spurred growth. The way the doctor had put it, the other man's tongue only served as the framework for which the elements of Far Horizon's body used to build a complete replication of his former tongue while using the other tongue as a means of

constructional aid.

The outward skin of the borrowed tongue, which had all that had been left of it, had sloughed off this morning and I'd seen with mine own eyes the solitary tongue that remained without any sign of scarring in its place. How all this could occur in about the span of a week was beyond me, but miracle that it was it had.

To my delight then I saw Far Horizon's eyes open and adjust to the dim light of the tent. Leaning over him I whispered, "How do you feel?"

He still looked rather groggy, but shifting his lips uncertainly they parted, "Tara?"

"Oh God! You can talk!" I half screamed beside myself with excitement.

I loved it! His voice was amazing!

Everything was amazing!

I felt myself tearing up again. Far Horizon's thumb on my cheek wiping at the moisture of a tear brought all my attention back to his lips, which I watched move to say, "I love you."

Looking to his eyes I cried out with all my heart in my voice, "I love you too!" Then I lost myself in the joy of kissing him and feeling him kiss me in return.

Life can be hard, but I'd found that even in the midst of the harshest of trials that if I only trusted my Creator then His peace would come upon me and that He would not only get me through those hard moments I faced, but also prosper me in ways beyond any imaginative comprehension I could ever possess. God was so good to me!

A note from the Author

A little bit about what went into influencing the story.

- This one was another weird one for me. I mean, if ever I had been informed say five years ago that I might be an author one day, there's a chance I would have believed you. However, if you'd said an author, who would write a first person narrated tale from the perspective of a 16 year girl then I would have thought you were nuts. The good Lord does work in mysterious ways. This is my fourth book that I have taken the perspective from the feminine side of the story and I have to say that along with the other three books (A Warrior's Return, Agent with a History, The Proverbial War) that I think this is one of my best stories. I don't know why that is, but as my wife put it, 'it's just such a good

story' and I agree with her and hopefully so do you.

- This book had some really hard moments to write. I really struggled about what to do in order to convey across the rape scene. It's not my objective to be overtly explicit in my books when it comes to sex, but the situation faced in this story demanded otherwise. To many times I believe in Christian fiction when such real life situations are encountered the objective seems to be to take a bunch of white wash paint and cover up what really happened and fast forward to the aftermath of what happens the next day and then shove it under the carpet from there on. Is that really beneficial to anyone? I don't think so. In all my writing I seek to define reality in both the flaws of my characters as well the environments that they interact in and sometimes to do that it requires a little extra explanation to do so and I think in the end it is better, because then you the reader have a

better understanding and connection with the elements of the story and how they might relate to your own life in some way, at least that is my goal. I'm sorry if I offended anyone, but I write what I feel God leads me to write and my goal as an author is to never deviate away from that path whether it tramples on social acceptableness protocols or not.

Reviews and help promoting my books is always appreciated. Thank You, to all who have helped me by doing so!

If you'd like to be informed about new book releases and the availability of free review copies then drop me a note and I'll put you on my fan list and send you updates as they come available. Contact Info:

guyactionwords@gmail.com

Guy S. Stanton, III

A few things about me



I live in the country and I'm glad of it. I have a beautiful wife sent from God, who graciously puts up with me. God has blessed us with three

awesome children
that I am very proud of. It seems authors always
mention
whether or not they have pets and so I will say
that
we have four, two dogs(Kregridor and Thora)
and two cats (Chester and Herman). As to my
interests, well, writing
and waiting for the Kingdom of Shamayim.

RIFT
WIND
Book Five
of
The Wind Drifters

Guy S. Stanton, III

Words of Action

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Guy's books can be found in a variety of formats, both digital and print, at the following locations: Words of Action, Amazon, Barnes&Noble, Smashwords, Apple iBookstore, Kobo, Goodreads, and CreateSpace.

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Book 5: *Rift Wind*

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Non-series Books

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“Let them have it!”

Warm Rain

*Dedicated to my fellow co-worker
Jaime Collins, who one day at work
brought up the topic of Melungeon
blood lines
in the Appalachian Mountains. In a
way he
got the gears turning within my
imagination
as to how to build a series around such
an interesting topic and here we are
now with book 5 of the series.
It's been a great ride.
Thanks Jaime!*

Chapter One

Hard Times

“They’ve latched on Captain Siringo.” One of the bridge officers named Briandy called out laconically.

I smiled grimly and said, “Put up a little bit of a fight to pull free from their tethers, but not too much. You know the drill.”

Briandy smiled a grim smile of her own, “Many times.”

She was right. We had done this far too many times, but there were few options left to us these days, in regards

to upgrading our older fleet vessels, for something with a few less dings and space miles under its tail.

That said the Asteroid Cruiser attached above us was no great prize, but in comparison to this over worn rusted relic it was better on a number of levels, namely speed. Speed was important out here in the Far Quarter.

The sound of grinding metal heralded the approaching invasion from the no doubt foul-smelling horde of cutthroats that lay above us. The scenario we were about to play out changed rarely in terms of variation.

Standing up I drew my pistol and checked the charge level. Full on charge glowed back at me from a green indicator dot. I holstered it and drew my second pistol from behind my back.

The second pistol was relatively the same in terms of style, but the power indicator level could be a bit faulty on this one. Time would soon tell as to its accuracy of being fully charged or not.

I saw sparks erupt from down the hall as saw blades chunked through the rusty hide of the old girl that had carried members of my race for several billion miles or so. It was a shame she had to go this way, but there comes the time when it's better to assign a ship to the graveyard versus watching her whole crew fried because she can't keep up with the pack.

The grinding shriek of the saws was at an end. A heavy chunk of metal fell from the ceiling along with a shower of electrical sparks from severed communication lines.

The insane screams of a demoned horde of Asteroid Corsairs sounded out on the heels of the metallic thud of metal impacting on metal. The Corsairs jumped down in great number into the aft passageways of the ship.

These Corsairs had only two purposes in life that motivated them to continue on in their grim existence out here on the edge of the cosmos, rape and plunder. Their despicable state of pointless being was always a good reminder of what happened when one's faith in something better happening failed entirely and all that was left was the animalistic urge to survive and carve out whatever pleasure there was to be found in the cold of space that stretched out endlessly around us.

They came down into the vessel in

ever-increasing numbers and as if on cue my crew gave only a token defense as they retreated back through the ship. Their easy acquirement of a foothold only emboldened the Corsairs more and leaving all caution to the wind the rest of the Asteroid Cruiser's crew hopped down through their boreholes in fear that they'd be too late to enjoy the amusements of raping the crew of the ship snatched in the clutches of their grappling harpoons.

Whether man or woman they didn't care, although women were preferred because they offered twice the available usable parts than that of a man and thus lasted longer as a source of amusement. It was easy to kill these monsters knowing all that I did about them.

I nodded my head and Briandy

whispered into her COM line. Instantaneously stun charges went off in the areas of first incursion. The ship reverberated with the shockwaves given off by the stun charges. Shaking my head, still momentarily deaf, I stepped out into the hallway as my bridge officers and other crew fanned out behind me filling the narrow corridor.

The stunned Corsairs tried to regain their way to their feet, while those still standing stumbled about unsteadily. I shot them where they stood or lay as those behind me added to the carnage by clicking off their beam weapons with veracity.

No quarter was given just as none would have been given to us. Stepping over the blown apart corpses of the fallen invaders I continued on as cleanup

teams strategically located about the ship converged on the initial access holes into our ship.

The way forward made clear, with no pirate left living, I bounded forward as two of my men from another corridor rushed forward to make a ramp holding their defense shields above them like an elevated stairway. My boot landed on one and in a running stride of momentum I bounded up to the next step and pushing off I catapulted up into the Corsair's Asteroid Cruiser. This part of the scenario could be a bit tricky.

Traditionally this was where we lost the most people and for that reason I made it a special point to be the lead

man in such maneuvers as often as possible. I was no better than any of my people and yet I was their leader. Performing such risks was my way of showing my commitment to the general cause of our survival.

With the advent of my people knowing the level of my commitment to them it helped my task as a leader because they would wordlessly obey the tougher decisions that had to be made at times such as abandoning members of the Fleet if it was for the greater good of the rest of the Fleet.

In short, I hated my job, and yet I'd proven as adept at it as my forefathers before me had been. The proof of my success as a leader was that my people were still together although even fewer in number than there had been in my

father's day of command.

No one was complaining about that though, because they all knew what a continual miracle it was that any of us yet breathed and were in possession of our right minds. The act of our continued survival against all odds was in and of itself one of the greatest generators of the will to hold on to the faith that one day things could change, but like all continuously tapped emotions it was getting worn out.

Time was running out perhaps even faster than spare parts were. Change had to come soon or else we'd end up like the scum we were killing even now.

My somersault through the Corsairs' opening in our hull carried me on up to my feet. Wheeling around I beheld the surprised visage of a latecomer to the

sortie below. I pulled the trigger, only the gun didn't fire. Blasted indicator!

The man gave a gap toothed grin and made to bring his weapon to bear, but he was already dead, his insides blown away by my holstered gun, which I'd drawn with what some said the speed of lightning. I wouldn't know as I'd never seen lightning.

Some phrases of speech persisted on from previous generations that made no conscious sense to those of us alive in the present who had never witnessed them. That said I did get the gist of what the phrase meant.

Several more Corsairs appeared and in rapid succession I took them out. Members of my crew were hoisting themselves up through the holes and the remaining cleanup proceeded quickly

without any further mishap.

Disgustedly I glared at my malfunctioning weapon as others of my crew bailed out of the rust bucket below to take part in the cleanup of the Asteroid Cruiser. Savagely I clanged it off of a bulkhead door and the red glowing indicator warning of low-power abruptly switched to a light green bordering on yellow. That was more like it.

“You should pitch that thing before it lets you down for good.” Briandy commented dryly from beside me.

Glancing to her I rightly acknowledged that she had a point, but I was reluctant to let go of the piece that

had been my grandfathers and his father before him. The gun was of Melungeon design and craftsmanship and such things were rare to us now as most of the weaponry and technology we possessed we had gotten from other sources as our own had run down or become antiquated.

This pistol still worked though, which was asking a lot for being in continuous use for about 200 years. It was allowed to have a few glitches from time to time given its track record.

Right or not in her assessment Briandy was getting too familiar with questioning my judgment again and leaning out to the side I smacked her hard on the rear. She skittered away from me with an affronted look and I said pointing towards our newly acquired ship's

bridge, "Get going!"

Spitefully she hissed out, "I should shoot you!"

Throwing my arms wide I said, "Take your best shot."

With a strangled scream of frustrated wrath she turned away to do as I'd said. Watching her go I had to admit that my baby sister had filled out into quite the female specimen.

I'd have killed another man for doing what I had just done. That thought no sooner occurred within my consciousness than I witnessed two of my crewmen turn their heads to look after my sister. Admittedly the girl liked to wear her pants far too tight.

As I continued to glower at the two men they took notice and immediate apprehension arose in their faces at

having been caught in the pursuit of the forbidden.

Pointing to them I said, “You two are tasked with dragging the garbage out of here before we take off.”

“Yes Sir!” Both men said respectfully, even as a hint of the internal groan at having been assigned to corpse removal detail leached out into their tone of voice.

I moved past them to make my inspection of the ship. In general the place was a pigsty and stank much the same. It was always the way of it, but thankfully the buttons and screens glowed brightly from beneath the layers of caked on grime.

The ship was of a common design with a few subtle improvements that made my appreciation of it rise a notch.

It had the appearance of resulting from a unique cultural background versus being an amalgamation of parts pillaged from a dozen different ships.

I wondered where the Corsairs had gotten it from. Sam, my chief engineering officer appeared in a doorway with the look of something important to say.

Sam was short for Samantha and of all my select crew that I favored to accompany me on these missions I had perhaps the most respect for her. While an attractive blonde she was happily married with two kids and so I never allowed myself to think further than the professional relationship we shared in terms of keeping our people alive.

“Everything all right with the propulsion systems?” I asked somewhat concerned.

She shook her head, “No, they’re just dandy. She’ll be one of the fastest in the fleet once I clean some of the bugs out of her, but there’s something I think you should see.”

I didn’t like what I saw in her eyes. I stepped forward and four others made to follow along but I waved a hand and said, “Stay here.”

Obediently they stayed behind. Whatever Sam had to show me I’d rather it remain in private given the serious nature of her manner.

Making our way through various corridors we came to the propulsion wing of the ship. Again I was surprised by the elegant but exotic layout of the ship’s systems.

This was a much finer ship than I had first thought. The outside appearance of

it did not do the interior workings of it justice at all.

Sam gestured to a console readout station and glancing to her I waited for her to explain what was causing the uptight tension that seemed to radiate out from her.

“It’s a curious design of a ship as I’m sure you’ve noticed. A good bit finer than the run-of-the-mill space trash we usually run across out here.”

“Get to the point of whatever’s bothering you Samantha.” I said using her full name.

She glanced around looking to see if we were alone. I watched her bite her lip then and tears sprang from her eyes to fall down her cheeks with abandon.

Without hesitation I stepped forward and hugged her to me. Her arms came

around me so tightly that my breathing was restricted.

Sensing a noise rather than being able to hear it over the sound of Sam's sobbing against my chest I glanced upward and saw Michalin, Sam's husband, towards the far end of the room. He had a look of concern etched across his face as he beheld his crying wife in my arms.

He was one of my best and most loyal fighters and I knew that while some might see it as odd for me to be hugging another man's crying wife I knew he thought nothing of it. I gestured him forward and upon him drawing close I helped transfer Sam to his willing arms of comfort.

Looking from the two of them I turned to the console station and with a few

movements of initiation the station came alive with its diagnostic reports of the ship's current condition. My hands gripped down hard on the edges of the console as I crammed my eyes shut not wanting to believe I'd seen what I just had on the screen.

“You saw it?” Sam asked in a voice still full of tears.

Turning away I stumbled to a nearby bench and sat down heavily letting my head fall forward into my hands. In the background I heard Michalin ask, “What is it?”

I felt Sam's gaze upon me and I nodded my still lowered head giving my permission for her to tell him. Sam spoke, “The readouts are translated into Melungeon.”

In a shocked sounding tone Michalin

asked, “Just what does that mean?”

“Well the ship isn’t Melungeon and standard occupational conduct of a captured ship is to change the ship’s analytics over into one’s own language.”

“That doesn’t mean anything!” Michalin said, a bit desperately as the awful truth of the situation began to press down on him like it already had on me.

Sam shook her head as more tears fell, “Ten years ago when we made contact with the Zanzi Fleet Squadron, do you remember that?”

“Yes, who doesn’t?”

“Well at the time we’d thought we were the only surviving fleet of our people who’d managed to survive through the years as we had. It was a time of celebration and we stayed

together for a year, until the need for resources drove us to part our ways. We set a rendezvous point for us to meet up at in a designated point in space in three years' time. Well as you know they didn't show up. While many of us feared the worst others contented themselves with the hope that they had just been delayed from reaching the rendezvous. While both fleets were together for a year I had the chance to study under one of their chief engineers. Certain system programming carries a uniqueness to it almost like a fingerprint to the individual who created it, at least it does if you know what you're looking for. The way the diagnostics are configured perfectly matches the engineer I studied under from the Zanzi Squadron. These were our people Michalin!"

Watching the pair of them I witnessed Michalin step away as he put a hand over his eyes before brokenly admitting, “I thought..... I thought a few of the bodies were faintly familiar looking.”

He stumbled and reaching up I pulled him down to sit beside me. Throwing my arm around his shoulders I drew him close to me as consummate warrior that he was he began to bawl his body shaking hard from the force of his sobs.

Both Samantha and I knew full well what it was that had driven the man not overly given over to expressing emotion into such a state as this. Sam kneeling down before her husband pulled his head forward against her chest as she whispered into his hair as her own tears wet his head, “Oh honey I’m so sorry!” Over and over and over.

Ten years before when we had quite by surprise met up with the Zanzi Squadron it had been universally agreed for the mutual continuation of the strength of our bloodlines after being so isolated as we were in space for almost 200 years that it would be a good thing to exchange some of our younger men and women in order to create genetic diversity in the future generations. Michalin's sister had been one of those chosen to take part in the exchange, as had two of his cousins that had been as close to him as sisters.

Standing up I looked about the room for a moment. Glancing down to the couple I said, "Keep this to yourselves."

Both nodded, still locked in grief together.

I made my way from the propulsion

room, but as soon as I was out of sight I collapsed against a wall and slowly slid to my knees unmindful of both the dinginess of the floor and the wall I had my face pressed against. I didn't permit myself to cry. I had no more tears anyway. However I could beg.

“God.” I whispered over and over in search of peace.

Brokenly I asked, “How can we keep going on? I'm at my end God! Every year it gets harder, with less food, less available energy sources, and less will to keep on trying. Is it Your will that we fail and all of us turn into these monsters we justly slayed today? Monsters who were once our brothers! If it is to be so than curse me now to death, because I don't want to live to see it come to pass!”

In surprise then I did cry. Not for long though. It did no good to beg or cry, when God seemed to no longer be listening to my prayers.

Pulling myself up off the floor I wiped away all sign of emotion and moved on down the corridor back towards the bridge. Before going in I cleared my throat and made sure my usual face was on even though I felt like more of my sanity had been stripped away from me.

How much reasoning ability could one lose before insanity took hold? It was a question I debated often on, but the answer was the same, not today. I just couldn't afford it.

I sat down in the forward bridge chair

and stared fixatedly out into the depths of space. A soft hand came down to squeeze on top of mine.

Breaking my gaze away from the void of space I turned to see Briandy seated in the other console chair across from me. There were tears in her eyes.

In alarm I glanced around and saw the same evident emotions repeated elsewhere and if that wasn't enough Briandy said, "We know. Roquana saw her brother."

Swallowing I looked forward again as I tried to hold onto my composure.

"What are your orders Sir?"

I broke my silence, "Cast off the mooring lines and set a course for the fleet."

People moved about in the background to perform the

accomplishment of my words. What kept them going? It surely wasn't my words. If it was though we were all in deep trouble as I had nothing left to give.

In a falsely jovial sounding tone Briandy said, "You're in big trouble Mister. Just you wait until I show mother the bruise I no doubt have on my rear by now!"

She was trying to distract me. Despite knowing that I responded with, "Just so long as she's the only one you're showing your rear to."

She harrumphed, "Why can't I have some fun? I'm old enough. Why do you have to curtain me off from all the men? A man doesn't dare look at me twice for fear of you!"

I looked at her directly, "Exactly! If they can't get over the fear of what I

would do to them enough to ask for your hand in marriage then they don't deserve you. When the right man comes along I'll let you go."

"Is that a promise?"

"It is."

"Then I guess you'll just have to hang in there and keep putting one foot in front of the other, because I'm not going to let up on you about being faithful to what you just promised me."

I got the gist that we weren't talking about prospective husbands anymore. I squeezed her fingers briefly and she went back to the task of piloting the vessel through space.

She was a good kid. She was almost twenty years my junior though.

My mother and father had been surprised to say the least. Father had

died before Briandy had been born though. Ever since then I'd taken on the role of being a father to Briandy then of being a brother to her.

She hadn't been my only sibling, but she and mother were all I had left now. Grinding my teeth I tried to will myself to have the gumption to keep pushing myself and everyone around me, but all I felt was a deep seated tiredness.

Hoping nobody would notice I let my head rest back against the seat and I closed my eyes. Footsteps drew near and I was on the verge of opening my eyes, when Briandy's curt words stopped the source of the steps. The steps retreated.

I was so rarely without an interruption. Someone always seemed to be needing something. Didn't they see

how burnt out I was inside of being able to help anyone let alone myself?

They looked at me and acted as if they thought I had the ability to work miracles. I wished then for the billionth time that I had been born somewhere else in some other era far from these godforsaken stretches of space I had been cursed to spend my days endlessly journeying through.

Thankfully then all conscious thought faded from me.

Chapter Two

On the Brink

“Siringo?”

I looked around, but I was alone.
Where was I?

In space. Always in space.

Asteroids passed by me and I gave them no notice. I continued walking toward a distant star nebula.

“Over here.”

I turned to look at the asteroids drifting by.

“Who’s there?” I asked uncertainly.

Drawing closer to the asteroids

nearby I suddenly found myself walking on grass. Incredulously I looked around in wonder. It had been years since I'd seen grass.

Where was I? I looked up and with a start I had to dodge out of the way of a reptilian's bite at my head.

The reptilian, our ever present enemy, just watched me from above laughing in the sick looking manner of their kind. I.....

“Wake up bro!”

Startled I came awake and sat forward in the seat. Blinking away sleep I glanced at Briandy, who motioning to her monitor said, “We're back with the Fleet.”

Nodding I straightened and tried to come to grips with the present reality and leave my dream world behind, but

the dream was hard to shake.

“You okay?” Briandy asked.

I nodded. She glanced away from me and silently I asked, “What was that about God?”

There was no answer, but I sensed change was eminent. Would it be a good change or was I about to see more of my people die or even worse yet have a hand in killing them myself as I just had with the former crew of this ship?

I wanted to be away from the public eye. I made my way swiftly along the gangways of the massive flagship of our little flotilla of ships in space. The flagship was old but she was of Melungeon design just as my gun was.

Within her old patched hull she bore a precious cargo of over 3000 souls. The seven other vessels of the fleet rounded the number off at almost 5000. To my knowledge we were all that was left of the inhabitants of our world long since destroyed by the enemies that we faced even today.

When our homeworld had come under attack, ships had left the surface left and right filled with all the passengers they could hold. The decision had been made to form up into flotillas and travel in search of a new homeworld while remaining separate from each other in order that some might slip through the enemies clutches.

One by one the fleets had perished or been lost from all contact. I thought we were alone until we'd discovered the

Zanzi Squadron 10 years before. Now though I was quite certain of our aloneness.

Word was even now spreading like wildfire and cries of grief cut through the atmosphere of the mothership. I stopped walking.

Steeling myself I turned to look down into the gallery that lay two floors below me. People were gathering in ever-increasing numbers and as they did they looked up at me steadily, as if in expectation that I could have something to say to make the situation any better than it was.

“What do I tell them God?”

The imagery of my dream came back sharply to me. I could practically feel the grass beneath my feet. Looking down at my feet all I saw was hard metallic

gangplank. Looking to the crowd below I spoke out in a clear voice, “I want you to all prepare yourselves. I want you to prepare for finding a new home.”

“What? How can you say that? There is nowhere for us to call home in this sector and even if there was we’d be destroyed before we ever set foot on it!” Cried out an angry voice from the gathering of people below.

More murmuring broke out, until the hall below was filled with shouting people. My people were breaking apart at the seams right before my eyes.

Drawing my gun I aimed it so as to not hit any critical systems and fired it. Sparks shot off and the echo of the blast’s reverb was loud enough to the point that everyone stopped talking.

In a measured tone I said, “Such civil

disturbance I will not allow! For those of you unhappy with the way I've run things then you're free to come find me out and put an end to my time as leader, but be ready to shoot if you do. As for the rest of you I'm asking for a little more faith on your part. I know what we've been doing is unsustainable. I know! None of you has to tell me how bad things are! I know!!!”

My angered shout echoed loudly throughout the gallery. I never lost my temper like this, well at least not often or ever as bad as I felt myself warming up to.

I forced myself to say in a more reserved tone, “If our situation does not radically improve within a year and by that I mean the seeing of us all settled somewhere on solid ground you have my

permission to blast my head off my shoulders. I won't resist you.”

Silence followed my words and I watched as what dim hope there was all but faded from view within the eyes of my people.

“It's time for a change in strategies. Up till now our focus has been on surviving. Survival at all costs. We've all lost someone special to that cause of staying alive and remaining free. That time is over. Orwel I want you to start a course for the fleet toward the inner galaxy. We're not going to run anymore. Prepare our defensive systems accordingly across the fleet.”

I gazed into the faces below now full of surprise after such an order. The order was different. It was a change.

“My people, how it will go for us I do

not know, but this I can tell you. Continuing to fight to survive and the insanity it engenders is not something I have any wish to continue on doing. Today I killed members of our own people. People who lost their soul in order to survive above everything else. It's not worth it! I will never become like the soulless demons that even some of our own kind have morphed over into! It's time to fight for the freedom and peace we want and if need be it's time to die! There will be no more running!!!”

A chant of, “No more running.” Erupted from the gathered people below and was soon picked up by almost everyone. The people were of one accord again.

I caught Briandy looking at me with a sardonic smile splayed across her face.

She pointed at me and mouthed out, “You da man.” As it became apparent that I had once again somehow pulled out something positive from the ashes of a fire thought too long gone to revive.

Despite myself I had to fight against the urge to smile. I really didn’t understand it. I’d pretty much promised everyone certain death and they were showing more enthusiasm than they had for years about anything.

I saw Randelon and I gestured for him to come to my quarters. I turned away then and left as the people continued to cry out with exuberance.

Reaching my quarters I pushed the door open and started the process of cleaning up. Myst hopped off a bookshelf and came to brush around my ankles softly purring.

Sitting down wearily upon the bed I leaned forward to scratch behind her ears. Her rumbling increased as she pressed into my touch. Her sublime satisfaction with the moment had me smiling even as I felt slightly jealous as I wished I could experience even half the pleasure that she was currently exhibiting.

My door opened and Randelon quickly stepped in closing the door behind him. Randelon was the nervous sort by nature even as he was an absolute genius.

Glancing up to him I said, “Randelon the new ship we hauled in today.....”

He nodded eagerly with barely controlled agitation at having to be still for even a moment.

“I want you to go over it with a fine

tooth comb. On the outside it doesn't look like much or that noticeably different from other such vessel classes, but inside at its nuts and bolts it's like a racing sloop. It's built for speed far beyond its looks and almost everything about it inside is different than I've ever seen before. I want to know who built it and if it holds any other surprises worth knowing about."

"Iiiiiiiiahhhh do itttt!" Randelon stuttered out excitedly.

He grasped at the door handle behind him and ended up smacking face first into the wall instead as he turned to exit the room. He hurriedly corrected his course and got the door open.

"Randelon."

He looked back with eyes that seemed already focused on the task I had allotted

to him.

“Don’t forget to eat and take some time to sleep every once in a while. You’re looking to thin again.”

“Iiiiiiii nneverr sleeppp.”

“I know you don’t, but taking a moment to relax time to time won’t hurt you. I need you Randelon. You’re my main go to guy to help me keep all this worn out junk operating at full capacity.”

He smiled broadly, only to then smack his face off the doorframe as he made to go for an exit from the room a second time. The door clanged shut and I listened for a while to his excited mutterings to himself about what he would need to dissect the new ship apart.

I rubbed my hand across my eyes tiredly. I did not want to become like

Randelon, with half my brain to fried to know whether it was time to sleep or not.

My door opened again just as I was pulling my second boot off. It was my mother.

Smiling she came towards me, “Quite the speech my son, although I would have left out the part about blowing your head off in a year’s time.”

Chuckling I nodded. Coming to me she pulled my face up and kissed me on the forehead.

“I’m glad you’re back safe, son.”

I nodded tiredly relishing the feel of her hands massaging at the tensed up muscles of my shoulders. I let my head rest against her as she squeezed rhythmically.

Chuckling softly she said, “I am not

the one you should still have doing this. You need a woman my son.”

Oh no, not this conversation again!

Her hands felt so good though that I didn't want to cause an argument so wisely I stayed silent.

“Do you want me to go get one for you? I imagine there's an easy twenty or so of them that would be only too eager to come if I asked.”

I pulled my head back to look up at her, “Have you suddenly lost your morality like everyone else these days mother?”

Laughing she shook her head, “No, I just wanted to see if you were listening. Well mostly anyway.”

I ducked my head down again, but she pulled my head back up, “You're going to be forty in a few years dear. You need

to get started making a family!”

Looking into her well-meaning eyes I asked, “Why?”

“Why?” She asked startled before then asking, “Don’t you want children?”

Looking into her eyes I said as kindly as I could, “No. You know why? Because I don’t want to watch them die like you’ve had to do. I’m not married because I’m psyched out enough with trying to keep everyone else motivated without driving a woman nuts from having to put up with the stress I live under. Beyond that the woman I wanted chose a man from the Zanzi Squadron ten years ago instead. In fact I may have killed him today with this gun! I don’t know, but I do know that none of this matters because the second this fleet pulls clear of these asteroid fields we’ll

show up on every long-range scanner from here to our former homeworld on the other side of the galaxy! Then we'll all die, but at least then it will all be over. Having a woman in my bed and a child to call my own are the last things on my mind right now!"

She was crying and hating myself more than I already did I stood up and moved away as far in the room from her as I could. I pressed my face to the wall waiting for her to leave as I felt unable to deal with any situation that involved emotions right now.

I felt her arms come around me and haltingly I said, "I'm sorry mom. I....."

"Shhhh." She soothed against my back and after a silent moment she said, "I'm the one who is sorry. I truly do know what you're going through son. I

watched your father suffer for years as it seemed like little bits of his soul were cut away with the loss of more and more of our people. I truly do understand it's just that I don't want it to happen to you like I saw it happen to him.”

I turned from the wall and hugged her to me.

Whispering against me she asked, “When did you lose your faith my son?”

“This morning.” I mumbled into her hair, as I remembered for a moment the comfort she had been to me as a little boy, when the fleet was under attack from enemy ships.

Those days were long gone now. As it was we really no longer possessed the ability to make a fight of it. All we could do and had done for going on the past twenty years was run.

Mother pulled back and meeting her gaze I witnessed all her motherly zeal come to the forefront as she said, “You may think God has forsaken you, but I know He hasn’t. You’re going to find that out for yourself. Now get some rest, you look awful.”

“Thanks.” I said.

She smiled and patted me on the cheek before going to the door. Turning back she said, “You did the right thing today. The time to run from whatever our fate will be is over. It’s time to begin something new. Your father would be very proud of you, even as I am. Sweet dreams my son.”

She closed the door after her and tiredly I went and laid down on my bed. Myst hopped up beside me and idly I stroked at her fur as I thought over what

I'd said to the people today.

I'd shocked myself by saying what our new strategy would be. I had no way of explaining it other than the desire to step onto a grassed plain again had seemed to overwhelm all conscious thought to propose to do otherwise. For better or worse we were committed to the new course at hand.

Chapter Three

The Unexpected

Endless grass. Whatever did it all mean?

Shaking. The grass was shaking. I was shaking!

With a start I reared up from the bed with my pistol armed and ready as my other hand gripped my would-be assailant about the neck.

“Ittt’s meee!!!” Randelon managed to choke out past the grip of my hand about his throat.

I let go and let the pistol fall to the

bed. The room was dark. I must have been out for a while.

“Randelon how many times have I told you to knock before you enter?”

“Iiiii diiid knock. Ittt’s importantt!”

In the dark gloom of the room I glanced over Randelon’s barely suppressed manic energy which seemed to be in ever abundant supply when he was excited about something. Coming to full awareness I said, “Tell me!” As some measure of his excitement wore off onto me in terms of general enthusiasm.

“Well, to start, it was as you said. The ship’s different to put it mildly.”

It was always like this with Randelon. Once he got on point about something to do with work his stutter went completely away as if it had never existed. Social interaction outside of work talk was

when he came across to most as mentally challenged. I knew better though.

I listened on as Randelon rattled on about the many improvements and modifications over more contemporary vessel models and the such. To a large extent I was already aware of the jist of what he was telling me, but I'd found it best to just let Randelon tell his story to completion before interjecting comments or questions.

“..... and you know what then? I actually discovered in a subroot menu down a reverse back layering that the ship has a completely autonomous navigation control system that flies under the radar unsuspected by anyone not aware of the hidden protocol. It was a thing of luck even by my standards that I found it. I just couldn't see why so much

power was being diverted to a submenu protocol tasked as a third swing maintenance backup system, then when I found out the hidden guidance system and that it had a second masked locator beacon it all made sense.”

“What!!!” I exclaimed.

Randelon tried to pull back, but my hands suddenly gripped the front of his shirt and pulled him toward me as I savagely asked, “Are you telling me that ship has an active locator beacon?”

“Yes, but it’s not what you think!”
Randelon squeaked out hurriedly.

I let go of him, “Explain.”

“Well it’s not a typical broadcast kind of beacon, instead it’s a receptor for an ultralow frequency modulator. If it has any discernible signal to be picked up by radar it would be a very weak one at

best. It's more of a navigational aid than a proximity sensor."

"I don't understand. Can you please dumb it down for me a little Randelon?"

Randelon sighed, "As best as I can tell it's part of a redundancy program linked with the subset navigation system that seems to be triggered to go off if it senses no human occupation onboard."

"You're saying should the ship's crew suddenly end up missing or dead which means there's no life signature contacts being recorded, the ship then automatically sets a prescribed course and returns to a preset location?"

Randelon nodded his head vigorously and added, "It's pretty ingenious if you ask me."

"Yes it is." I affirmed, as my mind ran with all the possibilities.

“Did you find any indication of how long that ship has been out of its original owners hands?”

“Yes actually. Just a little over two years, because that’s when the orderly maintenance schedules abruptly stopped and were rarely, make that practically never, run again. And before you ask the original builders were undoubtedly human. I found that out by analyzing the life-support systems and seeing what the specifications called for in terms of ideal support parameters for sustaining life. Do you know what this means Siringo?” Randelon finished with excitedly.

“Yes I think I do.”

Randelon went on as if I hadn’t spoken, “Such a ship of newer construction, but made to appear old on

the outside speaks of intelligent culture and one that has the resources to build ships and not just any ships but advanced ships!”

I stood up and walked around the room as my own excitement level rose higher and higher.

“Can you backtrack through the code to see where the recovery location the ship will head for on autopilot is?”

“Not easily. The code is masterfully scrambled in order to prevent that from happening. If I had a few months I.....”

I waved away his words with my hand. I didn't have months.

“However I could engineer it so that the life-support sensors wouldn't pick up on a body heat signature scan.”

I stopped pacing to give him a long stare. Decision made I said, “Do it, but

don't engage it until I say so. Get everything you might need to switch that sensor off-line, while I gather together a crew. I.....”

The alarm in my room went off violently and I ran for the door shirtless and without my boots on. Randelon wasn't far behind me as I made the short run from my quarters to the command-and-control center of the mothership.

Striding into the command center I was pleased to see all the late watch present and managing their stations with calmness. To say we'd had a lot of experience with emergency situations occurring over the years was to put it mildly, but just the same it was good to see training in action.

“Reptilians or Asteroid Corsairs?” I called out praying that it would be the

latter and not the former.

“Neither Sir. In fact we’re not quite sure what’s going on Sir. We’re receiving an activation alert of the Honpallian Array. We.....we’ve never had an alert from it before. It links from from.....”

“From the surface of Soluranami, our old homeworld.” I completed for the stammering officer of the watch as I turned to an unused corner of the control room.

The receiving station for the Honpallian Array had been located here all these years completely vacant of life as the homeworld it linked to was far gone in terms of ever being linked to again. Now however it was brightly lit up with flashing icons and lights.

The lights of the display glowed

brightly through the dust of countless years of neglect. I was ashamed to have to ask, but I simply didn't know much about the system or how it worked, "How does it work?"

"We're looking that up now, Sir. Fridan have you got it yet?"

"Yes, I've read through its operational procedure. It works much like our ship to ship personnel transporter only it's long-distance and requires a lot of power to make a successful matter transfer bridge."

"How much power?" I asked.

"All we have Sir and then I'm not sure if it's enough." Fridan responded with.

I glanced to Randelon and reading my mind he scurried away presumably to find me the extra power I might need.

“Sir you’re not possibly thinking about engaging the portal are you?” The on-duty officer inquired worriedly.

Looking to her I saw that the sentiment on her face was largely echoed by the rest of the on-duty staff. Stepping further into the room I leaned back against a console and crossing my arms across my bare chest I said, “Let me see if I can put it in perspective for you. Presently we are on a course headed towards the inner area of the galaxy. In five days’ time we will pull free of these asteroid fields. When that happens we will be visible on every long range scanner of both friend and foe, mostly foe I might add. Why are we doing that? Well because of several factors namely we don’t have enough food, spare parts, energy, morale and so on to keep living as we have done for

years on end. So to offset all that we have out of the blue a situation wherein we are contacted through a system only operable upon the surface of our former homeworld. I'm not going to pass up what could be the very news we have fought and survived so long for."

"But what if it's a trick? What if it's the reptilians' are playing a head game with us?"

"It's a risk we're just going to have to take. I'm sorry, but as you know there's no easy way of surviving the odds we're faced with. We've never had much of a chance, but for the first time in, since ever I guess, things are looking up. Now all of you to your stations and go ahead and alert other primary staff members in case this does blowback on us negatively."

Those within the room turned away to their assorted tasks even as Randolen popped back into the control center.

Fridan looked at his screen readout as an alert beeped, “We have 20% more power than before.” He breathed out mystified, as his eyes switched to Randolen in silent question. Randolen remained silent as to how he had acquired the extra power.

It wasn't that Randolen wasn't the type to share notes, but it was simply often too complex for the minds of most to comprehend exactly what it was that Randolen did to make things work better for him than they appeared to do for anybody else. As a matter of principle he had long since given up trying to explain the complexities of what he did to keep the fleet functioning at high-

capacity.

“Do we have enough power to make the transfer?” I asked.

Fridan nodded his head, “Just enough, that is if nothing goes wrong.”

Chuckling I said, “I’m sure that nothing could possibly go wrong. Why that system is the most unused piece of apparatus on this old bucket that there could be. It’s a miracle we didn’t part it out years ago in order to repair other systems. Well now I think it’s time that we push the button or whatever it is you do and let’s see the sparks fly!” I said rubbing my hands together with barely suppressed excitement.

People were looking at me strangely, but hey, so what. I was having my first run of good luck in years and I wasn’t going to deny myself from enjoying

every last second of it. I'd probably be dead anyway in about five days, but then again maybe not.

Immediately upon giving the order the flagship began to shudder and the lights started flickering.

“Sir?” The officer of the watch called out frantically.

“We'll ride it out.” I said gripping a hold of the railing behind me. The shuddering got worse and then the lights went out. Maybe this hadn't been such a good idea after all.

At least the shuddering had stopped. Someone was coughing and then there was a voice in a language not my own. I pulled my pistol and leveled it off in the darkness toward the source of the voice.

“Get some lights on in here now!!!”

I no sooner spoke then the lights

snapped back on. There before me not twenty feet away stood a man of average height and features, but who was dressed quite differently than us.

He stared down the barrel of my gun, which was only one of several that were pointed at him. He coughed again and I watched a bead of sweat roll down his face.

I lowered my weapon slightly and seeming to break free of his trance he held up a little black book and rifled through it busily. He seemed to read something and then looking up at me he said, "I've come in search of remnants of Soluranami. Are you of that people?"

He pronounced the words poorly, but they were at least recognizable enough to decipher what he'd said. Nodding I said, "We are and who might you be?"

Pointing to himself he said, “My name is Edgar and I’m at your service.”

“Okay Edgar, why are you here and how did you come from the surface of Soluranami?”

Edgar glanced at his book and then with a pained look said, “Repeat please.”

I did so patiently and nodding he said, “Your homeworld has been restored by remnants of your people.”

Exclamations of excitement broke out all around the control room. All the power sticks had long since been lowered, as the man before us was clearly not a threat.

Though I felt elation at his words there was something about his demeanor that said all was not well. Holding up a hand I silenced the jibber jabber taking

place all around the command center and then posed the question, “Why have you come?” Once more to our unexpected visitor from the other end of the galaxy.

“We need help! An alliance of dark forces has been formed against us and I fear that there’s not much time left to us if something doesn’t radically change. What information we have been able to glean about the enemy’s plans seems to allude to the fact that they intend to destroy the planet entirely this time.”

“Who is ‘they’?” I clarified.

“Hybrids of human and animal and some other reptile like beings.”

Everyone’s jibber jabber of excitement of a moment ago was long since gone. It was as if everyone had been given the ultimate present only to then have it stolen out from their hands

by the giver and smashed to pieces before them.

“Do you know how they plan on destroying the planet?” I asked.

“Bombardment from space until they manage to penetrate the core of the planet. Once that happens the chain reactions will likely do the rest.”

Nodding I said, “They’ll steer asteroids into colliding with the surface too.”

The stranger turned his head to the side, “How do you know that?”

Grimly I said, “Because I’ve seen it done before when a world’s defenses promised to put up too much of a resistance. Our world won’t be the first such victim. Out here in the Far Quarter there were once seventeen free worlds. Now they’re all blown apart because

they refused to submit to demon overlords. Tell me what it is you think we can do to help?”

The man shrugged worriedly and looking around said, “You won’t help us?”

Looking down with a sigh I then glanced back up to say, “We are in need of help ourselves. What you ask of us is impossible. Although we would all gladly die in defense of our world we would most likely be picked off long before we reached our homeworld. As it is anyway at top speed it would still take us several years of uninterrupted travel to get there. I’m sorry. As it is, I doubt that we even have the power supply to send you back.”

Edgar gloomily nodded and stepping to the side sat down on a bench, “It was

a wild hope anyway.”

He put his head in his hands and became silent. I stared at him a moment longer before I stared at Randolen piercingly.

He shifted uncomfortably and then as he often did he read what I was thinking.

“Ohhhh n-n-n-oooo! N-o-o-o-o! He repeated stutteringly as he shook his head negatively back-and-forth.

“Randolen it’s not a request. It’s an order.”

Still shaking his head he quivered out, “Ssshhoouldd never tolddd youuu my my my idea-ah!”

Slowly I approached him and put my hands on his thin shoulders. He was still muttering and shaking his head no. He wouldn’t meet my gaze and even now tears were falling fast down his sunken

in cheeks.

In desperation he whined, “I I I kill everyboddyyy!!!”

Stooping down I looked him in the face and forcefully said, “No you won’t! Randolen it’s the only way and I believe that with you and our people working together we can do it, but it’s going to take faith. Admittedly my faith walk has been pretty shaky as of late, but never did I think to receive such news of our planet’s survival as we just have. That is a miracle even as it’s a miracle that we have managed to survive all these years given what we’ve been up against and had to work with. God has been faithful even as I have been weak, but I don’t have to linger on in that state of weakness. I’m asking for another miracle and I’m believing it is going to

be granted to us. We will make it back to our home and together we will walk on the ground of our common ancestry. We will Randolen and genius that you are, you are going to play a major role in this effort and be remembered for years to come because of it!”

Randolen stared at me teary-eyed, but I saw the subtle firming of his chin as he asked, “The people? We-we will need extra shippsss.”

“I know. Can Sam rewire the sensors to not read body signatures in the new ship?”

He nodded and patting him on the back I turned to look at the room of gawking onlookers.

“Okay everyone here’s the deal. I have to leave to procure us more ships and while I’m gone everyone and I mean

everyone is going to listen and do to the very best of their ability whatever and everything this man says to do. If you don't I swear I'll blow your head off myself. Got it?"

No one spoke and putting my arm around Randolen's shaking shoulders I began to pray out loud, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry I forgot just who you are Jesus. Please help this man do the impossible even as You have reminded me that the impossible is nothing for You to manage time and time again. Help me find the help that we need. Help us survive, but what's more than that I pray that you would help us to overcome and be free once more to walk on a world of Your creation and view from afar the far reaches of space where we have been forced to roam endlessly these many

long years. I ask these things with all my heart even as I believe that You will grant them and let them come to pass for yet I have faith that You are a God that answers prayers.”

I let go of Randolen and without another glance to the others I headed from the room. Gesturing behind me to the newcomer I said, “You’re with me Edgar.”

The man hurriedly stood up and came up along beside me and Briandy, who had appeared from somewhere else. I didn’t miss the speculative look that Briandy gave the newcomer across my front as I walked between the two.

I didn’t know the man, but I liked what I could sense about him. He suddenly asked, “How is it that you know the Creator’s Son and what He did

for all mankind that you can call Him by name without ever having been on Earth?”

“Is that where you are from?” I asked with real interest.

He nodded.

“Well Edgar the Creator’s plan for all creation has forever been written in the stars. The problem nowadays is that there are few who yet know how to read what is there to be seen, but regardless of that, creation continues to testify of the truth. One has only to look.”

“Fascinating.” Edgar breathed out.

“Very.” Briandy commented, only her comment had nothing to do with the conversation at hand. I felt pity for this newcomer once from Earth, the first world, the birthplace of all humankind. It was clear that my sister had her sights

set for exotic game.

“Tell me Edgar are you a believing man in the Creator and His Son?”

“I’ve always thought so, but truly I didn’t know God until a few years back, when I journeyed off world with one of your people. His faith has redefined for me what my relationship with God should look like and I’m gladly changed from who I used to be. You remind me a lot of my friend.”

I glanced to the side at him. I liked the man. Glancing over to Briandy I found her watching me raptly and I nodded my consent.

Her face split apart into a huge grin as I said, “Take him on ahead to the new ship and see to his needs dear sister.”

“Aye aye Captain!” She said perhaps sounding the most enthusiastic I’d ever

heard her in response to an order of mine.

Poor Edgar. I watched her hustle him off and shook my head at the incongruity of it all. Her mind was full of romance and the excitement of possible love, while the world around was threatened by death on all sides. Truly love is blind.

Stepping into my quarters I threw some fresh clothes on and snapped on my extra gun. Myst looked at me steadily from the bed. All of a sudden she jumped down and hurrying to the door she turned her head from it to look at me expectantly.

“Why not? You’ll just get lost if you stay here. This place isn’t going to be home to us much longer as it is.” I scooped her up in my arms and hurried

on to the newly acquired ship as I continued to live and breathe on a prayer that I wasn't making the worst mistake of a man in over five generations of my family.

Randolen looked away from the departed form of his captain and only true friend in the galaxy to the sea of expectant faces before him. He knew that most of them thought of him as someone with some screws loose and admittedly he felt like that right now, but as Siringo had encouraged him many times he knew that he was not crazy.

He possessed a sound mind given to him by his Creator and so tamping down all the whispered accusations of

delinquency and self-doubts he spoke aloud without the barest hint of his usual stammer, “We have to get across the galaxy very quickly. The only way to do that is to deconstruct this mothership we’ve all called home for far too long and make a matter energy bridge gate.”

A hand raised. It was Fridan.

“Yes?”

“How do we manage to power such a gate as to allow entire ships to pass through?”

“By engaging a thermal nuclear fission of the aft engines energy cores set in juxtaposition to the forward engines which will be set in an inverted motion which will in turn drive the power outlet of the fission in the aft into making the gate sustainable for the duration of the time we need to transverse the entire

galaxy within approximately three or four days give or take a few. The trick will be in keeping the balance of energy transfer stable, which is why we'll need to create a hull of enforced tricanite steel that will enclose the fission event, which will occur in a vacuum while simultaneously being cooled by liquid nitrogen being sprayed against the hull as it heats up. All this is of course just how we will control the flow of energy. The actual energy for the event will be provided by absorbing and harnessing the free energy present within each cubic foot of space around us.”

The room filled with technicians, officers, and engineers stared at the man, who many of them had often made fun of behind his back, as if seeing an entirely different individual.

The officer of the watch asked, “Has anything like this been done before?”

“No. It requires an entirely new science that hasn’t been taught to any of you, as to my knowledge I am the only one who knows it, at least as far as I’m aware. I’ll do my best to convey the mechanics of it to you, but in general you’re going to have to take everything I tell you on faith that it will work, whether you understand it or not. Now first things first. People need to be evacuated to the outlying ships of the squadron. Make sure all portable generators are dispersed throughout the fleet in order to bolster the life-support systems. Military people I need you to see to that as well as the formation of demolition crews both interior and some suited up for exterior work. We will use

the fighters and their laser functions to carve off what we need of the mothership's structure to construct the matter bridge gate. Get to it. Engineers I need you to see to the conversion of two of our bombers into magnetized grapplers in order to arrange the pieces of the gate together into a circular synchronicity. You also need to formulate a powerful electronic magnetic array that will arch across the hull of the fission chamber in order to hold the gate together and give the proper alignment to fit even the biggest of our support craft. Can you head that up Thangi?"

A baldheaded engineer swallowed before commenting, "I can try."

"That's all we can all do. I offer no guarantees that this will work, but if we

all try then none of us has anything to be ashamed of, if these truly are our last days of life. Now get to it. Technicians you're with me. We'll need the laser apparatus from one of the fighters made portable to be better able to cut through the aft engine housing to free them up for realignment within the steel hull of the matter bridge which we will have to smelt from scratch.”

On and on seemingly the least of all those in terms of widely held esteem, on board the mothership Tartran, listed off orders, which as a group of listeners the rest of the crew followed to the full completion of as they began to rip apart and salvage parts of the ship they had called home for almost two centuries.

Chapter Four

Shoot!!!

I sat still as from a dead stop the ship began to pick up speed. I glanced back to Sam and gave her a thumbs up for successfully impairing the ship's life sign detector sensors.

The panels before me were dark and devoid of any clues as to where the probable destination might be. We really were flying blind.

The ship entered hyper travel smoothly and began to accelerate. Briandy and I shared a glance. This ship

was far quicker than any ship in our fleet could boast of being.

Getting up I went back to sit down beside Edgar at the rear of the control room. He glanced at me and feeling talkative I asked, "So tell me Edgar how did you come to be so far from Earth?"

He smiled, "An overly obsessive desire to experience adventure and see new sights, which I certainly have done so!"

Smiling I nodded. The man's command of our language grew stronger and stronger with each passing conversation I had with him.

"You are not of our blood. Why did you risk your life so to journey to an uncertain end on behalf of those who are not your people?"

Edgar shrugged, "Consider me a

stranger that's been grafted into the family so to speak. Your homeworld has become my home and I'm fully willing to die to preserve the lives of those who now call it home along with me. It was an easy decision to come. However the journey here and then the quite hostile reception at first had me wondering about my decision, now however I see it was the right thing to do."

I nodded, "That took a lot of courage on your part, faith as well. Welcome to the family Edgar." I said, as I extended my hand to him.

He shook it and I got back up to head back to my seat at the nose of the craft. Scarcely had I sat down then the seat across from me occupied by Briandy was vacated.

With a quick backward glance I

confirmed that Edgar looked as pleased to see Briandy sitting down beside him, as she seemed to be just to be in the presence of this stranger from Earth. Perhaps they would have a future together. Time would tell.

Propping my feet up I idly watched our progress through the galaxy as it swiftly passed by. Strangely enough we weren't headed toward the interior of the galaxy. That much I could discern. From all appearances our automated journey was taking us deeper into the Far Quarter.

I leaned my head back and closed my eyes. I wasn't sleeping though. Praying is all I did for hours on end.

Briandy stirred in the opposing console chair. Grumpily she sat up and stretched her back before then coming to full alertness, “We aren’t in hyper travel anymore!”

“No.” I commented reservedly from my seat.

It had been two days since we had started out from the mothership. We were deep in a sector of the Far Quarter that I had avoided whenever possible and of which I had only skirted along its edges a half dozen times in my entire life.

The reticence to return here was in part because of the first time I had encountered this stretch of desolate space. Sam came to stand beside me as asteroids in ever-increasing size drifted by the outside hull of the ship.

She turned her head to regard me worriedly, “Captain isn’t this the sector of space where your father broke away from the fleet to slow down some reptilian cruisers?”

“One and the same.” I responded with grimly, as my mind transferred back in time to that fateful day, when I had found myself thrust into the position of leadership. It had not been a good time.

How fitting to be headed back here of all places to find an answer that I hoped would help and not kill my people. Briandy was breathing hard and finally not able to take it any longer she said, “Shouldn’t we switch on the navigation and steer clear of these asteroids dead ahead?”

“Don’t touch anything!” I said firmly.

She swallowed her objections away

with a rare show of self-restraint and sat still as three enormous mountains of rock loomed closer and closer.

It was like a game of dare. Who would blink first though?

In the last few moments before impact the ship heeled over and sped upward unexpectedly. Even more unexpected was the sight of the three giant mountains of rock that had begun to abruptly spin and move toward each other, along with a host of smaller ones.

“Incredible!” Edgar breathed out.

Incredible it truly was I silently acknowledged, as I watched the asteroid rocks form together into one mass with pinpoint precision. Why hadn't I come up with an idea like this?

The angular pieces of asteroid rock coalesced into one giant rocky looking

ball. There were several deep channels left exposed in the surface crust and into one such channel the ship steered its way into.

Briandy kept glancing at me, as if begging me to tell her to resume control of the ship, but I remained silent.

It was dark as very little reflected starlight made its way into this interior cavern, which had been created but moments before. There in the darkness ahead a bright glow of color illuminated the cavern suddenly as a rocky portal opened with a shimmering haze in the cavern wall just ahead.

Moving very slowly the ship entered through the portal. I got up and made my way to the primary hatch.

The skeleton crew I had brought along with me hung about me in expectation of

not sure what. This was going to be no raid into another ship as one of our rehearsed snatch and grabs. This mission would depend entirely upon diplomacy and faith.

The ship settled and I nodded to Sam. She engaged the hatch release and with a hiss of expressed air the ramp lowered.

I walked down it and out into the expansive hanger bay that existed entirely hidden within the confines of this asteroid. Such an ingenious and superlative creation of manmade ingenuity.

Steam hissed from a canopy of overhanging pipes and I walked out into the expansive theater of another people's best response to the need to survive at all costs. It appeared to all the world that we were alone, but I knew that

wasn't the case.

I could feel watching eyes upon me. Motioning my small party to a stop I stepped forward several more steps to then stand motionless in expectation of whatever the hidden watchers intended for us. We were entirely at their mercy.

Out of a cloud of steam off to my left came a voice rich with both hostility and the unmistakableness of a female confident in her ability to dominate, "Tell me why we shouldn't kill you right here and now?"

Turning my head toward the voice resonating from the steam off to my left I shrugged and said, "No reason really. Unless that is if you'd like to exchange your cozy home here for someone else with a sky overhead and the feel of grass beneath your feet. Now if that is the case

then you have every reason not to pull the trigger.”

I waited saying nothing more.

“What could you Melungeon’s possess knowledge of that we could possibly want to know about? Your homeworld has gone the way of ours long since our own was taken from us.”

“A correction if I may. Our homeworld is surprisingly resurgent, while if I don’t miss my guess, yours is but made of the leftover pieces of this cracked shell that you’ve managed to cobble together and create a place where life can thrive where there should be none. Whether you gun us down now or not may I first say how deeply impressed I am with your people’s will to survive.”

Movement issued forth from the steam

and out walked the form of a woman that was a match to the voice that had commanded my attention as few women ever had. My eyes drifted admiringly over the form of a woman every bit the survivor that I myself was.

My eyes lingered on her face framed by curly blonde hair and the single eye that gazed at me commandingly. The leather eyepatch that blocked her other eye off from view only accentuated the levels that this woman was willing to go to in order to survive.

I placed her age as to being somewhere in her mid-30s and I found myself increasingly hopeful not to be gunned down by her. Her head shifted to the one side as she studied me with the same confidence that her voice had reflected earlier.

Her face shifted into a smile as white teeth flashed in a mercurial gesture that was hard to read even as it was beautiful to behold, “Well well well if it isn’t Captain Siringo himself. The intrepid leader of a lost squadron of souls without a home to call their own. In answer to your last question, you may. Now however if you’re thinking of taking our home from us then you’d better do some thinking on that, because we aren’t planning on going anywhere.”

Smiling myself I said, “A pity. I’d rather hoped that you’d share my world with me. All are welcome.”

Her gaze turned calculating and her one blue eye bore into me with ice chipping intensity. She gestured with one hand toward the steamy corridor she’d come through and obediently I stepped

forward toward it.

My small group made to follow, but she raising a hand in their direction said, “You stay.”

They stayed and I walked on alone into the steam. I felt her draw close to me and then the feel of both of my guns being lifted away from me. I made no move to resist. In fact I would’ve handed them to her if she had but asked.

I stepped clear of the steam to find myself in a corridor that led upwards on a slight grade. Her voice echoed of curiosity from just behind me, “This gun still works?”

“It’s an off and on relationship. I’ve found the need to give it a good bash from time to time.”

She chuckled and looking back to her I said, “Keep it if you like.”

“How generous of you. Pray tell how do you then intend to protect yourself if you give your weapons away so easily?” She asked somewhat coquettishly.

“Those?” I asked self-deprecatingly before adding, “They only make killing expedient. I need nothing more than these two hands to do my killing with if need be.”

“Yes, your people are very adept at killing I’ve come to find. So nice of you to return to us what is ours, but pray tell where is our ship’s crew? Have you kept them prisoner back at fleet headquarters as an added insurance that we let you go?”

“I didn’t come here to play with words and I have very little doubt that you don’t already know what happened to your crew. The guns you now hold did

their part to bring justice for the fate of your lost crew. As to the ship as you said it is yours. I make no claims to it, if I had I wouldn't have come.”

“Which indeed begs the question of exactly why you did come? I hope you're not going to repeat your story about a resurgent world free from the dangers of our shared enemies.”

“I came in hopes of forming an alliance. An alliance based on something we both desperately need.”

“And what is that?” She asked sounding openly sarcastic.

“Hope.” I replied with simply.

She remained silent. Our journey was at an end as the hallway we were in gave way to an expansive gallery below us. It was rather like being back on my own mothership. In fact it was eerily

similar in more than one way.

I glanced to her and she gestured to the left. I made my way along the railing as I became the intense subject of hundreds of pairs of eyes from those watching below.

“Stop and enter the door to your left.”

I did so and found myself within a cabin which matched my own almost perfectly. Turning about I regarded her piercingly as she closed the door behind her.

Watching me speculatively she asked, “Putting it all together are we?”

“This is a Melungeon mother class ship!” I exclaimed.

“Partly yes. In approximation it’s only half of one. We cut away what we didn’t need and made use of the extra parts elsewhere.”

“How do you hold all the outer rocks together in order to form this shell of ambiguity?”

“The asteroids are highly magnetized. With the proper use of electromagnets we can get them to do pretty much anything we want them to. We can even use their inherent magnetism to propel them at high speed should we need to. Please have a seat.” She said gesturing to one of two chairs.

I sat down and once more my back was to her. Needing to know I asked, “What happened to the previous owners of this ship?”

There was a telling pause before she spoke softly from surprisingly close behind me, “They lost all hope.”

My one gun slid down my front to land in my lap. She then made her way

around my chair to sit down in the chair across from my own.

She still held my older relic of a gun and by a way of explanation she cattily said, "I think I'll hold onto this. I like old things."

I nodded and looked down to the gun in my lap. I was finding the moment rather difficult to navigate.

Here I was in a ship such as the one I had called home all my life. Once a captain had ruled over a band of my people from this very room, until at some point things had gone wrong.

Looking up I tried to retain some measure of composure in my faceoff with this confident woman, who seemed to be the leader of her people even as I was the leader of mine. Meeting her gaze I found no way of restoring the moment

by putting forth an illusion of confident strength so looking back down to my lap I found myself asking before I could think better of it, “Do you ever find it hard as a leader to inspire others to keep going on in a fight that never stops?”

“Every day.” Came her softly spoken reply.

Looking up I witnessed some of the hardened persona that this woman manifested seemingly absent if but for only a moment. Nodding I looked back down and said, “Well I’ve reached a point of no return. I’m committing everything toward one end all action. The will to go on and continue surviving out here doesn’t work for me anymore. It just so happens however that there are factors at play which cause me to believe my actions could prove

successful in the long run. That said however my success is dependent on, among other things, what you decide to do right now. My offer to you and your people is real. My world does exist, but it is under threat of soon being nothing more than these spare rocks you have cobbled together in order to build a sanctuary hidden from view.”

I stopped talking as the enormity of what I was asking a complete stranger to undertake doing simply became too great for me to bear expressing my extreme need for help any further.

“So what would an alliance with you entail that we do for you?” She inquired leadingly.

Meeting her one eyed gaze I said, “Become one with my people and share in our fate whether it is to extinction or

to the future that we've all hoped for. I can promise nothing more other than the chance at something better for both our peoples."

"Wow! You don't mince your words do you?" She exclaimed before it was her turn to look away.

A long moment passed. The intense radiance of her one blue eye came back to mine, "My people would never go for it. We have managed to cobble together as you put it an existence, while not very glamorous, it has at least served us well. I can certainly understand why you have at long last chosen to abandon your fight for survival, but please do not think we are possessed of the same insanity that has befallen you. Consider your offer rejected." She finished with harshly.

I gazed steadily into her one eye and

said, “That means you need to kill me doesn’t it.”

“Yes it does. I’m truly sorry that it has to come to this.”

Without another word she lifted my gun and centered it on me and pulled the trigger. The gun didn’t fire.

In alarm she glanced down to it and I saw the defective red glow of its power indicator showing it had short-circuited its power supply yet again. All the criticism I’d received for holding on to that old relic was gone in a heartbeat even as my own heart was still beating within my chest.

I lifted the gun in my lap and brought it to bear upon her. She breathed in deeply, but remained still as her features remained tightly controlled. She still had a side arm, but seated as she was there

was no way she could ever get to it in time and she knew it. The girl had guts that much I would give her.

“Stand up.” I said softly.

Obediently she did so. I didn't miss the way her right hand twitched to go for her weapon strapped to her hip. Her problem however though was that her weapon was located on her left hip on the side that she still held my useless gun with. To drop my gun to the floor was to initiate the blast of my weapon ending her life.

“Turn around.” I commanded just as conversationally as I had when I'd told her to stand up.

Her eye flashed brilliantly with alarm. Slowly she did as I asked, but not before I saw her stiff composure begin to crack up.

“Toss my gun into the chair followed along by your own.”

My gun plopped onto the cushions of the chair and slowly she drew her own out of its holster. She held her gun down low along her side as I sat locked in stillness waiting out the long moment patiently waiting to see what her next move to kill me would be.

She tossed her weapon forward and it clinked off my old relic of a weapon. She was breathing hard now and I very much doubted it that this woman had ever found herself in such a powerless state as she was in now.

“Back up towards me, until I tell you to stop.” I said keeping my voice cool and detached sounding.

She was slow to respond, but her legs began to move to accomplish my order

after a long moment of indecision.

“Stop.”

She stopped.

I stood up and at the sound of my rising she visibly flinched and for a moment seemed about to turn around. She caught herself though and remained facing forward although now that she was close I could see that she was shaking.

Coldly I said, “Kneel.”

She remained standing as if locked in place. Putting one hand on her shoulder I pressed down even as I pushed my foot into the back of her one knee. Her leg crumpled and her other leg was overwhelmed by my down pressure and she crashed down onto her knees.

She was ready to fight for survival then, but the cold steel of my gun muzzle

pressed hard against the back of her neck quelled all resistive movement on her part. Her breathing was hard and emotional and I could still feel her shaking beneath my hand.

Glancing around to the side I didn't miss the track of a tear making its way down her porcelain cheek.

“You think I'm a real bastard right now don't you?” I asked leadingly.

“Yes!” She hissed back in response.

I pressed cruelly with the barrel of my gun and under the force of my pressure she was leaned forward until she had to brace herself with her hands to the floor to keep from falling flat on her face.

Coldly I asked, “What's your name?”

“Why?”

“Name!” I repeated harshly, as I pressed the gun hard against the back of

her neck.

With an emotional cry she broke out with, “Lathartha!”

I nodded my head and backed off on the pressure I was exerting somewhat. Kneeling down myself I switched my gun from the back of her neck to being pressed under her chin even as with my free hand I gripped a hold of her blonde hair done up in a bun on the back of her head by which I pulled her head back.

The intensity of her eye was no longer a match for mine as I point blankly said into her face, “I very well may be a bastard, but at least I haven’t lost the decency of my humanity as you have! Is your continued quest to go on surviving really worth all that you’ve given up?” I stated brutally, as I gave her a hard shake that probably hurt more than I had

intended, but the desperation of my situation had rather unglued me from my normal ability to be self-controlled with my emotions.

The look on her face was one of starkness and loss and letting her hair go I rose up and stepping to the chair she had occupied I picked up my old gun, which I then banged off the chair arm savagely. The power level switched back to green and turning back to her still kneeling on the floor I tossed it at her.

The gun clattered up against her knees and dumbly she looked down at it as I stated harshly, “There it will work now! Well what are you waiting for? Pick it up and shoot!!!”

Her hands didn't move. Tossing my own gun into the chair beside me I

stepped forward to crash down to my own knees before her so hard that the room shook slightly.

Picking my gun up I savagely pressed it into her hands. Making her resisting fingers form around the handle I pressed the barrel of the gun into my stomach even as I saw her head begin to shake no.

“Well go on! You’re the one who wants to survive so much so pull the trigger! Finish it!!!” I screamed into her face that was full of raw emotion now.

“No!!!” She screamed out trying to pull her hands free of the gun that I held them clamped to.

“Why not?” I screamed into her face.

“Because I don’t want to be who I’ve become!!!” She screamed out in a sob that sounded as if it had been wrenched

from the farthest depths of her soul.

Finally I let my insanity of wrath abate, even as I lost all my anger toward the woman who had so casually only a few moments before gone about trying to end my life. I knew the force that drove this woman. I'd been as driven as she to survive all my life, no matter what the cost may be.

It simply wasn't worth it anymore. Nothing ever could be if it involved the loss of one's soul.

In a calm voice, as I relaxed my grip on her hands I said, "Welcome back to reality Lathartha."

The gun fell from her hands, as she leaned forward with a keening wail to sob with her face pressed to the floor. I patted the back of her head consolingly even as I slid my gun out from

underneath her for fear she'd accidentally discharge it.

Getting up off the floor was a painful experience and when I'd managed it I rubbed at my sore knees for a moment. I tossed my gun to land back in her seat with the other two.

Glancing down at her I said, "I forgive you Lathartha."

She only continued to wail. Looking around the room in search of an answer to the situation I could only come up with one.

Approaching her I stooped down and awkwardly brought her up to her feet. I pretty well had to half carry her to my chair.

Sitting down I pulled her into my lap. She was becoming resistant as emotion left and personality began to appear

once more. With an arm I pulled her head toward me to nestle beneath my chin and before she could speak the words I sensed that were building up within her I said, "Shut up."

She remained silent and seated in my lap. My hand left her head to trace down to the back of her neck, which I began to massage.

"It's all right to be human. To be emotional. Maybe it's best for those beyond that door not to see you like this, but I understand and I don't think any the less of you. It's hard to always be seeing to the demands and needs of others with seemingly nothing left over for yourself and with no one to confide in. Such a life makes us hard and privately hopeless of anything good happening. I can't live like that any longer. I crave space. Space

away from people always demanding more of me. It's funny really. We're surrounded by the vastness of space, but have none for ourselves within the clustered little communities that we strive so hard to hold together. Such an existence can't go on indefinitely can it?"

Her head nodded against my chest.

"Is that a yes or a no?" I asked with curiosity.

"No." She confirmed softly.

Time stretched on until I asked, "Still want to shoot me?"

"No."

"Glad to hear it."

She wiped at her face and then she slid free of my lap. She walked away to stand facing away from me. I stood up and she turned around. Her face said it

all. She was at a complete loss as to what to do or say or even what the situation might remotely call for.

Stepping closer I made the decision for her. Leaning forward I kissed her on the lips.

Her lips were full and parted against mine, but that's as far as I took the kiss. She pulled away slightly and as her eye searched mine she breathed out, "What do you think you're doing?"

With complete honesty I said, "Forming an alliance."

Her eyebrow rose sharply and drawing in a breath to speak I stopped her by placing a finger against her lips. I shook my head no and obediently she remained silent.

Her eye searched mine in startled wonder. She gazed at me in silence as

my hands settled on her shoulders and pressed her backward.

Her eye widened as she felt herself pressed up against the wall of her room. Her hands came up between us, but I smoothly claimed her wrists and kissing her again I pressed both of her hands to the wall to either side of her head.

Breathing heavy she huffed out as she turned her face away from my drawn out kiss, “Is this how you form all your alliances?”

Shaking my head I said, “Never.”

My head began dipping back towards her and in a rush she asked, “Is this all just about diplomacy?”

Completely serious I said, “No.” Then feeling the need for more words I said, “Lathartha..... I..... I have the feeling that I can be completely myself with you.

You lead your people and I lead mine, but aren't you tired of being alone?"

She nodded and I kissed her deeply even as I fought within myself to hold back from the living temptation that this woman had suddenly become in my life. I'd come seeking an alliance and found so much more.

Breaking off the kiss I watched her eye blink for a moment as she seemed to come back from somewhere else. It happened then, she smiled.

Her smile demanded one by me in return. There was a coy reasoning to be glimpsed at in her gaze and curiously I asked, "What are you thinking?"

She wet her lips before responding with, "If we're brokering an alliance here why does it feel like I'm being forced to surrender?"

I grinned and let go of her wrists. I sobered quickly then as I felt the need to make something clear that perhaps our words were not.

“I’m not kissing you just because I need your help.”

She arched that eyebrow at me again and said, “Sure.” With a sharply sarcastic note to it.

Forming my hands into fists I put them to the wall to either side of her head as I passionately said, “I’m not!”

She blinked and taking my one hand away I gestured to the door, “What goes on out there is to itself. Right here and now it’s just you and I, with diplomacy being completely aside from the matter. I want that to be clear.”

She nodded before she cheekily responded with, “But you still want me

to help you with whatever you need help with don't you?"

"Yes." I said honestly.

I searched her eye and face for a sign of what she was thinking and then I watched her lips move, "I applaud your honesty Captain, but how do I know you're honest in your attentions toward me and not out for just what I can do to help you?"

It was a fair question.

"You're going to just have to trust me and take my word for it."

"I tried to kill you and would have if your gun hadn't jammed, what makes you think you can trust me?"

"It's a risk I'm willing to take." I responded, as in truth I really didn't have a sense of her ever be the type to double-cross me and she seemed to be

sensing the same with me.

She looked away and shaking her head she said, "I don't know. This is all changing rather quickly."

I stepped back, "If you need some space you have only to say so."

Her hand curled over the top of my shirt and tugged me forward toward her, "I didn't say I needed space. I've waited all my life for a man like you!" Her lips found mine, as she apparently chose to side with trusting the sincerity of my desire for her apart from any diplomatic goal I might have in mind for our two peoples.

Her arms came around my neck as she suddenly turned aggressive. Her leg rose along my side and sensing her desire I slid my hands down and lifted her legs, which she quickly clasped about my

waist while I had the joy of filling my hands with her well-shaped rear as I continued to press her to the wall.

Loud knocking at the door startled us both. I half dropped her and as it was we both almost fell.

I had the urge to laugh as I watched her face turn beet red as she called out in the best modulated voice that she could muster in the moment, “Yes what is it?”

“Are you all right?” Came the answering response from the other side of the door.

Glancing to me Lathartha said, “Perfectly.”

“What?”

“I’m fine! Now go away while I conclude this diplomatic meeting.”

We both listened to the retreating footsteps until we couldn’t hear them.

Glancing at each other we met each other's gaze before we both fell into a fit of laughter.

Still laughing softly Lathartha asked, "Is it the same way on your ship? The general lack of privacy I mean."

"Worse. They don't even knock on the door they just open it and barge in."

Her eyebrow arched, "Well that's going to stop!"

Slightly choked sounding as my mind ran wild with the understanding of that definitive statement I said, "It shouldn't be a problem anymore. My counterpart ship to this one is in so many pieces right now it's not even funny."

"What?" She asked in startlement.

Regarding her I did my best to state plainly what was transpiring with the mothership that had served my people so

faithfully for so many years, “As you know we Melungeon’s are on the far side of the galaxy from our original home, while I imagine your homeworld once existed in this sector.”

“Quite so. The rocks that shield us were once a part of our world. But go on why is your mothership in pieces?”

We’re using it to build a gigantic matter jump gate. It involves a science that doesn’t exist outside of the mind of one man, as far as I know of anyway.”

Lathartha’s eye had grown large, “How big is the gate going to be?”

“As big as we can make it. Ideally we want all of our remaining ships to be able to fit through it at once.”

“And how are you going to power such a gate that will have to convey such a massive load of material from one end

of the galaxy to the other?”

“The best that I can understand it is that we are going to tap into the free energy being held in the vacuum of space around us, while using the engines of the mothership to sort of direct the flow and form the containment for the energy harnessed from space by magnetizing the section units of the gate into a stable influx by which power can move through freely.”

“You have the technology to do that? What I mean to say is that you can actually manage the output of such a vast supply of energy being accessed without the gate becoming destabilized or overcharged?” She asked in amazement.

“Me personally, no, but one of my men I feel reasonably confident can pull it off. In effect I’m staking everything on

the chance that he can.”

Lathartha began to pace back and forth within the room and with interest I watched her. She really was quite stunning.

She stopped, “This ability to tap into the free energy of space and manage its output flow.....would you share it with us?”

“There isn’t anything that I’m not willing to share with you, last, but not least, my resurgent homeworld as it were.”

She gave me a direct look before she resumed pacing. She stopped again. She swiped at a tangled blonde ringlet of hair that had sprung free of her bun and said, “You and me, we would be together on your world should we prove successful in defending it?”

I nodded authoritatively as my eyes swept over her once more.

Her voice though had my eyes coming back to her face, “I’m 37 years old and along with the amount of abuse that my body has taken its strongly possible that I can’t have children. A man like you could have your pick of any you chose to have as a mate. Why would you settle for a scarred older hulk like me, when you could have more?”

There was a vulnerable intensity in the blue-eyed gaze she directed upon me. Cocking my head to the side I asked softly, “How long have you been demeaning yourself like this Lathartha? You’re beautiful, but beyond that I’m attracted to you, because well this may be a crude way of putting it, but I have little patience left for people who can’t

figure out minor issues for themselves and you seem a sort of kindred spirit if you will. I know how you think to some degree and while I'm sure we have differences I think in many ways we are very much similar as to how we go about doing things. In short I don't feel like I have to explain the emotions that make up who I am to you. I like that. If I'd been in your chair I'd have pulled the trigger too, but thankfully I believe in a God, who has been merciful enough to show me a way out of the self-imposed prison my mind can become at times. The ability to have hope in anything only exists, because there is a one true God able to make the impossible occur on a daily basis. It is that hope that is now being played out in the reality of the here and now. The faith engendered by that

hope is also what engenders even more hope in me that by working together we truly can affect a great and positive change for our combined peoples.”

Lathartha blinked and smiling softly she said, “You’re quite the man Captain Siringo. Well can I see how you’ve managed to survive out in the open for so many years, but I have to be honest with you. I don’t have many nerves left. I live on an edge that I’ve threatened to topple off of many times. Today I did topple off of it and now you’ve completely reversed everything and you’re telling me about a faith in God able to move mountains and of a future someplace else other than this cold smelly dump and worst of all you’re making me believe it could all be possible! What if it’s not?” She cried out

with sudden emotion.

I went to her and taking her hands I said, "If it's not then at least we have the satisfaction of knowing we tried and at least for a moment we were free from our imposed prisons of chance and circumstance. That's worth a shot isn't it?"

Staring into my eyes she shook her head, "How could I have shot you?"

Her eyes closed and squeezing her hands I watched the sapphire glow of her eye once more open to view me with its flame as I said, "I forgave you for that remember?"

Her chin wobbled, as she nodded her head with a look that said I had reached some deeply bared core of her personality.

"Now promise not to ever shoot me

again.”

Her high emotion was replaced with a sport of laughter, “Agreed.”

I let go of her hands with a smile. My hands rose to the bun of interwoven blonde braids at the back of her head and carefully I began tugging this way and that in order to free the tresses of her hair.

“What are you doing? My hair probably smells and I think I got some grease on it this morning.”

“Ahhh so that’s the aphrodisiac that I’ve been smelling that’s been overwhelming my senses with the passion to have you.”

Her face turned beet red, but surprisingly she stood still as her braided hair came loose with the help of my hands to cascade about her

shoulders. Admiring the blonde hair that my fingers slipped through I said authoritatively, “You look better this way. You should wear it down like this.”

Her one eyebrow rose, “And what do I do to keep from being sucked into one of the electromagnet props when my hair gets caught by one of the cooling fans?”

I winced slightly at the thought of that. “Okay maybe you should wear it up sometimes, but I’d like it down when you’re not working.”

“Oh you would, would you? Would you care to enlighten me when exactly I gave you the right to order me around and tell me what I can and can’t do on my own ship?”

“When you didn’t pull the trigger the second time.”

She blinked and looked down at my

chest as my words made a heavy impact. I backed her up against one of her bedroom walls again and her eye darted up to mine.

“Like it or not Lathartha, but from this moment on our people are now combined into one in order for our joint venture to succeed and as such there isn’t room for there to be two captains commanding the people’s attentions.”

She blinked against the fog of passion that had already begun to cloud her eye to ask, “What?”

“You heard me Lathartha. Your people are now my responsibility. Having two of us barking orders will only get confusing. However to make the act of being demoted more palatable for you it is my pleasure to inform you that the position of first mate is open and

available for you to take stewardship of.”

Outrage had fired her face to a passion of a different kind and in an angered clip of words she said, “Why you impudent scoundrel! To think you have the presumption to.....”

I sealed her words off with my lips. She mouthed her protest out anyway, but somewhere along the way they got largely forgotten.

As a last act of defiance she tried to knee me in the groin, an action I narrowly avoided.

“Easy now. I fully intend on doing my best to test your self-imposed parameters of thinking becoming with child is beyond your abilities. Somehow I get the feeling that you’re terribly mistaken in regards to that.”

Her face was flushed from both the effect of my words, our kisses and her remembered outrage and with heat she said, “Your ego is insufferable!” But then with a glance at my lips she whispered out, “But I accept your imposed parameters for us on all counts.”

I kissed her sweetly then. Breaking contact I said softly, “Thank you for being gracious about it Lathartha. I know what I ask isn’t easy for a strong-willed woman such as yourself.”

Her eye rose to mine and in a contemplative voice she said, “Sometimes there are benefits to surrender. Just don’t abuse the privileges of leadership that I’m relinquishing to you.”

“I hope to never do that Lathartha, but

if I do you have my permission to let me know loud and clear in regards to how I have gone wrong. Just don't shoot me is all I ask.”

She smiled, but then glancing to the door she purposely phrased her words to say cheekily, “Is the captain forgetting about his duties of disclosure to the waiting masses growing more anxious by the moment as to what is transpiring in here?”

“They wouldn't believe it, even if you told them, so why bother?”

Her eyebrow arched, “Is this the way you lead your people?”

Chuckling I said, “No. It's just really hard to make myself let go of you right now. I must confess that I have never been turned on before by the smell of engine grease as I am right now.”

She mock slapped me, but then soberly said, “I seriously would like it if you told them now and I really could use a bath as I find nothing remotely sexy about smelling like a part of the ship, which over the years I have come to hate intensely.”

Nodding I let go of her and stepped back allowing her room to escape. I turned to the door and the crowd that would be waiting below. In some ways it would be just like home and yet I'd never been so far from home as I was right now.

Chapter Five

One Cause

Lathartha stepped up to the railing of the overlook into the gallery below. The people gathered looked anxious, but at Lathartha's broad smile their anxiety seemed to go down a notch.

“My people today is the day that everything changes. Soon no more will we have to live in disguise amongst the ruins of our world. We have all heard of the surviving Melungeon fleet that has wondered the Far Quarter for almost as long as we have been held up within

these asteroids we now call home. I would like to introduce Captain Siringo to you.”

Surprisingly there was applause as Lathartha stepped to the side in order to make room for me. The place grew silent then until the sound of breathing was all there was to be heard. This cloaked home of these people was far quieter in operation than my old home, where the clanging and banging of overworked systems never ceased to let off its grinding squeal of arthritic complaint.

Looking at them I saw differences to my own people only in terms of the superficial. These people were survivors just like us and just like us they were desperate for hope of any kind. In a way it was easy to adopt them

as if they were my own.

I spoke out, "I've lived all my life within the confines of a space vessel much like this one. At the age of 17 I found myself looking down upon a sea of faces just as I see now. I salute you for your tenacity to survive as you have in the face of overwhelming opposition, but I applaud you because greater than that is that you have yet remained compassionately human. Many who have been cast adrift in these barren corridors of the galaxy did not fight to hold onto their sanity the way that you have and the way that my people have. Together we are one in our desire to survive and yet remain in control of what makes us uniquely human. I do not stand here as a man boasting of any special ability to have survived to this point, rather I am a

man tested to the extreme in my faith in the great Creator, who made all we see and touch. In a matter of a few spoken words the universe as it once was in perfection was spoken into existence. Through means not of our own choosing we were cast out from the first world of our creation in order to do the bidding of monsters in direct opposition to the ways of our Creator. Again we as two peoples are unified in this. In times past we both, through the grace of God, managed to attain freedom for ourselves even as the salvation story the Creator inscribed across all our separate skies in illustration of a Savior, His Son, though separated by distance from us no less died for each and every one of us. You and I are crafted in the image of the Almighty and for this we are hated by all

the fallen relics of antiquities past, who are long due for the judgment they so richly deserve. They destroyed your world and they made mine a place more akin to hell than the paradise it once was. They've hunted us both unmercifully because we defied them in our desire to remain free! To worship the Master that they can never be redeemed to and yet holds the reins of their fragile existence within the palm of His hand! To live the lives and experience the freedoms of choice that each man, woman, and child of us is born inherently to make as gifted to us by our God. You are not alone in your struggle to remain free. My people are with you and indeed there are likely more than we know of our kind hidden elsewhere waiting, as we, for something

to change. Something has changed. The bondage of survival my people have been shackled under is over! My world as you know was once a beacon for freedom for all the masses of humanity transported against their will from beyond the shores of Earth. It was fallen, but now it is reborn once more. My world has been reborn and just as it is resurgent in the freedoms of those who have turned it from disaster so is the hatred of all of our ancient enemies of old. They cannot allow us to come together yet again. It was only by chance they succeeded the first time and they dare not risk the rise of a people rich with the taste of freedom once again, because even as we have known tyranny there is not one of us here that will rest until it is abolished! I put before you the

cause that we all face and I say to you as fellow humans in the fight to live and experience the joy of our God-given rights that my world, which I have never seen, is no less not only my world, but your world also! We share a common story and now I tell you plainly that we share a common war for survival. For almost two centuries, perhaps longer for you, we've been relegated to running and hiding from those who hunt us. That time is over! Now is the time that we take back the freedom that was once our forefathers before us! Now's the time we not only celebrate our humanity and tenacity to survive, but also the reclaiming of our honor in a supernatural war against the forces of darkness that have forever opposed us! It's time to forsake survival and fight for the hope of

the end of war and the ushering in of the second great awakening of this galaxy! No more should we run and hide from those who are less in spirit than us without any hope of eternal life. No more should our children live in the fear of the proximity sonar alarms going off. No more should we live in the armpit of our broken down dwellings tested by time and lack of supplies and parts. No more should we tread on hoping for something to change, because I tell you it has changed! The time is now and if we do not capitalize on it then we may well lose the ability to affect change for yet another generation. Another generation that could see us all destroyed. But a few days ago I received one of those who returned to my homeworld and who has been helping to restore it to the

paradise it once was. He has told me of many things and while you can well imagine the fight that will be against us I believe with all my heart that our Creator has not brought us so far only two fail us now, in our gravest hour of need. No, today and each day from now is when we put on the courage of our forefathers who, centuries before our time, threw off the shackles of tyranny in order to claim freedom. We fight for what is ours by right and to that end I have committed everything. The mothership I have called home all my life is even now being fashioned into a matter jump gate, by which we have the means to transport our entire fleet the length of the galaxy. What my smaller fleet can do against an armada which will likely number several hundred to

every one ship of ours I cannot tell you. All I can tell you is that I have faith that we will win and not only win, but usher in a new era, an era of peace kept in security by our ceaseless faith in the God of our creation and the willing tenacity of our remembered slavery to purge every last trace of the enemy from the realms of our habitation. I urge you to join us because this simply isn't our fight alone, but it's yours too! My world is your world. The children I hope to have need a place to live and experience the joys of warmth and the comforts of life that have been so long denied to all of us. Are your children any different than those I hope to have for myself in what they need and deserve? Your children, my children, there is no difference even as my people's fight is

also your fight. Now my final question to you is will you join this war and fight alongside of us for freedom for all of us?”

I really didn't need to ask that, but as humans everyone deserves the right to choose their own path and these people were making their choice loud and clear. Screams and roars of unification with the common causes we shared echoed loudly within the confined air of the magnetically stuck together asteroid.

I wiped a hand across my brow to get rid of the sweat running into my eyes. I felt utterly spent of emotion and yet I had never been so elated.

I glanced to Lathartha only to see the respect that every man craves from the woman he's committed everything to. I'd waited a long time to see such a look of

shared consciousness and I thanked God on the spot for the birth of something beautiful and new within the very confines of a time of rapid change bordering on chaos.

Lathartha sealed the deal then before the ground swelling emotions of her people by stepping close and kissing me with a passion that left none of those watching the spectacle in doubt as to how truly in-depth two peoples had just become of one mind and one flesh within a matter of hours.

Laughter broke out almost as loud as the cries of jubilation before. When Lathartha finally let go of my face she did so without any sign of embarrassment.

Turning from me to grip the railing before her gathered people, who had

quieted down only somewhat less in volume than before, she said looking down at them, "Let there be no doubt in any of you that I support this man in any and all endeavors for which he undertakes for the combined good of both of our peoples." She glanced back at me with an intense look before then turning forward again to proclaim, "We are one! We will fight and if God deems it so we will win! To that end my last orders are these. Combine the rocks of our outer lying colonies into the prearranged Alpha squadron alignment. Set a course for the Melungeon fleet, which you will find on our return ships navigation. We will join their fleet even as we are now one people in cause and in hope. Together we will go through the gate that they are constructing and we

will wreck a terrible vengeance for the destruction we have all suffered at the hands of monsters for even now I've been told that that the ability to harness the free energy of space that we have failed so many times to replicate in our own experiments has been achieved by the Melungeon's. They are engineering their jump gate to be powered with the outlying free energy held in the vacuum of space all around us! With this step forward we will energize our rocky homes into the enemy's nightmare from hell! Go now and each of you prepare for what is to come.”

In exuberance the ranks of her people filed from the gallery with more hope and vigor than was ever experienced in any of the preceding generations to grace the corridors of these forlorn rocky

outposts of space. In every way it seemed I had met my perfect match in life.

Seemingly forgotten now by the people below I stepped up behind Lathartha. She turned to me with a ready smile and surprisingly tears.

“Thank you for this! How I’ve longed to see them like this. Whether we live or die this moment of freedom can never be taken from us!”

“I know of what you speak of only too well.” I said in complete acknowledgment of what she was experiencing now as a leader.

A grinding groan of noise the likes of which was rather alarming took place then and with the noise came quite a bit of turbulent shaking. Stepping to the side I gripped a hold of the railing and with

alarm asked, “Are we under attack?”

Laughing she said, “No! What you hear is the resistance of our inner nucleus as it remains stationary in gravity as the outer shell of rock around us spins around driven on by the proper sequencing of power given off by the magnetic ejections of electrical inverters located around the whole of the inner nucleus that we live in. In effect we are rolling through space right now.”

I shook my head still feeling very much in awe of what these people had managed to accomplish. In sudden curiosity I asked, “What you spoke of at the last about the plans of reaping revenge with these asteroid coverings of yours, can you explain that?”

She nodded, “What you feel in part is what they will experience if we were to

crash into their ships. As it is now however we are vulnerable to being blown apart or dismantled even as our world once was, but if we can channel the fusion power of unlimited energy the way you say your man has found a way of doing even so then we can literally supercharge the magnetic quality of the rocks around us into a virtual shield of unimaginable strength. We will smash through their fleet at will as if they were but pins to our higher mass of a ball twirling under gravitational power.”

I shook my head in complete awe. I had no words to say.

I had a world to return to. A way to get there and now a seemingly invincible means by which to destroy our enemies congregating against us in great number.

Finally I managed to breathe out,

“God is good.”

Smiling she stepped forward to give me a quick kiss before saying, “Yes He is! Thank you yet again for showing me that. I had all but forgotten what it is like to have faith, but you have brought it back to life with the strength of conviction you have in your own. Thank you.”

We stared into each other’s faces until finally I couldn’t help but ask, “Do you have somewhere we could go where we could be mostly alone?”

Cocking her head to the side curiously she said, “Yes, but why?”

I shrugged, “I’d just like to take a walk with you if I may. Get to know you so to speak.”

Her eyes glanced past me to the door of her room. Her face was a mixture of

puzzlement and amusement as her gaze came back to me as she asked, “Why?”

Then before I could speak she added, “I know you want me and I want you so why don’t you just take me into my room and we could be one even as you’ve made our two peoples one today with just the words you spoke.” She finished up saying, as she nervously tucked a few strands of her long blonde hair behind her one ear.

“Because I want more than that. To put it in a crude way as if to likening you to that of a fast space cruiser, I don’t want the sum total of my experiences with you to be simply the act of flying you as fast as you can go. While I do want that I also want to know why it is that you can go so fast, why your unique among all the others in the fleet, what your

capabilities are and what hidden potentials may lie yet hidden beneath the surface of your circuitry. In short I want to know you so well and be so fluent in your system telemetry that I could take apart your engine and reassemble it flawlessly and perhaps even improve on the efficiency of who you already impressively are.”

“You want to take my engine apart?” She asked looking at me in an odd way.

Feeling embarrassed I waved my hand, “Okay, bad analogy. I.....”

“No no! I like it. I’ve just never heard anybody talk like this, especially not to me. Come, the gravitational engine compartments are this way.”

Her hand slipped into mine and tugging I was compelled forward to follow her. There was something softer

about her all of a sudden.

Glancing at me in an almost bashful way she asked, “So what as my mechanic would you do different in my construction?”

“Well you see I’m not sure yet. I need to do some analysis on that, but right now I’d have to say absolutely nothing. You’re the best put together cruiser I’ve ever laid eyes on.” I said lightheartedly enjoying the verbal game we were playing. In some ways it felt like being a teenager all over again.

However my mood fell when I saw the light heartedness suddenly gone from her. I stopped walking and asked, “What’s wrong?”

Looking to me she gestured jerkily to where a twin matching blue sapphire to the one she yet possessed should have

been in her face, “you’re telling me you don’t mind this?”

I shook my head and said, “Ask any of my people and they will tell you that when presented with a flight deck full of cruisers to pick from that I never go for the ones with the flawless paint jobs. To me such ships are untested and not to be overly relied upon. What I look for is the one which shows some dents and in general proof of existence through some harsh realities. It’s not what’s on the surface that counts, but rather what’s under the hood. It also helps to have some miles under the belt so to speak, because then you know what the craft is capable of, but the biggest test of circumstance being that it’s still ready on the flight deck prepared to take more damage if need be. Ships like that I feel

the most confident in. The scars and haywire system glitches are in a way charming, because they speak to the character of that craft and what it managed to survive through. In such a craft I'm not simply flying it, but rather I'm flying with it into battle. Does any of what I'm saying make sense? I wish for your sake that you did still have two eyes, but once again in our little analogy here you'd be the ship I'd pick out of the lineup every time. The one I'd trust my life to and the one that I'd always respect and admire the most."

She shook her head before saying under her breath only barely loud enough for me to hear, "You make me want to laugh and cry all in the same moment. I know you're telling the truth, but... but..... we've only just met today!"

I smiled warmly, “And yet I feel like I’ve known you all my life. Shall we?” I asked in gesture to what could only be the engine compartment ahead of us judging from the loud noise and drifting aroma of grease and overheated coolant.

She reclaimed my hand with a teary smile and perhaps she squeezed it a little harder than before. We reached what was indeed a room full of machinery which though familiar in purpose was nevertheless unique in its design from anything I had ever seen before.

“So tell me how your experiences relate to this area. Something tells me that you’ve spent a lot of time here.”

Nodding she said, “I have. Not meaning to be rude or anything, but unlike you I wasn’t born into the role of leadership. This is where I got my start

and from here my successes spread out until it seemed everyone was asking me what to do with issues far more ranging than what lies within the functionality of machinery in this room. I hope I just didn't offend you about saying, 'being born into the role of leader'. You are without a doubt a great leader if there ever was one. For myself, as a leader, I'm more of a fill in the gap person. I'm actually really glad that you're in charge now and that I don't have to be mentally and physically on point all the time."

Ruefully I said, "Please don't retire on me now. I would be the first to say that I need help."

Smiling she showed off all her teeth as she responded with, "I haven't gone anywhere. Remember I'm your ever waiting cruiser waiting for my rider."

I looked at her as desire for her punched me in the stomach hard.

Her smile deepened as did her voice as she said, “Tell me do you perform maintenance on your own craft personally or do you have someone else do it?”

“I always do it. How else would I know what I’m working with?”

“Very true. I’ve found it much the same here in this engine room. Now I could explain how all the equipment in this room works, but really once you get past the surface appearance it all works the same. Want to see under the hood?”

Pure excitement danced lively in her eye and looking around briefly my gaze came back to her and quite honestly I stated, “Do you know how close you are to getting more grease in your hair?”

Laughing softly she whispered, “I know a back way out of here.”

“Then what are you waiting for!” I breathed out with the tension this woman had put me under by turning my own game back on me.

Arching that expressive eyebrow of hers again she coyly asked, “Don’t you perform a preflight check before taking your cruiser for a ride?”

“Honey I’m going to run every diagnostic variable on you that is known to man before I take you into the air!”

Smiling she backed down a side corridor that I hadn’t seen before and just before she disappeared into a cloud of steam she said with a crook of her beckoning finger, “This way to the flight deck Captain Siringo.”

She disappeared and trustingly I

followed her into the steam. Had this woman really taken an intended shot at me, but a few short hours ago?

I found myself doubly grateful for my defective old relic of a weapon right now.

Chapter Six

No Time

What a mess Randelon had made. Dimly I recognized pieces here and there drifting idly about of what had been my old home.

Destruction was plentiful to behold for sure, but what a construction was to be seen as well!

Before me rose an eclectic compilation of fused together debris that had been artfully linked together to form a massive jump gate that hung silently still in space. It was a behemoth to the

testament of what man could accomplish under sheer force of will.

From the looks of it Randelon had cannibalized another ship out of the fleet in order to complete the linkage of the metallic circuits for the huge gate. I glanced to Lathartha only to witness profound shock on her face as she viewed the construction before her.

How Randelon had managed to get so much done was even beyond my expectation of what I knew the man was capable of.

“Captain I’m sure glad you’re back!” Came my first officer’s worried voice over the COM channel.

“Let me guess, someone’s picked up on all the unusual activity taking place around here and is coming to investigate.”

“Yes Sir. We make it to be five reptilian cruisers on course with this location set to arrive within two days’ time.”

“How much longer till the gate is completed?” I asked in return as the ever present tensions of leadership swept back through me like a remembered cloak of oppression.

“Randelon has projected at least four more days Sir!”

I grimaced. While I had a newfound way of dealing with the cruisers I hadn’t exactly wanted to let the cat out of the bag so early as to our new found offensive abilities for fear of word leaking out and the surprise that I had wanted to deal to the enemy armada gathering off my world became an extinct possibility.

Even with an extremely strengthened shield I wasn't so sure of how much damage the five large asteroid ball like ships along with a host of smaller rock vessels could take when submitted to direct bombardment from the onset of a conflict.

“What's the delay in getting the gate completed faster?” Lathartha asked with visible tension.

The COM line remained silent in apparent confusion at an unknown voice.

“Well answer my wife's question!” I said testily.

“Sir? Uhhh congratulations, as to the question it's simply the amount of work assembly needed for shifting in the remaining links. All the complex technological linkage is in place.”

Lathartha turned to me, “I can get my

people to work on it and see if we can speed things up a bit.”

I nodded decisively and watched in appreciation as she ran off calling out orders in well-timed fashion. She was quite the woman.

“I can’t quite make up my mind whether it’s her well-developed sense of command or her well-proportioned rear that has you to the point of drooling dear brother.”

Instantly annoyed I glanced at my sister standing nearby and said, “Isn’t there someone else you could go annoy?”

She smiled candidly and moved off.

I don’t know what made me do it, but calling out I said, “Just for your information it happens to be both.”

She laughed, but continued on her

way. I liked the sound of her laughter, but glancing around worriedly I couldn't help but wonder if it was the last such sound of merriment I'd hear before reptilian torpedoes tore through the very hull of the ship I stood in.

There was an awfully lot to get done, but..... well, I'd just have to take some stock in my faith that it would all get done.

I rubbed at my eyes, which felt gritty in their sockets. Man I was getting old!

19 hours without sleep and I was dead. 10 years ago I'd of done this with no sweat.

I needed to retire, that was what. Some things had to happen first though.

Namely surviving the next few hours.

Something was nudged into my hands and I glanced down to see my mother offering me a cup of something hot. She was looking rather old right now. In a way we all were.

The five radar contacts on the screen had a way of doing that to a person. Heck I would've engaged the five cruisers without the asteroids for backup, but the 12 other contacts, but an hour or two behind the first five had a way of tipping things slightly out of our favor.

Once again I stared at the COM line waiting for it to speak. No one could say that we hadn't fought as hard as one could to do the impossible in the last 19 hours. The work crews were finishing up out there right now.

At the end it was all coming down to ride on Lathartha's firm shoulders. Randelon bless his heart had worked himself into a comatose stupor, but Lathartha's grasp of new ideas had been such that she'd been able to observe and replicate Randelon's monumental breakthrough in just the 15 hours before Randelon had passed out from exhaustion.

It wasn't all just her though, it seemed that everyone was putting forth an effort beyond the range of their former abilities whatever they may have been. This was the last push for survival by two peoples who had been forged in the fires of relentless pressure.

Continuing to stare at the COM I willed it to speak as if it had a voice and reasoning consciousness of its own. All

this effort on the part of so many desperate people had to be rewarded!

“Drink, honey.” My mother said as the contacts on the radar screen drifted a little closer.

I glanced down at the forgotten cup in my hands. I took a drink and immediately coughed flames. Clearing my throat I husked out, “What kind of jungle juice did you put in this mother?”

“Take another sip dear. I can’t say the concoction is a healthy one, but it will stand you back up on your feet.”

I’ll say, I silently commented to myself. “I’m not going to go blind from this am I?”

She rolled her eyes and urged me to drink again. I did so and immediately felt moisture pool in the corners of my dry eyes, which was a relief. The drink

was at least good for something.

I pushed the cup back into her hands, “Thanks mom.”

She smiled tiredly and said, “I really hate that I haven’t got to meet your leading lady son.”

“God willing you will soon. I think you will really like her.”

“I know I will. Any woman who can put the smile on your face the way the memory of this woman just did is a best friend of mine for sure.”

I nodded.

Mother glanced at the silent COM, “I’ve heard she’s doing the work of 10 men out there.”

“That’s putting it lightly.” I said, as once again the urge to be out there with her struck me hard. It wasn’t to be though, because of leadership and all

that. Right now I was fed up with leadership! Let someone else do it, only looking around confirmed that no one was angling for the job right now.

The COM line crackled and Lathartha's weary voice came over it weakly, but yet determined, "The last pieces are set. We have cohesion. I repeat we have cohesion. My tests show an uninterrupted power line across the full spectrum of the gate. We are ready to initiate cell power up and cohesion firing on your command Captain."

"Great! Now get back in here. Escorts get the last of our people inside on the double. To all ships move forward to predesignated alpha channels. Asteroids line up on center."

Ships started moving even as the command asteroid I was currently

running operations in rolled to its position point behind the massing of the fleet that filled the opening of the jump gate that yawned impressively wide before us.

All the enemy signatures on the radar seemed to impossibly increase in speed. My first officer's voice rang out with more savagery than I'd ever heard him exhibit before, "Not today cold teeth! The only thing you're going to chew on is our exhaust!"

Being the reserved type by nature he immediately looked embarrassed by what he'd said out loud. I eased his discomfort by saying, "True words. I'm considering a promotion for you. You can have my job in about a week." Everyone laughed, but in truth I wasn't really joking.

The COM crackled, “All teams onboard, Sir. There’s no one left out there.”

I turned to Briandy and watched her eyes grow big as I gestured to the newly installed array over in the corner that had only been activated for the first time in existence, but a week or so ago, “Would you care to do the honors?”

“Would I ever!” She said as she rushed over to the array. I didn’t miss the way Edgar gravitated along with her, but it was with surprise that I watched my sister share the power-up initiation process of the gate with Edgar.

I glanced to mother and we both did an eyebrow raise. At long last little sister was learning to share.

My attention was drawn to the corridors of outside space as raw power

on an epic scale swirled through the interlinked pieces of worn ship hide that had once been my home. With pride I watched the dented and grayed metal take on a sheen of molten power.

Space seemed to quiver and then like a reptilian tanker going up in flames the event horizon of the jump gate blasted past us. The asteroid barely wobbled, but I saw some of the smaller ships ahead of us get tossed about from the blast.

Well there was no time like the present in order to make history. Holding the fleet COM line up to my mouth I said, “Heavenly Father I pray that you would see us all safe to the other side and help us reclaim our land. All fleet vessels enter the gate.”

Without hesitation the forward

remaining ships of my fleet surged forward only to be consumed from sight almost instantaneously by the intervening space and time that we had bridged across. The flotilla of smaller asteroids zizzed forward to disappear and one by one the big boys rolled through until only the last asteroid which we were on was left.

She was the biggest of the five and I had my doubts, but I kept quiet about them. We eased forward under the careful guidance of the asteroid's pilot.

Turns out there was plenty of room and in awe I watched the color waves stream by the outer hull of rock as we entered high-speed travel. We'd done it!

Like angry wasps the five cruisers slid out of their high-speed vector stream. They seemed to hum their displeasure at the sight of empty space before them.

What was worse for them though was the sight of the giant super gate. They knew how to build jump gate's and had done so for some time, but never such a one as this. Not one of this magnitude that could convey an entire fleet across the length of the known galaxy.

The humans had taken a huge step forward. A step that their reptilian kind had never wished to see them achieve. A simple mission of hunting down a few scattered refugees from prior conquests had turned into something much more.

Their deep space communication arrays flared to life as all five reptilian

cruisers combined their energy supplies together in order to send out a massively powerful signal that would alert all members of their kind across the universe. The message flashed powerfully and deeply through the dimensional reaches of space.

The message was simple in its explanation of what the humans had managed to accomplish and it was direct in the order that it gave. It was time for the world of Soluranami to be utterly destroyed with every last human tracked down and killed less they once again become a worthy adversary.

12 more reptilian cruisers eased out of their vector streams and they of one hive mind combined to form a kill squad and ease forward toward the still flashing event horizon of the

magnificent gate poised in space. They would be the first to taste the resistant blood of the cursed Melungeon's.

The lead ship of the group however had no sooner touched the event horizon than the whole series of interlocked circuits of the gate turned molten red and exploded outward in all directions epically.

This safety feature hadn't been in the original design, but as a nature of habit Lathartha's people were used to cloaking or if need be destroying the evidence of their higher technological breakthroughs. All 17 cruisers were eviscerated by the gamma force rays let off by the explosion of the gate.

When the flash of the explosion faded away all that was left were the shattered remnants of what appeared to

be a metallic asteroid field lost to any significance within the deep reaches of the Far Quarter. The insatiable appetites and hatreds of a few had been denied, but the message they had sent had gone out far and wide.

I walked as briskly as my tired legs could take me down the corridor towards the hanger bay. I was tired and spent of all emotion, but the euphoria of the success of the moment had adrenaline moving my blood along.

Engineers and technicians alike lay asleep around the hangar bay as if dead having succumbed to the need for rest on the spot. These people had moved mountains and I only wished that I could

reward them in some way, but continued survival was the only reward to be offered at the moment and for now that was enough.

I found Lathartha still in her spacesuit passed out with the rest. I hurriedly began snapping her out of it.

She stirred fitfully and tried to open her eye, but I whispered as I bore her aloft into my arms, “Easy. It’s only me.”

At the sound of my voice she slumped peacefully asleep into my arms. I carried her back up the hall and through the interconnecting halls until gratefully I found a personnel transporter.

People still awake smiled wanly at our passing before laying their heads back down and closing their eyes. The lines between her people and my people had become hopelessly blurred as we

were now all embroiled on one joint quest together. They were one people and they were still free to live another day.

Finally I reached her quarters that were identical to my old and now dismantled ones and shoved my way through the door. It crashed back against the wall and I stumbled across the floor half-hazardly only to unceremoniously dump Lathartha roughly onto her bed.

I could tell that her rough landing had jarred her partially awake and quickly I apologized as I crawled up off the floor and onto the narrow bed beside her, “Sorry about that.”

Her words were so mumbled I almost didn't make them out, “Take me I'm yours.”

Chuckling I pressed my face into her

decidedly grease and oil stained hair and said, “You’re ravishment will have to wait. I need.....” All conscious thought disappeared other than the peace I felt at having her near to me once again.

Siringo’s mother slipped into the room through the still wide open door and approached the bed. Tears in her eyes she stared down at the sleeping couple whose hands had interlocked in their sleep.

Stepping closer she unfolded a blanket at the foot of the bed and covered the pair. Looking down at them she whispered, “Thank you for answering my prayer to see my son

settled and happy.”

With one last loving look at the pair she eased out of the room closing the door behind her.

The streams of high-speed color were all around us and then they were rapidly gone and in the instance that occurred I said, “Move the fleet down towards the planet. I think we could all do with the feel of ground beneath our feet and a breath of real air.”

I wished Lathartha could have been here to share in this momentous occasion, but both of us had agreed that it was for the best if the asteroids dropped out of the jump vector field before we reached the planet’s

atmosphere. Reason being that Soluranami was probably already being highly monitored by enemy spy craft and seeing the effective ability of the asteroids too soon may take all the surprise in the upcoming battle that they could offer us away.

The asteroids were headed here even now, but they were behaving as if part of an offshoot comet. They should be within striking distance within two days, if nothing went wrong.

Grimly I glanced at the radar output telemetry. Thankfully someone had disabled the alarm feature in order to not have it going off incessantly. The enemy were already here in great number.

They hovered in a gathering mass of a cloud at the edges of the solar system. Their numbers had grown exponentially

and already there were far more than I would've thought possible. Even with the help of the asteroids victory didn't seem possible when faced off against such odds.

I turned from the grim reality lurking in the dark of space to the dream coming true before my eyes. We were about to land on a living breathing world that just happened to be our homeworld of old. Somehow that just made it even more special.

The landing went a bit roughly as the act of landing a ship had never really been one practiced before by any of the officers on watch. Hatchway's opened and immediately what threatened to overwhelm everyone was simply the smell of fresh unfiltered air that bore with it the essence of a million smells

unfamiliar to us and yet divine in the experiencing of them.

Stumbling past people who lay about everywhere clutching at the green grass and breathing in deeply I made my way out further into the vast prairie of greenery before me that was spotted here and there by a young up-sprouting tree. I was at a lack for words to express the emotions of what I was experiencing right now.

I fell to my knees in the green grass humbled beyond all bearing, "Thank you God!"

Feeling vibration in the ground beneath me I looked up and saw perhaps one of the most beautiful sights I'd ever seen. A teeming herd of four-legged animals with unrivaled grace was streaming over a distant knoll in a

display of strength in motion.

I felt tears running down my face and immediately I was reminded that this was no way for a leader to be acting. Hurriedly I wiped at my face and got up.

The grass stains on my knees were like a badge of honor. It was hard to not just settle back down to my knees and dig my hands into real dirt.

No more bland tasteless hydroponically grown vegetables and simulated protein bars! That alone made the future immeasurably brighter.

I turned back to the landed ship to see my people as a whole spread out in complete revelment in the awakening of all their senses in a way that none of us had ever experienced before.

Soberly I took in the big dented pieces of space junk that had borne us here to

our home of old. It was a wonder that they could even support life let alone get off the ground. Which bore the question of, ‘how was I going to fight off an alien invasion with them?’

How could I possibly win given what I had to work with?

My eyes shifted to a gorgeous looking cruiser that had set down in the grass a respectable distance away from the fleet. I had not heard it before as I had been so lost in my enjoyment of this place.

Vaguely I recognized Edgar as being one of three men that were talking out in the grass not too far from where I stood now. Edgar pointed and the group headed my way. No doubt they were more of my people who’d returned home from elsewhere.

I took in the two men with Edgar for

what they were. They were fighters through and through. That was good, but the real question was, ‘did they have any more ships such as the sleek beauty in the grass behind them?’

They came to a stop and the oldest of the three said, “Welcome back to your home Captain Siringo. I can scarcely believe either the story of your survival or how you’ve managed to return so quickly. Surely God is favoring our cause. My name is Taren and this is my brother Logan.”

I nodded, “Thank you for your welcome, but tell me do you have any idea as to the force gathered against us up there just waiting to descend like a lead rain upon this world of warm skies and open prairies?”

Taran nodded, “I do, but if the Lord of

hosts is with us in this conflict I see no reason to fear even if the enemy were to block out the stars by the sheer volume of their number.”

Smiling I reached out my hand to Taran and he took it and shook it firmly as I said, “It’s good to be in the presence of brothers once more. Tell me what do you have to fight with?”

“Other than faith and determination not much. We have seven cruisers other than the one behind us. We have one larger cargo ship and a fleet of about 20 beast men tech cruisers we seized a few years back. I’ve set up some star batteries in a grid layout here on the surface, but that’s basically the sum total of our defensive capabilities.”

Edgar cleared his throat and with a glance at him Taran added, “There is one

other thing. Do you know anything about a ship classification entitled Deep Truth?”

“No, I don’t.” I said.

“I do Sir!”

I glanced to the side as my first officer hurried to explain his outburst, “I found mention of it in the records years ago. It was an ultrahigh powered ship of war called a Battle Slonager. It was the first prototype of a new class of ship. It was designed with only one purpose in mind. The travel of deep space and the ability to destroy reptilian worlds. It was never brought into service, because the huge mass of the ship required newer technology then was possessed at the time in order to accommodate its great bulk by which to power it to move through space. All it could manage at its

first stage of completion was what power its engines could generate. It was left behind because of its inability to jump into a vector stream.”

“I don’t need it to be vector stream capable.” I exclaimed in growing excitement.

“No sir, you certainly don’t!” My first officer responded back just as excited.

Patting him on the back I turned back to Taran, “So where is it?”

“That’s the problem. We know where the outside entrance is, but we can’t gain access to it. It seems that the way was sealed to all but only a fleet commanders direct input. As the last surviving fleet commander you wouldn’t happen to have some kind of activation key device would you?”

“Why yes I would.” I said, as I pulled

a necklace out of my open shirt that had a chip code key attached to it.

Looking to Taran I asked, “Do you have adequate personnel to fly the ships you do have, along with damage control squads?”

He made a face, “No not really. About half what I need.”

“That isn’t a problem as most my people have had some experience at just about everything it takes to operate a ship.”

Slapping my first officer hard on the back I said, “See that whatever personnel is needed is transferred to Taran’s control.”

Taran and my first officer, of whom I was increasingly proud of, headed off together. Taran’s brother Logan gestured to the cruiser behind him and said, “This

way to the big gun.”

Smiling, I followed. Things were looking up. An Asteroid Fleet, a Battle Slonager, and a respectable number of smaller class ships. We were still outnumbered by likely 500 to 1, but well I was excited anyway.

Chapter Seven

Out of the Past

The cruiser dropped down in preparation to land in a rough mountainous looking area of the planet's surface. There were some tents arrayed outside of a cave and in gesture to them Logan said, "We've been trying around the clock to find a way into this place, but so far we've had to pull back for fear of tripping a safety protocol that would trigger the mountain to implode."

Nodding I continued to impatiently wait for the ship to land. Once landed I

left the cruiser and pressed my way across the terrain until I entered a man-made tunnel that led up to a massive blast door.

The blast door was devoid of any ornamentation other than a single key code pad on one corner that glowed dimly in the shadowed interior of the tunnel. Removing my necklace I fit the chip key into the only slot available and had the satisfaction of hearing the locking mechanism click sharply.

The door screeched with heavy protest inwardly, but then abruptly stopped. The keypad no longer glowed at all. The power supply was done for. Not only was the power gone, but there was probably something obstructing the door from the inside given the protesting screech that had greeted our ears in the

first brief few moments of operation.

Logan and I glanced at each other. Together we approached the narrow crack between the door and the surrounding tunnel. A tentative shove was enough evidence that there would be no budging the door.

“Step aside gents and watch a woman get it done.”

Amused I watched Briandy saunter up to the narrow opening. Her curvy figure wasn't going to fit and I said as much.

She smirked, as she began to fit herself sideways through the crack, “You forget dear brother that a woman's curves are designed to be molded and reshaped for a man's benefit.”

I glanced to the side in time to see Edgar's face go beet red at both Briandy's brash words and the sight of

her squeezing her chest flat in order to fit through.

As Briandy disappeared from view Logan said, “Your sister is a determined one.”

“More like a bullheaded showoff than anything else.”

“Hey I heard that! Don’t be jealous of me because I’m beautiful.” Came Briandy’s voice with an echo ring to it.

Aggravated I asked, “What’s obstructing the door?”

“Some rocks and beams..... oh God!”

“What!!!” I exclaimed in horror as I imagined by sister in some deadly peril beyond the immovable door.

Both Edgar and I had rushed to the crack to vainly try to squeeze through, only to stop at her words, “It’s nothing just some dead bodies.”

I knew my sister rather well. To hear her so choked up emotionally over some dead bodies wasn't like her.

I heard rocks tumbling and the general sounds of exertion from the other side of the door for a drawn out period of time. Finally Briandy called out, "Okay see if you can budge it any. I'll pull from this side."

Together all four of us put our might against the door and it did indeed move inwards slightly. I called the extreme effort we were putting out off once a manageable distance had been achieved.

Switching on a portable light that I carried with me always I stepped into the dark musty air beyond the blast door followed along by Edgar and Logan. The sidewalls of the corridor were crumbled pretty badly, but an open passageway

beyond remained intact.

The remains of about five people had been pulled off a slight distance by Briandy. What was haunting however was the sight of the grooves and gashes in the back of the blast door from where people had hammered away for hours if not days in order to get through.

Swallowing I turned away and with a squeezing hand to Briandy's shoulder I then headed off down the corridor before us. Logan was beside me and glancing down I saw his rather odd looking gun drawn out and at the ready, "Tell me does that thing actually fire based off of explosive compounds?"

"Yep." Came his laconic reply.

"Fascinating. I'm going to need to collect one of those at some point. You might as well put it away though as

about the only thing with life to shoot at in here might be a spider or two.”

“I feel better just the same with it out.”

Commandingly I said, “And I would feel better with it put away. One shot from that thing and this whole place might collapse.”

I felt the heat of his gaze in the darkness, but I heard the gun slide into leather. Then under his breath I heard him mutter, “Sure can tell your family.”

I smiled, but didn't say anything.

The hallway ended in a rather large gallery of tech screens and consoles. A layer of dust lay over everything in the sight of our lights including the corpses many of which were still slumped fast in console chairs.

“Think you can get us some lights

Briandy?” I asked grimly.

“Half a second. There I think I got it.”

The gallery came to life as lights popped on here and there enough to illuminate the sad scene more fully. None of the screens popped on however except for one.

Drawn to it I stepped across the room carefully avoiding from stepping on corpses along the way that were laid out as if they had gone to sleep and never awoken. Reaching the lit screen I glanced from the slumped over corpse of a man that had fallen to his rest on the keyboard to the words on the screen that read like a journal entry.

“A note from one likely long dead to someone I pray is of my kindred. Assuming you are and that our work here was not in vain here goes. When

the cataclysm befell us the order was given to evacuate. About half the personnel fled, but those of us in the know knew that there simply weren't enough deep space ships in order to fit everyone. We made the choice to stay and further our work in hopes it would be of some benefit to those of our kind in the future. God willing as you read this that day has come. Anyway with the blast doors closed we did our best to shield the facility from the damage that was occurring on a planetary scale worldwide. In that, we were, for the most part successful. Some parts of the roof structure fell in on the Deep Truth, but fear not we managed to fix the damage. All went well for the first year of our captivity within the mountain. We dared not open the blast door for

fear what would await us outside in terms of extremes in weather. Then after another year went by we discovered that we couldn't open the door even if we'd wanted to. It was frozen shut. Better ice than lava I guess. Six months later our ventilation shafts to the outside were cut off, by we presume an incremental buildup of ice and snow. With but days of oxygen left to us one of our number came up with a means of using the Deep Truth's oxygen scrubbers to augment our air supply. It worked, but it came at a cost of breathing abnormally high levels of CO₂. That said we persevered on and I think it's been about a year now. It's hard to say for sure as the levels are really high now and it's hard to even frame the words for this message. Let's

see..... Oh we got it fixed. The Deep Truth can now travel through deep space. It took us a while, but with little else to do we made some new science. While we were at it we honed all the ship's systems some more in terms of peak performance. We would've liked to have taken it for its maiden journey ourselves, but the hanger doors won't open. Too much snow I guess. To whichever fleet commander may find this last creation of Soluranami's greatness all I can say is enjoy the ride. May you always be free. Over and out."

Edgar finished with emotionally, as he'd read the whole message out loud.

In the moment of silence that followed I reached out and patted the dry bones of a man who'd worked unselfishly to ensure the future of others. Turning away

I approached a long wall of windows.

Briandy, even though I could still hear her crying was back at work on a wall panel nearby. Lights flickered on and began to illuminate a truly massive hanger bay. The Deep Truth sat in radiant untested glory squarely within the expansive bay. I'd never seen anything like it ever.

As a ship it had the mass of two motherships and perhaps even more. The amount of resources alone to construct such a ship was unimaginable.

Truly the Deep Truth was the most epic of all ships I'd ever come across. If we'd only had such a ship fully operable when we had been forced to flee our world hundreds of years before how things would have been different! The past was just that though, but the future

sat dully gleaming before me now in awe defying splendor.

“It’s big.” Briandy breathed out.

“Briandy I need you to get back to the fleet. Everyone who’s competent and not needed by Taran to man the other ships I want you to bring here. Make sure to bring Randelon with you. Be as quick about it as you can.”

Nodding hurriedly she rushed off followed quickly by Logan.

Turning to Edgar I said, “Well my good man shall we break open the hatch and see what surprises she holds?”

Edgar however still seemed to be in a trance of some sort. I shook his shoulder and he seemed to snap clear of his mentally induced fog.

“Sorry what were you saying?” He asked.

“It’s not important. Let’s go see what deep truths are to be discovered.”

“That’s terrible!”

Laughing I continued on toward a gangway that seemed to lead into the hanger bay.

Without a little guidance I would never have found a way of gaining access to the ship, but it’s faithful builders had left a series of notes along with a roped off corridor that led me directly to the primary hatchway. Again I found the need to use the chip code key that had been handed down to me through the generations of my fathers.

It was simply beyond any coincidence how I, a fleet commander, should still be

alive and in possession of the only item that could unlock such a hidden potential of power as this. With a mechanical purr of well-tuned machinery a gangway extended down from above.

There were nearly three flights worth of stairs to climb in order to reach the interior of the ship. Massive wasn't the word for this ship.

Well, could I see how such a ship as this, let alone a fleet of them, would have been able to travel to the farthest corners of the universe destroying every fallen kind of species that it came across. Reaching the doorway I paused as I gazed inward at the dazzling display of circuitry and lights illuminated from within.

Stepping within the hull I was overwhelmed by the spirit of newness

that was about everything I saw. All my life I had been forced to cope with the broken down hand-me-downs of my fathers before me, but not this ship. She was brand spanking new.

Cautiously I made my way further through the ship. At the first the motherships had possessed artificial intelligence aids, the systems had for the most part worn out or more accurately put been intentionally shorted out because of the aggravation of being told over and over what dire consequences the state of the ship was in and that death wasn't far off if repairs were not made at once.

The AI intelligence had been more of a nuisance than a help in such circumstances. Knowing what I did though of the past it didn't come as a

great surprise when a technological image appeared to stand before me out of nowhere. On the other hand Edgar about jumped out of his skin.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to startle.”

Edgar upon straightening his clothes said determinedly, “That’s all right. I’m getting more and more used to the unexpected occurring on an ever more frequent basis.”

The AI in the form of a woman dipped her head in acknowledgment before turning her face to mine, “Captain you should know that my scans indicate an imminent mass invasion of this world by hostile forces.”

“You don’t say.” I said tongue-in-cheek.

She blinked electronically and I preempted an answer to a rhetorical

question by asking, “Which way to the bridge?”

She pointed and I took off in that direction.

“Anything I should know about before starting this baby up?”

“No Sir. All systems are completely integrated. It is possible to fly the ship solo, but I recommend against doing so as maintenance protocols and situations of the moment may mount at too great a rate for one person to effectively manage.”

“Yeah I figured as much. This isn’t my first adventure. By the way you don’t happen to have a shut off function do you?”

“I do.”

“Bear that in mind.” I stated threateningly.

Edgar eased up beside me to whisper, “You know she’s not real right?”

I gave him a, ‘are you for real look.’ And he hurriedly said by way of explanation, “Well I didn’t know! You threatened it with being put to sleep if it continues with annoying details. Why would you threaten a machine as if it were a person?”

“Because, my good doctor, things are not always what they seem. I came across an AI system on a captured vessel once that I swear to you was fully demon possessed. I literally along with some other believers had to cast the thing out of the ship long after all the physical circuitry that made the AI system functional had already been removed. When humans make things they have a tendency to want to play God and they

go a bit far at times in terms of making things that are artificial far too seemingly real instead.”

“You speak of a great truth.” The AI to the other side of me said.

Edgar and I glanced at each other and meaningfully he whispered, “I see what you mean.”

“Yes, man’s technological achievements have often proven to be the source of destructive elements to not only himself, but to other life forms.” I commented in reply.

“Again you speak.....”

“Shut it!” I said cutting the AI off from continuing further.

Finally after what seemed like walking the distance of two motherships back to back we came upon the bridge, which constituted the primary control

room for the Deep Truth.

“Well that took a while, but I have to say it was quite worth it to see all this!”

“We do have an inner ship transport system.” The AI cautiously informed from the background.

“Well why didn’t you say so?” I exclaimed.

“You stated a wish for my silence.” The AI defended.

I watched Edgar shiver and turn away to start going over the abundant functionality of the vital ship systems displayed throughout the massive bridge. I did the same and blessedly the AI allowed us to quietly explore without interjecting hints, tips, tutorials, statistics, or just plain annoying comments. It would seem it was learning just as we were.

Chapter Eight

Buying Time

I glanced around at the bridge full of individuals that I'd seen about me daily all my life. All of them looked to still be grappling with the unreality of their circumstances.

Zevaris, one of my chief technicians, came close and showed me a digital tablet that he was manipulating output levels on. "Look at this Captain! It's just like the old rust bucket, but all those submenus and tuning prerogatives never worked before. I remember my father

talking about them, but they never functioned for me. This is literally amazing in terms of what you can do with all this extra stuff in terms of hidden capabilities and additional power distributions. I can't figure out how we stayed afloat in space without some of these functions! It's simply incredible!"

"Enjoy it Zevaris you've earned the joy of working with something new for once."

He wondered off still mumbling to himself in apparent continual stupefaction. I shook my head as the reality that without the intervention of one man in particular we wouldn't have stayed afloat in space just as Zevaris had hinted at.

That man, Randelon, came popping

his way into view. Fully recovered from the jump gate experience and yet painfully thin he hustled over to me.

The opinion of him as an eccentric even laughable individual had changed in the eyes of all my people. They now looked at him with only respect and I didn't doubt that not one of them wouldn't have come to his defense should he have need of it.

They all knew full well that without Randelon they'd all be dead right now. While we still might all be dead soon anyway the possibilities were definitely looking up in terms of our continued survival.

Randelon was before me vibrating with the urge to speak, but appeared bound from uttering a single stuttered phrase aloud.

“Got all the diagnostics run?”

He nodded.

“Good to go?”

He nodded.

“Have you managed to strengthen the shield array with your new free energy vacuum energizer?”

He nodded.

“Well what is it that you want to say Randelon?” I asked teasingly.

“Itt’ssss gre-e-at! Evverrrthinggg thhhhe besssst!”

“I know and well it should be as a lot of good people sacrificed to make it so. Now it’s time to make their life’s work come to life in the aid of our world as they one day intended for it to. Power it all up. In fact do it from my chair.”

Without a break I rose to my feet and pressed Randelon into the cushions of

the captain's bridge console seat. In shock he sat there in stupefaction not only at my action of honoring him, but also at the chant that broke out among all those in the bridge as they saluted him as one.

Tears running down his sunken cheeks I watched him engage the entire ship from his seated position. This day had been a long time in coming, in more than just one way.

Like a monolithic rise of a nebula plume, I watched from screens all about as the ship came to full life. With a cranking groan of protest still audible through the thick hide of the ship I watched the overhead mountain peel away to reveal bright blue sky overhead.

The overhead canopy wings didn't make it all the way open, but with

shields at more than four times the power of the maximum energy level they had been designed for, the Deep Truth moved upward and the overlying rock layers that had jammed the portal opening crumbled away into nothingness. The Deep Truth had risen to see the light of day for the first time since its creation.

The light of the sun glinted off its metallic hull dully. As a ship it hadn't been built with pretty in mind unlike the sleek little cruiser we had arrived here in. No, this was an implement of abject warmongering.

The Deep Truth was built for only one purpose. The extermination of a race of abject monsters and it was set in every facet of its form to the completion of that objective.

I stood over one of my other officers in charge of radar analytics and with deep fascination I watched the swarms of the enemy's numbers that had already begun to descend toward the planet come to a complete halt as no doubt their screens lit up with the largest radar contact that they'd ever encountered. Their hesitation in this moment was proof enough of the innate fear they had of humanity given our divinely appointed creation and the blessing of eternity that was to all humans who would believe in the Son of God and the story of what He'd done so well portrayed out in the stars of creation all around us.

“Siringo?” Randelon called out questioningly.

I headed back to the lead chair of the bridge and Randelon vaulted out of it

and without a stutter said, “I’d feel better with you managing the next part of this play.”

Patting him on the shoulder I said, “And I know I’d feel better with you right on point to manage the power supply and the other hundred things you do without blinking.”

Randelon smiled and nodded before quickly sobering and saying, “Thank you for this. I..... It’s more than I ever dreamed of as being possible. Thank you for not giving up out there and for never losing your faith in me.”

Looking him in the eye I said, “You know I don’t think you’re ever going to stutter again.”

“I don’t think so either.”

I moved on past him and sat down as he hurried off to do his part elsewhere.

Once seated I experienced the joy of the power to be had at my fingertips. As much as I wanted to rain down vindication upon the hated swarm gathered above I contented myself with triggering onto two enemy signatures only.

They would never expect this as we were still yet relatively close to the surface of the planet and the main body of their ships were still thousands of miles away. No one questioned what I was about.

“Give me a 40% power charge on forward beam icons one and four”

“Charged and ready Sir.” Came back almost instantly.

“Fire!”

Twin beams of raw power shot out through the atmosphere and into space as

we continued to gain altitude. All enemy shipping in the path of the twin beams of energy was vaporized on contact, but still the power charge at but 40% was enough to carry on through until they each singularly crashed into the hulls of the two largest reptilian hive consort carriers.

The resulting explosions of these two ships took out a host of smaller less well shielded class ship's and yet we were still out of range of any return fire. Like scared bunnies the swarms of the enemy peeled backward from our ascent in distress of the situation at hand.

As a fleet the enemy shifted backward altogether, but I fired no more shots at them. Their retreat came to a halt.

I full well knew the quandary that they were in. The Deep Truth defied all their

probability algorithms with the scope of its abilities to take out their finest ships at such long distance.

To engage us was to risk annihilation of all their best ships. However to retreat from our world and leave our kind to repopulate and grow strong enough again to build such ships as this was to tempt the annihilation of their species for they could not doubt now as to what purpose this ship had been created.

The war between us was one without any quarter. They could not retreat and the threat of the cost of staying in the theater of war had them no doubt jibber jabbering away at each other in their foul language.

Either way what I was wanting to be accomplished was happening. I was

buying time. I needed one more day until I could unleash everything at my disposal upon my hated foe. The bad side of it however was that they would also have a day to dream up and implement contingency plans in order to cope with our newfound abilities.

In the end I wanted them to attack me as defending from a position of strength is always more preferable than venturing outside of favorable conditions. Positioned as we were now in the lower atmosphere we were well able to receive covering fire from the landside star batteries and in return provide support for them.

That said however it would be a grand thing to go rampaging through their lines with all guns blazing. I tamped down that wild desire and eased back in

my seat.

In amusement I watched the small fleet, heavy with exotic looking cruisers, head my way. Taran's face flipped onto a screen, "Quite impressive."

"Yes, quite the toy to pull out of the war chest isn't it. Have your squadron take up position within our shield cloud. Now, am I being broadcast fleetwide under a secure channel?"

When I received a confirmation from a quick head shake from my communications officer I began the layout of perhaps my most serious order to date, "Now hear this all outlying fleet vessels. Your mission is not to engage with the enemy. I repeat your mission is not to engage the enemy. Your sole endeavor should consist of two parts. Number one, stay out of the way of our

weapon platforms. Mark their locations well before we begin any enemy engagement. Number two, your mission is to intercept enemy fire at this flagship by any means at your disposal. This ship is fully capable of taking the enemy on by itself, but if we get injured or we lose vital controls the fight will soon be over and each of you smaller class vessels will be picked off in short order. I repeat that your sole objective is to stay within our shield radius and ensure the survival of the Deep Truth. I expect suicide runs and the mass bombardment of space mines as well as the use of lasers. Help this ship's defensive batteries to take out as much incoming hostile ordinance as possible. This upcoming battle will not be a battle about anyone's personal glory or how many enemy kills one can

individually rack up. This is a battle for survival! And survive with God's grace we will, but only if we stick together as a team. No personal heroics unless it is for the furtherance of the survival of this flagship to continue pressing fire upon the enemy unabated. I want five dedicated ships of your number focused directly under the forward bridge of the Deep Truth. These five are now Alpha Squadron One. The rest of you are Alpha Squadron Two. I may need alpha squadron one for special operations, but until called for provide cover fire. Should a vessel of Alpha One perish then a replacement needs to be drawn from Alpha Two. Are my orders clear?"

Acknowledgments rang in from all over.

"All right give me your names and

final locations around the hull of the Deep Truth when you have them picked out, until then radio silence as this will be a waiting game.

Hours passed by, in which I sat staring out into space as my mind played through scenario after scenario of what could occur in the hours to come. I looked up in startlement at the sight of my mother standing beside my chair holding a cup of something I presumed was for my use.

“What are you doing on board? You should be in one of the underground shelters on the surface!”

“Now son don’t get all cranky like your father used to. I’ve come too far to

sit this one out. You were unconscious with injuries at the time, but I was standing in the bridge of our old flagship and I got to watch firsthand as my husband outgunned and outnumbered got blown into a million particles, while he bought the time needed for the majority of the fleet to escape. Since then I've lost two younger sons and your older sister to those cowering fish scaled demons out there, but no more! Soon things are going to go the other way for the first time in two centuries and I'm not going to miss one second of it!"

"Simmer down mom. Save it for the fight." I said with amusement that seemed to be shared by everyone else in the bridge at the undying spunk that remained within my mother.

"Here sit on my knee you beautiful

woman you.” I said, as I pulled her down to sit on my leg.

She smacked me good-naturedly on the cheek, but she stayed where she was.

My arm around her waist squeezed and softly I said, “Thank you for never giving up on your faith and for praying for me as you have over the years.”

Looking benevolently down at me she shook her head, “Son I lost my faith many times and I stopped praying at all for long periods of time. Thankfully however my salvation isn’t based on what I can manage to do though. My God has kept me to this day and it’s only through His grace that I am a woman of prayer and faith now. I thank Him for this even as I thank Him for a son like you. Remember this Siringo that no matter what happens in the next few

hours we are a people who have our destiny shepherded over by the Lord of creation. We cannot fail in any endeavor we undertake when we are right with the Creator of all life.”

“Here you are telling me that you’ve lost your faith at times, only to be preaching at me now?” I teased.

“Not preach, but rather bear witness too. There’s a difference. There’s no need for you to think in your mind that I’m some kind of super woman as I am not.”

“Mother you will always be a super woman in my eyes.”

Smiling she laid her head on top of mine as we both looked out into space waiting for the inevitable engagement of our lives and futures to occur.

Chapter Nine

“Let them have it!”

The next day.

As planned we detected the trajectory of some close grouped asteroids drifting into the scene apparently at random. My fear though however was that the actions of the asteroids would become too suspicious and provoke an investigation, which was why I had ordered us forward away from the bulwarked safety of the star batteries below and toward the gathered horde above. This final battle would be fought in space.

As agreed upon there was no communication between our group and Lathartha's asteroid group. Seeing that the asteroids remained unchallenged did in part confirm that we had managed to successfully hold on to our surprise advantage in the battle to come.

Speaking of surprises I could only imagine Lathartha's reaction at the discovery of the crown jewel of our little fleet. For show I had the entire fleet gathered around me. Not just the cruisers, which were serving as extra defensive batteries for the Deep Truth, but all the old transporters of my old squadron as well.

The old squadron ships however were all for bluff as there was no one within them as all were being run on a programmed autopilot function that

Randelon had set up. They had one last duty to fulfill for our people before they could drift peacefully about as blown apart space debris with nothing more required of them.

I'd never experienced it in my lifetime, but I knew from stories of the past when we'd had the ship capability to fight back at times against our enemy that when any open confrontation with the enemy reptilian's would occur that they would tend to hold off on their fire until we had drawn perilously close and then let off everything in one massively drawn out salvo. It had been a long time since there had been an open conflict between us, but I was betting that their tactics had varied little over the years for why should they?

They had after all overwhelmed most

of the created worlds with the tactics they favored. Today however I had a surprise for them.

I was going to win the opening contest of firepower exchange despite their exaggerated numbers. Against the wishes of many of my officers, which mercifully went unexpressed I kept the Deep Truth's long-range weapons silent instead of picking off their lead ships at a distance.

My actions to the enemy must seem the height of arrogance. If one had a superior weapon as we did then why not use it to full advantage?

No doubt they were even now clacking their jaws of teeth together at the perceived presumptuous insult on our part of not even needing to even pick them off at long-range, because we were

of no doubt in being able to finish the job off up close and personal. At least that's what I hoped was going on within their fallen consciousness's.

Time would tell. Time unfortunately would also reveal what it was that they'd been busy at work at over the past 24 hours.

“Detecting a buildup of heat radiation Sir! They're readying their batteries to fire at us.”

“Have the transporters from the old squadron fan out to the sides of us and back our speed off a couple of pegs.”

The order was carried through swiftly and I watched my old fleet still tacking on under their old propulsion systems begin to outpace us slightly in their advance upon the enemy column. My actions might seem strange to the enemy,

but I wasn't going to let them think about it too much.

“Have all the transporters of the old fleet commence firing now and bring our speed down several more pegs. I want some distance between us.”

The old vanguards of the fleet that had carried us through the Far Quarter for time seemingly without end had their last moment of glory as they were finally allowed to stand and fight. The amount of fire they were able to put out however was almost beyond pathetic to behold though, but it did do the job of provoking the enemy.

I saw the radar screen flash brightly as a perfectly timed salvo from perhaps 4000 ships of varying class sizes cut loose with everything they had at once. Shields were already at maximum with

the weaker shielded close flying cruisers piggybacked beneath the protection of our own shield.

“Turn the old squadron broadways now! Reverse our speed at hard full!”

Ponderously the still firing old squadron of dented space debris turned broadways and as planned the biggest of the transporters swung over to fill the gap in the line where we had been formerly in position. Even now the Deep Truth sped backward at a high rate of propulsion followed closely by the cruisers who were in lockstep with our every movement.

“Randelon are you ready?” I called out.

“Waiting on you Captain. Say the word and it’s done.”

“Stop all engines and brace for

impact.”

The Deep Truth slid to a stop as I fixatedly watched on the radar screen the progress of the salvo of death fast descending upon the ranks of my old fleet. The enemy in truth had never stopped firing, but were letting off everything they had in an endless barrage. Let them fire. All sorts of technical difficulties arose from excessive firing of a ship's weapon platforms.

“Now!” I cried out and Randelon performed his latest trick of ingenuity. He'd come to me last night and put forth the idea and as always I took it for the golden nugget of inspiration it usually was and had flown with it.

Each of the transporter ships had a working shield array. Not particularly

very good ones, but they had them just the same.

Randelon had managed to engineer the shields of the transporters to differentially split power distribution when given the command. On the side facing the enemy the ship's shields disappeared from, while the power taken from that side was used to strengthen the shield still remaining that faced our way.

No sooner was that change of shield power accomplished than every last one of the transporters stacked too high in a solid wall between us and the enemy went off like a star being born in perfect synchronization of explosion. The deadly wall of the enemy's first fired salvo that might've crippled us was caught up and vaporized by the power of

the outlying blast radius of the old fleet going up into pieces.

While on our side of the explosion the explosion itself was less severe because of the temporary deafening impacts of the enforced shields, which helped to deflect most of the mass explosion blast radius towards the enemy fleet and away from us. Wave after wave of the enemy's missiles and particle generated lasers were eaten up by the rolling explosion of the old squadron's last hurrah that reached out to bathe over the forward lines of the enemy horde with devastating impact to their smaller class vessels.

“Let them have it!!!”

The Deep Truth surging forward at full speed bucked hard under the power of all her massive ordinance going off at

once. The vessel kept bucking powerfully as focused beam after beam pillared through the departing flame clouds of the old fleet's destruction to perforate into the enemy line.

The enemy line was no longer in solid order as the blast zone focused their way had blown the smaller ships against others and now they could add the carnage of a Battle Slonager's bite to the mix of general mayhem and death. Completely unscathed the Deep Truth surged toward the enemy line that its far-reaching beams were already lighting up in a fantasy vision of every Melungeon's best cherished dream of revenge come true.

The cruisers true to order held their fire and focused instead on incoming shots and the disruption of them from

connecting with our shield. The closer we got the worse our effect became upon the enemy as our bolts of power shot through the stacked up column of the enemy and took out sometimes a half dozen or more ships at a time.

The carnage was glorious and yet terrible. Such a ship as this should be destroyed, because of what would happen should it ever fall into the wrong hands.

Today however it was in the right hands and being used to glorious effect. A 100 ships were in flames and over 200 had already exploded and yet thousands of the enemy remained.

“Carve over into the enemy line there! We need to get in and mess with them so their return fire helps take out more of their own number and so we can bring

both sides of the ship into action and not just our forward batteries.”

The Deep Truth heeled over to crash through the burning debris of reptilian carriers and cruisers alike. We were taking hits, but it was ineffectual at the moment. Soon however it would not be.

Reptilian fighters buzzed in from all quarters of space as they jack jumped off hive carrier vessels until they formed a swarm of angry red radar signatures that caused the radar screen to turn completely red. Each fighter was loaded with fuel and to a one they went crashing full on into us in a constant barrage of suicide runs.

They weren't the only ones sacrificing it all for their continued survival and dominance of the galaxy. A large reptilian Hunter on flames was being

shoved into our port flank even as a 1000 enemy fire hits registered against our shield every three seconds.

Shield strength was still at three times more than was normal thanks to Randelon. All in all this was the beginning of a knockdown no holds barred fight. I made a decision then.

I wasn't going to play this cute. The Deep Truth had been built as a brute and a brute would be how we would act.

“Turn us up the line of conflict! From now on steer for where their shipping is the densest and ram your way through! Alpha one do your best to concentrate fire forward to make a hole for us to bust through.”

People were looking at me a bit strange, but nobody questioned me. What I was about to do was insane.

The enemy had made it clear that they were suicidal in their urge to end us so I was showing them I didn't care how committed they were to our destruction by ramming through them where they were. War is a battle of the mind as much as a battle rooted in the physical and at this moment I was showing them just how committed I was.

We were fighting on our terms and our effort wasn't one of survival, but of the utter disregard for the capabilities of the enemy because we felt grounded in our reality of being superior in force and will of mind. It was a psychological trick I well knew because they'd used it against us all my life.

Every battle that had been engaged in the past they'd attack with unending ferocity until we were vanquished not

caring how many they lost of their number in the assault. Today was a payback of their own medicine of shock treatment.

I got out of my chair to stride the deck of the Deep Truth, which shook and lurched as it busted a way through the length of the enemy line. One advantage to my tactic was that they weren't saturating us with mines because too have done so would have taken out ships still useful to them in the fight.

As my pacing took me about I watched the theater of battle develop all around. Enemy ships were falling into either side of our advance down the former battle line. In addition to the explosive let off discharges of ships we smashed through, we were suffering shield hits to the tune of several

thousand every second now.

Gutsy or not this tactic couldn't last too much longer. I was losing cruisers, which I hated to see.

I hated the loss of every one of my people that was occurring as I wanted everyone to have a chance to experience the new life to be had on the planet below us, but such is the way of survival. The strongest didn't always survive, but they did often get to choose who would.

“Looks like you could use some help big boy.”

A measure of peace calmed through the hot fire and chaos of war for a moment as the sound of Lathartha's voice crackled out over the COM. I turned to glance at the outward vector screen cameras that showed the outside

conflict in vivid relief as this was something I had to see.

The asteroids were grouped to either side of us. Two to the left and two to the right and one overhead, which would be Lathartha, while the smaller ones were in consort with the big ones. With the relish of generations seeking to see this day I watched the heavy masses of shielded rock dart forward like heavy leaded juggernauts into the ranks of the enemy.

From one ship to another the asteroids spun in a continuous churning mass of awe inspiring force. Within minutes over a thousand of the enemy were gone and those who remained were suddenly at a loss as to what target to pick on the most.

I stopped behind the shoulders of one

of my primary gunners. The Deep Truth had 14 Primary Beam drive plasma cannons and each one was belching forth with savagery salvo after salvo.

I walked down the length of the gunners and on to where the secondary weapon gunners were stationed. Everyone was giving their all in one mass cohesion of effort to destroy. The age ranges of the gunners I passed varied from boys of 14 up to women approaching my mother's age and everyone in between.

Our shield was no longer several times its power, but it was holding and glancing to where Randelon was stationed I could well imagine how the repeated repowering spikes to the energy grid were occurring. Sweat was rolling off everyone as they put forth

maximum effort and yet the numbers of the enemy remained high.

Reaching out my hand over the room at broad I prayed aloud, “Creator help us for we destroy that which is fallen and though we were once fallen we have risen in the redemptive hope of Your Son even so I pray that you would aid our cause and help us be free of this plague which has darkened the galaxies of Your creation for far too long.”

Shield strength abruptly shot up once again to full power and in startled shock Randelon glanced over at me as he lifted his hands away from the keyboard before him and said, “What do you need me for if all we really need is more prayer like that?”

Everyone seemed to fully realize that at the same moment. There was

something much greater at play right now than just a battle of the physical and everyone sensed it.

“All of you start praying! This battle is on two fronts! The physical and the spiritual and we have to win both!” I called out loudly even as my finger depressed the COM button relaying my words to the entire fleet.

The sound of called out prayers to God broke forth throughout the room and over the COM, and even echoed up from the far-reaching corridors of the Deep Truth. A shockwave seemed to course out from the heart of the ship and ripple outward through space leaving nothing untouched.

Reaching the forward windows I stopped to listen to something I heard intermixed within the loud prayers of all

those around me. What was it?

Groaning. I heard loud repetitive groaning.

Then before my eyes I began to see the spiritual manifest over into the physical. Reptilian ships that were the closest to us were starting to flee!

Everyone noticed it and for a moment the sound of called out prayers dimmed fleetwide. In alarm I turned back to the room as deep realization after realization coursed through me, "Don't stop! Keep praying! Keep showing the enemy what our strength is rooted in! It's not this ship! It's the Maker of the stars! Those demons have fed on our fear for years, but that time is over! We have not been given the spirit of fear, but of power and of a sound mind! Call out to your Creator! To survive is one thing we

know well, but to conqueror requires faith! Pray! Pray that your faith is strengthened! Pray because they can't bear the sound of your earnest heartfelt pleas to God for mercy and victory! Sing praises to God everyone! Sing as we fight! Cry out to your God for He is a God that hears and is faithful to save those who call upon His name!!!”

And so everyone did on and on in an endless prayer song unique to every individual. I had thought freedom was the feel of grass under my feet with the breath of fresh air filling my nostrils, but I had been wrong. Freedom was right now!

Freedom from all fear, as fear increasingly vanished away from all thought with the closer and closer I felt myself drawn near to my Maker. You'd

have thought the concentration of everyone would have dimmed with the advent of their ceaseless praying and singing, but the opposite was occurring.

Senses went beyond normal ability and skirted into perfection. Strength to go longer, fight even harder welled up from within.

Laughing I yelled out, “Remember this day! Remember that this is the day the Lord our God has made and He alone is mighty and worthy of honor and glory! The battle is not to the strong, but rather to those who are humbly mindful of who their God is. Our God is the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last!”

The Deep Truth blossomed forth with flaming beams and tracer ordinance that unerringly ripped through the hulls of enemy shipping whether they be engaged

or were seeking to flee the conflict. As a whole the Deep Truth seemed to pulse with a righteous fury beyond any perimeter of physical majesty.

Nothing was as it should be, but yet everything was as anyone could ever have hoped for it to be all because of faith. Faith truly could move mountains.

The enemy was disappearing off all our screens in greater and greater numbers. With the help of God's Holy Spirit we had driven the voracious will of these monsters to fight to the death into an action of flight.

Lathartha called out, "Are you seeing this?"

"Vividly my love! Keep smashing!"

"Aye aye Captain!"

Shields still at full power we cruised through patches of open space as enemy

ships now sought to flee from us as if we were in possession of a plague they feared more than death itself, but death dealing force we gave them in ever abundant supply.

It was truly incredible to realize that we had destroyed over several thousand enemy craft within the space of an hour and those left were doing their best to escape the battle that they had instigated with far superior numbers.

I doubted a chance like this to thin the enemies' herd would ever be presented again to us in such a fashion and so I continued to loudly encourage the destruction of every enemy ship no matter how far out from us it had fled.

An hour later saw the guns of the Deep Truth fall silent as there was simply nothing else left to shoot at. The

asteroids had drawn close and with a flash of color I watched Lathartha appear before me.

She jumped through the air at me and laughing I caught her as she exclaimed over and over, “Oh we did it! No, God did it! Anyway it’s done! We’re free!”

Laughing I continued to hold her as she shook at my head in jubilation.

“Captain?”

The tone of my first officer’s voice had me wheeling around to face him to the extent that I almost dropped Lathartha.

His face was deeply etched with worry, “It’s not over.”

“What? Do you mean they’re coming back for more?” I exclaimed.

“No, they’ve all fled, but I think their resistance was meant to only be a

distraction. They've opened a space time rip in the fabric of our galaxy. At least I think that's what they've done."

"What!!!" I exclaimed further.

He gestured to his screens which were then broadcasted up to the primary heads-up display.

"See over there. They have occupied us over here with the battle, while a few cloaked cruisers set up some kind of device that seems to be distorting time."

Blankly I said, "What exactly am I dealing with?"

"I'm trying to hack in now to their encryption database, but so far it looks like the purpose of this device is to serve as a reset in time for at least this area of space! I'm not sure how far ranging it is. I'm in! Oh God the date is set for the day before the cataclysm that

happened over two centuries ago!”

I felt everything seize into a cold tight ball within me at his words.

Lathartha seized my shoulder and shook hard, “What does this mean?”

“It means that there setting a redial function of time by which the reversing of to that particular date points to their intention of destroying the planet in its entirety instead of just rocketing it about with epic cataclysms of nature. It means that with the passage of time that there will be no Soluranami for Taran to discover and bring back to life. There will be no Edgar to contact us in the Far Quarter, if indeed we even manage to get that far in terms of surviving a second time down memories lane. There will be no Deep Truth Battle Slonager to rule this day in the future, but worst of all

there will be nothing to have any hope left for, if they can just change it up like this whenever they want to!”

Wheeling to Randelon I yelled, “How do we stop this thing?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t think something like this was even possible. The time dilation field hasn’t been activated yet, but soon it will be. If we hadn’t driven the enemy off so quickly we would never have known. They sacrificed their entire existence and their series of conquest for the past 200 years just so they could go back in time in order to ensure we don’t show up in the future! I don’t know how we fight this! I didn’t think one could manipulate time like this to do one’s own bidding. How does God allow something like this to occur?” Randelon screamed out at the last almost

hysterical as his great mind failed to come up with a solution to the problem.

I had no answers for him. I glanced to Lathartha, but the same hopeless look as to what could be conceivably done was reflected in her eye.

“Can’t we blow it up before it activates?” My first officer asked hesitantly.

“Goodness no! One rip is bad enough! How they’ve managed to rip it to a specified distance of years is beyond me! They’ve had to have had outside help. There’s no other explanation. They received help from someone who’s existed outside of time and yet experienced time as how else would someone know how to meld the two and subtract or add to them?” Lathartha exclaimed.

“You think this is the work of a fallen angel?” I asked.

“It has to be! Who else would have any inclination as to how the creation of time we perceive and that governs our lives was first created and put in place by God.” Randolen blurted out.

“If the end result, if it’s left to come to full fruition is what it is, then why is it such a bad alternative to just try to blow it up?” I asked him in repetition of my first officer’s question.

In frustration Randelon gestured at his screens, “Because the hijack of our dimension is being done from somewhere seemingly outside of our own reality. If we shoot we shoot at nothing as the manipulation is beyond our dimension and yet our dimension will bear the effects of it. They’re

rewriting history! How are they allowed to do this?” Randelon repeated again in hopeless anxiety over the moment at hand.

The COM crackled, “They aren’t. But when people lose track of the authority given to them over the management of our era of humanity within our finite universe such incursions by supernatural forces will be attempted. The key is to appeal to the One who exists outside of time and yet created it in the first place.”

“Mother?” I whispered out in complete astonishment as I wheeled around to face the COM speaker.

“Yes my son. I know you’re not happy about this, but well I’m a grown girl and I can make my own decisions and I make this one gladly.”

“Where? How? What are you doing?”

I exclaimed out in a lack for what was going on as my eyes frantically searched around for answers.

“Has faith taken you so far in victory today son that you do not recognize the need for it now? You will never outpace the need for faith whether in time of peace or war.”

“She’s taken a fighter from the hangar bay and she’s closing in on the expanding time dilation field!” Randelon whispered in a deeply shocked tone.

“Mother you need to get back here now!”

“No, I need you to pray for me now. Don’t worry, I know how to operate this ship. Don’t forget that your father found me on the flight deck as a fighter pilot many years ago. Admittedly it’s been a few years, but I was a pretty good pilot

in my day.”

Kneeling down before the COM I begged, “Please come back. I..... we’ll find another way.”

“No son. Not this time. Enjoy the future as I know that I even now enjoy the future that lies open before me. Please pray. I’m not above admitting this is a little scary even for an old prayer warrior like me.”

“Mom..... I..... I love you!”

“I love you to mom!” Briandy whispered out brokenly as she suddenly appeared on her knees beside me.

“I love you both my dears and really I love you all so much that this is rather easy. Now pray and then enjoy the lives your Creator has restored to you and all the freedoms that go with it and never forget He is your Maker and your

Redeemer.”

The COM clicked statically and with the loss of signal Briandy collapsed crying against me as all the rest of us could do was wait in grim silence. Husky voiced I called out softly, “Please pray.”

Immediately people dropped to their knees and did so even as Lathartha hugged me from behind and began praying into my ear. For me it was hard to pray, as all I could see was my mother out there within the reach of a fallen angel.

Thinking about it though I had to grudgingly admit that if someone had to be sent off on such a mission then mother was a great candidate for it. Knowing the truth of that made it easier to pray.

Ralinda Collins sighed as she felt that she'd come to the end of her journey through space. All around her was empty space, while off in the background drifted the carnage of war and those who had survived through it.

Glancing up at the canopy of the fighter she closed her eyes for a moment and basked in the warm feeling generated within her as the prayers of thousands interceded on behalf of her.

Opening her eyes she said, "Well I guess I shouldn't be wasting any more time seeing that it's a precious commodity these days."

That said she engaged the hatch release. The hatch blew off into space.

She should have been instantly

compressed and frozen solid by the vacuum of space but she wasn't. Calmly she undid her harness and then a bit arthritically she managed to stand up in her seat and climb out of her motionless craft.

Then with faith firmly in hand she walked across the intervening space in the direction that she felt led to go. Time and space all seemed to disappear as she stepped through dimensions to come face-to-face with an entity one day reserved for everlasting hell.

The fallen entity looked her over cunningly and yet dismissively. Far from feeling intimidated at all Ralinda instead felt herself fired from within with an intense anger bordering on wrath that this castoff of heaven thought so highly of his plans to

intervene in the sought out future of her family to enjoy the peace that they had won by right.

“They send me an old woman? Go and die and be no more old woman for if you draw closer I will see to your torment forever.”

“Shut up you disrespectful cast off! Old woman I may be, but the Spirit of the living God even now is aflame within me. God is greater than you or any of your fallen kind that has sought to plague the race of mankind with your many deceptions! I rebuke what you do now through the authority of the redeeming Son of God and I remand you into the custody that befits your breach into what only God as the Creator of time can purpose to do with time. One day time will truly end, but it

will not be by your hand and God will not be made a mockery of as you with your foolish intervention in the aid of your demonic children this day have sought to do. You speak of tormenting me and yet I tell you that you have no authority over me and yet one day this old woman will be a judge over your kind for all will be as it is written by the living words of my Savior and by His authority I cast you down never to rise against my people again!”

The bottom fell out beneath the creature before her and with a soul rending scream it disappeared dimensionally through time and space. The sound had been beyond horrendous to hear and Ralinda patted at her chest to calm the beating of her heart.

Tiredness overwhelmed her then, but

something made her glance up. When she did all tiredness was forgotten in the face of seeing what was opening up before her eyes.

“Come to me Ralinda and enter into your rest for all of eternity to come my good and faithful trusted servant. Fear not anymore for the lives you have contended for today. All has been set right and now comes your reward daughter of the Most High.”

Without hesitation, but rather with great joy, Ralinda stepped into glory and left all vestiges of time behind.

Chapter Ten

Warm Rain

I stared out over the grass of the prairie before me. We had landed only a couple of hours ago, but somehow this day had stretched forth into seemingly eons of time.

For the best way of putting it I self-diagnosed myself as being in a state of shock. I didn't know what to do to break free of it.

I felt lost and I didn't really know why.

I knew where my mother was. Indeed I

was actually happy for her.

We'd won the battle and suffered far fewer casualties than could seemingly be even believably possible, but still I felt just devoid of the ability to function. I was burnt out. Utterly burnt out with no fuel left by which to maneuver through life with.

A hand intertwined with mine. I glanced to the side at Lathartha and noticed her worried gaze upon me. I tried to smile, but it was beyond me.

“Come let's take a walk.” She said softly.

Urgingly she coaxed me to step forward. I moved stiffly at first and then more freely.

“I think we need to work on getting you to forget everything that happened up there.”

My lips came unglued, “I’ll never forget.”

She nodded, “Yes I know, but that doesn’t mean the past needs to step with you through the grass right now. Come feel the wind and the feel of what I think is rain in the air. Rain. Imagine it Siringo! Clear beautiful water falling down from the sky washing away all the dark memories of the past and bringing new life to the ground beneath our feet. Isn’t it grand?”

It was and yet I still felt helpless inside to partake of the joy of all that lay around us. It was raining even now. Warm rain.

I looked around at the grass bending beneath its weight. We were getting drenched, but I didn’t care.

I was actually starting to thaw out

from whatever deep level of coldness had held me locked up in non-reality. Lathartha saw it and smiling she asked, “I bet you could never guess what I have in my pocket.”

Taking a wild guess I asked, “A wrench?”

“No!” She laughed, but then added, “Granted that was a good guess as I usually do. Now guess again!” She challenged.

I shrugged as if to say I was done playing. She wasn't put off though. Reaching her hand into her pocket she brought out something white and holding it up she pressed it into my hand with both of hers.

Whatever it was smelled good as its essence dispersed into the rainy atmosphere we stood completely

drenched in. I opened my palm and looked at what I knew to be a bar of soap.

My eyes were drawn from it to Lathartha who with a sparkly look to her one eye was already half unclothed before me. In a few more moments she stood as bare as she had been at birth and with a bashful look she stepped closer as the warm rain pounded down harder and said, "I could really use a bath Captain. Would you do me the honor of scrubbing your first mate down?"

Smiling I said, "You are completely incorrigible."

Smiling endearingly her arms looped around my neck as she teasingly said, "That's why you love me isn't it?"

I shook my head no and her look

turned concerned, but vanished away as I said, “I love you because you put the song back into my heart and show me the way to go on. I love you because you’ve opened your heart and unselfishly shared of its treasures with me. I love you because I see every reason for living and enjoying life because of your desire to be with me through it all. I love you Lathartha with all my heart and yes I would love to give you a bath in the rain.”

Glancing into my eyes as tears streaked down her cheek she whispered, “Don’t forget to wash my hair.”

“Never. My only fear is that this bar of soap won’t last long enough for the eternity of time that I want to run my hands over your soap clad form. Heck, I could use a bath myself!”

Smiling cheekily she said, “Oh don’t worry honey. You scrub as hard as you want with that little bar of soap. I got another bar in my other pocket that I’m going to use on you darling.”

“Since when does a Captain submit to a first mate?” I challenged.

“What’s this Captain business? You’re retired honey and that means your mine to order about to do as I please.”

“Oh yeah?”

“If you have to ask honey I think it’s already a forgone conclusion of having lost control of the ship to a mutiny uprising.”

“Well if it has to be I do have to say you’re the most beautiful pirate that I’ve ever seen.”

“Or ever will.”

“Is that a fact?”

“It is honey. It is.”

A note from the Author

A little bit about what went into influencing the story.

- This book was a fun one to write. There's definitely not too much of the western in it, but I didn't really feel that there had to be. There is a lot of action however. Some of my favorite scenes that I've written as an author were of my spaceship encounters in Book 4 and Book 5 of The Warrior Kind series and in particular anything to do with the spaceship called the bar-Seth. Getting to play around with another epic sized battle wagon was very nostalgically fun.

- I have since thrown both movie series away, but at one point in time I was a Stargate SG-1 and Stargate Atlantis groupie. I loved those series and in many ways they fed my

imagination for lots of imaginative inspiration, which does creep out a bit in this book I have to admit. As I've already said both series went into the burn pile as they weren't really appropriate and were containing of a lot of risqué and occultic material, but that aside I am always fascinated how God can still use the charred embers of one's past when one was distant in relationship from God and pull it over into the present to help flesh out a story such as this one written in a God honoring way. God really can turn what was used for dishonor into something that expresses honor to whom it is due, **if you let Him**. Thanks God, all the credit goes to You for making me a success for Your Kingdom out of the mess that I used to be, when my life pursuits were focused on me instead of being about what You wanted!

Reviews and help promoting my books is always appreciated. Thank You, to all who have helped me by doing so!

If you'd like to be informed about new book releases and the availability of free review copies then drop me a note and I'll put you on my fan list and send you updates as they come available. Contact Info:

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Guy S. Stanton, III

A few things about me



I live in the country and I'm glad of it. I have a beautiful wife sent from God, who graciously puts up with me. God has blessed us with three awesome children that I am very proud of. It seems authors always mention whether or not they have pets and so I will say

that

we have four, two dogs(Kregridor and Thora)
and one cat (Herman). As to my interests, well,

writing

and waiting for the Kingdom of Shamayim.

